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**Heat**

by NeedTheDark

**Summary**

12% of the female population are omegas – beautiful, fragile, and designed to have children. Feisty and determined FBI profiler Liz Keen breaks the omega mold. But when fugitive Raymond Reddington turns himself into the FBI, he sets off a chemical reaction in her that binds her to him irrevocably. Lizzington Angst and Smut. Alpha/Beta/Omega AU.

TRIGGER WARNING: RAPE/NON-CON

**Notes**

Ok, be warned - despite having a weird/ridiculous premise, this fic gets very dark indeed. If you’re not familiar with the Alpha/Beta/Omega universe you may want to look it up as this could well not be your thing. You don’t need to know anything about it to read the fic though, all is revealed. Credit to ‘Tore my Yellow Dress’ who as far as I know was the first writer to link A/B/O to The Blacklist fandom with her wonderful fics. Please heed my warnings esp for Rape/Non-Con and do not read if this triggers or offends. Disclaimer: I do not own the characters or make any money from this fic.
Chapter 1

It was just before dawn and Elizabeth Keen was still sleeping soundly when her husband slipped from the bed. He moved stealthily to the kitchen like an intruder in his own house, avoiding each of the floorboards that creaked, and listening out for signs that she was waking. He smiled faintly to himself. He was an intruder of sorts, though not the kind that would break into a young woman’s home. No. He was much worse than that. He didn’t need to rape her – she was his wife. She gave it to him willingly.

Grabbing a screwdriver, he undid the bottom of a floor lamp and removed a burner cell, dialling a number he knew off by heart. He knew a lot of numbers off by heart.

“Hi, I’m having a problem with my account. The number is Delta, Sierra, 4-5-1…Get this. Mockingbird wants to have a kid, the natural way. You assured me it would be fine – she wanted to adopt because she was adopted, whatever… Trust me I’m trying but I’m not a fucking miracle worker…I’m a Beta, she’s an Omega, you knew that when you hired me for this” he hissed in a harsh whisper. “Yeah, well I hope I manage to knock her up for all our sakes…”

Tom Keen snapped the cell phone shut and shoved it back under the lamp, patiently doing up the screws. He took a deep breath and went back upstairs, sliding gently back into bed beside his wife. She turned over and groaned.

“Babe, what time is it?”

“I don’t know” he yawned, feigning sleep. “What time you gotta be there?”

“Oh crap, crap! My first day!”

The next few minutes passed in a blur, and Tom watched while his wife hopped around the house with a piece of toast in her mouth, pulling clothes on and grabbing her stuff.

She paused in the kitchen to take a slurp of coffee and he came up behind her. “Don’t forget your doctor’s appointment at 2” he smiled, sliding his arms around her waist.

“What if there’s something wrong with me?” She said quietly. “I mean, it should have happened already.”

She turned to face him and he held her tightly. “It'll be fine Liz. You haven’t been off your suppressants for that long.” He smiled slyly and put his hand on the back of her neck, mimicking an alpha gesture. “As long as we keep up -ah- regular physical contact you should go into heat anytime now.”

Liz leaned back. “I wonder what it’s going to feel like. Katie says you can’t think about anything except the other person - it’s like your whole body is totally primed for sex” she smiled coquettishly.

“Well that sounds terrible” Tom quipped, smiling. Then his expression turned sober. “You know Liz, this is a serious deal. It could be dangerous for you. If you change your mind we could adopt.”

Liz laughed. “Well I’m lucky I have you to do your part and make sure I’m alright” she said playfully.

Tom smiled and put his hands on her arms. “I’m serious Liz. It’s a lot of pressure on you – your body temperature will rise, if something goes wrong you may not be able to have children. If it’s not
consummated you would most likely die. Omegas don’t have it easy.”

She looked back at him reassuringly. “I know, I paid attention in health class Tom. And it will be consummated unless you’re planning on leaving me high and dry, mister. That’s not what I’m afraid of.”

He looked down at her earnestly. “What are you afraid of?”

“I…sometimes I wonder why you married me” she said hesitantly “even though we didn’t know if we would bond. What if… what if I can’t have children? Or I’m not right for you?”

A flash of something indecipherable crossed his face before he smiled. “That’s easy – I had to marry you Liz. And it’s gonna happen, you’ll see. And if not, like I said, we’ll adopt. A lot of people do. You always said how wonderful it was that Sam took you in. We’re gonna be fine.”

“I know we will” she said biting her lip. “Oh my god, the time - I’m going to be late!”

Seven minutes later, Tom and Elizabeth Keen stepped out of their house to be greeted by a helicopter and a fleet of FBI vehicles.

After that moment she was on auto pilot, her brain numb as she accompanied the agents to the black site where she was to be briefed. The smell in the crowded SUV was almost unbearable, awash with a cacophony of alpha pheromones and sweat-infused leather seats that made her feel sick. Her senses were heightened since coming off the suppressants and she wasn’t used to being around so many alpha males. Her old mobile psych team had all been betas – most people were. Tom was a beta too; he was kind and funny and he smelled normal. Nice. She wondered if she should say something, but she was too embarrassed. They would know what she was, anyway. Keep it professional, Keen she breathed to herself.

The ginger agent, Ressler, escorted her down through the old post office which was now a government black site. If she got lost she could just follow him with her nose she thought; he exuded entitlement and superiority and there was something faintly wheaty about the way he smelled, like bread or hay or tradition. He didn’t like her. She could tell that too. She soon found out why.

According to Assistant Director Harold Cooper, a gentle alpha with a distinctly calming presence, Agent Ressler had been trying to track the Raymond Reddington for years. Today, the man had surrendered to the FBI and said that he would only talk to her – not a powerful and high ranking alpha with the FBI who was deserving of the honor, but a lowly omega. On her first day. For a fugitive who had successfully evaded capture for twenty years this was a most unexpected twist, and it had ruffled Agent Ressler’s feathers considerably.

“You’ll forgive me for forgoing the usual paperwork” Cooper continued. “Reddington hasn’t come in on a whim – I’m concerned about what he’s planning. We need to get you in there now, if you’re ready?”

She sat up straight like a good agent (like a good omega, she thought) and answered as calmly as she could. “I’m ready.”

As soon as they reached the detainment floor her skin started to prickle. It was dark down there, her path illuminated only by sporadic spotlights that cast a cold, bluish glow over the scene. Her heels kept catching in the mesh of the metal walkway and she bitterly regretted wearing them, that and not tying her hair up. In her old job she hadn’t worried about her status or sexuality – it hadn’t mattered –
but as she walked past the rows of armed guards it suddenly seemed to matter a lot. She loathed feeling weak and vulnerable and the preponderance of Kevlar and masculinity wasn’t helping.

She wasn’t sure what hardened criminal masterminds looked like, but as the containment box beeped and shunted backwards revealing its occupant, what few assumptions she’d made were shattered in an instant. He was calm with a hint of a smile, and exceptionally well dressed in a three piece minus the jacket. She was momentarily shocked when she realised that his wrists and ankles were bound in cuffs and chains, but recovered quickly. He seemed utterly unconcerned, his focus solely on her.

As she took her seat in front of him it occurred to her that even this criminal – the man in restraints in the basement of a clandestine government black site – seemed to have more power than her. She resented him for it.

“Agent Keen, what a pleasure.”

He shifted his head slightly as he spoke and his scent and his voice hit her at the same time, like they were the same thing, rich and deep, sound and scent and sensation wafting around her. The sheer power of it was disarming and it took all she had to stay seated and not retreat back to the safety of the observation room. Unconsciously she rubbed her fingers over the scar on her palm to calm herself, before crossing her legs and positioning herself as closed off to him as she could. She spoke as she imagined an alpha female might, calm and superior.

“Well, I’m here.” *How dare you summon me. Waste my time.*

If he was amused by her impression of an alpha female he didn’t show it, only continued to speak to her in the soft tones reserved for children and omegas.

“You got rid of your highlights. You look much less…Baltimore.”

She felt her cheeks color in spite of her best efforts. He’d researched her. Why did he have to mention her hair? Her appearance? *Her body*…Her soft and sensual omega body she was trying to ignore. It was like he knew and was deliberately trying to remind her of what she was under her suit – breasts and slick and beauty and fragility.

She pursed her lips and decided to try a different tack. Humility didn’t come as naturally to her as most omegas, but she had a feeling it would get her somewhere here. “Why involve me? I’m nobody. It’s my first day. Nothing special about me.”

Reddington’s mouth curved into a close-lipped smile, like a wolf eyeing its prey.

“Oh” he drawled. “I think you’re very special.”

His tone had dropped so low that she wasn’t sure if anyone had heard it except her, and that’s just what it felt like - a private message to the creature inside her. She felt a soft, warm sensation in her belly, as though her omega self was stretching luxuriously, preening at the compliment.

“Why are you here?” she said sharply.

Reddington laughed softly, a low, pleasant sound. “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.”

She instinctively shielded her hand from his penetrating gaze. She tried to maintain her calm and confident affect but the truth was she felt anything but. This man disgusted her – he was a notorious criminal and traitor who abandoned his family. She hated everything about him, and yet being around him felt strangely like being cradled by a warm hand, like he was reaching out and soothing
her body and her mind.

“There was a fire” she said guardedly.

“Someone tried to hurt you.” He tilted his head to the side as he spoke, almost as if it was a test.

“Not exactly, no.”

He nodded leant forward slowly. When he spoke again his voice was like molten lava, vibrating in all her senses and flowing to her core. “May I see it?”

She hesitated and then rose from her seat, approaching him carefully and holding out her wrist to him, palm up.

Afterwards, she would not be able to explain why she allowed him to touch her scar. When asked, she would pass it off as a rookie mistake – she never meant to get close enough for him to touch her. She just wanted to build a rapport with her subject. But the truth was she’d heard the chains clink as he moved his hand. She’d known, but in that moment she’d wanted him to do it, she’d needed him to touch her, and nothing else seemed to matter.

An intensely sweet ache unfurled low inside her and spread through her body like liquid fire – it was so fast that she barely had time to realise what was happening as he brushed his thumb over her wrist. She withdrew her hand sharply and staggered backwards a few steps before her knees buckled and she collapsed to the floor, her heart racing and dizziness clouding her head.

She looked up and saw that Reddington’s confident demeanour had slipped; his mouth hung open and his piercing blue-grey eyes were wide with shock. She heard shouts in the background and the sound of guns being cocked, but could only focus on the man in front of her, the way her breasts ached painfully under his gaze, and the need to fight the bizarre and shameful urge to open her legs for him to inspect her. Agent Ressler reached her first, kneeling beside her and shouting accusingly at Reddington – “what have you done? What did you do to her?!?”

Reddington didn’t answer. His mind, once exceptionally calm, was now racing. When he saw her hit the floor in front of him, vulnerable and eyes wide, he felt a sudden, overwhelming urge to pounce on her. And then, when he saw Agent Ressler run to her side, he felt rage like he hadn’t in years – he wanted to rip the younger man apart, and believed he could actually have done it were it not for the chains restraining him.

That was when it hit him, with disturbing and sickening clarity. This was heat.
Reddington’s gaze was locked on the girl, flushed and blinking on the floor a few feet away. She was so close, if he could only reach her, touch her again, just for a moment… He tried to focus, calculating scenarios, trying to make sense of what had happened. Omegas who worked in public offices took a course of suppressants before they were allowed in the field, but of course, she wasn’t a field agent. This was her first day and she was only there because of him. With months and months of meticulous planning leading to this day, how could he have been so damned careless?

It hadn’t been part of the plan to touch her. No, that had been pure instinct, a sudden and deep compulsion he was now sorely questioning. By God he’d barely brushed his thumb over her skin - the lightest contact - and it simply hadn’t occurred to him that he shouldn’t. She was only four years old when he last met her.

A deep and harrowing sense of shock began to creep over him. She may have been only a child then, but they had met before. Not only that, he’d carried her through treacherous flames to safety, held her close and cared for her, comforted her and been comforted by her, in her own sweet, childish way. It had been…powerful. Now she was grown he’d connected with her again and the bond had been irrevocably sealed. Katerina’s daughter. Sam’s little girl. The child he needed to protect. It never occurred to him. And yet, the girl who had always seemed to belong to everyone except him was now his and his alone.

“My God!” Cooper’s face was ashen as he looked from the woman on the floor to Reddington. Ressler observed Liz’s reddening cheeks and realisation dawned. “You bastard” he spat. “You asked for her - you did this on purpose!”

On hearing the accusation Reddington recovered somewhat, his air of calm detachment returning. He laughed hollowly before responding “I can assure you Donald that not even I can control nature’s imperative, and furthermore, had that been my design I would have found a more effective means to achieve it. One which didn’t involve me caged in a box like an animal” he added, pulling at the chains for emphasis.

“Oh God…Tom…” Liz moaned, putting her head in her hands. Reddington’s gaze snapped back to her.

“Who’s Tom?” Cooper asked Ressler. “A boyfriend?”

Ressler looked grim. “Her husband.”

“She’s married? Jesus Christ” Cooper exhaled loudly before clearing his throat awkwardly. “Agent Ressler, take her to the infirmary.”

“She’s not ill, Harold” Reddington said sourly. “At least not yet.”

Liz shook her head as Ressler helped her up from the floor. “No, I have to go home. I have to see Tom… I have to find a way to explain this…”

“Absolutely not.” Reddington’s voice cut through the room like an anvil and all eyes turned on him. He ignored them and focussed on the girl, wishing he could give her the privacy she deserved for this conversation. “I’m sorry Elizabeth, but under no circumstances should you see your husband right now.”
The panic she was feeling was joined then by a terrible anger. “How dare you” she hissed. “You think you own me now? Is this some territorial game for you? You don’t get to tell me what to do! He’s my husband!”

Reddington looked uncomfortable for the first time, but answered her gently. “Tom Keen isn’t the man you think he is. It’s too dangerous for you to see him” he said, shaking his head. “Trust me, Lizzie - it’s not safe.”

“Don’t call me that! God, you expect me to trust you?” she exclaimed scornfully. But he was suddenly so serious, his eyes full of concern. She hated that she felt a moment of doubt. “I don’t have to tell him yet” she added desperately, and immediately wished she hadn’t uttered the thought aloud.

Reddington winced and closed his eyes for a moment before responding quietly. “Lizzie, he will know.”

She flushed an even deeper red with crippling embarrassment. Of course – he would smell her. They all could. Her rapidly rising body temperature, the sheen of sweat on her neck and the scent of her arousal came together like a beacon announcing that she was ready to be mated, calling to them all, especially to him, the man in chains.

“Oh” she breathed. Reddington inclined his head and gave her a small, reassuring smile but she wanted the ground to open up and swallow her. Instinctively she stepped back as far away from everyone as she could, but her heart was hammering, her flesh burning up, and her knees wobbled, causing her to stumble.

Ressler was by her side in an instant to steady her, and there was a loud clang as Reddington was prevented from springing forward by the thick chains that bound him. Liz looked at his face; it was both terrifying and mesmerizing. His expression was dark and desperate and his eyes burned into her like there was no one else in the world. He had seemed so refined, and yet now he was like a wild animal chained to prevent him from tearing her apart.

“Enough!” Cooper’s voice cut through the commotion. “Agent Ressler.”

“Um, let’s get you out of here” Ressler said awkwardly to Liz.

It was all Reddington could do to suppress the growl rising in his chest as he saw the agent lead her away from him. She went with him willingly, but turned her head to meet Reddington’s eye as she left, her cheeks pink and mouth slightly open in shock.

After she was out of sight he regained his composure somewhat and turned to Cooper, his mouth set in a hard line. “You’re making a mistake.”

Cooper scoffed and ushered to the guards posted at the exits. “Take him back to the detention facility.” On hearing these words, Reddington felt very uncharacteristic panic rise within him. His eyes glittered as he struggled to maintain a calm affect. “Harold, that’s hundreds of miles away! You’ll only be hurting her if you do this. Be reasonable.”

“Be reasonable?!” Cooper repeated, enraged.

“You know I need to be with her.” Reddington added in a quieter tone.

“The only thing I know” Cooper said in heavy tones “is that I had a young agent with a bright future ahead of her, a future which has been just narrowed to two possibilities – almost certain death, or her life in the hands of the number 4 on the FBI’s most wanted list, a notorious killer and career criminal nearly twice her age. I suppose you’ll want to use this as leverage to cut a deal” he finished.
Reddington’s face burned with the rush of testosterone, but also with anger, anger at Cooper and himself. “Trust me when I say that this is the last thing I expected to happen” he said in a low voice. “But now that it has, you should at least let me talk to her – you know the bond must be consummated. I have absolutely no intention of leveraging an innocent young woman’s life.”

“Then what is it that you want?” Cooper said slowly.

Reddington sat back and smiled. “Harold, I thought you’d never ask. I want to help you catch the criminals who matter. The politicians, the arms dealers, the terrorists. The ones you don’t even know exist. I’m Ahab, and if you want the whales on my list, you have to play by my rules. The first one being, you get nothing from me until I speak with Elizabeth Keen.”

Cooper’s expression darkened. “If your information is good then we can talk. But as far as I’m concerned you lost the right to speak to her when you did this” he snapped and turned to walk away.

“Harold” Reddington’s voice was now little more than a growl. “If you keep her away from me it will be you killing her, not me. It’s your decision.”

Cooper paused before turning back to face him. “No” he said after a beat. “It’s her decision.”

The infirmary was a cold, sparse room with a metal desk, plastic drawers of medical supplies and an examination bed. Liz sat shaking on the bed, her fingers working furiously over her scar as if she could somehow rub off Reddington’s touch. As though it wasn’t too late.

She looked up and saw that Agent Ressler had paused near the door as far away from her as possible, shuffling his feet distractedly and smoothing his hair with his hand. She met his gaze and was alarmed at the look of pure lust she saw in his eyes, barely concealed by his nervous gestures. It was terrifying; this man didn’t even like her but now he was looking at her like a piece of meat he wanted to devour. She looked away from him hurriedly and got off the bed, moving to stand in a corner, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

Ressler cleared his throat. “Why aren’t you on suppressants anyway?” he snapped. “Isn’t that standard procedure?”

Liz shook her head desolately. “My husband and I are trying for a baby. I didn’t plan on being in an environment like this, you guys just swooped in. And it’s not like it ever happens this way! I don’t know him – I mean, we barely touched!”

“Yeah that’s another thing” Ressler continued. “You expect me to buy that you’ve never met Reddington before? He asks for you and then this happens? The bureau are gonna have a lot of questions for you. I can’t see how they could keep you on after this.”

Liz closed her eyes as the further implications of her situation hit her. “They can ask all they want” she ground out. “I’ve never met him before. I don’t know how this happened.”

“Oh I know how it happened” he responded patronisingly. “An omega decides that the FBI is an appropriate career choice, and then fails to take precautions, compromising an operation that began before she even got her diploma.”

Liz’s mouth dropped open. “Screw you! I graduated top of my class” she spat. “I’m extremely good at what I do. I don’t accept that I can’t work in law enforcement just because of my sexuality.”
Ressler looked shocked. “You sure have a mouth on you for an omega, I’ll give you that. But you shouldn’t talk to your superiors that way, not round here.”

Liz’s heart began to pound even harder – it wasn’t just her arousal that was heightened, it was anger too. She felt sweat gather on the back of her neck and under her arms as the heat raged inside her. “Superiors? What’s that supposed to mean? You mean because you’re a senior agent? Or because you’re an alpha and I’m an omega – is that what you really meant? Jerk.”

Ressler sighed. “Look, don’t get me wrong. I’m all for omega-feminism but not when it endangers lives and stops me doing my job.”

Liz shook her head exasperatedly. “Just drive me home please. I need to go home.”

He cleared his throat again. “Ah, I’m having a female agent escort you home - agent Malik. She’s with CIA counter terrorism and she’ll liaise on the case. I’m just waiting for her to come in. Sorry” he muttered, “I don’t think it’s a good idea for me to be in a car with you. Confined space, you know” he finished awkwardly. “I’ll send Malik down as soon as she gets in.”

Liz watched speechlessly as he left the room, closing the door behind him. She was horrified by how he had been looking at her as if he wanted to tear her clothes off, and he wasn’t even the one who had put her in heat – he’d effectively said he couldn’t even be alone in a car with her! She knew the biology behind it, and she’d felt ready. But nothing had prepared her for this; the sheer powerlessness, the humiliation, the aching, trembling need.

Moments later she heard men’s voices echoing in the corridor, and the stomp of the guards’ boots as they passed by the infirmary. She was suddenly overcome with fear – what if they came in and found her? What would they do? She’d heard about omegas in heat being gang-raped, but it never occurred to her that she would have anything to fear. It was supposed to happen in the privacy of her own home, with her husband, who loved her. Instead she was here, alone, the throbbing slick between her legs aching to be touched by man who was so much older than her, a dangerous criminal with a voice like heat itself.

She was relieved when Agent Malik entered the infirmary. She shut the door carefully and shot Liz an appraising look. When she spoke it was with a down to earth British accent. “I’m Meera Malik. I hear you’re having a really shit day.”


“This is your first heat?”

Liz nodded. “You need to prepare yourself. It’s going to get a lot harder in the next twenty four hours” Meera said grimly. “If there’s anything you need to do urgently get it done now. Your mind clouds and your body progressively weakens – it’s like losing all your power.”

“You’re an omega?” Liz asked, surprised.

“Yes. But I get suppressant injections and as far as I’m concerned that makes me like any normal beta.”

“There aren’t many of us in law enforcement.”

“The idea that omegas can’t work in high stress or enforcement jobs is complete bollocks – it’s just
the knuckle-dragging alphas who run the show can’t deal with us being anything other than subservient sex-objects” she said exasperatedly. “With the right medication it shouldn’t matter whether someone is an alpha, beta or omega.”

“Except there’s no medication for this” Liz said quietly. “Either they let Reddington knot me, or I most likely die. I honestly don’t know which option I’d prefer at this point.”

Meera gave her a wry smile. “Yeah it’s messed up, right? The wrong guy puts you in heat and having sex with him is the only cure. But then it’s only 6% of the population that has this problem, and they’re all women. Do you think there wouldn’t have been a scientific breakthrough if this happened to men? As it is omegas will probably die out eventually – being forced to have sex in order to survive isn’t exactly my idea of an evolutionary advantage.”

Liz stared bleakly out of the window. “I don’t know what to do.”

Meera gave her a sympathetic look. “I reckon you’ve got to shag him. But don’t think that means he owns you - get what you need from him to survive and move on with your life, yeah?”

A horrible thought occurred to Liz and she breathed in sharply. “What if he won’t? What if he just lets me die? He’s a criminal, he’s probably killed hundreds of people, it won’t matter to him – he won’t care what happens to me!”

“Hey” Meera said firmly. “Take some deep breaths and calm down. Did he give you any reason to think he wouldn’t be prepared to go through with it?”

Liz paused, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth. “No, he was…sweet, actually. He even seemed concerned.”

“Well there you are then” Meera said briskly. “Alphas want to do their duty, it’s a pretty powerful urge. I don’t care who he is or what he’s done, he’ll be pining for you before long.”

Liz looked up, overwhelmed with the strangeness of the idea – the notorious criminal brooding and yearning for her. She remembered the dark and wild expression on his face when Ressler had led her away from him, the way he’d almost broken the chains binding him. She swallowed, her earlier panic returning.

“And if he says yes? What if he hurts me? What if he’s…violent? I swear he looked like he was going to tear Agent Ressler’s head off! Oh God I can’t, this is too much-”

Meera looked uncomfortable but spoke matter-of-factly. “Don’t worry about that until you have to.”

Liz shook her head in disbelief. “You know, I studied Reddington at the Academy. The concierge of crime. I don’t remember anything about him being an alpha.”

“It’s not the kind of thing they’d want to advertise” Meera said derisively. “The country’s brightest and best are alphas – it’s practically a requirement to run for political office. They don’t want to admit that an alpha could betray their country and set up a criminal empire.”

“Or bond with an omega FBI agent. I imagine they’ll want to keep that quiet too” Liz laughed bitterly.

“Yeah” Meera sighed. “For now, let’s just get you home.”

“Right. Home” Liz echoed desolately. “So I can tell my husband that I’m bonded to another man.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Please heed the archive warnings and note an additional warning for domestic violence. Don't read if this triggers or offends.

Liz’s stomach swirled unpleasantly as she crossed the threshold of her house. The dizziness was getting markedly worse as her temperature rose, and she was overwhelmed with the uncomfortable thought that if she just lay down it would be alright. She thought again of the man, the criminal, the way he had looked at her as though he owned her. She shook her head. She needed to focus for this conversation. Poor Tom. He was so devoted to her, he didn’t deserve this any more than she did. She leant heavily against the front door for a moment before moving into the living room. She heard Tom’s voice calling from the kitchen.

“Babe? You Ok? The doctor called and said you missed your appointment.”

He rounded the corner to the living room and stopped when he saw her tear stained face. “God Liz, what’s happened?” He walked quickly to her and drew her into a hug. She felt the exact moment he realised. He stiffened and drew back from her, his face alarmed and mouth set in a thin line. “Liz – why do you smell like another man?” he said slowly, his face darkening. “What have you done?”

She tried to speak and a sob escaped her lips. “It’s happened Tom, I’m…”

“You’re in heat” he finished for her, stepping backwards.

“Yes” she whispered. “I’m so sorry Tom. You have to know I didn’t do this on purpose.”

He sat down heavily and looked up at her. “How long have you been seeing someone else?” His voice was tight and cold.

Her mouth opened in shock and panic. “Tom! It’s not like that. I’ve never even met him before today.”

“Right” Tom said incredulously, shaking his head.

She took a step towards him and then stopped, painfully aware of how her scent would undermine what she had to say. She swallowed, trying to stay calm.

“Listen, I know you’re hurt and this is a shock but we can get through this. It’ll be once, a onetime thing” she said quickly, hating the words as she said them. “I don’t need to stay with him, and I don’t want to. We can get past this. We love each other, we can survive this… I can try to fight it, maybe I’ll be ok…” she added desperately. Her lip trembled as she spoke, frantically trying to find a way for it to be ok. But it wasn’t.

Tom laughed strangely, an hysterical high pitched, derisive sound that she’d never heard from him before. “You can’t fight it Liz, you know that. It’s what you’re made for” he said, staring at her with a bitter smirk. “So who is he? Who’s the guy who’s gonna fuck my wife?”

“Tom!” Liz frowned, appalled by his harsh words and the alien expression on his face. All she
wanted was for her husband to comfort her. “You don’t understand. It’s so awful. He’s an informant for the FBI.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “An informant? You mean a criminal…”

“It’s worse” she whispered, wiping the tears from her eyes. “He is – was – an international fugitive. The things he’s done… He’s a murderer and a traitor. And now I’ve got to sleep with him in order to survive, it’s so horrible. God, all he did was touch my hand for a second. That was it. You do believe me, don’t you?”

As he listened to her Tom grew pale and removed his glasses, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It’s Reddington, isn’t it?” he said finally, looking up at her with eyes full of hatred.

Her stomach lurched as she registered his words. “What did you say?” she gasped. “How do you know about Reddington?”

Tom didn’t answer, only stood up and began pacing the room agitatedly, balling his fists at his sides. “How long have you known about him?” He shot at her.

Liz frowned in confusion, choking back sobs, trying to ignore the uncomfortable warmth under her suit. “Tom please, I haven’t met him before today! Why are you being like this?”

She yelped as he suddenly sprang towards her,grabbing a fistful of her hair and yanking her head back. His glasses lay forgotten on the table. “Don’t lie to me Liz. How long have you known” he said, shaking her. “When did Reddington contact you? There’s no way he touches you once and you’re ready to have his fucking children.”

Tears of shock began to stream down her face. “What are you doing! Tom stop, please, you’re hurting me!”

He let go of her roughly and she stumbled backwards. “Tom, what the hell!” she yelled.

For a moment her fragmented thoughts tried to make sense of it while her scalp burned and her body sweated and throbbed. Her kind, gentle husband had never behaved this way, this just wasn’t him.

She watched in horror as he ran his hands over his face talking almost to himself. “Oh God, I’m a dead man. I should have known… you were never mine. You were always his.”

“What are you talking about?” she choked desperately as her husband’s face twisted into cold fury. She didn’t even recognise him.

He shook his head and an unpleasant smile crept across his lips as he approached her again. This time she shrank back from him, but he reached out and gripped the back of her neck with his hand like she was a wayward kitten; it was now just a parody of a caring alpha gesture.

“So now Liz, don’t play innocent with me” he crooned in a sing-song voice. His breath was hot on her face and suddenly smelled so wrong, like saccharine and acid and lies. “Be a good little bitch and tell me the truth. How long have you known about Reddington? Did you know when we got married, hmmm? You’ve known this whole time?”

She stared up at him speechlessly and he tightened his grip on the back of her neck, bringing his other hand up to cup her face, his thumb pressing painfully into her cheek bone. “You’re so pretty Liz. I know all omegas are, but you…” he said softly, “I fell in love with you the first time I saw your picture. You looked like an angel.” He let out a harsh laugh. “Maybe that’s why I didn’t see what a deceitful little slut you are. Is this an omega thing, huh? You think you can lie to me because
I’m not an alpha?”

“No Tom” she gasped finally “please! What do you mean you saw my picture? I don’t understand what’s happening-”

He tutted and shook his head again. “Wrong answer, Liz.” With that he shoved her to the ground and delivered a lazy kick to her ribs. “Last chance”, he spat, “tell me what you know.”

She was too shocked to speak or fight back. Even if she could, she was weak and her limbs felt heavy. Agent Malik was right, she thought numbly. It was like all your power is gone.

“God, you smell like a nasty little slut, you know that? You stink of him. Reddington’s little whore.” Tom’s harsh voice floated over her before he kicked her again. She curled into a ball, sobbing on the floor as pain radiated through her.

He knelt over her, feigning an apologetic smile. “I think our marriage is officially over. Goodbye Liz.” With that he delivered a calculated punch to her head and her world went black.

Reddington watched calmly as Cooper approached the containment box. “Where is she Harold? There’s no use in hiding her from me. I think you’ll agree Agent Keen and I have much to discuss.”

Cooper looked uncomfortable and Reddington’s expression darkened. “What’s happened?” he asked in a low voice.

“She’s in the hospital” Cooper responded. “You were right – her husband didn’t take the news well. She’ll be ok, a neighbour heard the commotion and put a call into the local PD.”

Reddington’s face hardened, his eyes boring into Cooper. “How badly was she injured?” he said quietly.

“Bruised ribs and a mild concussion. She’s going to be fine – I think the shock is worse than anything else.”

Reddington nodded slowly and looked away for a moment. “And where is Tom Keen now?” he said, his voice low and dangerous.

Cooper shook his head. “In the wind. We’re going to find him. You can rest assured he’ll pay for this.”

“Oh I know he will” Reddington responded darkly.

Cooper paused and looked at him thoughtfully. “You expect me to believe it’s a coincidence that you warn Agent Keen not to see her husband and then this happens? I think you’d better start giving me some answers.”

Reddington’s face turned blank and he sat back in his chair, his jaw tight. “I think not. I’ve been more than patient, but you have to give to get, Harold. Let’s start with swapping that dingy prison cell for a hotel room. I’ve had quite enough of chains and boxes. The Sofitel would do nicely - the presidential suite. Tell them I prefer blankets instead of a comforter and I expect fresh fruit to be delivered every morning – you wouldn’t believe how difficult it is to get one’s five a day when being detained courtesy of Uncle Sam. It’s as though they’re running a bizarre scheme to maintain a race of vitamin deficient criminals.”
Cooper regarded him sceptically. “The Sofitel, blankets, fruit… This is a smokescreen. You’re not interested in swanky hotels. You just want out of here so you can get to Agent Keen.”

Reddington smiled graciously. “I can assure you I’m most interested in the arrangements for my accommodation. And if you’re interested in my help preventing crimes that have already been set in motion by the names on my list, you’ll see that my request is fulfilled. The clock’s ticking, Harold.”

Cooper folded his arms. “I’ll see what I can do about the hotel, as a temporary measure until we can discuss terms. But understand, you’ll be fitted with a tracking chip and will be there under armed guard. Stay away from Agent Keen.”

Reddington’s eye twitched fractionally. “I’m sure you’re aware that will become increasingly difficult.”

Cooper sighed and ran his hand over his brow. “If she wants to see you naturally I won’t prevent it. But it’s her choice.”

Reddington looked up from his crossword puzzle as his hotel room door crashed open, revealing an enraged Agent Keen. A frown crossed his features as he observed her. She had stitches on her temple and a faint bruise forming on her cheek, but her large eyes were sparkling blue with anger. She kicked the door shut behind her and strode into the room.

“You’re going to tell me what the hell is going on!” she yelled. “Tell me how he knew about you. How do you know Tom?”

Reddington regarded her, his expression etched with concern. “Lizzie why aren’t you in hospital? Did you discharge yourself? That was foolish, especially in your current condition” he said carefully.

“As if you care!” Liz’s heart was thumping in her chest; fear, adrenaline, the heat – it all seemed more pronounced the moment she was in a room with him again. “Tell me how my husband knew about you!”

Reddington ignored the question, tilting his head to the side as if trying to assess her injuries for himself. “Are you alright?” he asked softly.

“No. No I am not alright. I feel like my body isn’t my own – like I don’t know who I am anymore! My husband, a man I thought loved me…” she broke off as she felt sobs rising in her chest. “I’m bonded to… to a monster” she shot at him angrily, her eyes like fire. She couldn’t stop the tears coming and she raised her hands to cover her face. “Please… tell me why he hurt me” she sobbed.

Reddington looked pained and he sat in silence, working his jaw for a moment while she began to pace the floor in front of him. Finally he clasped his hands in front of himself on the table. “Tell me exactly what he said to you.”

Liz took a ragged breath. “He said your name. Asked me if it was you who had done this. Asked how long I’ve known about you. I told him I didn’t know what he was talking about and he…”

“He struck you” Reddington supplied gently.

She wiped her tears away angrily. “He said I was your whore” she whispered. “That he should have known I was yours.” She looked up at the ceiling to blink away more tears and missed a dark flash of anger cross Reddington’s face. “He wasn’t Tom” she continued. “That man today – he just wasn’t
“Well we agree on that” Reddington said evenly.

She rounded on him, her voice cracking with tears and rage. “When you came into the FBI… did you know what would happen? Did you do this to me on purpose? Did you do this so you could-”

“No” he responded sharply, giving her a stern look. “Don’t ever think that Elizabeth.”

Frightened by the severity of his tone, she looked away for a moment before trying again. “Tell me what you know about Tom.”

“Why don’t we talk about you” he responded, fixing her with a gentle stare. “Our little predicament.”

This time she returned his heady gaze and every nerve ending in her body began to sing. He gave her an infuriating little smile, as though he knew exactly what she was feeling; to her horror she felt the dull throbbing between her legs intensify, and slickness began to coat her thighs. His smile vanished instantly and his nostrils flared slightly. Instinctively she stepped back away from him and winced as she felt a pang from her bruised ribs.

She saw his shoulders tense, his hands gripping the sides of the table as if forcing himself to stay seated. “Lizzie…” His voice had dropped so low, like a warning, the timbre of it sending shivers through her. She felt hurt and vulnerable – she hated it passionately. Being in his presence made her feel so weak. She wanted him to hold her, to comfort her in spite of herself.

“You can’t ignore this” he said firmly.

She felt panic rise in her chest. “What, you expect me to spread for you right here in your ridiculous hotel room?” she said incredulously.

She felt a shiver of fear as his lip twitched and his face darkened. “No” he said, his tone clipped. “But I do expect you to behave like an adult and address the issue. As you quite indelicately pointed out, the bond needs to be consummated. I won’t require anything of you after the deed is done” he finished tersely.

He was displeased with her; she had offended him with her crude comment and she felt a bizarre urge to kneel at the feet of this criminal, to apologise and have him cradle her face and tell her everything was ok. It was utterly unbearable, so instead she went with another instinct. Anger. How dare he. He didn’t own her; he had no right to her body.

Since the moment he had touched her she had felt owned. She had become property, there for sex, primed for sex, for him, and what was worse, everybody knew it. Having fought so long for professional credibility it was now gone in a heartbeat, along with her husband. Enraged, she strode towards him, grabbed his pen from where it lay on top of his crossword and unceremoniously jammed it into his neck. Whilst she thought of nothing except hot, blind anger as she did it, afterwards her psychologist’s training would tell her that her instinct to penetrate his neck with a phallic object was her way of trying to restore the power imbalance.

As she did it he grunted, raising his hand to cover hers where it hovered at his carotid and oh God it was like fire lighting inside her. Their hands clutched together, warm and sliding while his blood flowed between their fingers; she wanted to taste it, she wanted him to taste her, to mark her as she had him. The smell in the room was electric – the metallic tang of blood, musk and pure sex that ignited all her senses. She ached for him, a deep uncontrollable throbbing that made her moan audibly in spite of herself as she felt his heart pumping the blood under her hand.
Terrified of her thoughts and by what she had done, she dropped the bloody pen on the table and fled from the room.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

This is the first of my fics to which I have applied an E rating and I’ve done it for a good reason – in addition to explicit content this chapter contains extremely dubious consent. Please do avoid if this triggers or offends.

Five days after the hotel room incident Reddington swept into Cooper’s office at the black site, his expression grim.

“It’s been days Harold and not a word. She hasn’t returned home, she hasn’t visited friends or relatives. That leaves you” he said, his eyes glittering and tone dangerous. “You’re hiding her from me. This ends, now.” As he spoke, sweat seeped into the collar of his shirt, chafing and stinging the healing wound on his neck where she’d stabbed him.

Cooper clasped his hands together on his desk, looking uncomfortable. “Agent Keen informed me that she would call when she was ready. Until she tells me otherwise, I won’t divulge her location to you or anyone else.”

Reddington could feel the testosterone coursing through him, a vein on his temple throbbing noticeably. His cool exterior was one of his chief defence mechanisms; having it stripped away by uncontrollable urges, this need to find her, protect her, to mate her, was becoming unbearable.

“You’ve spoken with her?” he said sharply, clicking his tongue against his teeth. “Does she understand what’s happening to her?”

“Don’t underestimate her” Cooper responded testily.

Reddington tilted his head sharply. “Oh, I’m not underestimating her. She survived a brutal attack by her husband while battling a relentless chemical reaction designed to force her body to submit.” He paused and shook his head, raising his hand to the wound on his neck. “She risked killing the one person who could save her to make her point. I assure you I’m not underestimating her for a second” he finished with feeling.

“She stabbed you in the neck” Cooper pointed out.

A ghost of a smile crossed Reddington’s lips. “Yes she did” he murmured softly.

Cooper raised his eyebrows. “I see…” he said slowly. “Regardless, it’s up to her to decide when she’s ready.”

Reddington removed his fedora and sat down heavily, fixing Cooper with an iron stare. “Has it occurred to you that she may not be able to call? She could be seriously ill by now.” He broke off abruptly, aware that he was allowing panic to seep into his voice. How unexpected it was that he was struggling to control this, after all these years. When he spoke again his tone was soft and dreadful. “How long are you going to wait, Harold. How long until it’s too late.”
Cooper removed his glasses and tossed them on the desk, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’m aware that time is passing” he said quietly. “And I’d be lying if I said I don’t have concerns that she hasn’t accepted the severity of the situation.” He sighed before continuing. “I am also aware that I bear some responsibility here – I brought her in without going through the proper channels and taking appropriate precautions. It’s been a long time since I dealt with rookie omega agents.”

Reddington’s features softened. “Harold, as hard as it is to believe, right now I am not the enemy. I have no desire to allow my carelessness - or yours - to cost a young woman her life. We both want the same thing here.” He rose from his seat and looked directly down at Cooper, his tone resolute. “I will find her. It would be better for her if it were sooner rather than later. Where is she?”

Cooper looked away for a moment, before opening a drawer in the desk and removing a hotel key card, which he handed to Reddington. “The Duchess Suite at the Fairfax. We hold it as an exchange post for our agents coming in from the field… She’ll have her service weapon with her” he added uncomfortably.

Reddington nodded his understanding, before taking the key and making for the door.

“Reddington…” He turned back from the door to observe Cooper’s furrowed brow. “Don’t hurt her.” He nodded again, although his expression was bleak. They both understood the reality of the situation. This was a pact with the devil.

As he entered the suite her smell assaulted his senses, making his cock rage in his pants. She was lying on the bed wearing only a T-shirt and panties, her eyes shut and her fingers closed around her cell phone. He saw her badge and gun on the sideboard and moved there first, swiftly removing the magazine from the Glock. It wasn’t a necessary precaution he thought as he observed her, weak and feverish on the bed. She was too far gone to defend herself. He wished to God it hadn’t come to this – even without the delay in consummation it would hurt her. He wondered if she knew that.

Sensing his presence in the room, she opened her eyes and whimpered when she saw him. She shook her head vehemently. “No. No!” She tried to move away but he knew her poor limbs wouldn’t obey her instinct to run at this point.

He removed his jacket and hat and placed them neatly on a chair, before walking to the bed and sitting next to her. Her features contorted in terror as he carefully removed the phone from her hand and placed it on the nightstand.

He smiled gently and spoke as softly as he could. “Hello Lizzie. Why didn’t you call sweetheart? Why do this to yourself?”

She was covered in a sheen of sweat and locks of her hair clung to her face, which was, he noted, still a little bruised from her attack. It was heart-breaking. He placed a gentle hand on her forehead and found that she was burning up, her eyes glazed. The gesture seemed to relax her though, and after a few moments she answered him.

“I thought I’d have more time” she said, her breathing shallow. “I thought…maybe I could beat it. If I was just strong enough…”

Reddington frowned, his expression pained. “Oh sweetheart, you are so strong. But it doesn’t work like that. I’m sorry. Believe me if there were another way I would find it for you.”
He moved away for a minute and returned with a glass of cold water and a damp cloth. He sat back beside her on the bed, holding her up and bringing the water glass to her lips. She drank gratefully before sinking back onto the pillow. He proceeded to wipe the cool cloth gently over her face.

She turned her eyes upwards to look at him. “How are you so calm?” she breathed. “Don’t you feel it too?”

Reddington laughed gently. “Don’t be fooled. I have more testosterone in my system than a teenage boy at a public swimming pool. My God, I almost tore Harold’s head clean off this morning…” his words died on his lips as he saw Liz’s face crumple with the sting of betrayal.

“Cooper… he sent you. He gave you my room key and sent you to -”

Reddington’s mouth twitched and he cut her off. “It’s not that simple. You can imagine Harold was extremely reluctant, but at the end of the day, we both want what’s best for you.”

She let out a bitter laugh and shook her head. “Right. So if I say no? If I tell you to go?”

He swallowed hard. She had to test the boundaries - that was only natural. But he had always said to himself that he would never lie to her.

“I believe I will always do whatever I have to do to keep you alive.”

At that she began to cry, enraged, frustrated sobs with what little energy she had left, her hands balled into angry fists. He shifted uncomfortably on the bed, attempting to conceal the bulge in his pants from her so as not to frighten her further. Her scent was driving him wild, a heady musk of fear and arousal that he needed to consume – he wanted to drown in it. Without a doubt a younger or lesser man would not have been able to maintain this level of self-control.

Taking a deep breath, he reached for her hand. “I’ve found that it seems to be my role in life to darken my soul for the sake of others. I am capable of doing despicable things so that others might live.” He offered her a sad smile and spoke as kindly as he could. “And that’s what’s at stake here, Lizzie. You don’t want to die, do you.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head, and, relieved, he laid his hand gently on her cheek, wiping away a tear with his thumb.

“Good girl. You’ve been so brave, Lizzie. So brave. It’s time to let me help you.”

He lent down to place the gentlest kiss on her forehead, before moving slowly to her mouth, tasting her exquisite lips for the first time. She moaned involuntarily as he made contact, her body arching up instinctively towards him. He withdrew, breathless as he felt the surge inside him.

“I need to ask you a few questions first, can you manage that?” he asked as calmly as he could.

She nodded, sniffing and angrily swallowing tears, refusing to meet his eye.

“Good. Do you understand how the process works?”

Liz’s ears turned pink with embarrassment and indignation. “Of course, I’m not some clueless teenager!”

“‘I know Lizzie” he responded patiently. “I need to ensure that we get you through this successfully. While I will do my utmost not to hurt you, there will be some pain. It can be…distressing. Especially the first time.” He took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. “If you can’t stay still for the
knot I will have to make you. Some omegas prefer to be restrained—"

“No!” Liz’s face paled in terror, her eyes growing enormous. “No please don’t do that!”

He placed his hand on her forehead, gently stroking her hair and face to calm her. “Shhh sweetheart, don’t worry. I won’t, not if you don’t want it.” He looked down at her damp, quivering body, and ran his thumb over her trembling lip.

“I’m going to take my shirt off now” he said hoarsely, removing his vest and working at the buttons of his shirt, careful not to let her see his scarred back. Now wasn’t the time for that conversation. She was too weak to be an active participant, which would at least reduce the likelihood that she would notice, he thought bitterly. She said nothing, but tried to reach for him with one hand, desperately in need of skin contact.

He smiled gently. “Soon, Lizzie. May I take your shirt off too? You must be very warm. Let’s make you more comfortable.”

He reached out and gently peeled the sweat-soaked T-shirt up and over her head. He had already observed the peaks of her nipples through the thin fabric – she wasn’t wearing a bra, and he grunted his approval when she was revealed to him, her small, rosy breasts swollen and pink, her slim body glistening with sweat and desire.

“You are exquisite, Lizzie” he breathed. “Let me see all of you.” He hooked his fingers into the top of her panties and tugged them down. Miserably embarrassed, she put her hand down to cover her swollen sex, but he took her wrist and moved her hand gently but firmly away.

“No sweetheart, don’t hide from me. There’s no need to feel ashamed. It’s perfectly natural.”

His eyes roamed over her body, drinking her in, the alpha in him brimming with lust and pride that the girl lying naked in front of him needed him to survive. He put his hand gently on her thigh, stroking her with his thumb, and heard her groan unhappily.

“Just breathe Lizzie, try to relax. I’m not going to harm you. You’re safe with me” he murmured in soft, reassuring tones. “Now, I want you to bend your knees a little and when you’re ready, just open your legs.”

She choked out a sob of bitter shame but did as he asked, exposing herself fully to him as his large hands helped her position herself. When it was done he stroked his hand slowly up and down the inside of her thigh, higher each time until he reached her sex, swollen and dripping with arousal. Very gently, he slipped a finger inside, testing her readiness.

He groaned involuntarily, and she let out another angry sob as he explored her gently with his finger. “Lizzie look at me…I know you are frightened, and I’m sorry for that, but I promise you are ready - your body has prepared you wonderfully.” He drew back and spoke softly. “I want you to touch yourself.”


“Much as I cannot deny that the prospect of you pleasuring yourself for my benefit is torturously arousing, I want you to do it so that you can feel how ready you are. To help you relax.”

Her cheeks flamed with embarrassment, but just as he hoped, the soft timbre of his voice reassuring and instructing her was enough to compel her to obey him. Hesitantly she slid her hand down, and he watched as she touched herself, while his cock strained so hard at the fabric of his pants the
discomfort was unbearable.

Never taking his eyes off her, he quickly undid his belt buckle and removed the rest of his clothes. As his erection was freed the gland at the base was already beginning to swell, and he saw her retreat, drawing her legs together while quiet, breathy sobs tumbled from her mouth. She was starting to panic and it occurred to him too late that she had probably never seen an alpha penis before.

In a heartbeat he was kneeling over her on the bed, painfully aware of her trembling, her eyes fixed on his groin.

“Lizzie look at me, just look at me. It’s going to be alright. You’re safe, I promise.”

Quieting at the sound of his voice she met his eye, and he wasted no more time, positioning himself between her legs and penetrating her with a smooth thrust, holding her firmly in case she panicked again. As he entered her they both cried out, not least with relief that the process their bodies had been yearning for over the last week was finally underway.

He moved slowly inside her in long, measured strokes, breathing hard through his nose and resisting a desperate need to rut, to fuck – to ravage her. Poor girl, he thought as he looked at her beautiful, tear-stained face below him, her eyes squeezed shut. Nature was a cruel mistress. As he seated himself fully on top of her he couldn’t remember ever having felt more aroused, but was simultaneously disgusted at himself as the alpha in him wanted to force her to submit, to leave his marks on her milky skin and hear her cry just so that he could comfort her. It sickened him.

He was pleasantly surprised when he felt her begin to move her hips a little beneath him, rubbing herself against him almost unconsciously, scenting him and seeking her own pleasure. He reached down to stroke her face, coaxing her to open her eyes. “Lizzie… would you like to come sweetheart?” he said softly. “Do you want me to make you come?”

Her shimmering blue eyes were still fierce with anger and shame, but she nodded. “I need to” she ground out, as if she couldn’t bear to ask.

“I know” he breathed, bending down to kiss her wet cheek, savouring the salty taste of sweat and tears. “You’re ok. I’m going to make you feel so good sweetheart.”

He reached down between them, coating his fingers in her slick and began to lightly stroke her clit, working his fingers gently through her folds. He could feel how close she was, and allowed himself to smile at the sounds of her moans and the rapturous scent of her arousal increasing as he slid his fingers over the wet, swollen bud of nerves, matching each stroke with the thrust of his hips.

“Mm…Mmm…Please” she mewled helplessly, arching off the bed to grind against him, completely lacking in rhythm or control. It was delightful.

“That’s it sweet girl, let go…you’re such a good girl…” he panted, drawing the fingers of his other hand through her hair as he touched her. He pulled her head gently back as he bent down and breathed into her neck “come for me Lizzie. You’re alright, just let go, sweetheart…”

He rocked languorously back and forth, his penis stretching her and rubbing that sweet spot inside her while his fingers slid over her clit again and again until he felt her contract tightly around him as she orgasmed, her arousal soaking the sheets and her little cries of pleasure ringing in his ears.

He thought again of the imperative, and imagined her breasts and belly swelling in pregnancy as his child grew inside her. With that he lost the control he had fought to maintain, a deep pull inside him taking over his conscious thought as he slammed his hips forward, thrusting mercilessly for a few
short bursts until his cock began to swell and pump inside her. Despite his best efforts to remain as quiet as possible out of respect for her, he let out a gruff shout as he began to ejaculate, overcome by intense pleasure as the knot expanded, locking them together.

His breathing labored, he held her tightly to ensure she didn’t try to move and risk hurting herself or worse, not completing the process. He loathed himself as he heard her whimper in distress, her cries becoming harsher as the knot stretched her harder. He braced himself for her to struggle but she remained still and he felt a rush of pride; his omega – the girl he had rescued years ago- had grown up to be so good, so brave and beautiful.

Instinctively he placed his palm firmly on the back of her neck and held her to him, murmuring endearments and kissing her head while she buried her face in his chest, wetting it with tears and sniffles and open-mouthed sobs. Not once did she try to move though, nor did she beg him to stop, only clung to him, her fingers sliding clumsily on the sweat gathering at the back of his neck, beading on his soft, short hair. She didn’t ask the impossible and he was so grateful for that. As he finished he whispered to her that he was sorry from the bottom of his heart, but she was already limp in his arms, passed out from pain and exhaustion.

Still inside her, he laid them both down carefully, resting her head on his chest, kissing her hair, and praying that it didn’t take, that there would be no child to complicate her life further, to remind her of this, or for him to endanger just by virtue of being the father. He freed himself from her as soon as he was able, and pulled the blanket up to cover her, before tenderly brushing her hair off her face with his hand. She looked so peaceful now, in marked contrast to earlier. He never wanted to see a woman look at him in pure terror ever again, especially not her.

Just a week ago when he had turned himself in he was curious to see the woman she had become, but did not predict he’d feel anything but affection for the little girl who had come through the flames with him. Now, looking at her sleeping form he thought he had never seen a more beautiful creature; the light and hope with which he had always associated her seemed to radiate from her soft features. And she was going to hate him forever, he thought bleakly. He had always known that she would eventually. But not like this.

He held his hand to her forehead before checking her pulse, relieved to find that she was cooling and her heart rate was returning to normal. He needed to know that she was going to be ok before he left; painful as it was, he knew that she would not wish to wake with him at her side.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liz woke alone, feeling rested, as though she had come out of a long, deep sleep. The events that had transpired came back to her in flashes and she struggled to make sense of it. He had come to her, in the end. Would she have asked eventually? Or would she have soldiered on by herself, feverish and sick as her temperature and estrogen levels continued to rise, ravaging her immune system until she died in pain and alone.

Over the last week she had grown more determined thinking about being at the mercy of the notorious criminal; her body had ached for him until it hurt, but her mind - everything she was as a person - said that she wasn’t giving in to him. He was a murderer. How naïve would it be to think that he wouldn’t hurt her. That he wouldn’t take some sadistic pleasure in it. He had no right. But once he was there, the timbre of his voice and the genuine emotion reflected in his eyes had caught her off-guard. He had seemed so understanding. Tender, even.

Pushing the thought away she rose from the bed and went to shower, allowing the hot water to soothe her, washing away the tears and sweat and their mixed fluids from her body until she felt a little more herself. As the water poured over her she kept waiting for the tears to flow, to be consumed by horror, or shame, but the feelings refused to come.

She shivered despite the warmth of the water, recalling his hands on her. Soaping her breasts it occurred to her that he hadn’t touched them. In fact, he hadn’t touched her gratuitously at all – the only thing he had taken that wasn’t necessary was a single kiss.

She slapped her palm hard against the shower wall. If he had just used her, been violent or careless it would be easier to hate him, to call this what it was. But now, no matter how hard she scrubbed herself clean, he was still there, in every cell of her being, not evil or invading, but caring, comforting. It was somehow worse, she thought; she had nothing left in her life but anger, and it felt like he was trying to take that from her too.

When she exited the bathroom in a terry cloth robe there was a knock at the door. She looked cautiously through the peephole and was relieved to see that it was just a member of hotel staff with a trolley, an older woman with a steely black bob and glasses. She opened the door and saw that the trolley was laden with treats and a bouquet of flowers; sweet and savory pastries, exquisitely decorated chocolates in an artisanal box that didn’t appear to be from the hotel, a multivitamin drink in a glass bottle, and a delicate bouquet of the purest white roses.

“Let me get my purse-” she began.

“It’s been taken care of, Ms Keen. And you have the room as long as you require.” The woman gave her a sharp, appraising look before smiling almost sympathetically and disappearing down the corridor.

Liz frowned after the woman, noting that she seemed to melt away into a fire exit at the end of the hall. Taking the trolley inside she saw that there was an envelope tucked in between the dishes. Taking a deep breath she opened it, and withdrew two business cards. The first one bore the name, contact details and credentials of a doctor – Dr Deborah Kaiser, OBGYN. Her frown deepened and she looked at the other card, which was blank except for a cell phone number hand written in red ink, and a note which read:
Ready, she thought, panic rising in her chest. Ready for what? They’d done what had to be done, it was over - he had no further right to her. There was a time in the not so distant past when an alpha had a right to claim an omega he had bonded with; legally he could have sex with her without her consent, beat her within accepted disciplinary limits and take ownership of her property.

The law had changed in 1976, giving omegas the right to full freedom after a bond had been consummated. Technically speaking they had no right to refuse consummation though – suicide is still a crime. Liz shuddered. She wasn’t old enough to remember what things were like before omega rights had been ratified, but he was, she thought uncomfortably.

She swallowed, steeling herself. Whatever his views and expectations were, she didn’t care. She just wanted to put it behind her and try to pick up the pieces of her life. She could hardly be his handler at the FBI now. She didn’t even know if she had a job to go to. If there was a child… No. She couldn’t even think about that possibility now.

She tossed the cards aside and grabbed one of the pastries, taking a huge bite and barely chewing. She was ravenously hungry. An hour later, clean, fed and rested, she checked out of the hotel, leaving the cards behind in the room.

Assistant Director Cooper sat in his office, withering under the icy gaze of Diane Fowler, the head of the counter terrorism unit. Much as he had a strong and sensible head on his shoulders, the last couple of weeks had been something else. How could it be that just two people, a single criminal and a young omega agent, could have multiple government agencies scrambling, pushing their own agendas or just wanting to distance themselves from the mess? All this while Reddington sat serenely in his hotel room like Julian Assange, with chaos unfolding all around him.

He thought about the bottle of scotch in his desk drawer, and then looked at the alpha woman in front of him, the pearls on her bracelet clacking together as she spoke animatedly. The scotch could wait.

“This is a poisoned chalice Harold, no one wants to touch it – are we really going to be the ones to give Reddington immunity?”

Cooper sighed. “He’s been playing in the big leagues for twenty years. There isn’t a major criminal operation he doesn’t know about.”

“And how would I justify this?”

“You don’t. It’s completely off the books.”

Fowler arched an eyebrow, pursing her lips. “What about the girl? Agent Keen. Her bond with Reddington. She can have no part of this, she’s obviously compromised.”

Cooper shook his head. “That’s the catch. She’s part of the package. Otherwise the deal’s off.”

Fowler scoffed. “What does he want? Conjugal visits?”

“He wants her to liaise between him and the team. He’d bring his cases to her - there’s no suggestion that it would be anything other than a professional arrangement.”
She laughed derisively. “I’d sooner appoint her courtesan to the entire most wanted list than allow her to run point on one of the most important intelligence coups of the century. You honestly expect me to believe they’ve never met before? We’re being made fools of, Harold.”

Cooper bristled, privately disgusted by the older woman’s tone. “We’ve dug deep. There’s no connection that we can see. And for what it’s worth, they both appeared genuinely shocked when the bond happened. In fact, Reddington looked like he’d seen a ghost. My money says he didn’t plan this.”

“Don’t tell me you believe in soul-bonding, Harold” Fowler said scathingly. “That a single touch is all it takes.”

Cooper sat back in his chair and stared out of his office window down to the main floor. “The idea that an alpha and an omega can be destined for one another… It’s Hallmark nonsense of course. But it does make you wonder. There’s still a lot we don’t know about alpha-omega bonding.”

He watched as the woman drew herself up to her full height. “Regardless, an omega can’t be a handler to an alpha. Especially one she bonded with. She’d be completely under his control.”

Cooper smiled wryly. “You could afford to be a little more open minded, Diane. From what I’ve seen from her so far there’s no reason to think that she’d let him control her. She might just surprise you.”

Fowler grimaced sceptically, but then nodded. “Fine, give him the deal. But watch the girl – if she’s Reddington’s weakness she’s ours too. God help us, one day you and I will be talking about this moment in front of a senate hearing.”

Liz had wandered around her brownstone like a caged animal for days. Assistant Director Cooper had put her on administrative leave until the bureau reached a decision as to how to handle the ‘Reddington situation’, as he put it. Neither of them had mentioned the hotel on the phone, but she’d been very short with him. She thoroughly expected to receive her marching orders at the end of it all. The waiting was killing her, but it wasn’t the worst thing. Not by a long way.

Returning to her empty home after the hotel she’d found that her living room was still cordoned off with crime scene tape, specks of her blood dried on the floor, the rug still rumpled where she’d lain in shock while her husband kicked her like an animal he was disgusted with.

She’d never thought about it before, how the SOCOs never clear up crime scenes after documenting evidence. The haze of the previous week had lifted and the horrible truth had settled in her stomach. Her husband – whoever he was – wasn’t coming back, and the only job she had left was painstakingly scrubbing her own blood from the floor.

Now, in her clean and lonely house, she was about to pour herself a glass of wine when she froze at the sound of the front door opening and clicking shut. She waited, paralyzed, the hairs on her arms prickling.

The scent that wafted from the entrance hall was unmistakable; gentle power and entitlement, a smell that was almost a feeling, like being cradled in large hands. In the days following their coupling at the hotel room, she had found herself weeping alone in bed at night, thinking not of her lost husband, but him, aching just to be held by him, to be safe, and hating herself for it.
But she didn’t feel safe now. He was here, in her home, uninvited. By the time he appeared in front of her dressed smartly in a luxurious overcoat and fedora, her heart was thundering in her chest. She watched him warily like a cat ready to flee, knowing it was too much to hope that he couldn’t smell that she was afraid. Her fingers closed tightly around the corkscrew in her hand.

He removed his hat and tilted his head to the side with a pained expression on his face. “I’m not here to hurt you. Or to make any…demands.” he said softly. “But we do need to talk, Elizabeth.”

Liz nodded shakily and gestured towards the couch, wincing inwardly as he positioned himself next to her favorite cushion, the one she sometimes fell asleep on watching TV. It would smell of him now. It occurred to her then that perhaps he had chosen the spot because he was drawn to her scent.

She put down the corkscrew and drew her arms around herself. “I don’t have anything to say.”

“Then I’ll begin” he said gently. “You haven’t visited the doctor I recommended.”

His statement took her aback slightly and it took her a moment to answer – she felt as though he were admonishing her. “I saw my own doctor” she responded defensively.

“And are you alright?”

Liz let out a sharp laugh. “I’m still here, so yeah, I guess.”

She watched as his jaw tightened a little, but when he spoke it was with the same, gentle tone. “I take it there won’t be a child.”

She shook her head mutely. She’d gotten her period, but hadn’t felt the relief she had been expecting, only a strange sense of loss and confusion. It occurred to her then that the timing of his visit wasn’t a coincidence – he had been waiting to find out. The idea of him thinking about that sickened her, but seeing his face taut with anxiety gave her a peculiar urge to comfort him.

“The doctor said that’s not unusual” she said hesitantly. “It was my first time and also…the stress of it…” she trailed off. “I’m back on suppressants now.”

He nodded tightly but said nothing, and she wondered if it was possible that this hardened criminal felt the same sense of loss that she did. But how could he? She was the one who had lost everything. She looked down to see her husband’s glasses sitting on the table, and reached for them, holding them up to Reddington.

“Tom’s glasses” she whispered. “He left them, and all his stuff. He hasn’t been back.” She took a deep breath, staving off the tears that made her throat ache. “When I came home I saw them on the table, and I put them on – I don’t know why. I guess I wanted to figure out what he was thinking, see what he saw. And I did. Literally.” Her hand shook as she held the tortoiseshell frames. “They’re just glass. No prescription.” She stopped and swallowed a sob. “He wasn’t real, was he. None of it was real.”

“No” Reddington said quietly.

She looked at him, her eyes shimmering. “Tell me what you know.”

He stared softly back at her for a moment. “I know that you are stronger than you realize. That you’re going to be ok. And I know that you deserve the best in life. It will come, Lizzie. I promise.”

She wanted to rail at him, to make him tell her what he was holding back, but once again he’d caught
her off guard with the softness of his gaze, his tone, the genuine feeling there. Elizabeth Keen wanted to scream, while the omega inside was purring.

After a moment he put his hand in his coat pocket and withdrew a book, rising from his seat to hand it to her. “A gift for you.”

She accepted it cautiously and looked down at the ornate leather cover which read *The Good Woman: Omega psychology and social justice at the dawn of the twentieth century* By Mary Whiton Calkins.

“It seemed appropriate” Reddington continued after a moment. “She was—”

“I know who she was” Liz interjected. “She was the first woman president of the American Psychological Association and the first person to write extensively about omega sexuality and rights. It’s a seminal text.” She opened the cover and raised her eyebrows. “This is a first edition?”

“It is” he confirmed, smiling for the first time. “It came from a friend who deals in rare books and antiquities, strange little fellow really—”

“A friend?” she asked incredulously.

“An associate, then” he responded, his smile gone.

He stood in uncomfortable silence, working his jaw for a moment. “Elizabeth you have a decision to make. Very soon you are going to receive an offer of employment with a dedicated task force run by Assistant Director Cooper. Should you choose to accept you would act as liaison between me and your team. Should you decline… Lizzie say the word and I’ll disappear. You’ll never have to see me again.”

Her lips parted in shock. “You turned yourself in. They put a tracking chip in you…”

“You don’t believe I could vanish in sixty seconds? I offer that particular package to clients” he reminded her gently.

“You’re offering to walk away – for me?”

Reddington looked at her regretfully. “I’m not going to force you to work with me or to enter into any other kind of…partnership.”

She looked away from him then, unable to meet his gentle stare. The silence hung there thickly until she heard the swish of material as he turned to leave. “I’ll be gone by morning” he said in a low voice.

“Work” she whispered.

He turned back to her with a questioning look.

She looked up to meet his eye. “That’s all it would be between us, just work - end of story.”

His mouth twitched fractionally as he observed her. “That’s never the end of the story, Lizzie” he said quietly.

She frowned, but before she could formulate a response he’d palmed his hat onto his head and nodded his farewell.

“I’ll see you on Monday, Agent Keen.”
Fun facts:

The date for ratification of omega rights (1976) corresponds to the date Nebraska criminalised marital rape, the first US state to do so.

Mary Whiton Calkins was the first woman president of the American Psychological association, and wrote The Good Man and the Good

Julian Assange had been holed up in the Equadorian embassy about a year at this point
Chapter 6

Liz had a naturally cool temperament which was unusual in an omega, and made it a little difficult for her when getting to know new people. Despite being a trained psychologist, she never really understood why she found it so difficult to trust people.

One thing was for sure though, it would be a hell of a lot harder now that her husband – the man she had trusted most - had been revealed to be a liar and an imposter. After receiving Cooper’s offer she’d made the decision to throw herself into work in order to cope, but as she entered the post office black site for the second time, she felt a wave of apprehension.

Walking down the dark corridors she discerned whispers and glances in her direction, and it quickly became apparent that the story of the omega agent and the criminal had spread like wild fire. Meera Malik had said that for the majority of her colleagues her omega status wasn’t an issue, but Liz realised she would have no such luck. As if her striking features weren’t enough to draw attention, everyone knew that she had slept with the infamous concierge of crime, and why. It was mortifying.

When she reached the main floor she was greeted by Assistant Director Cooper who asked her to come to his office. He motioned for her to sit but she declined abruptly, wanting to retain the illusion of power that standing afforded her. He nodded, sighing.

“Agent Keen, I’m sure you’re aware that I disclosed your location at the hotel to Reddington.”

She nodded tightly, looking away from him.

“It was a tough call” he continued “but I made a decision that ultimately saved your life. The job I do requires me to make extraordinarily difficult judgement calls that either save agents or sacrifice them. The ones that save agents’ lives are the easier ones to make. Do you understand?”

“I understand it was an impossible situation” Liz responded curtly.

She knew it wasn’t exactly Cooper’s fault, but God she hated him for it, she hated the gossip, the shame, the sheer powerlessness.

Cooper pursed his lips. “I don’t know you Agent Keen, but I do know that you have an exemplary record.” He paused, regarding her thoughtfully for a moment.

“I also believe that Reddington sees something in you. Whatever he’s become, the man was an extremely skilled intelligence officer. I would be honored to have you as a member of my team, but none of that matters if you can’t take orders from me. Do we have a problem? Or are we going to work together.”

Liz took a breath and looked him in the eye. “We’re going to work together.”

Cooper nodded gravely and extended his hand to her. “Welcome to the team, Agent Keen.”

After their conversation, Cooper took her back to the main floor for a formal introduction; she was relieved to see Meera, and less so agent Ressler who seemed almost as awkward around her as he had been when she was in heat. There was also another man there, a nervous looking beta.
Cooper gestured to the team. “Agents Malik and Ressler you already know, and this is Agent Aram Mojtabai, our strategic and technical technician. He’s the guy you see when you need to hack a foreign government server and don’t have time to get congressional permission” Cooper deadpanned.

Aram laughed timorously as he approached her to shake her hand. “He’s kidding…sort of.”

Liz smiled and Aram stepped back slightly, his eyes widening a little. “Ah… wow. You’re definitely an omega” he said quietly.

Liz felt her cheeks color a little. “Yes, but I’m really hoping that it won’t be an issue. It wasn’t with my old team, and people here might not even know if it weren’t for…” she trailed off, not wanting to mention what happened with Reddington.

Aram looked at her hesitantly before blurting a response. “Ah, respectfully, they would know. I mean, you really look like an omega. I do mean that with the utmost respect” he said hurriedly, “but you guys look…different.”

Liz raised an eyebrow which only seemed to worsen the man’s discomfort as he continued his awkward speech. “You know, you have higher estrogen levels which generates certain favourable characteristics, clear skin, large eyes, nice temperament…”

“Agent Mojtabai…” Cooper interjected.

“Sorry” Aram stuttered. “I just… what I mean to say is, welcome and I’m sure you’ll be an asset to the team. And it’s totally not your fault what happened with Mr Reddington. I’ll shut up now.”

He meant well, and Liz smiled weakly. “Thank you Aram.”

She was about to continue when the old yellow elevator clanked open behind them, and Reddington swept in elegantly with two of his people in tow, a man and a woman.

The team turned collectively to look at them, their faces grim, and Liz felt her insides churn. She’d known that she would see him today - she’d accepted the job – but as he approached she had to force herself to keep calm. Her heat was over, and he hadn’t given her any other reason to be afraid of him. So why did she feel this way?

She kept her eyes on the woman who accompanied him - she was a beta, but very beautiful with long black hair and a tight red leather jacket, and Liz found herself wondering who she was to him. Had they slept together? Was this the kind of woman he would prefer, given the choice?

Her stomach twisted. After all, he hadn’t chosen her for their bond any more than she had chosen him. It occurred to her then that with everything that had happened she hadn’t stopped to wonder what he thought of her; he’d given no indication that he had a deeper interest in her now that her heat was resolved. Perhaps he didn’t find her attractive at all beyond a purely chemical reaction to her need to be mated. She hated herself for caring.

Reddington smiled broadly at the assembled group, seemingly unconcerned by the tense atmosphere. “Agents, may I present my security team, Dembe and Luli – watch yourself with her Donald” he said with a smirk. “She hates men and cops most of all.” His eye flicked over the team, past Liz and settled on Meera. “You I don’t know.”

“Meera Malik.”

“You look like the CIA.”
“Yeah? What does the CIA look like?”

Reddington offered her a charming little half smile. “Attractive but treacherous.”

The sick feeling in Liz’s stomach worsened as she heard Meera’s flirtatious response: “I guess we’ll find out.”

It was horrible. She knew she’d asked him to keep their relationship professional and she hadn’t expected him to single her out, but for reasons she couldn’t quantify she hated that he had paid particular attention to Meera. She squashed the feeling down and folded her arms.

“Well? You said you’d be bringing a case” she said tersely.

Reddington looked at her for the first time since his arrival and smiled tightly. “Agent Keen, eager to begin I see. Very well, we’ll dispense with the niceties.” He clapped his hands together and began to address the group grandly.

“You will find that I’m very accommodating of a broad range of criminal activity, but if there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s hypocrisy. The organisation I’m going to deliver to you is as corrupt as they come, and yet it consistently comes up smelling of roses. But perhaps not this time” he added smugly.

“As you all know, the Ford Foundation spends millions providing homes and education for disadvantaged children. Five weeks ago, Emerson Ford, the twenty year old grandson to the late shipping magnate Alexander Ford, was arrested for the murder of a young woman-”

“What is this?” Ressler interjected. “I know this case, it was all over the papers. You’re supposed to be bringing us high level targets – terrorists, serial killers – this case is a straight rape-homicide, and it’s already been solved.”

A plastic smile spread across Reddington’s face. “Your compassion and powers of observation astound me Donald, and yet if you’ll permit me to continue you’ll see that Washington’s finest may have missed a much broader picture. The victim was one of those rescued by the Ford Foundation, and she is sadly one of a number of girls under their care who have turned up dead over the years, with many more disappearing without a trace. The arrest of Ford’s grandson presents a rare opportunity to take a closer look at their organisation.”

He paused and looked around at the sceptical group. “Aram perhaps you’d be so kind as to pull up some illustrative material on this big screen here - I always find pictures useful when trying to connect the dots.”

“Yes Mr Reddington, of course” Aram responded nervously, glancing apologetically at his colleagues.

His fingers moved like lightning on the keys and the large screen on the tactical floor lit up with newspaper articles regarding the murder, photographs of the Ford family at various social events, and finally the police files complete with crime scene photos.

“Right” Aram continued. “The Ford Foundation is currently run by John Ford, Emmerson’s father, but the grandmother Jaqueline Ford is the matriarch of the family, she’s the public face of the foundation. She’s done all the PR stuff since her husband died. Emmerson was arrested for the rape and murder of Abigail Halcroft five weeks ago after police traced him to the hotel where she was found.”

While Aram talked Liz felt her stomach tighten as she looked at the photographs on the screen. The
victim was young – no older than seventeen – her naked body spread-eagled carelessly on a hotel bed and ugly, purple welts around her neck where she had been strangled.

As a profiler Liz had seen plenty of crime scene pictures before, but the thing that froze her blood here was the close up of the girl’s face. Even with rigor setting in it was clear that she had been an omega; her green, lifeless eyes were too big for her porcelain face, her full lips slightly parted where she had let out her last breath.

Liz swallowed bile and stole a glance at Reddington, but he wasn’t looking at her, his gaze fixed on the screen, tension tightening the muscles in his face.

Cooper stepped forward. “You’re saying that one of Washington’s largest charitable foundations is a front for child trafficking?”

Reddington turned to look at him. “I’m saying that an alarming number of children who’ve passed through that organisation are now either missing or dead, and almost all of them were omegas. It’s up to you to find out who’s behind this.”

Liz cleared her throat. “The Ford Foundation works with hundreds of children each year and many of them have been re-homed and gone on to college - they have good lives. Why is it only omega girls who have gone missing?”

She saw Reddington’s eye twitch fractionally as he went to answer her, but before he could, Meera cut in.

“Omegas fetch quite a price on illegal trading sites like the Silk Road” she said matter-of-factly, as though it didn’t affect her - as though she wasn’t an omega herself, Liz thought bitterly. “They’re a rare commodity these days-”

“And wherever there’s a rare commodity, there’s a market for it” Reddington finished. “I should know.”

Liz could feel his eyes on her, scanning her face for her reaction. She nodded tightly, but stubbornly avoided his gaze until he continued to address the group.

“It’s no coincidence that the girl Emmerson Ford is accused of killing was one of the foundation’s omega wards. Go pull that thread and I’m betting the whole sweater will unravel.”

“Fine” Ressler said curtly. “We’ll head upstate and see what he has to say for himself.”

Reddington laughed abruptly. “No need for that Donald. It’s my understanding that Emmerson Ford is resting comfortably at the family home under house arrest.”

“What?” Ressler said sharply. “It’s a rape-homicide, how did that little punk make bail?”

Reddington tilted his head and smiled humorlessly. “I imagine young Emmerson has an army of first-rate lawyers – there’s no guarantee your prosecutor will even get a conviction.”

Liz’s stomach lurches. “That’s ridiculous – the evidence against him is overwhelming. According to these files he used his credit card, and there’s a witness that puts him in the hotel at the time of the murder. I don’t see how they can argue that he didn’t do it….” she trailed off helplessly. Somehow she already knew what he was going to say. The conviction rate for sex crimes committed against omegas was still pitifully low.

Reddington looked at her regretfully. “They won’t. They’ll argue diminished capacity – he’s an
alpha, she was an omega. No doubt they’ll say that nature took its course and the situation got out of
hand.”

Ressler grimaced. “It wouldn’t be the first time a case has fallen apart because people believe alphas
can’t control themselves. He’s not going to get away with it just because he’s from a wealthy family.
Malik, you’re with me.”

“No, take Keen” Cooper interjected. “It’s her case. And the sooner she gets into the field, the better.”

Ressler frowned. “With all due respect sir, I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Reddington smiled unpleasantly. “Donald I’m sure it’s a challenge for you to retain all the
information I’ve given you thus far, but you do remember the part about my cooperation being
predicated on working with Agent Keen?”

Ressler huffed loudly. “How could I forget. But this isn’t a good idea. She’s a rookie, she has no
field experience, and-”

“And what?” Meera cut in. “She’s an omega? So am I, you think I shouldn’t work in the field?”

“You’re an experienced agent” he responded sullenly.

Cooper stepped forward, the shadow of his broad shoulders falling over the operations desk. “We
can debate the finer points of omega politics later. Agent Keen, are you ready for this?”

“I am” Liz responded as coolly as she could.

“That’s settled then” Reddington said, smiling broadly. “Good hunting, or however you law
enforcement types characterise your activities.”

He turned to leave with his security team, and as she watched him retreat Liz felt choking anger build
up in her chest. She needed to escape what had happened between them - she needed to escape her
omega status - and here he was, throwing it back in her face. She marched after him and caught up
with them at the elevator, grabbing his arm.

“Are you kidding me with this case?” she hissed as he turned to look at her.

He nodded at his security team, who backed away, leaving them alone.

“The rape-homicide of an omega” she continued angrily in a hushed voice. “This is the case you
decide to start with?”

His expression was unreadable, but she thought she saw his jaw tighten a little.

“While that was indeed an egregious crime, this case goes far beyond one girl” he responded in a
low voice. “I would have thought you’d be pleased at the opportunity to bring down a prolific
trafficking ring, especially one which poses as a charity operating on your doorstep.”

“Is that it?” she said slowly, scanning his face for clues. “Or are you actually trying to make sure I
can’t forget what happened?”

The lines around his eyes deepened as he gave her a concerned frown. “If you need more time-”

“I don’t” she responded belligerently. “I’m fine.” It was bad enough that her colleagues were
questioning her ability to work this case, she didn’t need him doing it too.
“Well then” he said, his blank expression returning. “Be safe” he finished firmly before turning and disappearing into the elevator.
Chapter 7

When Liz and Ressler arrived at the Ford’s palatial town house they were shown into the drawing room by a maid, who politely asked them to wait.

Ressler cast his eye around the luxurious surroundings, shaking his head. “This is unbelievable – the kid’s a murderer and he gets to wait it out here in the lap of luxury just because of who he is.”

“You don’t buy it then?” Liz asked pointedly. “Emmerson’s alpha defence? It seems to me that you have pretty traditional views.”

Ressler shot her a sharp look. “It doesn’t matter what I think. A crime is a crime, and no one should be exempt from the law just because of who they are” he sniffed. “And just so you know, I don’t buy it – just because I have doubts about you working in the field doesn’t mean I don’t find it offensive to suggest that we alphas can’t stop ourselves from killing omegas. It’s bull - the kid’s guilty.”

“We’ll see what a jury decides” a drawling voice said behind them.

They turned to see Emmerson Ford leaning nonchalantly against the door, a young alpha with blond hair, lean, muscular shoulders and a pinched, cold expression. Beside him stood his grandmother Jacqueline Ford, a beautifully coiffed alpha woman in a classic Chanel suit.

She walked towards them with a warm smile, shaking their hands. “You must forgive my grandson - this entire business has been very hard on him. It’s a terrible misunderstanding.”

“I’m sure” Ressler said sarcastically, while Liz raised her eyebrows.

Jacqueline Ford’s smile remained intact, though Liz detected her eyes grow colder as they flicked over the pair, taking in Ressler’s cheap suit before settling critically on Liz. “How can we help you agents? I’m sure you understand we can’t discuss Emmerson’s case.”

“We’re not here to discuss the case” Liz said coolly, attempting to seem unphased by the alpha woman’s cold eyes on her. “We’d actually like to ask you about other children that the Ford Foundation has worked with over the years.”

Jacqueline nodded. “Of course, but you understand it’s been many years since I’ve been able to take an active role in the foundation’s activities – they just wheel me out at benefits these days” she said with a laugh like cut glass. “Emmerson’s father handles the practical side of the foundation, but I’m afraid he’s not here” she finished, her lip curled in what appeared to Liz to be distaste.

“We’ll catch up with him later” Ressler cut in. “Ma’am, would it surprise you to learn that over fifty omega girls helped by your foundation have subsequently gone missing?”

The woman smiled regretfully, her small, perfectly veneered teeth gleaming behind pink lipstick. “Unfortunately it doesn’t surprise me at all. We do our best to help these children, but no matter how hard we try, omegas always seem to find trouble. It’s in their nature I’m afraid – more often than not they find their way into the wrong man’s bed. They can’t help themselves.”

The woman paused and smiled artificially at Liz. “I’m sure you understand, don’t you dear. How easy it is to take a wrong turn.”
Liz felt a chill run through her as the alpha woman smiled coldly at her.

“We’ll need to take a look at your records just the same ma’am” Ressler said, seemingly immune to the atmosphere.

“Of course. Come with me and I’ll see what I can find, although I’m sure we don’t have anything that will be of use to you. It won’t take long - your charming companion can wait here” she added firmly as they left, and for the second time in the visit Liz felt grubby, as though the woman was disgusted by her presence. It was like Ressler had brought a hooker with him to this woman’s house instead of a fellow agent she thought, her stomach clenching with embarrassment and resentment.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, they had left her alone with Emmerson who was now openly leering at her as he leant casually on the door frame.

“So” he sneered at her. “They let omegas in the FBI. Is your father ok with that? Is he proud?”

Liz looked at him softly. “What about your father, Emmerson. Twenty years old, charged with a rape-homicide. Is your father proud?”

The boy’s smirk vanished and a flash of anger crossed his pinched face. “Why should I care what he thinks? He’s just a beta” he spat.

He regained his composure quickly, and a twisted smile crossed his thin lips. “Abi…”

Liz stiffened at the mention of the dead girl’s name and he carried on, his small, beady eyes gauging her reaction.

“She struggled really hard, you know” he said conversationally. “I wasn’t expecting that. You omegas are stronger than you look. It doesn’t mean I can’t put you down just like that” he hissed, snapping his fingers. “I’m not going to let some omega whore ruin my life. You watch. I’ll be back at Harvard in the fall like none of this ever happened.”

Liz shook her head, appalled, but at that moment she heard a raised voice in the hall and left the room, careful not to give the boy the satisfaction of turning back to look at him.

She found Ressler in the foyer along with Jacqueline Ford and a beta man who was presumably Emmerson’s father.

“I want you out of my house” the man said heatedly. “How dare you come here and question my son – if you want to speak to any of us again you can do it through my lawyer. Now please leave, we’re preparing for a charity gala in a few days and we’re behind schedule as it is.”

“It’s fine – we’ve got what we need for now” Ressler said officiously. “Thank you for your help ma’am”, he said to the lady.

Liz nodded politely to her, but the gesture went unacknowledged and she could feel the woman’s disdainful gaze on her back as they left.

Not long afterwards she received a cheerful call from Reddington informing her that he’d obtained some information pertinent to the case. She asked him what it was, but he dismissed her query out of hand – something about phones being impersonal – and invited her to meet him at a catholic church down town.
She hadn’t expected to see him again so soon, and certainly not alone. An uneasy feeling settled over her at the prospect, and she wished fervently that he’d chosen a venue other than a church. She wasn’t religious, and she hadn’t given it much thought before the last few weeks, but religious institutions were generally not kind towards omegas.

In many faiths omegas were seen as whores and temptresses, and there were still some orders of omega nuns who spent their days in penance for the sin of their mere existence. After having endured the supercilious, judgmental attitude of Jacqueline Ford, a church was the last place Liz wanted to be.

Steeling herself, she entered the ornate, oppressive building and sat down next to Reddington on a pew near the back. She noted wryly that despite his illustrious membership of the criminal class he had respectfully removed his signature fedora. It perched on his knee, his long fingers resting on the brim. _Fingers that had touched her intimately. Probed inside her. Made her orgasm._ The thought came unbidden and she took a deep, steadying breath as he turned to look at her with a small smile.

“A church?” she queried in a low voice. “I would’ve thought you’d want to avoid places like this.”

He laughed gently. “Lizzie I’m a criminal, not a vampire. Churches are quiet and peaceful and these days unfortunately often empty. Perfect for a private discussion.”

He rolled his tongue seductively around the word ‘private’, and she was alarmed to feel her insides twist sweetly, as though the omega inside hadn’t got the memo that this was just business.

“What have you got for us?” she asked, trying to sound as professional as possible.

He turned his eyes back towards the front of the church where the altar was illuminated by an enormous stained-glass window depicting the Virgin Mary.

He tilted his head to the side as he studied the image, as if deep in thought. “Beautiful, isn’t she” he murmured, his voice low and rich. “The way the light shines through her. You know, there are many historians who have argued that she was an omega. I think they’re probably right.”

Liz tensed next to him. “Yeah. Except the whole immaculate conception thing gives her a free pass. Away from the stigma. The shame.”

He turned to look at her with a concerned frown, but she kept her eyes steadily ahead. “The case, Reddington.”

He paused for a moment but then answered her directly. “I’ve received information that a girl will be sold at the Ford’s upcoming charity gala. The initial bidding process has already begun and it’ll be completed at a ceremony of sorts on the night.”

Liz exhaled loudly. “That’s brazen of them. Emmerson’s under house arrest, plus the FBI are breathing down their necks. It’s risky.”

“It’s exactly what I would do” Reddington said, matter-of-factly. “They’re vulnerable, the worst thing they could do would be to let people know it. They need to put on a show, now more than ever. If you want to find out exactly who’s behind the auction, I suggest you have someone throw their hat in the ring.”

Liz looked at him incredulously. “You mean you want to pose as a John? Classy” she finished scathingly.

His expression darkened and her stomach flipped unpleasantly at the thought that she’d offended
“No” he answered in a hard tone. “It wouldn’t be convincing. It’s well understood in this world that my various… proclivities… do not include children.”

It suddenly occurred to her that although they had slept together, she had no idea what his proclivities were as he put it, and she felt an irrational sense of shame that she can’t have been an interesting partner for him given the state she was in when he found her.

Whatever he was into she had no doubt that it was adventurous – far beyond anything she’d experienced – and undertaken with women infinitely more sophisticated than her. She thought of his team, of the woman – Luli – and the omega inside her curled up in shame. She had just… just lain there. What must he have thought of her?

Aware of her reddening cheeks and the lengthy silence, she stole a glance at him. His disapproval had ebbed away, replaced by the same, concerned, questioning look he’d had for her earlier. She shook her head.

“Ressler can’t do it – they know he’s an agent, and they were very clear that they didn’t want us interfering in this event.”

“That’s why it’s the perfect cover” Reddington smiled slyly. “These buyers aren’t shady underground miscreants, they’re CEOs, politicians… and law enforcement. The worst kind of corruption at the highest level. Dear old Donald will fit right in.”

Liz hid a smile. ‘If I’m going to persuade Ressler to pose as a double agent he’ll still need an official excuse to be there. And he’ll need back up.”

Reddington nodded. “A credible threat of violence against the Ford family would certainly justify the presence of the FBI.”

“Those of us who work within the bounds of the law can’t just make up a death threat to buy us entry to an exclusive event” she said exasperatedly.

“Fine” Reddington said airily. “How about a death threat from the number four on the most wanted list? I Raymond Reddington do hereby state my intention to have Jacqueline Ford assassinated. Will that do?”

Liz rolled her eyes. “Yes, I guess that would do. I’ll see if I can sell it to Cooper.”

She went to stand up but Reddington seemed in no hurry to let her go.

“You met the Fords today” he said conversationally. What did you think? What profiles have you discerned.”

Liz paused, taken aback. “The kid basically admitted to me that he’d killed the girl – boasted about it” she responded hesitantly. “Ressler’s looking at the father, John Ford – he got pretty angry when he turned up and found us there looking at the foundation records, not that we got anything useful.”

Reddington canted his head slightly. “That’s agent Ressler’s opinion. What do you think?”

Liz stared at him. She was now employed as a profiler by the FBI, but he was the first person who had asked her opinion on anything so far. The way he looked at her, encouraging and genuinely interested, made her feel valued for the first time since she started. She took a breath.
“Ok. I think you were right – the kid’s the key to unraveling this. Behind the bravado he’s angry and scared. I’d say he didn’t have anything to do with any of the other murders or disappearances, but he showed contempt for his father because he’s a beta, and so did the grandmother. She also shares her grandson’s disdain for omegas. In my opinion the father’s a puppet. Jacqueline Ford is where we want to be looking – that woman is way more than a sweet old lady they roll out for PR purposes. If the foundation is responsible for the disappearances, I bet she knows about it.”

As she spoke, a small smile spread across Reddington’s face. “Fascinating,” he said quietly “what you can learn about people. I wonder what you’ve learnt about me. Tell me my profile.”

Liz’s lips parted in surprise and her mind raced through all of the encounters she’d had with him, desperately trying to separate what she knew about him from the war raging inside her.

“This is my first case, I need to get back” she deflected.

“Indulge me.” He spoke softly, but his eyes were fixed on her and she suddenly felt compelled to obey him.

“Fine… You’re a loner. You’re obviously as comfortable in a church as you are in some cave negotiating with terrorists, but you have no home, or real friends. Relationships of any kind make you vulnerable. That’s why you’re terrified of what happened with me – our bonding.”

She paused, realising that she was shaking a little, but she had to finish – she needed to show him that she understood.

“You don’t hate me for it though, for what happened between us…” she breathed. “You hate yourself.”

She watched the color drain from his face as she finished her speech. His eyes remained on her but he said nothing and after a moment he looked away silently and, red-faced, she turned to leave.

“I’ll see you at the gala, Agent Keen.”

She turned back in surprise but he was still facing away from her, his eyes fixed once again on the image of the Virgin Mary. “You’re coming to the party?”

“I wouldn’t miss it” he said, without looking round.

That night, emotionally and physically drained from her first day, Liz flopped into bed and fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. It should have been peaceful; she’d made progress on the case and held it together with Reddington however much he was getting under her skin.

It wasn’t peaceful at all though, and by 2am she was wide awake, alone and shivering in a cold sweat after a terrible nightmare. In some ways it was just a classic anxiety dream – the one where you go into school or work and realise you’re naked – but in other ways it was much more than that.

The black site was warm and dark as it always is – it’s impossible to tell what time of day it is there – and as she walked onto the main operations floor she had no idea at first that anything was wrong. Aram was there at the computer station. She smiled at him before remembering that she shouldn’t do that – that was how he knew. She watched as his mouth slowly formed a word – ooooomeeeega–but she couldn’t hear it over the blood rushing in her ears. He knew what she really was. They all knew.
She looked down and realised she was naked, her nipples proudly erect as though her body wanted to be on display whatever she thought about it. Suddenly the whole team was there – Aram, Meera, Ressler and Cooper. She tried to apologise for being so unprofessional but they didn’t seem to hear her. She watched, deeply ashamed as Cooper shook his head disapprovingly and Meera rolled her eyes at her, before Ressler grabbed the back of her neck and marched her forward.

For a moment she thought he was taking her somewhere safe where she could hide her shame, but to her dismay he stood her in the center of the room where everyone could see her. She tried to apologise again but her voice came out as nothing more than a whisper no matter how hard she shouted; she was suffocating, panicking, and the room got smaller and smaller with her team mates looking at her, surrounding her, closing in on her.

Suddenly their hands were all over her, poking and pinching the flesh of her belly and thighs, their intrusive fingers exploring her private places as though she were just a play thing. She was humiliated as Cooper just stood there, barking orders at her that she couldn’t understand, like a test she was failing miserably. Meera and Reddington’s assistant Luli appeared at Cooper’s side and it was then she realised the horrible truth; it wasn’t Cooper that she was standing naked in front of. It was Reddington.

He stood serenely, immaculately dressed between the two beautiful women, laughing and whispering with them, fondling their necks and doing nothing to help her. He just ignored her. She needed to focus, she tried so hard to block everything out and then everything fell away and she saw it clear as day - Jacqueline Ford in her suit and pearls, whispering in Reddington’s ear.

He looked at her then with sharp, disapproving eyes and she realised with sickening horror that he knew she had seen - she’d been found out. She needed to run from him but she couldn’t, her limbs limp and heavy as he approached her, his expression cold and clinical.

Her heart raced as he put his hand on the back of her neck, firmly holding her in place like a frightened animal while he thrust his fingers forcibly between her legs. She gasped as he withdrew his hand. It was covered in blood, coating his fingers, staining his immaculate white shirt cuffs, her blood - her loss - and she heard his words again in the distance…

…I take it there won’t be a child...

She woke pinned in tangled, sweaty sheets, deeply shaken and wondering what the connection was between Reddington and the Ford family. He was hiding something - she was sure of that now.
Chapter 8

As she entered the Ford’s house for the gala, Liz could hardly believe that Cooper had signed off on the undercover op. Ressler hadn’t been happy but he had agreed, probably because this was the first time that Reddington had shown the inclination to involve him at all, she thought. Looking out over the swathes of Washington’s great and good in colorful, sparkly dresses and tuxedos, and taking in a heady cacophony of alpha and omega scents, she felt relieved that she didn’t stand out for once.

She wore a simple black cocktail dress and hadn’t put any makeup on – she rarely did, not wanting to draw attention to her omega features more than necessary. Here, she faded into the background alongside politicians’ wives dressed up to the nines, and businessmen with young, glamorous omegas on their arms.

There was one thing that made her feel different though, even if no one else knew about it. As she shifted slightly she felt the warm metal of her Glock strapped to her thigh. Both gun and holster were just FBI standard issue, but wearing it under her dress in a room filled with alpha males made her feel a kind of power and security that she never usually did. She had to live in a world where they could do anything they wanted – where they could buy and sell women like her - but tonight she didn’t have to be afraid. They were taking them down.

Reddington’s contact had vouched for Ressler, they had arranged for a bid to be made for the girl, and now their job was to wait for him to be approached. If all went according to plan, the transaction would take place and they would be able to make an arrest, which would give them access to the foundation’s financial records going back decades. Those records would prove that the foundation had been selling omega girls to the highest bidder and allow them to track down those who were still alive, while finding out what happened to those who’d died.

It would be a major coup for the FBI, Ressler had said smugly, and Liz had no doubt that he would take the credit for any arrests they made. She saw the target, John Ford, doing the meet and greets and noted his mother Jacqueline in a green taffeta evening gown working the other side of the room. Emmerson Ford was nowhere to be seen, but then that was probably to be expected under the circumstances.

Although Ressler was convinced John Ford was behind the foundation’s shady dealings, she’d asked Aram to look into Jacqueline’s past. As a rookie omega agent her opinion held no weight with her superiors, but Aram had sweetly agreed to investigate, in case her hunch was correct.

She stood at the bar keeping an eye on Ressler as he mingled conspicuously, ensuring that he was visible to whoever would approach him. As she watched him her eye wandered through the crowd and she found herself searching for Reddington, her stomach fluttering whenever she saw a man of his height and broad shoulders, before realising that it wasn’t him. He had said he would see her here, but perhaps he had changed his mind.

Her reverie was broken by the sound of a man clearing his throat. She looked up to see a tall alpha with thick dark hair in his late thirties smiling broadly down at her.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt your… what was it you were doing exactly? You looked rather deep in thought” he finished, his eyes twinkling at her.

“I guess you could say I was people watching” she answered distractedly.

“Ahhhh” he responded knowingly. “That happens to be a favorite past time of mine too. But then,
I’m a lawyer so I need all the distractions I can get” he laughed sheepishly. “I’m Martin, by the way” he said, extending his hand to her. “Martin Cross.”

“Liz” she responded, shaking his hand. “I’m a psychologist, so people-watching kind of goes with the territory.”

He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “A psychologist?” he chuckled. “I was not expecting that! That’s—”

“Not a suitable professional for an omega? Yeah, I’ve heard that before” Liz cut him off defensively, but felt bad when she saw his face fall.

“I was going to say that’s really interesting” he finished, chagrined.

Liz smiled at him regretfully. “Sorry. It’s been a tough week.”

“Not at all – why don’t you make it up to me with a dance?”

The twinkle in his eye was back and just as she was about to decline Liz felt a rush of rebellion. What would be the harm in dancing with him? After all, her husband – who apparently wasn’t even real – had walked out on her, Reddington had no claim over her, and he wasn’t even here. Plus, she was supposed to be blending in.

Moments later the man was moving deftly with her on the dance floor, his hand at her waist, guiding and turning her in time with the strains of the jazz ballad wafting over the ballroom from the band. She wasn’t a particularly good dancer, but he made her feel like she was, and she had to admit to herself that she was having fun for the first time since her life had been turned upside down.

She was so caught up that she didn’t see Reddington approach, and his voice sent a jolt of surprise and fear running through her.

“May I?” he said icily.

Her partner looked irritated, but bowed out graciously with a nod of his head. He and Reddington were both alphas, but etiquette demanded that the older male took seniority. Although Reddington wasn’t as tall, he had an aura of power that obviously wasn’t lost on Martin, who threw her a regretful look as he vanished hastily into the crowd.

Reddington stepped in seamlessly, gripping her waist a little more firmly than the other man had, the luxurious material of his tux brushing against the scar on her wrist as they moved.

“Agent Keen, you seem to be enjoying yourself.”

She looked up at him but he wore a blank expression, the only sign of his displeasure the tight grip of his hand above her hip.

As they danced he turned her so that she was facing away from the crowd and she shook her head fractionally, taking the lead and moving them round again.

“I need to keep an eye on Ressler” she said in a low voice.

“I see” he said dangerously softly, pulling her to him. “Is that what you were doing when I arrived?”

Her heart was thumping, and it had nothing to do with the fact that she was on her first undercover assignment. She felt as she had in her dream, as though she’d been caught and had incurred his
disapproval. She hadn’t been this close to him since they’d consummated their bond in the hotel room, and she could feel the warmth of his body like a cloak around her, jealously protecting her from the gaze of other men.

She felt a powerful urge to rest her head on his shoulder, to inhale the musky scent of his neck and have him hold her close, to ask him to forgive her for dancing with anyone but him. Their bodies fit together perfectly, sliding and turning effortlessly through every step of the dance. She felt his leg slip between hers as they moved and a dry smile turned the corners of his lips.

“Well if I’m not mistaken you’re at least adequately armed for this assignment” he murmured quietly, a trace of humor in his voice.

A sweet burst of desire shot through her abdomen; whether it was his rich, humorous tone or the feel of his leg between hers, the fact that he’d discovered her secret or the warmth of the gun metal on her thigh she didn’t know, but as a blush crept over her chest she wished that the suppressants could stop her feeling this way completely, could stop him from knowing. But he did know.

She looked up at him and his smile was gone, his eyes dark, dilated and fixed on hers. Her inner omega practically rolled over in pleasure, but she wanted to die of embarrassment. She tried to step back but his hand gripped her harder, and for a moment they stood there, frozen, until to her immense relief the band began to play through the final bars of the ballad. She looked round just in time to see Ressler duck out of the ballroom.

Recovering his implacable expression, Reddington twirled her elegantly one last time and released her hand, sending her off to follow Ressler with a simple nod of his head.

As she worked her way through the crowd she noticed the other undercover agents speaking into their collars or cufflinks. She could identify them easily even without their unsubtle communication; unlike the rest of the beautifully turned out crowd, their tuxedos were cheap and ill-fitting, and their hair short, regulation styles.

As she approached two of them from behind, she overheard a snippet of their conversation and stopped short.

“…did you see her all over him on the dancefloor? The girl?”

“The girl? You mean Reddington’s bitch…”

The men laughed and she turned to walk out another way, anger tearing at her insides. She stepped into the foyer and summoned her mental strength, focussing everything she had on assessing the situation and ensuring that she did her job well. Reddington – and whatever the hell had just happened between them - could wait.

She could hear the surveillance team in her ear piece telling her that she should wait for John Ford to make a move, but she knew better – something was off. The man was still mingling in the crowd, but there was now no sign of Jacqueline.

As she slipped into the hall she saw Ressler disappear through a door at the end of the corridor flanked by two security guards. She made to follow him and another burly guard in a suit with an earpiece approached her.

“Sorry Miss, this area is off limits to guests.”
Liz blinked coquettishly, twinkling her blue eyes at him. “Sorry I was just looking for the restroom – could you show me? I’m so lost!”

“Of course Miss.”

The guard relaxed and came up beside her; he didn’t even see her elbow coming before she’d knocked him out cold. She bent down and took the key-card hanging at his belt, and walked briskly to the door at the end of the corridor. Opening it with the key-card, she saw a set of winding steps leading down to another level of the house.

She pressed her finger to her ear-piece. “Aram do you copy?”

“Aram, yes.”

“Ressler’s gone down to a basement level on the north-west side. It wasn’t in our brief.”

“Ah, that’s because according to the blueprints it doesn’t exist” Aram said nervously. “I’ll pull up what I can and brief the team.”

“There’s no time – I’m going in. Send back-up when you can.”

“Copy that – be careful agent Keen. Oh! One more thing – you asked me to dig into Jacqueline Ford. I haven’t got much background because she only moved to this country in the 80s when she married Alexander Ford.”

“Where did she come from?”

“Russia. Her name back then was Irina Venediktov. She dropped the accent and changed her name when she moved to the states. I’ll let you know if I find anything else.”

Liz frowned. “Ok Aram, thank you.”

She slipped through the door and began her descent, eventually coming out in front of a large steel door. She pressed her finger to her ear-piece again but heard nothing – the comms didn’t work down here. She was on her own. Taking a deep breath, she slid the key-card into the door mechanism and slipped inside.

She stood, transfixed by the sight in front of her. The room was as lavishly decorated as those upstairs, and at first glance it appeared as though the party was merely continuing much as it had upstairs, with people in evening wear drinking champagne. Her arrival went unnoticed. But at the front of the room there was a large clear plastic cage, and inside, sitting on a velvet chair like a porcelain doll in a display case, was a girl.

She was startlingly pretty even for an omega, with enormous blue eyes and dark hair that had been curled to sit on her shoulders. She was dressed strangely in what looked like a children’s party dress, although she was surely too old for a garment like that. Liz found it difficult to judge her age exactly; the poufy dress, her wide eyes and baby face made her look so young, but the dress was a little tight where she was beginning to fill it out with the onset of puberty. She sat perfectly still, the picture of omega obedience, although her gaze was a little glassy as though she had been sedated.

Staring at the girl, Liz was suddenly reminded of herself as a young teenager, the same deep blue eyes, baby face and swelling omega body, confusing and impossible to control. She suddenly thought of her beta father – of Sam – and how difficult it must have been for him to advise her or protect her, with no mother, no alpha or omega around to help. But she’d had him, and he was wonderful. This girl had no one.
She could see the back of Ressler’s head in the crowd, but if her comms were down, then his would be too. They would have to hold the fort until Aram could call in the cavalry. She was about to move towards him when Jacqueline Ford appeared, gliding on to the stage at the front of the room to refined applause from the audience. Liz slipped behind a pillar to avoid being recognised, her senses sharp, hyper aware of the gun strapped to her thigh.

From her new position she could see Emmerson Ford standing off to the side, his eyes fixed on his grandmother on the stage as she introduced the girl who was to be sold. He was twenty years old now, and she wondered just how long he’d been attending these auctions, how far he was born bad and how far his grandmother had been poisoning his mind.

Jacqueline’s spiel was turning her stomach, and even from across the room she thought she saw Ressler’s shoulders tense.

“Here we have a stunning young bitch - brought to us after the tragic loss of her parents, she is a well-educated, rare and beautiful creature. At just fourteen this virgin omega is the perfect age for training, and will make a charming addition to any family” the old woman simpered, smiling artificially with a cruel glint in her eye.

“Gentlemen, your starting bids have been secured to a holding account. When the bell sounds please place your final bid amount using the key pad provided to each of you. Remember, this is a rare opportunity to own one of the prettiest bitches we have ever had the pleasure of bringing to auction.”

It was as though they were talking about a pet, Liz thought numbly - a show dog in season and ready to be mated, like she was. Gritting her teeth she slipped unnoticed through the crowd until she was able to catch Ressler’s eye. He nodded his head fractionally in acknowledgement, but before she could do anything else, two security men marched to the front of the room, whispering in Jacqueline Ford’s ear before walking her quickly off stage and out of the room.

Aram had been true to his word. The armed response team was there moments later, men storming in through the back doors and rounding up the bemused guests. Liz’s eyes darted back towards Emerson Ford, who was now shouting for his grandmother like a lost child. She saw the anger and panic on his face as he realised he’d been left to fend for himself; it was both heart-breaking and frightening. She knew then that he was going to run.

“Ressler!” she yelled as Emmerson darted through a concealed door behind him. She made to follow him but Ressler was hot on the boy’s heels, thundering through the crowd towards the door.

“I’ve got it, Keen – take care of the girl” he threw over his shoulder as he ran.

Liz bit her lip as she approached the girl in the cage. She’d alerted the task force to the hidden underground room, she’d gotten the alarm out, and still Ressler didn’t trust her to be his partner in the field. She thought back to the undercovers laughing at her and then met the frightened stare of the girl in the cage. For a moment it was like looking in a mirror.

“Hi sweetie” she said softly, mustering a smile. “My name is Liz and I’m with the FBI. You’re gonna be ok. Let’s get you out of here, huh?”

Taking the key-card she’d swiped from the guard, she drew it down the digital lock of the cage and watched, relieved as the door swung open. She expected the girl to jump out of the cage, but she just sat there, looking at Liz with those enormous eyes.

“What should I do?” she whispered.
Liz swallowed, and stepped into the cage, crouching down so as not to frighten her.

“You’re free” she said softly. “You can do whatever you want to do.”

After a moment the girl nodded hesitantly, before standing up and walking away with the agents waiting to help her. Liz got up but then paused, standing alone in the cage while a strange sense of guilt crept over her, as though she had lied to the girl. Was any omega really free? The cage door was open, but Liz felt every bit as trapped.

Her thoughts were suddenly shattered by the sound of gunshot. The agents spun trying to determine where it had come from, but Liz knew.

She ran for the concealed door through which Ressler had pursued Emmerson Ford. Drawing her gun she moved quickly along the dark corridor and up a flight of stairs until she heard Ressler’s voice coming from a store room.

“Give it up kid. Why don’t you put the gun down.”

Liz peered around the door frame and saw Emmerson with a gun drawn on Ressler, who was slowly circling the young alpha with his hands raised. He was unarmed, and she realised with alarm that the boy must have taken his service weapon. She could see plaster on the floor where the kid had fired a warning shot into the ceiling, and saw his hands shaking as he kept the barrel pointed at Ressler’s head.

“You don’t get to say what happens here” Emmerson spat, “this is my house. I want to see my grandmother – get her here now!”

Taking her moment, Liz stepped into the room, her gun trained on the boy.

“Emmerson - we can talk about your grandmother but first you need to lower your weapon for me. Can you do that?”

His head whipped round at the sound of her voice, his breathing shallow. “Don’t come any closer bitch – I’ll kill your partner right now I swear!”

“Keen” Ressler growled. “What are you waiting for?”

Liz took a breath and focussed on the boy, keeping her voice calm. “No one has to get hurt here, Emmerson. You’re in charge. You can choose to walk out of here.”

“I can’t though, can I” he said, his voice cracking. “If my grandmother is arrested and the foundation dissolves I’ll be convicted.”

All through the evening Liz had felt more secure knowing that she was armed, but as she gripped the gun in her hand she knew that it was her profiling skills and not the weapon that would save them.

“You’re an alpha” she said softly, purposefully injecting a tinge of admiration into her voice. “You have the power here – you’re in trouble now but you’ll come out on top. Alphas always do. That’s what your grandmother told you, isn’t it?”

She smiled at him encouragingly and he looked at her uncertainly, the gun wavering in his hand.

Liz heard a crackle in her ear piece – it was Aram. They’d left the basement room and their comms were back on-line.
“Agents Keen, Ressler, do you copy? There’s something you need to know. Jacqueline Ford has been found dead, an apparent heart attack. Report please.”

Liz’s lips parted in shock. She saw Ressler raise his hand to his ear and knew he’d heard it too – she prayed silently for him to keep quiet and shook her head but it was too late.

“It’s over kid – your grandmother’s dead. We’re the only ones who can help you now”

She watched in horror as Emmerson turned white, and saw him raise the gun.

“No!” she yelled, but it was no good – his eyes were glazed and focussed on Ressler, his finger tightening on the trigger.

She fired twice, just as she’d been taught at the academy. The boy went down and she watched, shell-shocked as Ressler kicked the gun away from the kid’s limp hand. She ran to the boy’s side and felt for a pulse.

“Call an ambulance!”

“He’s dead Keen” Ressler breathed. “Don’t worry. It was a good shoot.”

She rose shaking from the floor. “It didn’t have to happen this way.”

“That’s the job.” Ressler patted her stiffly on the arm. “Hey – you saved my life. You should be proud of yourself.”

And then he was leaving, speaking into his button mic, like nothing had happened. A moment later more agents swarmed in and she handed them her gun wordlessly, before walking out of the room. She knew who she needed to find.

She marched past the throngs of guests being rounded up, questioned and processed, and out of the house until she saw the black sedan parked outside. Reddington’s bodyguard Dembe got out of the driver’s seat to open to door for her but she wrenched it open before he had the chance, dropping into the backseat next to Reddington. He seemed un-phased by her dramatic entrance, and merely raised the crystal tumbler of amber liquid in his hand.

“Scotch?”

“My God” she breathed. “You said you were going to do it. You actually told me to my face that you were going to have Jacqueline Ford assassinated!”

Reddington took a sip of his drink, his expression implacable. “My understanding is that Mrs Ford died of a heart attack after it became apparent that her empire was collapsing.”

“I don’t believe it for a second” Liz fumed. “This whole case was personal for you – all of this is. You played us and I’m going to find out what you’re up to. You can start by telling me why you chose me. You owe me an answer.”

He frowned, the corner of his mouth twitching. “I told you I didn’t know what would happen between us.”

“No, I mean before. When you came in, you asked to speak to me. You knew things about me.”
Reddington worked his jaw slowly and she held his eye determinedly.

“Because of your father” Reddington said then, his expression blank.

Liz frowned. “Do you know my father? Do you know Sam?”

“If only the answer were as simple as the question seems.” He looked away from her for a moment and then back, his eyes scanning her face. “Have you told him? About us?”

“There’s nothing to tell” she spat.

“I see” he responded, his tone hardened. “Well that’s for the best. I’d prefer you to keep it that way.”

She wasn’t sure why, but it stung, and she looked away from him, the madness of the entire evening creeping in on her.

“I shot Emmerson Ford” she said quietly. “I killed him. You don’t seem surprised” she continued, looking back at him. “Did you want me to do it? Is that why you brought me this case? Did you think it would help me to kill someone who raped and murdered an omega?” she asked, her voice cracking.

“No Elizabeth” he responded with a frown. “I never wanted you to find out what it feels like to take a life. But you did what had to be done.” He shook his head and sighed. “That boy’s life was ruined long before you met him.”

Liz nodded bitterly. “He was raised to think that alphas are untouchable. That omegas are just playthings you can throw away. Do you know what the other agents call me behind my back? Reddington’s bitch. That’s all I am to them.”

Reddington’s eyes narrowed. “Who refers to you that way?” he inquired in a low voice.

Liz looked at him warily. “What, so you can deal with them like you did Jacqueline Ford?”

She watched as Reddington’s jaw tightened. “I certainly think that they could afford to be taught some manners.”

Liz huffed angrily. “Then you’ll have to give that lesson to the whole bureau. I never felt like an omega before I joined the taskforce. Before I met you. It didn’t used to matter.”

His expression was pained but he spoke with surprising softness. “None of us can deny what we are, Lizzie. But it doesn’t define you or your future…I’m quite convinced you have the strength and tenacity to achieve extraordinary things” he finished gently.

Taken aback, Liz looked down, anxious not to let him see the color creep into her cheeks.

“It’s not all bad with the team” she said hastily. “Aram is sweet. He tried to make me feel welcome, even if he did go on about how I have higher estrogen levels and how that’s what makes me look different” she finished, shaking her head.

Reddington nodded and looked out of the window for a moment. When he turned back he offered her a tight smile. “It isn’t the fact that you’re an omega that makes you beautiful, Lizzie.”

Liz’s already enormous blue eyes widened, a gesture she usually avoided because it made her look a little unearthly. She felt the color in her cheeks deepen and she hated it, she hated the way her body responded to him. Most of all she hated that the omega part of her felt reassured that he admired her.
She turned to face him. “You and I work together, I’ve accepted that. But that’s where it ends – we’ve done what had to be done and now it’s over. In there, when we were dancing… Whatever you think you’re doing, you have to stop. What happened between us… it doesn’t make me yours. Understand?”

Reddington’s lips pressed into a hard line. “Yes.”

She nodded and went to open the car door.

“But you might find it more difficult than you think to move on from this” he added gravely.

She exhaled loudly, her breath hissing between her teeth. “You don’t give up, do you?” She shook her head and got out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

“No” he murmured to himself, raising his glass of scotch to his lips. “Not on you.”
Chapter 9

Two weeks had passed since the gala and Liz hadn’t heard a word from Reddington. She’d been glad to get back to normal, to acquaint herself with the task force, but much as he was absent in the days, Reddington continued to haunt her dreams at night. Sometimes all they did was dance, round and round until she felt dizzy with want, with the need just to be held. Other times his presence was more abstract, more sinister – a sleek, leather-gloved hand at her throat, or at her belly, as if he was laying claim to her womb and the life he could put there.

She kept herself busy at work, but in the spare time his absence afforded she had her own side project going on that no-one else knew about. She’d rented out a small storage space, completely empty except for pin boards where she collected her thoughts and evidence regarding Reddington and his connection to Jacqueline Ford and her imposter husband Tom. Tangible evidence was very thin on the ground, although she had uncovered some alarming links between Tom and a murder that had taken place when they were on a weekend break.

She knew she should really investigate getting the marriage dissolved, or annulled or whatever, but somehow she couldn’t until she had some kind of closure – until she knew what the hell was going on. In some strange way, she drew comfort in the fact that she was still technically married, as though it could somehow protect her from Reddington’s grasp. She had no idea how he would react if he discovered she was investigating him; she didn’t want to find out.

One day she rose early to get a coffee before work at her favorite café. The morning sun was warm on her shoulders as she sat down outside, her attention distracted by a cute couple with a baby that made her heart ache a little.

“Lizzie we need to talk.”

Liz jumped in surprise, and looked round to see Reddington sitting on the bench beside her, one leg crossed over the other. He looked more casual than she had ever seen him, his eyes shielded by sunglasses and his jacket removed revealing the shirt and vest underneath. His neck was a little tanned and freckled, and she wondered what warm country he had visited that week. She wondered fleetingly how his skin smelled in the sun.

He tilted his head and smiled as though he could read her thoughts, and she swallowed, composing herself.

“How much do you remember about Kyle Davenport?” he asked momentarily.

Liz rolled her eyes. “Fine I’ll bite. Kyle Davenport… Freelance torturer for hire. He’d extract the information a client wanted or just hurt someone to order – he was obsessed with human anatomy. My profile put him away three years ago – he’s in prison.”

“How about telling me how you knew Jacqueline Ford? How about Tom?” Reddington looked away out over the street without acknowledging her question.

“I don’t know how you knew her. It was through Tom. They were married.”

Liz tilted one eyebrow at him. “Tom married Jacqueline Ford?”

“She fell in love with him at the party. She thought he was handsome.”

“Why did she marry him? That doesn’t make sense.”

Reddington shrugged. “It didn’t make sense to me either, but I can’t talk about it.”

Liz huffed. “Fine. But who is Kyle Davenport?”

Reddington’s eyes narrowed. “I’ll tell you if you promise not to investigate.”

“Not as of the early hours of this morning” Reddington replied smoothly. “There was a breakout at Washington State last night. My sources say Davenport is unaccounted for.”

He turned to look at her, his expression indecipherable behind the sunglasses, save for a tightness in his jaw. “He’ll come for you, Lizzie.”
Liz pursed her lips, anxious to disguise the uneasiness that crept over her at his words. “What makes you think that? If he wants revenge there are any number of people he could go after – the officers who arrested him, the prosecutor, the judge…”

“You’re right that Davenport was never in it for the money” Reddington said conversationally. “Offering his services was a convenient way to capitalise on his predilections. The omega agent whose profile led to his arrest…” he mused, running the tip of his tongue over his bottom teeth. “He won’t be able to resist.”

His tone made her shiver inwardly, almost as though it were he who couldn’t resist. She rose from her seat, her jacket over her arm. “Ok, I’ll take it to the taskforce and we can liaise with the prison authorities.”

Reddington shook his head. “I can’t protect you effectively at a government black site. I’d like you to stay with me until he’s apprehended.”

Liz raised her eyebrows incredulously. “I don’t need your protection. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to work to track this guy down.”

“And if I insist?”

His tone remained neutral, but a chill snaked over her for the second time that morning. She looked about her, surveying the area. She immediately saw Dembe standing at the entrance to the coffee shop, his hands folded in front of him, but as she looked about she realised his people were everywhere; a man with a gray ponytail seated near them in jeans and a T shirt who looked up as she turned round, a young couple who’d previously been laughing and joking were now poised for action, a business man holding his briefcase open a fraction.

She knew Reddington could smell the jolt of fear that ran through her, but as she turned back to him she decided not to give him the satisfaction of hearing it in her voice.

“They’re all your people. I suppose they’re waiting for your signal?”

He canted his head slightly and Liz wished she could see his eyes behind the sunglasses. “They’re here for your protection.”

She squared her shoulders and looked down at him. “If you want me to go with you you’ll have to kidnap me. I won’t go willingly and there’ll be quite a scene. I’m sure a wanted fugitive would want to avoid that.”

Reddington laughed gently, stretching his arms out casually across the back of the bench.

“My people are the best Lizzie, if I’d wanted to kidnap you Gerald over there would have drugged your coffee and you’d be secure in the back of the sedan with me right now on the way to a safe house instead of exposing us all to unnecessary danger.”

There was an edge to his voice that chilled her almost as much as the scenario he’d just painted, as though her unwillingness to be kidnapped was inconveniencing him somehow.

She slammed her coffee down on the table. “In that case I’ll be leaving. And tell your goons to back off.”

“The goons are non-negotiable” he said matter-of-factly, rising from the bench. “If you refuse to come with me, then they go with you.”
She opened her mouth to protest but he cut her off. “I’ll be in touch.” He offered her a tight-lipped smile before straightening his fedora and walking away towards his car.

When she got to the post office black site Aram gestured conspiratorially for her to come over to his work station.

“Agent Keen, good morning… so I’ve found out some more information about Jacqueline Ford that may be of interest. There’s nothing concrete, but in Russia she was linked to an omega trafficking organisation called Zavodchiki. It means… erm… breeders.”

Liz frowned. “Breeders?”

He nodded nervously. “Yeah. It seems like they sold omega children to a variety of unsavoury characters but they got on the US government’s radar when we received intelligence that the Russian government was experimenting with using alphas and omegas to breed a race of super humans – they were genetically selecting for alphas and omegas, sourcing them from the black market.”

Liz paused for a moment, her mind racing. “We had US intelligence looking into this in the 80s? Aram, could you check what Reddington was doing back then? When he was an intelligence officer?”

Aram looked about him guardedly. “Documents pertaining to Reddington’s missions before he committed treason are highly classified – we’d need permission from the defense secretary to access them.”

Liz smiled coyly. “I seem to remember director Cooper telling me you were the person to see when I needed to hack into a government database without permission. I know it’s a lot to ask, but I was wondering if you could try? We’d keep it between us…”

“Oh it would take me about thirty seconds” Aram said smiling bashfully. “Between us” he repeated with a grin, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

He paused before looking up at her. “Russia. Reddington was posted with naval intelligence in Russia from 1982 onwards. It was his last mission.”

Liz took a deep breath. “What else? What was he doing there?”

“Ah, that’s it” Aram said frowning. “The file’s been scrubbed. Looks like someone didn’t want anyone knowing the details of that mission.”

“Agent Keen”

Liz turned round to see that assistant director Cooper had stepped onto the floor. “Sir, Reddington’s made contact. We have a case, and this one’s kind of personal to me. Reddington says that there was a break out at Washington State last night, and a serial killer named Kyle Davenport is unaccounted for. I helped put him in prison three years ago.”

Meera and Ressler appeared behind Cooper, and Ressler whistled in disbelief. “Davenport’s a nasty piece of work – tortured and killed at least a hundred people that we know of. That was good work getting him off the street” he said stiffly.

Liz smiled to herself; it seemed that that she’d earned at least a small amount of respect since the
incident at the Ford house.

“We’re going to put him back where he belongs” Cooper interjected. “Let’s get the warden at Washington State on the line, see where we stand.”

That afternoon Meera caught up to Liz with a knowing look on her face.

“So, Reddington brought you this case this morning? Kind of early, isn’t it?” she questioned gently.

Liz shook her head. “It’s not like that. He accosted me at a coffee shop. He’s worried Davenport will come for me because I helped catch him, but like I said, we need to check out everyone else who was involved.”


Liz looked at her uncertainly. “No… I’m worried about Reddington. There’s a lot we don’t know about him. About why he committed treason, left his family… He was a decorated officer…. ” She paused, worrying her lip before continuing in a low voice. “He’s dangerous. Possessive.”

Meera frowned. “Has he tried to hurt you?”

“No, nothing like that” Liz responded hastily. “But he implied that things aren’t over between us. What if he’s right? I hate him for what happened. For turning my life upside-down… But I can’t stop thinking about him, Meera. Before, when this happened you said that I would be able to move on.”

Meera looked at her sympathetically. “Yeah, but I didn’t say it would be easy. There’s a reason alphas and omegas tend to stay together after they’ve bonded, even if they weren’t together before. It’s a powerful feeling. But despite what assumptions people make, it certainly doesn’t mean that you don’t have a choice.” She smiled mischievously then. “Say the word and we can go out on the town, pull you a nice beta bloke who doesn’t have ‘international crime lord’ on his resume. I’ll be your wing-woman.”

Liz smiled weakly. “Thanks but I’ll pass for now – I’ve had enough bad luck with men recently to last a lifetime.”

“Let me know if you change your mind. And Liz?” Meera added soberly. “If you’re really worried about Reddington you should tell Cooper.”

“No, I can handle him. I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve…” Liz finished knowingly.

At that moment, her cell began to ring. “Speak of the devil, it’s the devil.”

She took a breath and answered. “What do you want? Calling to threaten me again?”

Reddington laughed abruptly but when he spoke there was an edge to his tone again which told her he was annoyed.

“Lizzie, making arrangements to ensure your safety hardly constitutes a threat. I called to see if I could assist with your case but if you’re not interested I really must be going – these hellfire missiles won’t sell themselves.”

“Are you serious?” she asked, alarm creeping into her voice.
“Perfectly” he replied nonchalantly. “I need to keep up appearances – I am a criminal after all. What do you have so far?”

Liz sighed. “Not much. Davenport’s in the wind, we’re going to talk to his cell mate but the warden isn’t confident we’ll get anything out of him.”

“I see” Reddington responded sagely. “If he’s been reluctant to talk thus far I have a feeling he might have a change of heart. Go see him Lizzie. If there’s something to tell, he’ll let you know.”

Liz frowned. “What are you going to do?”

“Sadly there isn’t a prison on earth where I don’t know a few guys.”

Liz rolled her eyes. “Great. And what about my entourage? Are you gonna call off your goons now?” she asked boldly.

She heard the slight crackle of Reddington’s breathing on the line before he answered in a stern tone. “No.”

She looked at her phone screen but the line was dead – he had hung up.

When they arrived at the prison the warden rolled his eyes as soon as he saw Liz. “Have you any idea what kind of uproar I’ll have on my hands if I let an omega like you go down the men’s block? It’ll be like Mardi Gras with pheromones. Sorry miss, I can’t allow it.”

Liz was outraged but before she could respond Ressler surprised her by stepping in. “Too bad pal. This is special agent Keen, she’s my partner and she’s coming with me.”

He squared his shoulders and the warden shrugged. “Fine. But I take no responsibility - you’d better watch over her” he said seriously.

They were shown down a long corridor past the cells, and the noise that erupted as Liz walked past was deafening. Men were whistling, banging the bars and cat-calling, shouting crude comments about sweet omega pussy and making obscene gestures. One inmate even began to masturbate openly in front of them; as they walked Ressler attempted to shield her from view, though whether he was trying to stop the inmates from seeing her or visa versa she wasn’t sure.

Depressed and a little shaken, Liz was relieved when they were shown into a gray, bare interview room. Davenport’s cell-mate Michael Griggs was a thin, dishevelled beta with a lined face and silver hair beginning to show at his temples, but Liz suspected he was younger than he looked. He raised his hands from the table in greeting as they entered, the chains on his wrists clinking.

“Well now. You got some friends in high places now don’t cha” he said with a grim smile.

“That’s one way to put it” Ressler answered sardonically.

Liz sat down at the table opposite the man, troubled by the slightly wild look in his eye.

“Did Reddington threaten you?” she asked softly.

Griggs didn’t answer, but broke into a mirthless laugh, as though it were a silly question, and Liz felt equal parts anger and foreboding.
“Tell us what you know about Davenport” Ressler said sharply. “Otherwise you’re just wasting our time.”

Griggs looked at him distastefully. “Fine. You think it was easy sharing a cell with someone done what he done? Reckoned he was safe just cause he only killed when people paid him to. I knew better.”

“Was he violent?” Liz asked.

Griggs shook his head. “Nah. That psycho was as quiet as the grave. Didn’t talk much. ‘But recently he started bitchin’ about that lawyer of his. That’s why you’re here right? You wanna know where he’s going? Well if I were his lawyer I’d be fixing to leave the country right about now.”

Ressler frowned. “His lawyer? Why would he have it in for the guy who defended him?”

Griggs shrugged. “Past few weeks he wouldn’t shut up ‘bout how his lawyer screwed him over, didn’t give him a proper defense. Says he blames him for his conviction, that he’s gonna make things right. Then he breaks out. So like I said, I wouldn’t wanna be that guy.”

Ressler gave Liz a pointed look as he pulled his phone from his pocket. “We’ll get our guys to track down the lawyer, hopefully head Davenport off.”

He began tapping on his phone and Liz looked back at Griggs. “Is there anything else you can tell us about Davenport? Anything at all, even if you don’t think it’s important.”

Griggs shook his head. “I told ya. The ole terminator wasn’t the chatty type, ‘till recently that is.”

Liz raised her eyebrows. “Why did you call him the terminator? Because of the people he killed?”

The man laughed, making her feel a little naive. “Nah. We’ve all crossed out our fair share” he said casually. “They call him terminator ‘cause he never stops. A year or so back there was a scuffle in the chow hall, Davenport got shanked in the stomach. He was bleeding all over the place but just kept coming, got the guy in a choke-hold calm as you like, put him out cold and went back to finish his dinner like it was nothin’. Terminator, see?”

Liz nodded, though she didn’t see – she had a feeling there was something missing that she hadn’t yet grasped. Ressler pocketed his phone again and gestured to her to leave. He strode out of the interview room and Liz made for the door, stopping when she heard Griggs speak again.

“Hey omega…”

She rolled her eyes inwardly and turned back to him. She half expected him to make some crude sexual comment – she heard enough of them – but what he actually said was much worse. His voice was quieter now, like he didn’t want to be heard, and almost paternal.

“Prison ain’t no place for a sweet thing like you, and neither is doing business with Reddington. If he’s helping the FBI he’s doing it for his own reasons and you’d best beware. Cross him and he’ll hunt you down and slit open your tender little belly girly, soon as look at ya. He won’t be swayed by a pretty face, no not that one” he finished distantly.

“You know him?”

Griggs recoiled a little. “Only by reputation. And that’s enough.”

Liz nodded curtly and left the room, her stomach churning.
“What was that about?” Ressler asked.

“He wanted to warn me about Reddington” she said as calmly as she could. “I get that a lot.”

Ressler bristled, and Liz swore she could actually smell his hackles rising. “He’s got a point. I hunted Reddington for years. He’s a manipulative, ruthless killer who only does what’s good for him.”

Liz turned to him, her fingers rubbing absenty at her scar. “Griggs was scared. He had this look – I’ve seen it before. It was exactly how Tom looked when he found out about Reddington. Before he…” She broke off, the memory of his attack on her too bitter to continue. “Even hardened criminals are afraid of him” she breathed, her chest feeling tight.

Ressler nodded, his expression grim. “Look Keen – Liz – I don’t know what happened between you and Reddington, you know, afterwards…” he said awkwardly. “But I know this. He’s never backed down. He’s as territorial as any alpha I’ve ever seen, and he doesn’t let anyone take from him, not ever. You can’t give him a reason to think you’re his. If he thinks that…he won’t let you go.”

Liz nodded numbly as they walked out of the prison. On the car ride back to the black-site she remembered the dance she shared with Reddington, and watched the black SUV in the wing mirror that had been following her since this morning. Reddington’s people. She felt ill to her core, sick and panicky, and it wasn’t just the residual smell of the prison, cloying with sweat and dirt, and unpleasant, repressed sexual energy. She could feel Reddington’s hold over her and it was suffocating.

She needed answers, something she could use to protect herself from him. She thought back to Aram’s discovery regarding his activities in Russia; if only she could prove that he knew Jacqueline Ford from before, if she could prove that he killed her – she’d have something over him.

She needed to go to her storage locker where she kept a copy of Reddington’s files, and everything she’d collected so she could look for a link. But if she was going to do that, she’d need to lose the security detail he had following her. By the time they got back to the black-site she knew exactly what she was going to do.

She went to her office and closed the door, getting her cell out of her bag.

“Hey Tori, long time no see… Listen, do you still have dark hair?... Remember that trick we used to pull in college where we’d take each other’s places in lectures?... I need a favor…”

An hour later she slipped out to walk to her storage locker on foot, unnoticed while Reddington’s people followed her friend in her car to the grocery store. It was the perfect ruse she thought, smiling to herself.

She didn’t see the van pull up beside her until it was too late.
Chapter 10

When Liz woke up she was lying on the concrete floor of a warehouse, her head throbbing and the smell of the place making her instantly nauseous. The cloying aroma that surrounded her was sickly and festering like rotting meat. Her hands had been tied behind her back with a cable tie, the plastic biting cruelly into her wrists.

She manoeuvred herself into a sitting position and looked about her. The space was dark save for a single naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, buzzing and flickering, illuminating metal bars and tables stacked up around the perimeter of the grubbily tiled space. Going against her instincts, she sniffed the stale air to try and ascertain her whereabouts, and the distinctive smell of dead animals stuck in her nose and on her skin. She realised with a sickening feeling in her gut that she was at an abandoned slaughter-house – the smell of frightened, dying animals was unmistakable.

She saw movement ahead of her and her worst fears were confirmed as Davenport stepped into the light in front of her. He wore faded blue jeans and a plaid shirt that were slightly too big for him, and Liz guessed he had stolen them on the run. His sandy hair was shorter than she remembered, and he was thinner, but he still had the same deceptively boyish, inquisitive face. He smiled at her, almost as though he was pleased to see her.

“You’re awake – that’s good. I thought I might have hit you too hard” he murmured. “Girls break so easily.”

“You want to keep me alive” Liz breathed. “We both want the same thing then. For you not to hurt me.”

Davenport looked about him thoughtfully. “I didn’t say I don’t want to hurt you” he said in the same distant tone.

She watched in alarm as he walked over to one of the metal tables and began to arrange a horrific array of objects; a cleaver, several meat hooks, a bone saw and a black plastic baton which he picked up slowly, his fingers caressing the handle. After a moment it buzzed and Liz saw a flash of blue at the end – it was a cattle prod.

She swallowed her fear and tried to keep her voice even. “We spoke to your cellmate - Michael Griggs. He said you were going after your lawyer. You can’t take down everyone who put you in prison, you’ll be caught.”

As she observed him she thought she saw the corner of his mouth turn in a smile. “Not everyone. Just you, sweet thing. I knew you’d talk to Griggs. Seemed to me I’d have a better shot if you thought I was coming after someone else.”

Liz fought the urge to retch, the horror of her situation settling on her shoulders like a dead weight. He just wanted her.

“Why are you doing this? Because of my profile? If you don’t want to go back to prison you should be running as quickly as you can, not bothering with me.” As she spoke her fingers sought out a rusty masonry nail sticking out of the wall behind her and she began to work the cable ties along it slowly.

“Your profile” he echoed, looking over his shoulder with an almost rueful expression, “was missing something for sure. But I guess an omega lady like you wouldn’t get it.” He paused and smiled
again. “I’m going to make you get it though.”

She licked her dry lips and nodded. “Ok then – tell me how it was wrong. Tell me about yourself.”

He didn’t answer and Liz’s heart began to pound, panic setting in. “They said you only tortured people for money – but that’s a base motivation. You’re more than that, aren’t you? I’m right, aren’t I? Your father beat you – that’s true too? You can be better than him!” she said fervently, rubbing the cable ties as quickly as she dared behind her.

“Psychologists” he scoffed derisively. “They all want to know about my father. How he beat on us. I’ve never been one for conversation” he said quietly, running his fingers down the cattle prod. “But you can talk though. In fact, I hope you do. I want to hear everything. I want to know everything you feel” he finished, turning to face her.

He stepped towards her just as the cable ties snapped off her wrists, the long nail coming lose from the exposed brick under the tile. Seizing her moment she sprang up and stabbed the nail into his thigh as hard as she could, the sickening sound of it twisting into his flesh making her gag. She began to run, but as she pounded across the cavernous warehouse floor a strange thought occurred to her. He hadn’t made a sound.

She looked back as she ran, and from the fleeting glance she had she saw to her horror that he was still standing, apparently unaffected, just staring down at the crimson stain on his leg. If anything, he seemed puzzled. She made it through the door, the industrial evening air burning her lungs as she breathed, but a moment later she felt his body slam into her from behind, sending her hurtling to the floor. She clawed and twisted frantically in his grasp, sinking her teeth hard into his arm, but still he made no sound other than his breathing from the exertion of running after her. Soon after, the flat of his arm tightened around her neck and the lights of the city in the distance faded to darkness.

Reddington swept into the black-site with a stony expression on his face. The pieces had fallen together to construct an alarming picture; agent Ressler had contacted him reluctantly to say that they’d retrieved traffic cam footage of Davenport in a stolen vehicle which showed him bundling a woman fitting Lizzie’s description into a van. Meanwhile, his security team had even more reluctantly imparted the information that they had been duped – her car had been abandoned in a grocery store parking lot, the driver – whoever she was – unaccounted for.

As he strode onto the operations floor Ressler approached him with his shoulders squared and chest puffed. “I swear to God” the ginger agent spat “if you had anything to do with this, if you’re in on it with him just so you can get your filthy hands on her-”

Reddington bristled, cutting him off sharply. “By all means Donald, finish your posturing. I’m sure Agent Keen can afford to wait” he finished drily.

Ressler stood back with a scowl and Reddington nodded at the assembled team. “Ok then. You were all clearly under the impression that Davenport wasn’t a threat to Agent Keen, I’d like to know why.”

Ressler shook his head in frustration. “Davenport’s cellmate told us he had a beef with his lawyer. Spent the last few weeks vowing to get even.”

Reddington’s expression tightened. “In my experience people with grudges don’t suddenly develop
them years after their incarceration. You fell for a red herring Donald and as fish go, this is the bitter kind.”

Cooper stepped forward, his hands planted on his hips. “If I recall, it was you who advised us to speak with Davenport’s cellmate.”

“Because people in close confines talk Harold” he responded scathingly. “It’s up to you to interpret what they say.” He shook his head. “Did he say anything else? Anything about Davenport, where he might take her.”

Ressler shrugged. “Nothing like that. But he did tell us some prison yard story about him, how they call him the terminator because he got shanked and carried on eating dinner. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Reddington narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “On the contrary, I think it means everything. Agent Keen profiled that Davenport was obsessed with human anatomy. What if he was obsessed with pain…because he can’t feel it.”

“He’s immune to pain” Ressler finished, understanding dawning. “How would the authorities not know that?”

“Congenital Insensitivity to Pain - it’s an extraordinarily rare condition” Aram chimed in. “If he’s sick or injured he can’t tell how bad it is. It’s a miracle he’s still alive – ah, not for agent Keen that is.”

“But that doesn’t explain why he would be fixated on Keen” Ressler said in a frustrated tone.

“Aside from the fact that her profile put him away? He wants to experiment on her” Reddington said quietly, the tension in his jaw palpable. “There are many people who believe omegas feel more pain than the rest of us. He’s curious.”

Ressler turned and looked at Meera. “Is that true?”

“There were some experiments done in the 1960s that suggest omegas are more susceptible to pain than alphas and betas, but the results are rarely referred to as the experiments were deemed unethical. Unsurprising, really.” she added sardonically.

Cooper stepped forward, “If he’s experimenting he’ll need space…and equipment. He wouldn’t have taken her far, too much risk of being caught. Aram, pull up Davenport’s last known location and triangulate a search grid within a 10 mile radius. Look for isolated, empty houses, workshops and warehouses.”

The information appeared on the big screen at lightning speed and Cooper nodded. “Reddington-”

But when he turned around, Reddington was already stepping into the yellow elevator, his silent body guard in tow.

Liz opened her eyes and moaned in fright as her senses came back to her. She had been stripped to her underwear and was hanging upright from one of the meat hooks in the warehouse, her arms stretched painfully above her head. Her toes barely reached the floor and as she scrabbled for purchase with her feet she felt dirt and tiny bone fragments scrape along her toes. Her fear seemed to heighten her omega senses even more and the smell of old meat was now putrid, making her gag.
She twisted helplessly as Davenport approached her. He was now bare-chested and as he stepped into the light she gasped at the marks covering his body. He had numerous scars, many from wounds which had not healed properly, leaving deep, uneven crevices in his skin. There was a deep gash in his side that looked like it could have killed him, and a slice across his stomach. The worst things by far though, were the small, perfectly round scars which littered his chest and arms. Cigarette burns. She looked down and noticed that he had torn a strip of the plaid shirt and tied it round the wound in his leg.

“I understand now” she said, her voice trembling. “You don’t feel pain do you? That’s why you were experimenting on people.”

He smiled at her, with something that looked like relief. “Smart lady.”

He began to pace around her back and she tried to turn her head as far as she could to keep him in view.

“Your chest – did your father do that to you? I’m sorry-”

“I DON’T WANT TO TALK ABOUT MY FUCKING FATHER!”

Liz couldn’t help the sob that escaped her as his sudden shout echoed round the dank walls of the slaughterhouse. He had been so quiet and calm before. He was behind her now and she closed her eyes and braced herself for pain, but when she finally felt his hands on her it was almost gentle. He gripped her round the waist from behind - as though he were measuring her – before running his hands slowly around her exposed back and stomach. His hands were rough, ridged and scarred, every movement of his fingers scraping her sensitive skin.

“Your skin” he murmured, as if genuinely surprised. “It’s so soft. Smooth. There ain’t a mark on you. You got someone who keeps you this way? An alpha?”

Liz wriggled involuntarily on the hook, loathing the feel of his rough hands on her. “Nobody owns me” she answered vehemently.

“Sorry” he said, stepping back around in front of her. “I didn’t mean any offense. I haven’t known many omegas.”

Liz met his eye then, opening hers as wide as she could. “Please, let me go. Please. I don’t think you want to do this.”

He gave her a quizzical smile. “That’s a neat trick – with the eyes. That’s supposed to make me feel protective, yeah? But I’m just a beta. It’s funny” he continued, staring at her intently. “I can’t feel pain but you’re an omega – you feel more pain than anyone else.”

Without warning he reached out with a knife blade, pulling the tip down her ribs and over her stomach. It left a deep scratch, with little stinging beads of blood seeping up here and there.

Liz gasped in shock while he watched her face closely. “How does it feel?” he asked, his voice tinged with boyish excitement.

“What?” Liz breathed in pain and confusion.

“How does it feel – tell me! Describe it!”

Now that he had drawn blood panic began to crowd her senses and she struggled to speak. “Ah, mmm it hurts” she ground out.
“It hurts” he repeated hollowly. “IT HURTS – that’s all they ever say! How does it hurt?”

“I’m not playing your game” she choked. “You can never understand pain if you’ve never felt it. You need to accept that!”

A flash of rage burst across his face and he threw the knife to the floor with a metallic clang like an angry child throwing a toy. He strode across the room to the table and picked up the cattle prod, returning brandishing it in front of him.

He pushed the tip forcefully under her chin, his finger hovering on the switch. “So you don’t wanna play huh?” he spat. “How about I just see how loud you scream for starters.”

She tried to twist her head away from it, shaking with fright “No, no, please no”

He removed the prod from her chin; for a second she thought he had relented but then he drew the baton slowly down her body and onto her stomach, lubricating the tip in her blood in an almost obscene manner.

Finally, staring at her face with a look of deep concentration, he pushed the switch on the handle.

Reddington was in the car approaching the warehouse district when his keen ears heard it on the breeze - the desperate, animal cry of an omega howling in pain, wailing for her mate to come to her. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he felt it, he thought fuzzily as he hollered at Dembe to drive in the direction of the sound. Every sense was aroused and shattered by it; the terrible sound, the scent of her terror sharp and distinct amongst rotting meat while the hairs on his arms and legs prickled.

As they drew closer he had wild thoughts – what if other alpha males heard her cries and rushed to her aid, would he then vanquish them and take her for himself? But of course, those proud and illustrious men never had to hide in the shadows. In the cold, festering darkness there was only him.

Surely though, she would have many heroes willing to fight for her as she lived her life – she was truly the most beautiful creature he had ever seen. And yet, she was equally cursed; for every hero she had there would be a demon following her, meaning to do her harm. She had no knowledge of her enemies. Then there was him and what was he in the end? Her hero? Or just one among many demons that would eventually bring her pain and destruction. Perhaps he was both.

When they were close he instructed Dembe to stop the car. Stepping in to the night air he tilted his head to the side, closing his eyes and allowing the sounds and scents to draw him a map to her. Usually he thought it best where possible not to rely on senses that the majority of the population didn’t have, instead using the technologies that were available to his associates and enemies. He had survived a long time in his brutal world with the knowledge that understanding the way people think is far more likely to keep one ahead in the game than a sensory advantage. But not this time.

As he stalked through the plots of rusty, abandoned buildings he allowed himself to be guided by her scent which, although usually rapturous to him, was now soured by the acrid stench of fear. When he caught the metallic tang of blood slice through the air he drew his weapon, manoeuvring around burnt-out cars and junk with feline agility, his mind saturated by rage and anxiety. By the time he reached the warehouse he heard her wail again; it was weaker this time even though he was closer to the source, and every scent, every sound, every thought and sensation narrowed to one all-encompassing feeling: Lizzie.
Chapter 11

It was through a blur of pain, lights and nausea that Liz saw Davenport fly. One moment he was there, right in front of her face, the next he had been thrown clean across the room and was lying on the floor, a figure advancing on him. She blinked, trying to stay conscious, to focus on what was happening. There was a swift movement followed by a sickening crack which punctured the disconcerting quiet. It was a grotesque sight that met her eyes as she focussed on Davenport; surreally he was actually trying to get up from the floor, though his efforts were hindered by the sharp white bone protruding from his leg.

A moment later her hazy view of him was obscured by the figure who was now striding towards her.

“Lizzie”

She heard her name in the distance, rough and urgent, and knew then almost on a primal level that he had come for her, Reddington was there and she was safe. Moments later she felt his fingers press into her neck before cupping her face and she tried to look at him - she wanted to so much - but she could no longer fight the unconsciousness that had been clawing at the edges of her mind as her body sought to protect her from unbearable pain. The strain on her arms was relieved and a sense of weightlessness took over her limp body as he lifted her from the cruel hook on which she had been hung up. Overcome by relief and exhaustion, she passed out in the safety of the alpha criminal’s arms.

She woke some minutes later engulfed by Reddington’s comforting scent, and for a second she thought that he must be holding her close. However, she soon realised with alarm that it wasn’t him, but his jacket which had been laid over her. She was lying on one of the metal tables, weak and disorientated, and all she could see from her current position were the filthy chipped tiles on the wall of the slaughter house. For a terrible moment she thought that Reddington had somehow failed – why else would she still be there? – but then she heard his voice from somewhere behind her, cold and slow and simmering with a rage that she could almost taste in the air.

“…there’s a truly unique scent in here. Blood… fear… the acrid aroma of inevitable pain and surrender. We’re both violent men, Mr Davenport. I’ve taken on a life that requires it. But you crave the scent of fear. You hunger for pain. You find little meaning in life without it and yet you cannot detect it. Cannot feel it. To me… it’s overpowering. As deafening as a scream from the one person in the world I care about.”

Liz lay perfectly still as she listened, her limbs too weak to move and her mind racing. What was he doing? She held her breath as she heard Davenport respond, the voice that would haunt her for many nights to come tinged with wonder.

“So she does have an alpha then. She’s yours.”

“I think it would be more accurate to say that I am hers” Reddington responded softly.

Liz’s lips parted slightly in surprise, but before she could really process his declaration she froze in utter shock as she heard the fine buzz of the cattle prod crackle through the air before hitting flesh.

“You can’t hurt me” Davenport panted, his breathing short and uneven.
The atmosphere in the cavernous space was heavy with anticipation as Reddington answered, his voice almost hypnotic.

“Oh but I can, Kyle. You see, hurt is a much broader concept than most people realise. I once knew another man who couldn’t feel pain. A fisherman born on the Norwegian fjords, the ocean was a second home to him. As a young man he felt utterly invincible. But as he faced the perils of the sea year on year – as the dangers mounted and his life became more complicated – he carried the burden of knowing each moment that he could be dying and not even realise it. For those who have felt indescribable pain it’s difficult to comprehend. But in the end…he understood that a life without pain was a life lived in fear. Despair. Abject terror of death. Because he knew that when death eventually came calling…he wouldn’t hear him knock.”

His words chilled Liz to her core and she closed her eyes tight shut as she heard the buzz of the cattle prod again, tears squeezing out from behind her lashes. She could hear Davenport’s ragged breathing under the sinister hum, and for a moment she thought she caught the unique scent of his fear, like lost children and disused farmyards.

When Reddington spoke again, his voice was hollow and empty, consumed by a quiet rage that made her useless limbs tremble at the sound.

“Electrocution’s a tricky thing. There are few external signs, but the internal damage can be devastating. Depending on the voltage and duration of the shock it can lead to temporary numbness in the extremities, breathing difficulties, hearing and vision loss. At its worst it can burn your organs from the inside out. Turn them to stone.”

Reddington paused and then laughed mirthlessly as he continued speaking, venom dripping from his voice. “Without pain, there’s really no way to tell whether you’ve had a little tickle… or whether I’ve applied so much juice your miserable lungs are about to steal their last, desperate gasp of oxygen.”

“Stop” Liz whispered, her mouth bone dry and her tongue heavy. Gripping the hard metal sides of the table she did everything she could to summon her voice. “Please stop!”

If possible, the atmosphere in the room became even heavier as her plea echoed round the walls, the only sound in the otherwise oppressive silence. She wished to god that she could see what was happening but her limbs were still numb and jelly-like as she lay shaking on the table. In the silence she thought for a moment that he had heeded her request, but then his voice came again, dreadful and so low it was almost as though he was talking to himself.

“Perhaps it’s fitting that a man who feels nothing should die of a broken heart.”

Liz choked out a horrified sob as she heard the hum of the cattle prod again and the distinctive thud of a body crumpling to the floor.

She held her breath, her teeth sinking into her lip to stop her crying out again but she knew that Reddington was coming for her, his footsteps swift on the concrete floor. Her mind swirled – was it possible to torture someone who can’t feel pain? He had certainly terrorized him. He had killed him in a soft and terrible rage, and now she was alone with him, unable to run, just like when he had come uninvited into her hotel room.

She flinched, trembling as he appeared above her, her heart fluttering uncomfortably like a bird trapped in her chest. His eyes were burning with the heat of the kill and she watched, shaking with apprehension as he bent over her, wordlessly shifting his jacket from her body, leaving her exposed in her bra and panties. He placed his hands firmly on the table on either side of her head, breathing hard, his nostrils flaring and mouth twitching at the corner. His expression was mesmerising, as wild
and dark as it had been when she had first gone into heat and it felt for all the world like being pinned in between the paws of a giant cat.

Instinctively she tried to move away, raising her shoulders off the table, but he pushed her back down gently.

“Lie still” he panted gruffly.

Swallowing, she nodded weakly. It wasn’t as though she could do anything but stay still she thought hazily; her limbs were so numb, tingly and uncoordinated like someone had put all her cells back in her body in the wrong order.

He lowered his head slowly and for a confused moment she thought that he was going to kiss her, but he stopped inches from her neck and inhaled deeply, his lips tight and eyes half closed. She felt his hands move down on either side of her, gently lifting her bruised wrists one then the other, and running his hand down her arms, turning them this way and that.

She watched his jaw tighten as he observed the deep welts on her wrists but he moved quickly on to her legs, his hand ghosting over her thigh bringing back a visceral memory of when he had prepared her to be mated. He worked methodically and with great care, drinking in her scent while his gentle hands took note of every minor injury, checked every inch of her. Checking what’s his, she thought helplessly, compulsively replacing Davenport’s touch with his own.

She whimpered when his hands moved to the cut on her stomach and she heard him make a noise in the back of his throat that sounded like a growl. Suddenly she tensed her abdominal muscles as she felt his tongue run lightly up the edge of the wound, and then again, purposefully, unhurried and wet. She gasped at the sensation; it was so strange, so unknown to her - he was cleaning her, his tongue soft, soothing and thorough.

It was shockingly intimate. Never in her life had she imagined receiving such treatment, and certainly not from someone who was both singularly refined and utterly ruthless. She was aware that this was something that some alphas and omegas did and she remembered the strange urge to lick his neck when she’d stabbed him with the pen, but this – the flood of hormones, the tenderness, the feeling of overwhelming care and comfort - was unlike anything she’d ever felt.

She began to relax, to sink into the feeling, but as she did so she caught the lingering smell of burning flesh in the air, and the cruel words he’d spoken to Davenport before killing him echoed in her mind. The scent offended her heightened senses and seemed horribly familiar to her for reasons she couldn’t grasp. A desolate sense of panic and confusion began to well up in her chest and she let out a soft, keening whine, a plaintive animal sound that was strange even to her own ears.

It seemed to bring him back to himself and she watched him look up, his expression softer and more composed, as though grooming her had calmed him as well. He gave her a tender smile and reached down gently to brush a lock of her hair from her face with his hand, stroking her cheek with the pad of his thumb.

“You’re ok sweetheart, you’re going to be fine. Come.”

He put his hand on her arm to help her up but it was like his spell had been broken somehow. She stiffened as though she’d been electrocuted again and pulled away from him.

“No! I can do it.”

He looked pained but stepped back silently, his cheek twitching and eyes watching her like a hawk.
She pushed her aching frame round with enormous effort, peeling her cold, sweaty skin off the metal table and landing on her feet, pulling his voluminous jacket around her. Swallowing saliva she took a shaky step forward, but her knees immediately buckled beneath her, her legs still impossibly weak and shaky.

He stepped quickly forward, catching her and lifting her exhausted body into his arms in one deft movement. She kicked the air feebly, but his grip only tightened, pulling her to him and cradling her head against his chest.

“Shhh Lizzie, I’ve got you. You’re safe. You’re safe now” he soothed.

At his words she finally began to cry, overwhelmed by tiredness and confusion; it began to sink in that she was alright – that she had lived through it – but there was no escaping that those same hands with which he now comforted her had just killed a man. She twisted weakly in his arms, her hand limply grasping at his vest in protest even as she sobbed into the fine wool and inhaled his comforting scent.

As he carried her from the warehouse into the night air she heard shouts and running footsteps.

“Ah” he murmured drily, his lips brushing against her hair. “Your colleagues have caught up with us.”

“Reddington! Is she alright?” she heard Ressler’s alarmed voice above her head.

“I’m ok” she said shakily, struggling to make herself audible.

“I’ve got her” Reddington growled, as though he were afraid Ressler would try to take her from him.

He carried her over to a waiting ambulance where they were met by a young beta male paramedic.

“May I?” the young man asked hesitantly.

“You may.”

Reddington had responded before she’d had a chance to, and she was confronted with the sickening realisation that the paramedic wasn’t asking her permission to treat her, but Reddington’s. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, she belonged to him.

She lay there numbly as he very gently transferred her to the arms of the waiting paramedic as though she were a new-born baby. The paramedic laid her down on the gurney, quickly attaching a heart monitor to her chest and shining a pencil torch in her eyes, before pulling a blanket over her with a nervous glance at Reddington.

“She’s stable. I’m calling it in, I’ll be back in a moment” she heard him say, and then he was gone.

She felt a soft tugging at her calves and realised with some confusion that Reddington was tucking the blanket in around her to keep her warm. It was an absurdly sweet gesture, and she shivered faintly at the memory of his tongue on her stomach, grooming and calming her.

She heard the brush of material as he manoeuvred himself around the side of the gurney and sat down on the bench beside her. He removed his fedora and set it down on the seat next to him before looking down at her, his expression serious.

“Elizabeth, Davenport didn’t arrange for a lookalike to drive your car to a grocery store parking lot and evade my security detail, you did that. I want to know why.”
He spoke softly but with unwavering authority and she looked away from him, color rising in her pale cheeks. “I told you” she said with calmness she didn’t feel. “I don’t need your protection so I got rid of them. Anyway, it’s over – you can call them off now.”

“You’re lying” he countered, his tone still soft but with a sternness that twisted in her stomach. “You aren’t sorry that they weren’t there today, even when you needed them. You’re relieved. You’re hiding something from me. I’d like to know what it is.”

She didn’t respond, only drew her bottom lip between her teeth, and the silence was broken a moment later by the hesitant voice of the paramedic.

“I’m sorry sir, but we need to go.”

Liz stole a look at Reddington, who was still observing her intently, working the tension in his jaw. He nodded sharply and stood up, returning his hat to his head before stepping out of the ambulance without another word, closing the doors behind him.

As the ambulance drew away agent Ressler appeared beside Reddington, his hands on his hips.

“That’s quite a mess you’ve left in there” he said pointedly, gesturing to the warehouse. “Are you going to tell me how Davenport died? A broken leg would’ve been more than enough to incapacitate him. And it sure as hell wouldn’t kill him.”

Reddington smiled artificially, his tone full of faux enthusiasm as he stared after the departing ambulance. “You know, I once knew a man who survived being shot twice only to die after breaking his pinky finger – a fat embolism if you can believe that… Life’s a funny thing” he finished hollowly.

“Yeah” Ressler shrugged cynically. “I’ll be sure to put that in my report. You know she’s afraid of you, right?” he added in a low tone, unable to keep the smirk from his voice.

Reddington didn’t answer, his expression inscrutable, and after a moment Ressler shuffled back to the crime scene barking orders. He didn’t see Reddington linger there watching the lights of the ambulance disappear over the horizon, as though in having found her, he could not bear to lose sight of her again.
Chapter 12

After the incident with Davenport Liz felt as though she had taken a frustrating step back with the team. With the exception of Meera, her colleagues seemed to expect her to be traumatized by her ordeal, as though her tender omega psyche might break under the stress. Agent Ressler’s attentions were particularly annoying, his supercilious attitude towards her now supplemented with embarrassing alpha behaviors such as conspicuously striding over to pull her chair out for her whenever she sat down. She hated that he had seen her crying and vulnerable, and suspected uncomfortably that he would be only too pleased to use her in his rivalry with Reddington. She’d gone back to being a porcelain doll, just like the omega girl at the Ford’s auction.

The truth was that she had been deeply affected by her abduction, but certainly not in the way that they assumed. When she closed her eyes at night, it wasn’t Davenport’s face that floated above her, but Reddington’s, calling her name in the distance with an urgency that seemed to register in every cell of her being, and lingered even in daylight hours.

Tonight as she lay down to go to sleep he appeared in her mind yet again, her brain tormenting her with sounds, images and scents; him calling to her, carrying her, laying her gently down, the warmth of his hands on her skin. She yearned for him desperately, and hated herself for it. Pitifully far from sleep she turned over in frustration, burying her face in the pillow.

He was still there in the soft blackness, the brush of the pillow over her cheek reminding her of the brush of his tongue over her stomach. She wriggled unconsciously against the sheets as if trying to wipe his touch away, but the action only served to scrunch up her sleep-wear uncomfortably. Exasperated, she yanked off her tank top and shorts and flopped back down on her front, taking some relief in the feel of the cool sheets against her naked skin.

Slowly, she lifted her hips and allowed her hand to slide down onto her stomach, keeping it there for a while, her fingers seeking out the mark to the right of her navel where Davenport’s blade had split her skin. It was almost healed already, but tonight it burned with the memory of Reddington’s alpha treatment, dedicating all of himself – his rage, his pain, his love, his tenderness – to her.

It occurred to her then that while thinking about him she had unconsciously adopted the lordosis ‘presenting’ position traditional for omega mating, her breasts pressed into the sheets while her hips and ass were slightly raised off the bed. He hadn’t insisted on it when he’d come to her hotel room, and she wondered why he’d wanted to see her face, if he was aroused by her distress as some alphas tended to be, or whether, perhaps, he’d simply wanted to be able to check that she was ok.

In the quiet of the bedroom she used to share with her husband, she tried not to think as she arched her back and slid her fingers down to the aching slick between her legs.

She expected to feel better the next morning having got him out of her system, but to her dismay she woke feeling warm and frustrated, with his velvet voice rolling in her mind. “I think you’re very special.” “Some omegas prefer to be restrained...” She blushed even though no-one was privy to her thoughts, and hastily pulled on her running gear before heading to the park.

She’d been there almost every day since Davenport, sometimes twice, doing laps and push ups in the hopes of building her fitness and strength. Much as she was recovering well, it bothered her how easy it had been for both Davenport and Reddington to carry and restrain her. She had the brains of a
first-rate agent, but she wanted the body to match.

As she stretched she recalled her training at the academy. She’d graduated top of her class two weeks early, and had been especially delighted to pass physical test. She hadn’t expected to succeed there; as an omega it was difficult for her to maintain the physical strength and stamina required. But she had, and as she looked back on it she had an unpleasant thought.

Reddington had said he knew her father, and it was obvious that he had a great deal of power and influence. What if he had somehow greased the wheels? What if she hadn’t really met the standard required? There was a reason there were so few omegas in the FBI – it was almost impossible for them to pass the physical. She’d received some bitter comments from alpha classmates insinuating that someone had pulled strings on her behalf, but until now she hadn’t thought it was anything other than prejudice and jealousy.

She shook the thought away, and began her run. She’d become familiar with the route in the park, the trees heavy with sweet blossom sprinkling on the tai chi groups, new mothers and couples who wandered the paths on gleaming mornings like this one. It was the life she was going to have before it all went to hell. Seeing them made her ache inside and she tried not to feel resentful.

As she ran into the dark underpass on the north-west side of the park unease began to creep over her. She picked up her pace, shaking off the feeling; of course she was uncomfortable in dark corners after Davenport - that was only natural. The strange curve of the concrete tunnel meant that she could see the green light of the sun shining through the park trees on the other side, but the middle of the underpass was shrouded in darkness. As she pounded down the concrete a shadow sprang out in front of her and she slammed hard into a warm body. Panicked and disoriented she flailed ineffectively as she was dragged to the dark wall of the tunnel, a hand clamped firmly over her mouth.

She smelt him before she saw him, the cheap, artificial scent of her estranged husband’s cologne clogging her nose and eyes. She’d never had to heart to tell him she hated it – as a beta, he wouldn’t understand how overpowering it was to her. Now her heart raced as she looked into his eyes, scanning his face to try and guess his intentions.

Very slowly he removed his hand from her mouth until one finger was left on her lips, warning her to be quiet.

“Don’t scream, don’t run, just hear me out. I’m not gonna hurt you.”

“You already have” she whispered, breathing hard. “You attacked me. The police are looking for you.”

He shook his head, pursing his thin lips. “I know, and I am so sorry, Liz. I was upset – I know that’s no excuse-” he said hurriedly, “but I wasn’t myself.”

Liz exhaled loudly, her eyes darting about her to check her escape options before looking back at him. “I don’t know who you are!” she hissed.

He gave her his signature thin, boyish smile. “Tom Keen - I’m still your husband. God Liz…” he chuckled, raising a hand gently to stroke her face. “You are so beautiful. Like friggin’ Helen of Troy and I’m dying without you babe, I’m a mess. I’ll do whatever it takes to make things right.”

Liz shook her head, biting back tears. “How about you start by letting me go and turning yourself into the police?”
He nodded earnestly. “I will, I know I have to do the right thing. But not the police. It has to be your team at the FBI. There are things I know… things you need to hear, Liz.” He looked about him furtively. “Look I gotta go.” He held up a card with a cell phone number. “You can reach me here. Think about it.”

She stiffened as he leaned into her body, sliding the card lasciviously into the back pocket of her lycra running pants before kissing her on the cheek.

Stepping back he made to leave, but suddenly stopped and turned back to her with a sheepish expression.

“By the way… I got a message on my old cell from your aunt June. She’s been trying to contact you – I guess you guys haven’t been in touch recently, huh. She said your dad’s sick. But you know what she’s like” he continued hastily. “Always overreacting. I’m sure it’s fine. Think about what I said, Liz.”

After that he was gone in a flash, pulling his hood up and walking briskly out of the tunnel.

That evening Liz spoke to her dad and, after he’d reassured that he was just having some routine tests, she turned her attention back to her husband. Sitting alone on her kitchen floor, she cradled a glass of wine in one hand, and the card Tom had given her in the other. She made it appear and disappear between her fingers, a children’s magic trick with some very grown up questions. If she called him, could she handle seeing him? She longed for a sense of normalcy. She missed her husband and their old routine. Could she accept the fact that he never existed? Could she really turn him in? And if she did, would she have to testify in court?

Was she ready to tell the world the hateful things he’d said to her? To announce that he’d beat and kicked her and she’d done nothing to defend herself – to confess in front of strangers that she’d been in heat, her body sweaty and needy and weak? Then of course there was his cryptic comment about things he could only tell her and the task force, things that were obviously connected to Reddington.

Twenty four hours later the only thing she’d decided was that if she was going to consider turning him into the task force as he requested, she wanted an idea of what he would say. Never go into an interrogation blind, her old criminal psych professor had said. And between Reddington and Tom, she had been kept in the dark long enough.

She slid the heavy metal door of her secret storage locker shut behind her, and as she turned she yelped loudly in fright at the sight of Reddington leaning casually against the desk she had set up in there. He was dressed formally in a dark three piece suit which had concealed him in the shadows, his signature fedora resting ominously on a stack of the files regarding his Russian connections she’d worked so hard to keep hidden from him.

“You scared me” she ventured, eyeing him from across the small space.

“Apparently” he said drily, his head cocked to the side. “Perhaps that’s why you didn’t see fit to tell me that you’re investigating Tom on your own. That you’re investigating me.”

Liz tossed her purse aside angrily. He’d invaded her personal space, her secret place where she came to think. How long had he known about her storage locker? Had he been snooping there before? She felt the fine hairs on the back of her neck prickle indignantly. Traditional alpha etiquette demanded that they be aware that their presence and scent may be overbearing, and ensure that they provide
omegas with a space for themselves where possible, even if it was just an armchair in their shared house which was reserved for the omega alone. Reddington clearly had no compunction about invading her space.

“What did you expect?” she said exasperatedly. “You’ve told me nothing – you must have known I’d try to find out for myself. Now please leave. You’re trespassing.”

Ignoring her, he began to thumb through the files on her desk and, outraged and territorial, she marched towards him, grabbing his wrist.

“I said leave” she began, but in an instant he’d twisted his hand elegantly round such that it was now he who gripped her wrist, not hard enough to hurt, but enough to make her wonder fleetingly what she had been thinking antagonizing him without an escape plan.

She stood there frozen in his impassive stare, keenly aware of the close proximity between them. Standing next to him she was reminded of the sexual dimorphism between alphas and omegas; he wasn’t a particularly tall man, but he was considerably larger and stronger than she.

He released her moments later with an enigmatic nod of his head, but she was sure she felt his thumb brush over the scar on her palm as he did so. It conjured up a visceral memory of the moment the bond had happened between them, and sent a familiar ache in her breasts and belly rolling over her.

Not for the first time she wondered about the efficacy of her heat suppressants, about whether they were any match for the pull she felt around him. Rationally she knew that if taken correctly they would stop her going into heat, but the fact that he could still make her feel as though she might was disturbing none the less.

She stepped back, drawing her arms around herself. “If you’ve come to try and stop my investigation you’re wasting your time.”

“Elizabeth I haven’t come to stop you” he replied in a low voice. “In fact, I’m here to help” he continued, standing up and turning to look with interest at the artefacts and photographs on the pin board.

He leaned in and stared with mock horror at a grainy photo of himself, his clothing casual and chin stubbled. “My god this is a dreadful photograph, you couldn’t have found a more recent one?”

Liz raised her eyebrows. “You want to pose for a mugshot, feel free to walk into any police precinct in the DC area - I’m sure they’ll be more than happy to accommodate you.”

Reddington laughed genially as he continued to stare at her pin board, his broad shoulders shaking.

“Look” Liz continued, “if you’re serious about wanting to help me you can tell me what you know about Tom. I found out my husband is a stranger and since then my life has been turned upside down. I want answers.”

Reddington turned back to face her, his expression serious again. “Before I reveal anything to you I’d like to know why you concealed the fact that you met with him, from both me and your colleagues. You’re playing a dangerous game, Lizzie.”

She tensed, feeling as though she’d been caught out somehow. So that’s why he was here in her space now. “Are you still having me watched?” she queried accusingly.

“Answer the question” he rejoined in a hard tone.
She looked at him defiantly. “I didn’t agree to meet with him. He accosted me.”

The alpha criminal’s lip twitched as though he were stifling a snarl. “And yet you’re protecting him.”

Liz shook her head vehemently. “I’m not protecting him” she said defensively. “He…he came out of nowhere. I needed time to think…” she trailed off.

Reddington canted his head, his forehead creased into a stern frown. “There’s nothing to think about. Lizzie, men like Tom don’t change. He lied and manipulated his way into your life. Into your bed. And when he realised he could no longer have you he beat you unconscious. Do not forget that.”

Liz swallowed and looked away. “He offered to surrender to the taskforce. Gave me a contact number… I’m turning him in. The team can take it from there.”

Reddington exhaled loudly. “If Tom wants to be handed over to your team he has a reason. Don’t underestimate him.”

She drew herself up, her jaw set determinedly. “It doesn’t matter - whatever’s going on they can handle it. I’ll set it up.”

“I don’t want you seeing him.”

Reddington’s voice had dropped, and Liz looked round in surprise, unsure of what she was hearing in his tone. His deep cadence resonated so profoundly in her chest it was as though his wishes were being inscribed on her, but at the same time there was the tiniest hint of a question, like he was acknowledging that it was not his place to command her.

She licked her bottom lip, scraping her teeth over it in a nervous gesture, and looked at him with large, hooded eyes. “Then what do you want?” she asked quietly.

He stared at her for a moment with something almost like longing, before the corners of his mouth turned into an affectionate smile and he nodded gently.

“I want to give you a blacklister. A new name – or rather an old one. I promise it’s a doozy.”

Liz sighed exasperatedly. “I thought you were going to help me find out about Tom.”

Reddington didn’t answer, only went to her pin board and moved the photograph of Tom into the centre, stabbing the pin through his head with what Liz thought was unnecessary force.

“The life I lead” he began in a gravelly voice “entails a considerable degree of risk that must be monitored. Managed. It means cataloguing my vulnerabilities.”

“Me” Liz said slowly.

He gave a shallow nod in confirmation. “I believe the man known as Tom Keen was hired to marry you. To spy on you and gain valuable information.”

“Information on you” Liz breathed, feeling nauseous. “We were connected before we bonded. Tell me how. You said you knew my father…”

Reddington’s expression changed suddenly into one of concern. “How is he Lizzie? I hear the cancer is back.”

Liz frowned. “What? No, he’s fine, just having some routine tests…”

“You should be there with him.”

“I spoke to him last night – he would have said something! I don’t know what game you’re playing” she snapped. “Let’s just stick to Tom.”

Reddington’s eyes narrowed a moment before his signature inscrutable expression returned. “Ok then” he responded briskly, placing his fedora on his head and straightening it in one smooth gesture. “Bring him in. But before he’s booked for his vicious assault on you make sure he’s questioned about the murder at Angel Station – I can see you’ve collected a reasonable amount of evidence. Victor Fokin was no tourist. Have agent Malik take a run at Tom - if anyone can find out who he’s working for she can” he added, smiling unpleasantly. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I have business that requires further travel today. Be careful, Lizzie.”

Liz watched wordlessly as he ducked elegantly under the door of the storage locker, her stomach swirling with a mixture of familiar jealousy, confusion and anxiety.

She’d call her dad again when she got home.
Reddington stalked down the corridor of the Nebraska hospital with tension aching in his powerful shoulder muscles. It seemed to be there permanently these days; with all his wealth and resources he hadn’t known just how difficult it would be to protect Sam’s child. He hadn’t dreamed it would be he who would hurt her. It pained him to think of her stubbornly fighting against her own nature, alone and in the dark about so many things. And she was fighting, he thought, smiling softly at the memory of her scent that morning; he wondered if she knew that she was an open book to him, that he could smell her desire, her frustration, and it was rapturous.

Despite her inner turmoil she had been magnificent, challenging him like a lioness, defiant and resourceful. His chest swelled with pride to think of her stumbling bravely on, though he had no right to feel it. She wasn't his. He hadn’t raised her. He hadn’t packed her school lunches or taped her drawings to the fridge. Nor had he made her his mate. He’d done what was needed and hadn’t taken more than that, though his urge to do so was becoming alarmingly distracting. He hadn’t made them a bed to share or built a home for her. Until she came to him, until she asked, he could build her a glittering palace and it would be nothing more than a cage to her. He wasn’t a father or a lover, but God he did love her, in ways he didn’t even fully understand himself.

As he moved through the hospital to the oncology ward he bowed his head to prevent his face appearing on security cameras. He avoided public buildings where at all possible. It shouldn’t have been like this, he thought grimly. He entered the hospital room of his old friend with a heavy heart. They had been close once - dear friends in fact - but now as he stepped over the threshold contemplating what would most likely be their last conversation he felt an uncomfortable sense of shame.

Sam was lying propped up in the stark bed, a cell phone clutched to his ear, his complexion yellow and sickly.

“I’m sorry to bring you so late to the party... I was trying to protect you… Yeah, I know… I know… I love you too butterball.”

He sighed and hung up. When he looked round he raised his eyebrows in a manner that reminded Reddington of Lizzie.

“Ray…” he chuckled, his rasping laugh catching in his throat. “I must really be dying if you’re here.”

Reddington smiled sadly at his friend. “You should have told her before, Sam” he said gently.

Sam looked down at the covers, his sallow skin sagging with regret. “I know. You think you can save them from anything. But some things are just meant to be, and there’s nothing you can do.”

Reddington took a deep breath and nodded slowly. He was beginning to understand that very well. “How long?” he asked quietly.

Sam shrugged. “Six weeks, hooked up to pointless machines. I wish they’d said six hours.”

“I finally had a chance to see her Sam. She’s grown into a truly beautiful young woman. And not just because she’s an omega…There’s a fire there she got from you. You should be proud.”

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. “I’ll never forget when you told me she was an omega - I thought Jeez I’m in trouble, I’m gonna be more afraid of her than she is of me. And how was I gonna protect
her from all those guys who’d eventually be lining up round the block to date her.”

Reddington’s smile faded, his voice becoming quiet and gravelly. “You did protect her, Sam. She’s…extraordinary.” He swallowed, unable to keep the guilt from his eyes as he faced his friend.

Sam frowned, searching Reddington’s face. Silence hung thickly in the air and his eyes widened with realisation.

“You… You bonded with her.”

Reddington stared at him, his face taught with anxiety, his silence confirming the truth.

Sam began to shake his head in alarm. “No Ray, no. Not my little girl. Not you, not your world, not for her…” he moaned, his voice breathless with rising panic. Suddenly he stopped and stared at Reddington, his eyes dark and suspicious. “It’s not possible… Christ Ray. How did this happen?”

Reddington’s jaw tightened uncomfortably. It was a question he’d asked himself many times; there was no answer that would save him from the depths of guilt, and certainly no answer that would satisfy the father of the girl whose destiny he had shaped irrevocably.

“It doesn’t matter” he deflected gruffly. “What matters is that it has. Anything else is a distraction.”

Sam continued to stare at him, the shock deepening the dark circles around his eyes. “It matters to me, Raymond” he said darkly. “What have you done?”

Reddington flinched, his friend’s horror and suspicion clawing at his insides, the air poisonous with silent accusation. “It was never my intention” he said quietly. “You must know that. I would never do anything to harm her.”

Sam licked his dry, crinkled lips, his eyes glittering. “I need to tell her.”

Reddington looked stricken, the breath quickening in his chest. “No.”

“Ray I have to – before I go. She deserves the truth. Especially now.”

Reddington shook his head and slowly approached the bed, sitting down. “I can’t let you do that my friend.”

“She has to know. So that she can choose the life she wants. Ray…promise me you’ll let her choose. Tell me you won’t force her!”

Reddington swallowed and looked at him gravely. There was a long pause before he spoke. “I promise that whatever happens… I will always act in her best interests. You’re a wonderful father Sam. You gave her an incredible gift. But it’s my job to protect her now.”

He reached out suddenly and grabbed a pillow from the bed, holding it down hard over his friend’s face. Sam’s pitiful, reflexive struggles were abhorrent to him, but desperately painful as this heinous act was his heart was resolved as he thought of his friend’s daughter, the pain and horror that would mar her angelic face should she ever find out the truth about her past. About him.

In the end, Liz let Ressler and Meera pick Tom up. She called the number he had given her and set the meet, leaving her colleagues to apprehend him. A small part of her felt guilty for the deception - she’d told him she just wanted to meet up to talk properly – but none of it mattered now. She was
booked on the first available flight that evening to Nebraska to see her father. As she waited in the black site for confirmation that Meera and Ressler had got Tom, she told herself again and again that it was going to be ok. That her father would survive this, and that the imposter who’d posed as her husband would go to prison.

She looked up with red-rimmed eyes when Meera came into her office.

“You look like hell. You ok?”

“My father’s sick” Liz sighed. “Just tell me you got Tom and I’ll be on my way to Nebraska.”

Meera nodded sympathetically. “Yeah we got him. I’m sorry to hear about your dad.”

“Meera…” Liz asked hesitantly. “How is he? I guess he’s pretty mad at me.”

She paused for a moment, and Liz detected a hint of unease flicker across her face. “No… Actually he asked if you were ok. Said he understood if you needed time before you saw him.”

“So he confessed? He admitted being a fraud? Admitted what he did to me?” Liz asked slowly.

Meera took a breath. “I’m afraid not. He’s denying any knowledge of the murder at Angel Station, says he was there for a job interview?”

“That’s what he told me but that was obviously a cover! You don’t believe him do you?” Liz said, panic rising in her chest.

“No” Meera sighed. “As far as I’m concerned your ex is scum. But all he’s said is he doesn’t remember hitting you. He’s not denying it, which is something, but I’d feel a lot more comfortable if we could pin him down on the murder.”

Liz’s heart began to pound, her palms sweating unpleasantly. “That’s bull – surely no one will buy it?”

Meera regarded her hesitantly. “Look Liz, I know things are difficult at the moment, but we really need him to talk… And he’s saying he’ll only talk to you.”

Liz scoffed. “Where have I heard that before?”

“I know it’s a pain in the arse. But if it gets him out of your life for good, it’s worth it” Meera finished briskly.

Liz nodded, pursing her lips. “I have a half hour before I have to leave. Let’s get this done.”

Her heart pounded as they walked down the corridor to the interview room. She suddenly realised she had no idea who to expect on the other side of that door. Her husband? A murderer? Or just the stranger who beat and kicked her.

“I’ll be right on the other side of the glass if you need me” Meera said meaningfully as she closed the door behind her.

Liz stopped short as she looked at her husband sitting at the table, his hands cuffed. He was wearing glasses again, and gave her a wan, puppy-dog smile. He looked like the man she married.

“Hey babe, I’m glad you’re here. This is kind of intimidating, you know?”

Liz felt the blood rush in her ears. “Tell the truth and it’ll all be over.”
Tom smiled and looked about him. “So this is where you work, huh? I had no idea. Looks like you were keeping secrets from me, Liz.”

She squeezed her hands into fists at her side. “I was keeping secrets from you?” she spat heatedly. “How about the murder at Angel Station? Victor Fokin, a Russian agent about to defect to the U.S…”

To her dismay Tom began to laugh. “Liz… this is crazy - a Russian agent? Are you serious? Like I’m Tom Bond. I gotta say you’re sounding a little nuts.”

Liz swallowed, trying to stop her hands from shaking with rage. She hated that he was making part of her doubt her own mind. “When you came to me in the park you said that you wanted to do the right thing.”

His expression turned serious. “And I do. I know I did a terrible thing and I’m so sorry, I would never hurt you. I was just so angry, I must have blacked out or something. It was a shock, finding out you were having an affair.”

“I wasn’t having an affair” she ground out.

A flash of something nasty crossed Tom’s face before the pathetic smile of a wronged husband returned. “So you haven’t slept with him then?” he asked innocently, staring up at her.

“You know how it works” she whispered, a blush of shame creeping up her neck.

Tom shook his head slowly as though he were admonishing one of his grade schoolers. “He’s not who you think he is, Liz.”

“You told me there were things I needed to know. Are they about Reddington?” Liz asked in a clipped tone, maintaining her composure.

She frowned as Tom turned slightly, raising his hand to rub the side of his face. “Turn the camera off” he said nonchalantly in muted tones. “You really wanna know? Turn it off.”

Liz hesitated, and looked briefly towards the glass. She knew Meera was there watching on the other side. Sighing, she reached up and pulled the cable from the interview room camera.

“Happy?”

Tom sat casually back in his chair, though he was looking at her intently. “So this is what it takes to get some private time with my wife. I’ve missed you Liz.”

She shook her head in exasperation and turned to leave, stopping dead in her tracks when he spoke again, tension tightening his voice.

“You can’t trust him – he’s dangerous. He will make you his. He’ll use you, he’ll control you completely, and when he’s finished with you, he will kill you.”

Liz turned back to him, her teeth biting into her lip uncertainly.

“What, you really think he’s above killing an omega?” Tom continued. “He’s a vicious, alpha criminal. Alphas kill their omegas all the time, Liz. Half the time it doesn’t even make the news” He finished cruelly.

Liz took a deep breath. “I think out of the two of you only one has hurt me and it wasn’t him. I’ll see
you in court” she finished firmly, slamming the door behind her.

Liz joined Meera in the observation room and shook her head. “He’s playing me. Reddington was right, he wanted to come here for a reason and it wasn’t to give us information – I’m not sure what it is, but all he’s doing is getting under my skin – it’s all inferences, nothing concrete.”

Meera nodded slowly, and the two omegas watched through the one way mirror as Liz’s estranged husband rubbed his hands together nervously.

“He’s a good actor” Meera observed conversationally. “Total psycho though. He’s got a routine – look how he rubs his hands, moves one to the back of his neck and then glances at the glass. Typical stress gestures until you realise he’s doing it again in that order. He’s not nervous at all, he just wants us to think he is.”

Liz exhaled slowly. “And I didn’t see it.”

“You weren’t looking for it at home. No one does” Meera said, clicking her tongue dismissively. “Do you believe him? About Reddington hurting you?”

Liz drew her arms around herself defensively. “Reddington is obviously dangerous, but he does have a moral code. It’s hard to explain… He wouldn’t hurt an omega. At least not gratuitously…” she trailed off.

“So he’s a killer, but he’s a gentleman about it” Meera said incredulously. “You need to be careful, Liz.”

“Why, you don’t think Tom’s telling the truth about Reddington?”

Meera shot her a grim look. “All I know is, talking about Reddington was the only time that man in there was genuinely rattled.”

Liz shook her head. “I have to go if I’m going to make my flight. I don’t know what to do – if Tom’s claiming he blacked out when he hit me…”

Meera regarded her with a steely expression. “Give me an hour with him, I’ll see if I can jog his memory.”


Liz made her way back to her office to pick up her purse, pausing to run her hands through her hair. Her forehead was clammy, and it occurred to her that her body hadn’t felt entirely normal since the day she met Reddington. She recalled his words about Meera being the one to get the truth out of Tom and felt a painful stab of jealousy towards her friend. She made being an omega look easy. But then, she’d had a mother and a family who understood.

Liz smiled, suddenly reminded of Sam and his clumsy attempts to explain omega physiology to her when she was a teenager while they worked on his beloved old Chevy.

“It’s a great car, classic paint work and real popular. But the engine’s temperamental, overheats if you’re not careful…”

She laughed fondly and grabbed her purse. Just as she was leaving, she received a call from the hospital and sank to her knees in the quiet of her office.
It wasn’t a conscious decision to call Reddington – she’d already dialled Nick’s Pizza before she even realised what she was doing. She spoke to his bodyguard Dembe who instructed her to come to the Kennedy Center opera house. As she reached the giant, illuminated steps she almost turned back. She felt drained and shabby in her work clothes, her eyes blotchy from crying and hair unkempt compared to the grandly dressed men and women who attended opera performances. While she hesitated Reddington’s bodyguard Dembe came into view, approaching her with a kind smile.

“Elizabeth” he said gently. “Raymond is waiting for you in the gallery. Come.”

She nodded wordlessly and followed him up the stone steps and into the gilded hall, up plush red staircases winding higher and higher while the strains of the orchestra floated around her until they reached a service corridor at the top of the building. Dembe opened a door for her and ushered her inside.

The music was louder there, but echoey and haunting as though she were still listening from far away. She fumbled through the shadows, following the music until she saw him leaning against a balcony staring down, illuminated by a light coming from below. She was relieved to see that, like her, he wasn’t dressed for the opera, although his dark suit seemed to cling to him in the shadows like a shroud. His shoulders were uncharacteristically hunched as though he carried a great weight.

He turned as she stepped towards him and gave her a gentle smile, though his eyes were tired and the circles under his eyes more pronounced in the light and shadows of the gallery. As she reached the balcony she gasped quietly. They were at the very top of the opera house; the dome above them was covered in rich reds reflecting golden lights, while ropes of crystal flowers hung down, eventually connecting with an opulent chandelier. From their vantage point they had a perfect, if far away view of the stage, the throngs of opera-goers engrossed in the wrenchingly sad music that floated up towards them.

“Verdi’s Rigoletto” Reddington rumbled softly. “The daughter of a court jester is seduced by a licentious duke. The jester, whose only joy has been ruined by the duke, plots to murder the man responsible. His plan is tragically foiled by his own daughter, who sacrifices herself to save the duke. The man who was so undeserving of her love.” Reddington gestured at the stage below. “He sings: God in heaven. She was struck by the bolt that I loosed in my quest for vengeance...She begs him to forgive all as she dies.”

Reddington turned to look at her, his eyes dark and sorrowful. “I’m sorry about your father. If there’s anything you need. If there’s anything at all I can do for you… Please ask.”

Liz nodded silently, breathing in sharply to stave off the wave of tears pushing at her eyes and throat. As she looked down at the tragic scene unfolding off the wave of tears pushing at her eyes and throat. As she looked down at the tragic scene unfolding on the stage she wondered briefly at his tone, which was almost as though he were begging her to give him a task. Too bad she had nothing for him. There was nothing she needed but her father back.

“Is this where you come?” she asked suddenly. “To watch the opera?”

“Best seats in the house” he replied with a sad smile.

“That’s not it” Liz said quietly. “You’re up here because you can’t be down there. Not with the normal people, the people who don’t have international arrest warrants hanging over them. You have to watch from the shadows. That’s what you do.” She turned to scan his taught face while he looked down at the wailing Rigoletto clutching his daughter’s body. “You watched me, didn’t you?” she asked hollowly.
Reddington stayed silent for a moment, and when he spoke it was barely audible over the melancholy strings of the orchestra. “If I am the phantom, it’s because man’s hatred has made me so. If I am to be saved, it is because your love redeems me…” he said distantly. “You know, Gaston Leroux was supposedly saved by the phantom from falling from an opera gallery such as this one. In exchange for his life he agreed to write the phantom’s great love story.”

“The phantom” Liz repeated incredulously.

Reddington turned to her then and smiled affectionately. “Even monsters have their truths that must be told. As do you, Lizzie. The best way to keep the memory of your father alive is to talk about him.”

As the lights went up and audience applauded and hummed in the cavernous arena below, he gestured to the space behind them, now bathed in soft light from the auditorium. The gallery was cluttered with worn furniture, musty costumes and old pieces of set, but in the back Liz saw two luxurious velvet and gilt chairs of the kind that would have been reserved for presidents and their first ladies, and an ornate table set with a scotch decanter and two tumblers.

He rested his hand on the small of her back, and Liz felt a wave of care and affection wash over her, his scent warm and inviting in the low light. She choked down a sob and he drew her gently to him, planting the lightest kiss on her temple.

“Tell me some stories” he said softly.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Things hadn’t been good for Liz since her father’s death. She didn’t have it in her to explain Tom’s absence at Sam’s funeral. As she nodded politely at distant relatives and friends it occurred to her just how much of an outsider she was in her own life. The only person who seemed to understand anything of what she was going through was Reddington, but he had kept his distance since that night at the opera. The profiler in her deduced that he was giving her space to mourn. The omega inside resented him for not taking her under his care and command in her time of vulnerability.

To make matters worse, despite their best efforts the team had failed to build a case against Tom for the Angel Station murder. He’d stuck to his story throughout, and there was no way to prove he hadn’t believed he was going for a job interview. The best they could do was charge him with assaulting Liz, but, much to her dismay, he’d entered a plea of not guilty, claiming diminished capacity. The bastard was going to drag her through a trial.

After some deliberation she had contacted the lawyer she had danced with at the Ford’s auction, and to her relief he had been pleased to hear from her, and more than willing to talk her through the proceedings. It was a good thing that he was, she thought, given that the district attorney - a young up-and-coming alpha woman - seemed more interested in furthering her career than in winning Liz’s case.

Now as she sat on a bench under the morning cherry blossom on the bank of the Potomac Liz allowed her heightened omega senses to whisper stories about her surroundings in her nose and ears.

“I know you’re there” she murmured softly after a while, knowing that Reddington’s keen alpha ears would hear even from his position several yards behind her.

A moment later he appeared next to her on the bench, his scent like a warm caress in her belly. She noted that he’d left a respectful space between them, not enough for another person to sit though - at least not an adult.

“What do you want?” she sighed. “I’m tired and Tom’s trial is going on this week. I’m preparing to testify.”

Ignoring her question, he handed her a plastic cup with a bright striped pink straw. “Here - try a pick-me-up smoothie. You’ll be ripe and ready to start the day in no time” he said, flashing her a smug smile.

She accepted it grudgingly, and took a sip before grimacing. “Ungh... What’s in this thing?”

“Oh” he twinkled, “beets, carrots, acai berries, a lot of ginger – it’s packed with Vitamin C and B5 to help keep those eyes bright and your nose wet.”

Liz raised her eyebrows. She hadn’t heard him indulge in alpha humor before and it rankled, as though he were keeping her in good condition like a show dog or one of her dad’s classic American cars.

As she looked at him she saw that although his tone was humorous his shoulders were tense and his tanned, weathered hands were resting rigidly on his thighs.
“Is a trial really what you want, Lizzie?” he asked quietly. “To have your life picked over by Tom’s attorney? To relive everything that’s happened…”

Liz worried her lip, knowing that he was referring not just to Tom’s ill treatment of her, but also the consummation of their bond.

“I want justice.”

“And unfortunately a court room is rarely the place to find it. Your justice system is a very blunt instrument indeed Lizzie, you must be prepared for that” he said, the tension tightening his jaw as he stared out over the Potomac.

She glanced sideways at him, her eyes narrowing with suspicion. “I need to do this my way. Please don’t… don’t interfere. No witness or jury tampering. No bribes.”

Reddington let out a sharp laugh. “I wouldn’t dream of it. Although now that you mention it I’ve dreamt of much stranger things-”

“I mean it” she cut him off vehemently. “This is something I need to do for myself, without you pulling strings or whatever it is that you do. You know, I graduated Quantico early, top of my class. At the time I was proud even though people were saying behind my back that it must have been fixed because I’m an omega, and I couldn’t have possibly done it myself. Now I’m starting to wonder. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that would you?”

Reddington’s expression was inscrutable behind his sunglasses, although she thought she saw his brow crease a little.

“I’m afraid the inner workings of the FBI have always been a mystery to me” he responded smoothly, looking away.

The corner of his mouth twitched then as if he were considering something. “Elizabeth, before you do this there’s something you need to know about Tom.” As he spoke he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a file, which he handed to her.

The first thing Liz saw when she opened it was a photograph of an extraordinarily pretty omega woman. She had delicate ivory features with long, flame red hair and large, piercing green eyes.

“She’s beautiful” Liz murmured.

“She’s dead” Reddington responded without emotion, his gaze fixed somewhere in the middle of the river, though hidden by his sunglasses.

Liz swallowed and flicked through the rest of the file, which contained a gruesome photo of the woman’s body in a shallow grave along side that of an unknown man. She noted the lack of crime scene tape and markers; Reddington, or one of his people, had discovered the bodies.

“You’re showing me this because you think Tom did it” she breathed.

“I know he did it” Reddington said quietly. “After he disappeared I hired a private investigator to locate your former husband, the best of the bunch. That’s my man next to the girl in the ditch Tom dug to conceal their bodies.”

Liz blinked, the strangeness of the situation creeping over her like a cold sweat. “Who was she? Why would Tom do this?”
“Her name was Lucy Brookes, though recently she was going by the name Jolene Parker. I believe she worked for the same people as Tom. Things were falling apart and he’s been improvising - it’s possible she was sent to get him back on track. Either that or it was personal” Reddington added in a neutral tone.

“What do you mean, personal?” Liz said, frowning.

She watched the corner of Reddington’s mouth twitch slightly. “Lizzie there’s something you should understand. Lucy Brookes was strangled to death. Tom is clearly a highly trained operative, he had access to a weapon. There are any number of more efficient ways he could have dispatched this young woman had he deemed it necessary. And yet he chose to choke the life out of her. Slow. Intimate. Watching the light drain from an omega’s eyes…” Reddington trailed off, shaking his head.

Liz exhaled shakily. “You sound like you’re speaking from experience” she whispered.

He didn’t answer and the cold feeling in her limbs worsened despite the rising heat of the morning. “That poor woman” she said eventually.

“She made her bed” Reddington answered, his mask of indifference firmly back in place.

“And Tom lay in it” Liz shot back. “That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

Once again Reddington was silent and Liz rose to her feet and gripped the metal railing by the river in frustration. “You know we can’t use this in court, right? Apart from anything else, nothing that relates to you is admissible – in the interests of national security” she finished bitterly.

He nodded, his mouth set in a thin line. “Tom Keen doesn’t belong in a court room Lizzie. Your justice system isn’t set up to handle someone like him. I can.”

“I’ve seen what your brand of justice looks like” she breathed, her mouth quivering with tension. “I’ll take my chances.”

“If you insist on relying on the sticky wheels of justice you’ll need a good lawyer to ensure your interests are represented as well as those of the district attorney. I’m happy to provide some names” he responded crisply.

Liz exhaled scornfully. “Pass. The last thing I need is lawyer who’s anything less than clean. Besides…” she added hesitantly. “I already have one.”

He turned to look at her. “May I ask who?”

“His name is Martin Cross. He’s actually been very helpful.”

She watched nervously as the corner of Reddington’s mouth twitched in displeasure. “The boy you met at the Ford’s illicit auction. For someone who wants a ‘clean’ lawyer, if such a thing exists, you’ve picked a strange horse to back.”

Liz was stung. It was as though he were questioning her ability to handle herself, which in truth she was already doing herself. Covering her discomfort, she laughed in disbelief.

“He’s hardly a ‘boy’ – he’s an experienced attorney and I’ve no reason to think he was involved with the Ford’s side business. He was just a guest, there for business not pleasure. Like me” she added sulkily.
Reddington’s face hardened behind his sunglasses. “Well it seems as though you have everything worked out” he said in a clipped tone. “Good. Because I have a case.”

Liz pursed her lips and pushed her hair out of her eyes exasperatedly. “Of course you do. You know I’m supposed to be giving evidence in court. Are you trying to sabotage me? Or do you just enjoy making my job that little bit harder?”

“The last time I checked, your job was to catch the criminals that I delivered to you” he responded casually. “Or have you forgotten our little arrangement?”

Liz swallowed. Although his tone remained neutral she knew she’d managed to rile him, a prospect which made her feel simultaneously triumphant and frightened. She wished she could lock out the part of her that was desperate to sit back down next to him, just to catch his scent and feel the warmth of his body beside her.

“What’s the case?” she sighed.

She was standing with her back to the sun, and as it sparkled on the water behind her, he squinted up at her from behind his sunglasses, a small smile on his lips.

“How would you like to catch the man who hacked The Pentagon’s mainframe? A man who created backdoor pathways to their defence system controls, not to mention accessing the identities of undercover agents with the Joint Intelligent Agency all over the world. Incidentally, in the right hands a list like that is worth millions.”

“You mean the wrong hands” Liz said firmly. “And anyway, I’m not aware the Pentagon has had a security breach at all, especially one that catastrophic.”

Reddington’s smile broadened. “Neither are they.”

After Reddington’s revelation, Liz bolted to the black site to brief the team. His claims of a catastrophic security breach that had gone undetected were hard to believe, and Ressler was the first to say so.

“This is ridiculous even for Reddington. If Joint Intelligence assets had been compromised we’d know about it – they’ve infiltrated some of the world’s most prolific terrorist organisations, not to mention Chinese financial institutions, African governments… We’d have a slew of dead agents and several international incidents on our hands.”

“Not necessarily” Meera countered. “All this tells us is that whoever gained access hasn’t used the information yet.”

Liz nodded. “They’re most likely looking for a buyer. Reddington says the collective value of the data that’s been obtained could be over $50 million.”

“Yeah well Reddington would know” Ressler scoffed. “He made his name selling national secrets – I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s trying to get his hands on the information himself. If we catch the hacker first, he wouldn’t have to pay up.”

Liz pursed her lips as she wondered about Ressler’s accusation. Part of her wanted to dismiss it, to tell him he was wrong and allowing a personal grudge to cloud his judgement, but she couldn’t deny that it would be just Reddington’s style to use the taskforce to remove obstacles while he swooped in
to profit. It was clever, and had a certain elegance and humor to it. It was very him.

Her thoughts were broken by Cooper and Aram emerging onto the floor. Cooper looked grave.

“I’ve just had a very tense conversation with the secretary of state. It seems that after initially dismissing our concerns they subsequently performed a full system sweep and detected a zero-day vulnerability that was used to facilitate the hack. They’re suddenly very interested in the source of our information.”

Liz’s eyes widened in alarm. “You’re not giving them Reddington!”

“No” Cooper assured her, “but be in no doubt that all eyes are on us and the sooner we catch this hacker, the better. What have we got?”

“According to Reddington the word is it’s the work of a sophisticated, mercenary cyber criminal who goes by the handle ‘Hermes’” Liz offered, bringing up the hacker’s profile on the operations floor screen. “His usual M.O. is corporate hacks like changing investment banking passwords or holding company client lists hostage and releasing them for a fee. This is the first time he’s gone after a government target, let alone one this big.”


Liz shook her head. “You’ll have to deliver the message solo – I’m due in court today to testify against Tom.”

She spoke with as unaffected an air as she could manage, but the whole team turned to look at her, their expressions concerned and sympathetic. She smiled bravely at them and nodded her thanks as Cooper patted her shoulder reassuringly with his giant alpha hand.

“We’re all pulling for you, Agent Keen.”

“Kick his arse” Meera yelled after her as she stepped into the elevator.

Liz was relieved to see Martin Cross waiting for her on the steps of the court house, his height and immaculate suit making him stand out as unmistakeably alpha. As she approached him she caught his scent, an expensive, board-room smell that made her feel uneasy and out of place. She found herself noting that he wasn’t wearing a vest as Reddington would have been had it been him here to support her. She shook the thought away.

He flashed her a brilliant smile as she reached him. “You all set?”

She mustered a smile. “Yeah. A little nervous to be honest though; Tom’s story about blacking out and losing his temper… He’s a master manipulator. I’m worried the jury will fall for it.”

“Nonsense” Martin said breezily. “Just tell your side of the story and don’t be afraid to show some emotion, though I’m sure as an omega that will come naturally. Trust me – not a single juror will be able to resist such a pretty face.”

Liz forced a smile, but couldn’t shake the feeling of foreboding that crept over her, a feeling which got worse and worse as the day wore on.
The first shock was seeing Tom at the defence table; he’d lost weight, his hair was unruly and his glasses were thicker than she remembered. Far from the cold, muscled, angry man that she’d seen recently, his new persona was even less threatening than his old school teacher act had been. He looked incapable of tying his own shoelaces, let alone of hurting anyone. He gave her a meek smile as she took the stand, which sent her heart thundering into her throat.

The D.A. wasted no time asking her to recount what had happened the day she had come home to tell Tom she was in heat, and the woman’s blasé questioning unnerved Liz even more. It’s just like being on the stand in any other case for work she told herself. Just answer honestly and professionally. Relieved that she was getting through it she glanced at Martin in the gallery, but he was no longer smiling, a slight frown creasing his chiselled face.

Before she could think about why, Tom’s attorney got up for her cross examination and she steeled herself. This was the difficult part.

He was a small, shrewd-looking beta who greeted her politely before beginning his questioning.

“Agent Keen, I appreciate that this must be very difficult for you so I’ll keep my questions as brief as possible. You are a special agent with the FBI – could you tell me what self-defence training you’ve received in that capacity?”

Liz took a deep breath, composing herself. “Hand to hand combat and weapons training.”

He nodded as though deep in thought. “And despite this advanced training, you were unable to defend yourself during your husband’s momentary lapse?”

“It happened so quickly” she answered tightly. “And I wasn’t at my usual strength.”

“From what you’ve said this assault sounded quite severe. May I ask roughly how long you were in hospital? A week? A month?”

Liz pursed her lips. “About six hours.”

The defence attorney frowned dramatically. “Only six hours? That does sound severe” he said sarcastically.

“There were exigent circumstances that required my attention. I discharged myself against medical advice” she responded carefully.

“I see. These ‘exigent circumstances’ you refer to - did you in fact discharge yourself from hospital so that you could have sexual intercourse with a man other than your husband?”

Liz’s cheeks flamed with anger and embarrassment and she tried desperately to swallow her rage. “There were a number of factors-”

“Then allow me to simplify” he said, cutting her off. “Did you subsequently have sexual relations with a man other than your husband?”

“I was in heat, I didn’t have a choice” she ground out, wishing she could knee this sanctimonious prick in the balls.

She watched in dismay as he shook his head, as though he were disgusted with her. “For the uninitiated among us – I note the majority of our jurors here today are betas - could you say whether alpha-omega bonding happens at first meeting or whether it happens after a pair have had some contact with one another? After an affair, if you like?”
Liz closed her eyes momentarily, her heart thundering. “Usually there will have been some contact, but that didn’t happen in my case—”

“To be clear, Agent Keen, you’re asking the court and your husband to believe that you were not having an affair, despite all evidence to the contrary?”

Liz felt tears prickle her eyes, although there was no way she could give Tom and his bastard attorney the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

“I did not have an affair” she said vehemently.

“And yet the District Attorney has not put your alpha on the stand to testify to that – perhaps because she knows he would tell a different story.”

At that, Liz saw the corner of Tom’s lips curve into the faintest of smiles, before the judge, an elderly alpha man with a kindly face, instructed Tom’s attorney to move on.

“Very well, there’s just one more thing I’d like to address, Agent Keen. What do you know about the medication Megazolam, otherwise known as Megased?”

Liz was slightly taken aback by the question and before she could answer the D.A. stepped in, though her monotone voice made it sound as though she were just going through the motions. “Objection, calls for an expert opinion – the witness isn’t a medical doctor.”

Tom’s attorney rolled his eyes dramatically at the judge. “The witness is a board certified psychologist, a law enforcement officer and belongs to the category of persons – omegas – to which this drug is marketed. She’s wholly qualified to answer.”

“Over-ruled” said the judge, nodding. “Go ahead Mrs Keen” he said softly. “You can answer the question.”

Ignoring the judge’s patronising tone Liz responded flatly. “It’s a common sedative used by some omegas for social or religious reasons. It heightens omega characteristics such as muscle weakness, fatigue…”

The attorney nodded. “And have you, as an omega, ever used this drug?”

Liz frowned. “No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes” Liz nodded, although her heart was beginning to race again. Why was he asking her this?

“Agent Keen, are you aware that you failed an FBI mandated drug test in June of 2012, which showed that you had taken the drug Megased, and that despite failing, no disciplinary action was taken against you?”

Liz felt bile rise in her throat, confusion swirling in her head. “No, I was not aware of that. To my knowledge, I have never taken it.”

“I see” Tom’s attorney said incredulously. “So to recap, you deny having an affair, and you deny using drugs, despite being unable to offer any evidence to refute these claims.”

“Is there a question in there?” Liz spat icily before she could stop herself.

“No, Agent Keen” he responded officiously. “I think we’ve heard all we need from you.”
After stepping down from the stand, her knees shaking and nausea roiling in her stomach, Liz left the court room and walked out onto the courthouse steps. The entire building was dominated by the stench of alpha pheromones and she was desperate for some fresh air. She wasn’t alone long though, as Martin came up behind her, his alien smell crowding her senses again.

“Seems like your ex hired a Rottweiler attorney there” he sniffed, as if he were somehow put out.

Liz looked up at him. “I was fine until the end there, he just got under my skin” she sighed.

For the first time since she’d met him he looked a little uncomfortable. “You were very… professional” he said slowly. “Look, a few tears would probably have helped, but I’m sure the jury will sympathise anyway. You are an omega, after all.”

As he spoke, Liz’s panicky feeling worsened and a strange warmth spread over her, a flush that was mildly reminiscent of her heat. Suddenly her head was crowded with thoughts of Reddington, of how comforting his scent would be at this moment, of how he might hold her, or tell her a bizarre, irreverent story that would somehow help her make sense of her current situation. Her thoughts turned with alarm to the Megased, and she wondered whether Reddington would be able to offer an explanation for that.

Martin lifted his nose slightly and smiled. “Someone’s a little wound up” he said in a saccharine tone. “Why don’t you join me for a drink, see if we can’t calm you down a bit, hmm?”

Liz shook her head, making a rebellious mental note to avoid alphas wherever possible, their infuriatingly superior attitudes, the fact that they could smell exactly what was going on with her… It was obnoxious.

“I’d better not - we’re in the middle of a case. Thanks though, I really appreciate your help.”

She smiled politely but he didn’t return it, and she caught a flash of anger in his scent as it crackled in the air between them.

“I would have thought when an alpha gives up his time to help an omega the least she could do would be to grace him with her company for a few short hours” he said testily. “But then, you don’t exactly have an omega temperament, do you. Good luck with your case, Agent Keen.”

Liz stood there in stunned silence as he walked away haughtily down the courthouse steps, the tang of his bruised ego still polluting the air around her. Perhaps he was right, she thought numbly. She wasn’t like a normal omega. Maybe that was the problem.

It occurred to her then that none of this would be happening to her if it weren’t for Reddington, but despite that, her inner omega was now practically screaming for him to come and take her away somewhere soft and safe where she could be with him, and only him, protected from the harshness of the world.

Chapter End Notes

I've wanted to see more from the show dealing with Tom's abuse, and have recently been offended by a show writer's suggestion that because FBI agents are strong they shouldn't be seen as victims of assault or abuse. The omegaverse is very handy for exploring this issue!
Chapter 15

After her gruelling experience in court Liz had a multitude of questions for Reddington, or at least she told herself that was why she was so desperate to see him. She couldn’t go to him though, she reasoned, without having made some headway in the case. Instead she endured another sleepless night with her sweaty, sticky limbs becoming trapped in the sheets as her imagination delivered her pitiful thoughts of him comforting her, his smooth, deep tones soothing her as she lay alone in the darkness.

The next day she made her way to the black site and received a report from the team that unsettled her greatly. In her absence they had begun an investigation into the hacker known as ‘Hermes’ implicated by Reddington; on the surface they had made a great deal of progress, mapping his corporate hacks for the past year and even managing to freeze several bank accounts believed to hold funds obtained through holding trading company files hostage. They already had enough to arrest him and put several open cases to bed. However, nothing they had found suggested that he had been involved in the Pentagon hack.

As Liz listened to their report she thought back to Ressler’s assertion that Reddington was messing them around for his own profit and the sick feeling in her stomach worsened. It hurt to think that he had given her a bogus lead on purpose the week that she was being grilled on the stand. Her attention snapped back to the present when Aram began to question her.

“Agent Keen, I was actually hoping you could shed some light on this-”

Liz sighed, feeling exasperated. “Look, I know you all assume that Reddington would confide in me, or that I know more about him now, but he’s not my alpha, not like that. If I knew anything more, I would tell you” she said shortly.

She felt instantly sorry for Aram as his eyes flicked down at her sharp tone. “Ah, actually I meant that you could shed some light as a profiler” he responded hesitantly. “Whoever hacked the Pentagon left a standout digital signature - it’s pretty cool actually, they used asymmetric cryptography to create a series of non-uniform probabilistic polynomial time adversaries…”

Looking up at their blank faces, Aram shook his head and continued. “Uh, I’ll skip that part. The point is that the signature seems to spell ‘BETA’. Once I found that, I linked it with several other hacks that occurred within the last year, all with signatures containing the word ‘beta’, but there are some real anomalies – for one thing I haven’t found a single corporate hack. There’s really no pattern that I can see and so far nothing to link them to Hermes. I thought you might have more luck” he finished smiling timidly at Liz.

Liz winced in regret – it hadn’t even occurred to her that he would be referring to her profiling skills and the truth was she was relieved and grateful to be asked.

“Right” she smiled apologetically and began looking through the case files Aram had flagged on the screen.

Her smile quickly turned to a frown. “I see what you mean – a small state bank, a concert ticket sales company, a computer game franchise… These are a long way from Hermes’s corporate jobs. And why would this person graduate from scoring concert tickets to hacking the Pentagon?”

Ressler wrinkled his nose doubtfully. “Are we sure these are all the work of the same hacker?”
“The signatures are all variations on the BETA theme – ‘beta man’, ‘beta b ready’, ‘beta than u’ and lots more like it. At first I thought they could be different people using the same handle – like a cooperative – but hackers tend to work alone and the coding is too precise. It’s the same guy. I just can’t prove that guy is Hermes.”

“Maybe because it isn’t” Liz said flatly, the sinking feeling in her stomach worsening. “Is it just me, or do the beta handles all sound a bit… well, childish? ‘Beta than u’, ‘beta me if u can…’ It’s almost like we’re dealing with a kid. Aram, can you find out what band the hacker wanted tickets for?

He began to type furiously and a puzzled frown crossed his face. “Erm… Taylor Swift. And as for the games franchise…ok this is weird. Our hacker seemed particularly interested in the algorithms for a game called, er, ‘Zombie Riot 5’. I should be able to identify the name that went with the concert tickets though – every ticket holder has to carry matching ID before they’re admitted. Ok so the tickets were in the name of… Mia Johnson, 17, a high school senior at Dulwich Academy. Miss Johnson has eclectic interests…”

“Let’s go ask her about them” Ressler said grimly.

“We will” Liz said, pursing her lips. “But not before I’ve asked Reddington about his interest in this case. He played us. I want to know why” she announced determinedly, and swept out of the office.

After she had spoken to Dembe and been given the address of an old fire house, Liz wasted no time in getting there and rapping on the large wooden doors. The whole drive over she had become angrier and angrier at Reddington’s manipulation, such that by the time Dembe let her in and asked her to wait, she was fuming.

“Forget it – where is he?” she snapped as she stormed through the foyer and shoved open the door to the back room.

She realised that part of her had been hoping to catch him in some dastardly act, to confirm her private fears that he was a self-interested criminal who cared nothing for her. At least then she would know. The scene that met her was not what she had expected.

Although the fire station was long since abandoned, the back room was bathed in warm light from a lamp, with shelves upon shelves of books, a record player and a work bench in the middle of the room. In the corner she saw a modest but comfortable looking bed, and it was then that she realised why Dembe had asked her to wait: Reddington slept in this room. Having an alpha or omega visit the place where one slept was an intimate thing. She was surrounded by his warm, masculine aroma, and knew instantly that he had spent at least one very fitful night in that bed, the complex scent of scotch and sweat on cotton caressing her senses.

Reddington looked up as she banged the door open. He was sitting at the work bench with his sleeves rolled up, a dark, workman’s apron covering his suit. A long, curved piece of decorated wood lay across the table in front of him, surrounded by tools and tiny brass rivets. The sharp scent of her anger wafted around her as she strode into the room, piercing the warmth of his nest. She was glad of the shield it provided her, though if he noticed it or was annoyed at her intrusion he didn’t show it.

“Lizzie. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“You played me” she said heatedly as she reached the work surface. “You said that the Pentagon
hack was perpetrated by Hermes.”

Reddington picked up a small screwdriver and nonchalantly continued his woodwork. “How was your court date” he asked gently as he worked. “Are you alright? If you decide that you require a more reliable service than your justice system can provide, my offer still stands-”

“I’m not discussing this with you. You lied. I want to know why.”

He looked up at her impassively from his seat behind the bench. “I have never lied to you. I told you the word was that the Pentagon job was the work of Hermes, I never told you that I believed it.”

Liz’s face hardened in fury. “Ressler was right. You’re using us to serve your own agenda.”

“If agent Ressler wasn’t too busy peeing against lampposts he would realise that serving my agenda is the best career move he’s ever made” Reddington responded drily.

“What was worth sending me on a wild goose chase the week of Tom’s trial, hmmm?” Liz seethed. “What has this Hermes done to piss you off?”

“To me? Nothing. But he’s becoming a thorn in the side of one of my associates” he ventured casually.

Liz’s face darkened. “So you’re having me do dirty work for your friends” she spat.

Reddington offered her a sad smile. “I don’t have friends. In my world debts can be paid in a number of ways” he mused, squinting as he worked a tiny rivet into the wood in front of him. “I simply delivered a criminal to the waiting arms of justice whilst alerting you to the very real threat posed to the agents whose identities could be compromised as the result of another hacker’s work. It seemed more elegant than a bullet. But then most things are.”

A small pang ached through Liz’s stomach at the picture he painted of the world he inhabited; bleak, and dangerous, full of debts and conspiracies.

She reached down and ran her fingers over the curved wood that lay across the desk. “What’s this? Some kind of weapon?” He remained silent, only continued working the rivets into the soft, polished wood.

Liz shook her head. “We traced the Pentagon hack to a 17 year old girl. Did you know about her?”

Reddington leaned down and blew gently on the rivet he’d just attached, dispersing the wood dust across the table and tickling Liz’s nose with the pleasant, warm scent of walnut.

“A teenager” he chuckled conversationally. “If she is responsible, ask her if she wants a job.”

Liz felt another jolt of anger run through her, and this time Reddington looked up at her, nose twitching slightly as he caught her scent, his eyes watching her sharply.

“She’s a kid” Liz said hollowly. “However she got mixed up in this she needs help. The last thing I’m going to do is send her your way so you can corrupt her too.”

Reddington’s mouth hardened into a thin line. “You feel I’ve corrupted you” he said softly. It wasn’t a question.

Liz sank her teeth into her bottom lip. “In court today Tom’s attorney told me that a routine FBI drug test showed that I’d taken Megased. But I never have. And no one ever mentioned that I failed a
drug test. I don’t need evidence to know this has something to do with you.”

He paused, his tongue running along his lower lip thoughtfully. “When was this?”

“June of 2012.”

“The same month as the Angel Station murder” Reddington responded quietly. “Perhaps the evidence you refer to is closer to home.”

Liz paused, the implications of his statement sinking in. “I remember that weekend” she said slowly. “That last night I was so groggy. I thought I’d had too much wine… You think Tom drugged me” she whispered.

“I think being on vacation with his wife may have been an impediment to his plans to carry out a professional assassination” Reddington said gently. “A large enough dose of Megased would have ensured that you slept through anything untoward, and would be easily explained away in the eyes of the authorities should it become known. It’s controversial but not illegal. And you are-”

“An omega” Liz finished for him, her voice hollow. “I’m an omega” she repeated, her chest tight as the full implications of her sham marriage came crashing down on her. “That’s all I was to him. A play thing he could do whatever he wanted to…”

She stopped as she saw Reddington’s lip curl into an angry snarl at the image she’d given him; although not directed at her it was frightening, and she stole a sideways glance at his bed in the corner, resisting her inner omega’s urge to go and lie down there in a silent offer of comfort and submission.

As though he could read her mind his eyes softened and crinkled into a pained smile, and she forced herself to stay firm.

“I want to know why he did this to me. Tell me.”

Reddington winced a little as he responded “I can’t do that.”

“You can’t or you won’t?” she hissed.

He looked up at her for a moment in silence and she noticed tiny flecks of gold in his blue-grey eyes as they caught the lamplight. “It’s more complicated than that” he offered finally.

Liz nodded slowly, her lip trembling with rage and frustration. “No. I think it’s perfectly simple. Tom manipulated me in every way and now you’re doing the same. Hiding things from me, making me feel things I-” she broke off suddenly as a blush crept up her neck.

The pull for him she’d felt after her grilling on the stand was even stronger in his presence; the longer she stayed the more distracted she became, the more she just wanted to lie down, at his feet, on his bed, in his arms… She had to get out of there.

“Have fun making your weapon” she shot at him before turning abruptly and walking quickly towards the door. As she left she thought she caught the faint sound of his sigh.

As Liz and Ressler approached the steps of Dulwich Academy, a grand, historic building, Liz groaned inwardly at the stench of teen hormones.
Ressler inhaled deeply. “Makes you nostalgic. School was pretty awesome, huh.”

“Not really” Liz responded testily.

Whilst thankfully she’d grown up in a predominantly beta community, it never paid to be different in high school. She nodded towards a group of girls hanging out on the school steps.

“We’re looking for Mia Johnson” she called.

The girls seemed to part like the Red Sea to reveal an ethereal omega girl sitting on top of one of the stone bannisters, swinging her graceful legs under her tartan school skirt. Liz heard Ressler inhale as he took in her appearance; tall and impossibly slender, the girl had waist length hair the color of burnt gold, and chestnut eyes that blinked at them with a hint of mischief as they approached.

“Something tells me that girl doesn’t play Zombie Riot 5” Ressler murmured, carefully working his way past school girls making eyes at him. “Miss Johnson?”

The girl smiled coquettishly. “How can I help you officer…”

“Agent” he responded officiously. “I’m Agent Ressler with the FBI and this is Agent Keen. We need to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course” she simpered brightly. “Though I’m not sure what I could do for the FBI, unless you want someone to go undercover as Miss Washington…” Her comment elicited giggles and whoops from her friends, though Liz saw the girl shoot her a look of intense curiosity as she took in her badge and gun.

Following a hunch, Liz turned to the group of girls waiting on the steps and promptly dismissed them. “Thank you girls, I’m sure you have classes to go to now.”

After the group had shuffled off whispering and grumbling, she turned back to Mia, whose expression had turned serious without a trace of the dumb school girl sass she had put on for her friends.

“Has anything happened? Am I in trouble?” she asked, looking up at Ressler with enormous doe eyes.

“That depends” he answered her sternly. “You recently went to a Taylor Swift concert. Could you tell us how you got your ticket?”

She looked confused. “I never went to a Taylor Swift concert. I mean, I wanted to, but we couldn’t get tickets.”

“Then how do you explain there being a ticket in your name?” Ressler pushed.

The girl’s eyes darted fearfully between Liz and Ressler and Liz was sure she could actually hear her heart racing.

“I guess he was telling the truth…” she blurted.

“Who was?” Liz asked gently.

“Ethan. Ethan Maly, this guy in my class – he’s so weird. I don’t even know how he found out we didn’t get tickets, but one day he comes up to me and is like, I got you on the list. I didn’t believe him, and besides…he’s a bit of a freak” she said uncomfortably.
Ressler frowned. “What makes you say that?”

Mia looked up at him nervously. “He’s like a maths genius and that’s kind of cool, but he’s been following me round school for months and he says weird stuff like he can look after me better than any alpha. But I don’t need looking after” she added, tossing her golden chestnut hair. “I’m going to go into law enforcement. Maybe I could be an FBI agent like you” she finished, looking at Liz earnestly.

Liz smiled. “You should – we need more omegas. If you want to help us investigate you can tell us more about Ethan – he’s a beta, right? Has he been acting especially strangely recently?”

Mia nodded. “Last week some of the guys had a big fight after school. Some of the alpha kids were saying that you have to be an alpha to get a good job, because alphas are smarter and stronger. Ethan got so mad. He said that he was going to work at the Pentagon even though he’s a beta, and this one alpha, Damien, said that his dad works at the Pentagon and that Ethan would never get a job there because he’s a beta. The teachers had to break it up. There are a lot of alphas at this school - I guess it’s hard for him” she finished sympathetically. “Him being so clever as well.”

“Thanks” Liz said, handing her a business card. “If you think of anything else, or if you ever need career advice…”

Mia flashed her a genuine smile of delight. “Thank you Agent Keen, that would be great!”

She jumped off the bannister and ran up the steps towards school, her legs long and slender as a deer’s. Ressler stared after her a little longer than Liz thought necessary.

“Hey, eyes back in their sockets, Agent. Besides, if she joins the FBI you could be her supervisor one day.”

Ressler bristled defensively. “I know you don’t have a high opinion of alphas, but not all of us are after grooming teen omegas. She deserves every opportunity to do well for herself” he said stiffly. “Anyway, it looks like we’ve found our hacker - we need to talk to this Ethan guy right now.”

Before Liz could respond, a deafening explosion ripped through the school, the force of the blast sending her flying back down the stairs. Thick smoke billowed around, her ears were ringing and she could taste the tang of blood in the air.

Dazed and grabbing blindly for her gun she looked up in time to see a boy emerge from the smoke. She watched in horror as he reached calmly down onto the stone steps, hauled Mia up from where she had fallen, and dragged her back into the smoke filled school.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the immediate aftermath of the blast Liz found herself struggling to breathe, as though she were underwater listening to the muffled sounds of screams and falling glass above her. As she tried to take a breath her lungs were filled with the stench of smoke and in the haze it pricked a memory, one she couldn’t quite grasp – more like a feeling, as though she were a child who couldn’t put into words what she was seeing.

It was shattered as quickly as it came, and reality came rushing back in along with the sound of sirens in the distance. She heard a shout from Ressler who was jogging down the steps towards her.

“Keen! You ok?”

“Yeah” she breathed, her voice hoarse. Sitting up she grabbed her cell phone from her jacket pocket; ignoring the seven missed calls on the screen, she dialled Meera who answered on the first ring.

“Liz where have you been, I’ve been trying to contact you-”

“There was an explosion at the school” Liz panted. “We’re ok, looks like mostly walking wounded but we’re going to need the bomb squad to clear the area.”

She heard Meera inhale sharply. “Yep, I’ve got it – they’re on their way. Jesus, Liz…”

“Why were you calling? Have you got information on the case? I’ll take anything I can use to help me talk to this kid.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“No… Actually, it’s your husband’s case. The jury came back but they couldn’t reach you - the judge wouldn’t hold it. I tried…”

Liz froze on the steps of the school. “What happened? Tell me!” she croaked.

There was another pause before her friend spoke again. “I’m so sorry Liz.”

A cold feeling spread through her body, spiralling outwards from her stomach, as though she’d been hit with a second blast that only she could feel. It was as though her brain and body had somehow separated, her mind seeking refuge in another time when she’d had every confidence that if a man beat her unconscious he would be punished for having done so. But he wouldn’t be. He was free, she thought numbly.

Meera was continuing to talk but she barely registered what she was saying. “…doesn’t mean what he did was ok…idiot jurors don’t see you as a victim…just because you don’t act like an omega is supposed to…Liz… Liz?”

Liz swallowed and hung up the phone without responding, slipping it calmly back into her jacket pocket. Clutching her weapon she began to stalk up the stone stairs towards the school.

Ressler appeared at her side. “What the hell are you doing, Keen” he growled. “The bomb squad needs to clear the area before we can go in.”
She looked round at him with fire in her eyes. “Ethan – he’s got Mia. He’s taken her into the school and I’m not going to wait around to see what he’s got planned for her.”

Ressler grimaced, and after a second nodded and drew his weapon. “I’ve got your back.”

Together they hurried through throngs of confused, shouting students and teachers into the smoke filled building. Once they’d moved through devastated foyer they found the school eerily quite and empty; despite the noise and smoke the blast hadn’t done much damage to the core of the building.

“He planned this” Liz observed. “The blast was a distraction – it pushed everyone out of the school, it was designed to create maximum panic and minimum destruction.”

“The basement” Ressler said grimly, gesturing to an open door in the dark corridor. Liz nodded and they made their way down the dark steps. In amongst the smoke and chemicals of the bomb blast her sensitive nose could make out the faint odour of old cigarettes and alcohol. Under different circumstances she might have smiled – this was where the bad kids hung out. But now her world had changed and the bad kid they were after was in a league of his own.

She could hear a faint noise of talking coming from beneath them and Ressler held up his hand. They paused, both putting their exceptional hearing to use to figure out what kind of scene they would be walking into.

The girl’s muffled sobs were clearly discernable, as was the boy’s voice. He spoke softly, murmuring sweet things to her, attempting to soothe her. Liz was relieved; however violent he was – whatever else he had done - he clearly didn’t want to hurt the girl. He cared about her.

With a jolt she thought of Reddington and the sad smile that he seemed to reserve only for her, the one that made it seem as though he were looking at the most cherished thing in the world from impossibly far away, across a gulf of violence and guilt.

Licking her lips she tried to concentrate on the boy’s voice as they moved along the dark, damp basement corridor.

“Don’t cry, it’ll be alright, I promise” he crooned, though Liz could detect a hint of uncertainty in his voice now. “I did it for you, Mia. To prove to you I’m just as good as anyone who works at the Pentagon, I’m better than them.”

Liz heard the girl’s voice then, though she was so quiet she was almost indistinguishable from the sigh of the water pipes that lined the basement.

“Please… I don’t know what you’re talking about, please just let me go, I won’t tell anyone I promise-”

“Don’t say that!”

He was agitated and Liz caught the tang of his sweat in the air as he continued.

“There’s a back way out of here, we can leave without anyone knowing. I can get all the money we could ever want - we can be together!”

As they rounded the corner into a dark, clanking boiler room Liz felt Ressler bristle in front of her, his alpha instincts taking over.

“It’s not going to happen kid” he growled as he stepped onto the scene.
Ethan spun round in shock, his hand gripping the frightened omega’s wrist. “Get out! Leave us alone, you’re ruining everything!”

He drew the girl to him clumsily and she stumbled on her spindly legs like a new born calf, shaking in his arms, her breathing labored through her sobs.

Liz detected the flare of Ressler’s protective alpha warning scent and it spurred her on. The boy was hurting her and had to be stopped. She raised her weapon, but as she did so she remembered the last time they had dealt with a hostage situation, remembered Emmerson Ford’s lifeless face lying on the floor after she’d killed him. Ethan wasn’t armed, and if his design of the bomb was anything to go by, he hadn’t been trying to kill people.

Ressler began to speak to the girl in soft but authoritative alpha tones. “Mia, you’re going to be alright. Ethan, agent Keen here and I all want you to be ok and we’re going to make that happen.”

Mia nodded shakily, but Ethan only tightened his arms around her and Liz watched uncomfortably as she buried her face in his chest. It was involuntary, an omega instinct to seek protection where she can, whether her rational mind wants it or not. It was a feeling with which Liz was becoming all too familiar. She took a breath and spoke gently to the boy.

“Ethan – you’re a clever guy. Really clever, I know that. And I know you want what’s best for her. You want to look after her like an alpha would. And to do that, you have to let her go now.”

He looked at her incredulously. “Don’t tell me what to do! You wouldn’t talk to me like that if I were an alpha” he spat bitterly.

“She would, trust me” Ressler cut in darkly.

The boy ignored him. “If I were an alpha, you’d do as I say, because you’re an omega – like she is” he said, clumsily stroking the girl’s long hair. “But you didn’t listen to me” he murmured into the girl’s ear. “Nobody does. You told them about me, didn’t you. I saw you talking to them – shh shh shh, don’t try to deny it” he continued as the poor girl desperately shook her head, her body trembling with fear like a trapped rabbit.

The smell in the basement was becoming hard to bear, the sickly scent of the young omega’s fear cloying in their olfactory organs, begging them for help. If Ethan had been able to detect it, she surely would have been moved to release her, Liz thought sadly. She swallowed hard.

“Ethan, I married a beta.”

The boy’s eyes widened as she’d expected. She had his attention.

“My husband… I didn’t care that he wasn’t an alpha. I loved him. I wanted to have a family with him and be with him forever. But he used me.” Liz swallowed again, biting back a sob. “Instead of caring for me… He lied to me. For years. He took advantage of the fact that that I was an omega. He grabbed me – just like you’re doing to Mia now. He threw me onto the floor and kicked, and punched… And I was so scared. When you’re an omega it doesn’t matter that in your head you’re just like everyone else. Because if a man chooses to… he can take away all your power. Make you feel trapped and frightened. And the worst thing is, even though he’s hurting you… in that moment you still feel like you need him. That maybe if you’re good enough, he’ll protect you…”

Liz broke off, color rising in her cheeks. It was everything she felt. Everything she couldn’t bring herself to say in court, in front of a stuffy judge or a sneering defence attorney, she’d said in this dingy school basement, witnessed only by her partner and two bewildered teenagers.
The girl’s breathing had become dangerously shallow and Liz could feel Ressler staring at her. She summoned her strength to finish what she’d started.

“So you see Ethan, caring for an omega isn’t about whether you’re an alpha or a beta. It’s about whether you’ll listen to her and do the right thing. She doesn’t want this. Let her go.”

As he listened the boy’s face had turned white and he looked more like a confused child than the alpha he wanted to be.

“I’m sorry” he whispered, drawing the shaking girl slowly away from his chest and looking down at her. “I just wanted what they have. What the alphas have. I never wanted to hurt you… I love you.”

Slowly, the girl turned her eerily beautiful face up to him and almost seemed to lean into him. For a moment Liz thought she might kiss him, until she heard her speak. Her voice so weak it was barely audible.

“I don’t feel… good.”

The spell of the moment was broken and Liz and Ressler rushed forward together just as the omega’s eyes slid shut and she slipped down in the boy’s arms. Alarmed, he grabbed awkwardly at her to stop her from falling and staggered to the floor holding her limp body.

“Mia! Mia?” He touched her face tentatively now as if he were afraid she would break, before looking up at Liz and Ressler. “What’s happening?” he asked, puzzled.

A second later Ressler shoved him aside with a swipe of his large hand, and Liz pulled him to his feet and backwards, away from the girl lying motionless on the damp, dirty floor. “Let him work” she whispered numbly.

His forehead creased in confusion, the boy turned his gaze back to the floor, and saw Ressler pounding on the girl’s chest, his fingers interlaced and spittle gathering at the corner of his mouth as he breathed.

“C’mon, come on…” he murmured, wiping his mouth with his sleeve before bending down to breathe air into the omega’s frail body.

Liz watched frozen as Ressler returned his hands to the girl’s chest, the compressions so violent against her tiny frame Liz was sure she heard ribs crack. She saw him bend down again, this time scraping his teeth against the girl’s neck, trying to stimulate an omega response. She imagined it was her lying there with Reddington doing the same for her, and felt sick.

“I don’t understand” Ethan said slowly. “She was fine. She was just… scared. That’s all! Everyone gets scared!” he said desperately.

Without looking away Liz gently slid her hand into the boy’s unresisting fingers. The basement was silent now except for the whistle of the water pipes in the background.

Ressler rose quietly to his feet and walked for a few paces until he reached the wall. He stood silently for a moment before his fist collided with the bricks with a smack that made Liz jump.

“She’s gone” he said hollowly, turning to face them.

“I don’t understand” Ethan moaned, his hand dropping to his side.

Ressler stepped towards him and placed handcuffs on the boy’s unresisting wrists. “She probably
went into shock” he explained as he secured the cuffs, his tone surprisingly gentle. “Omegas aren’t built to withstand what she went through today. They’re delicate.”

“We’re not weak” Liz heard herself say, her voice shaking. “Delicate… That’s another word for weak, isn’t it? Well we’re not. I’m not.”

“No one’s saying that Liz-” Ressler began, but she couldn’t, she couldn’t hear him talk about omegas, about how they weren’t built to survive, and she couldn’t stay there a moment longer with the body of the girl who was going to be an FBI agent like her.

Her boots pounding along the corridor and up the dark stairs as she ran, she thought of how Reddington had dodged her question about whether he’d pulled strings to help her pass the FBI physical. She could hear her blood rushing in her ears, hyper aware of every heart beat, nauseous fear swimming through her veins. Perhaps she was never meant for this job. Tom’s bastard attorney had exploited it, her own lawyer had said she wasn’t like a proper omega, and the jury… The jury had seen fit to punish her for it.

As she emerged from the school into throngs of emergency service personnel she looked down at the floor, breathing hard. Something white was sticking out under her boot – it was the business card she had given Mia before the explosion, now sullied with specks of blood and dust. The lettering of her name – Elizabeth Scott Keen, Special Agent – swam in front of her eyes. She let out a quiet, heartbreaking whine. There was only one person who could give her what she needed now.

Liz was surprised when Reddington opened the door to the fire station himself. He greeted her with a gentle smile which faded as he took in her dishevelled appearance and wide, frightened eyes. For a moment they were both perfectly still and quiet, until he opened his arms and she crashed forward into his embrace. She didn’t even try to pretend that she wasn’t drinking in his scent as she clutched him, nuzzling his neck with her nose. He allowed her to do it, holding her firmly, his hand smoothing her tangled hair under his palm.

When she was ready, he ushered her inside and sat beside her on a large, brown leather sofa in the main room. Still he said nothing, only stayed beside her as her eyes darted fearfully around the room, and back to him.

“I don’t even know why I’m here” she said finally. “If I stop thinking it’s like I drift back to you. Like it’s what I’m supposed to do. You were right about the court case - you knew what would happen.”

The corner of his mouth twitched sympathetically as he nodded, and she brushed tears from her eyes with her fingertips.

“I did everything I was supposed to as an agent, in court and at the school today. But it wasn’t good enough. The girl died. She was an omega and she died” Liz said shakily, turning her face up to meet his concerned gaze. “I need to know. Did you have anything to do with me passing the FBI physical? Because if you did, then what everyone says is true – I shouldn’t be an agent, and I’m risking people’s lives-”

She felt his hand take hers firmly, his eyes warm and stern. “No, Elizabeth. Your achievements are your own. Had I falsified your test result I would never have been able to be sure that you were safe in the field. And your safety… is of the utmost concern to me.”
Liz stared at him, and as he spoke a realisation hit her. “You didn’t interfere with that… But you did deal with the drug test I failed. That’s why I never knew about it. You hid it from me because you knew that if I found out I might learn about Tom. About you.”

Reddington sat silently, working his jaw and Liz shook her head. “I should be angry. God, I should be so angry but all I feel is this ache… this need…” She turned her eyes up to him again as she spoke, hesitantly this time, afraid of his response.

For a moment he was very still, before rising from the sofa and heading to the corner of the room, where a large object stood covered by a blue velvet cloth. He gripped it carefully and pulled it across the floor to where she was sitting, the noise on the wood floor telling her the mysterious item had wheels.

She looked up at him in confusion, and watched as he removed the velvet cover, revealing a beautiful carved wooden harp. As she looked at it, she recognised the curved piece of wood he had been working on earlier that week, the tiny brass rivets attaching the delicate strings of the instrument. The elongated post of the harp was carved with intricately gilded mythological figures; a proud, muscular alpha man with the body of a wolf, his arm outstretched, reaching for his omega, a beautiful girl with full breasts and the hind legs and tail of a cat.

“This is what you were making” she said slowly.

“Restoring” he responded gently, taking his pace beside her on the sofa again. “Restoring instruments is something of a hobby of mine, though I must say I’m a little more at home with a piano than a harp.”

He patted the space between his legs on the sofa and Liz shifted to sit there, savouring his warm, alpha scent as he reached carefully around her.

“This one is the work of Victor Salvi, known as the harp maker of the world. It may seem like a large instrument but it’s unusually small for a harp. It was made for a young omega… with very small fingers” he finished, gently placing Liz’s slender hands on the strings.

“I don’t know how” she said, confused.

She felt him lean forward, his cheek almost resting against hers.

“Close your eyes.”

He proceeded to run her unresisting fingertips over the strings, producing a heavenly sound that made her sigh with pleasure. The sound was so comforting, so familiar…

She frowned, opening her eyes, and began to pluck the strings slowly as his large hands covered hers, occasionally moving her hand or her finger to help her get the right sound.

“I’ve done this before” she breathed, her hands dropping to her lap. “When I was a little girl… Before everything changed, before the fire… Wherever I was in the house I could hear it – the vibrations of the strings… It always made me feel safe. Protected…”

She shifted back against him and felt his body stiffen a little behind her as her bottom brushed against his growing erection, earning her a low growl from him.

“Lizzie…”
It both relieved and excited her to know the effect she had on him, and a sweet rush of slick began to gather between her legs. She knew he would be able to smell that she was aroused, but she didn’t care.

Turning to face him, her eyes as wide and deep as the sea, she leaned up and slowly pressed her lips to his.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks to Catherine_Medici for her invaluable advice on this chapter! xxx
His lips were softer than she had imagined, his cupid’s bow so perfect she wanted to trace her tongue over it, tasting the sweat she knew was gathering there. He remained perfectly still, his eyes closed with sandy lashes spread in elegant fans. He hadn’t responded, but he hadn’t stopped her either. She drew back slightly so that she could study his face, and observed a slight crease of a frown between his closed eyes as though he were lost in a dream from which he couldn’t wake.

Another day she might have marvelled at the sight of the typically sanguine concierge of crime lost in a moment of private thought. Now it just made her feel even more unsure and vulnerable than she had when she had arrived on his doorstep. She thought of her tangled hair, of how messy she must look to the distinguished alpha who never failed to be immaculately presented. Her inner omega began to panic at the thought that he wasn’t pleased with her appearance, that with the beautiful harp he had deftly dodged her admission that she desired him. He knew what she needed – what did she have to do to coax him to give it to her?

Feeling more like a lost, grubby child than an attractive woman she slid her dusty jacket off onto the floor at his feet and sank down to kneel on it as neatly as she could, looking up at him, her pupils as large as saucers. As she moved he finally opened his eyes and looked down to see her in her best submissive position. He did not look pleased, his eyes sharp and his teeth clamped against the inside of his cheek.

Her panicky feeling worsened; she had to do better, she thought wildly, she had to make him want to look after her. She knew what she had to do – she could practically taste the bead of pre-cum she knew was gathering at the tip of his penis, the scent salty and soapy and tinged with a pleasant tang of pressed wool from his pants.

Licking her lips, she reached shakily for his groin without a single thought other than the need to taste him, to bring him pleasure so that he might shield her from the horror she had felt that day.

Her hand had barely grazed his thigh when his fingers snapped firmly around her wrist, halting her in her tracks and giving her an unpleasant jolt in her stomach.

“Stop, Elizabeth” he said firmly.

His tone was not unkind, but that did nothing to stop the sick feeling swirling at the thought that he was rejecting her. She looked up at him, confused and ashamed. He had a strange look on his face and her inner omega hung her head in shame; she’d displeased him with her botched attempt to seduce him and he was going to send her away, humiliated.

Seeing her chin crumple, his expression softened and he released her wrist.

“Hop up.”

He patted his lap and she climbed into it obediently, curling her legs round and burying her face in
the reassuring scent of his neck. From her new position she could feel his hard length poking at her through his pants and she whined involuntarily, rubbing herself against him.

“Shhh sweetheart. Settle down now” he soothed, smoothing her hair with his hand and kissing the top of her head.

She felt hot tears of shame prick her eyes. He didn’t want her, so why couldn’t he just dismiss her? Why did he have to keep her here and be nice about it? It made her feel so much worse.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me” she gasped quietly into his shoulder.

“There’s nothing wrong with you” he breathed, kissing her head and resting his cheek on her forehead. “There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re being driven by a powerful biological imperative. You had a terrible shock today which has left you feeling vulnerable and alone. You’ve lost your father. You’ve been betrayed first by your husband and then by the justice system in which you placed your faith. Everything inside you is yearning for safety. For my protection. Your body is urging you to form a bond so that I will offer it to you. But you already have my protection, Lizzie. No matter what.”

As he spoke she knew that every word he was saying was true – of course that was why her body was reacting this way. It was a natural omega response. But as she sat curled against him the throbbing between her legs only became more powerful – so much so that it almost hurt - until all she could think about was having his hands on her. She no longer cared why she wanted him, only that she did.

Running on pure instinct she ran her lips over the freckled skin of his neck, her tongue slipping out to taste that glorious smell, that feeling.

“I want to take you in my mouth.” She had murmured the words against his neck before she could stop herself and she buried her face in his shoulder, her cheeks burning with the shame of it.

To her surprise, he laughed breathily. “Mmmm sweet girl. Have no doubt I want nothing more than to feel that delicate pink tongue of yours lapping at my cock… but it’s not going to happen until you truly want it to, Elizabeth.”

At his words a fresh wave of arousal coursed through her, soaking her panties. She was surrounded by the intoxicating scent of her own need, and she could feel the effect it was having on him. She wriggled daringly in his lap, earning her a soft grunt from him, his hands gripping her a little harder.

“I do want it” she whispered into his neck.

“Hmm” he rumbled incredulously, planting another kiss on her head. “And if we hadn’t bonded, do you think you would be here, offering sexual favors to a criminal you’ve known for a few short months?”

She paused, not wanting to answer and he lifted her chin gently with the crook of his finger until she reluctantly met his eye. “The truth, Elizabeth.”

“No” she said in a small voice.

“That’s what I thought” he said, although he didn’t sound displeased as she’d feared, only resigned.

For reasons she couldn’t quantify, the thought that he believed her interest in him was simply due to some hormonal aberration made her feel quite desolate. Her desire was so strong, so absolute – nothing that powerful could be so meaningless. She fixed him with a soft, pleading stare.
“It doesn’t change what I need. What I’m feeling… Red it hurts.”

She saw his forehead crease into a pained frown at that, and felt his cock twitch in his pants under her thigh. She wasn’t the only one whose body was making demands.

He studied her for a moment, his tongue running thoughtfully across his lower lip. Then, placing his hands gently round her waist, he shifted her in his lap until she was facing away from him, her legs parted on either side of his knee.

“What are you doing?” She whispered, her heart fluttering in anticipation.

“I’m going to give you what you need, Elizabeth” he said softly into her ear. “But that’s it. You are not to touch me… to seek to gratify me. Do you understand?”

She nodded speechlessly, a feeling of calm washing over her as he spoke to her in authoritative tones. She held her breath as one of his hands slipped deftly inside her blouse, and the other popped the button on her pants, pulling the zipper down at a leisurely pace.

She bucked impatiently against his hand and he responded by holding her tighter to him, his breath hot against her neck

“Sit still” he growled, and she leaned back, trembling on his knee as he reached inside her underwear and gently cupped her mound, the warmth from his palm as reassuring as it was arousing.

At the feel of his large hands on her, the fear she had felt slowly began to ebb, her taught muscles relaxing. She allowed her head to rest against his shoulder, her nose turned towards his neck, drinking him in as he began to gently massage her breast. The sensation sent waves of pleasure through her body and she reddened at the realisation that her excitement was soaking his hand as it rested between her legs.

She whimpered faintly, fighting the urge to buck against him again, and was rewarded as his long middle finger slid down along her opening, gliding easily over her clit and between her swollen, wet lips.

He hummed in pleasure as he felt how aroused she was, a deep growl that vibrated through her as she pressed herself back against him.

He continued to stroke her, his touch light and steady, mindful of how sensitive she was. As he worked her up he added another finger and began to murmur in her ear, his voice as rich and soft as his caresses.

“You’re ok sweetheart… you’re going to be ok” he crooned. “You’re such a good girl, so brave Lizzie, so strong…”

She sighed as a feeling of delicious, contented warmth spread over her. He understood exactly what she needed to hear, he knew just how to touch her, his fingers rubbing her with the right amount of pressure, the heel of his hand massaging her mound while the fingers of his other hand grazed over her erect nipple.

Despite her best efforts to stay still for him, she began to squirm in his lap as her pleasure mounted, and she heard his breath hitch as she ground herself against him. He squeezed her breast in his hand and began to slowly increase the pace of his fingers inside her underwear until she moaned helplessly, her senses completely filled with the scent of their mutual arousal and her thighs quivering as sweet pressure built inside her.
She felt his chest heave with the effort of keeping control, the muscles in his legs taught beneath her.

“Are you going to come for me Lizzie” he growled urgently “be a good girl for me-”

His words shot straight to her core and she cried out; it was what she needed – to be cared for, instructed, to be fucking owned - just for that moment.

His fingers slid over her clit again and again and she came then, like sweet lightening in his hand, bursts of pleasure unravelling deep inside her and settling peacefully in her limbs.

“That’s it, yes, my beautiful girl…” he panted. “You’re safe. You’re safe now” he breathed, kissing her temple as her head lolled back on his shoulder.

When she came to her senses she looked up at him with hooded eyes to find that his sodden fingers were resting on his lips, his eyes shut with an expression of pained ecstasy on his face as he enjoyed her scent.

She understood then with complete clarity what he needed, something he had needed since their bond had been sealed, something she needed him to do just as much. He needed to taste her – to scent her – down there.

She gently took his fingers from his lips and, looking up at him, she slipped them into her mouth, her tongue neatly cleaning her slick from the rough pads of his fingertips. He watched her with sharp, gleaming eyes, his lips slightly parted and his breathing fast.

Emboldened by his reaction she leaned forward and kissed him deeply, her tongue inviting him to taste her essence. He groaned in her mouth and then pulled back, breathing hard, his hand gripping the back of her neck in a true alpha gesture that sent electricity crackling in her belly.

“Elizabeth” he warned darkly. “You can’t possibly comprehend what you’re doing. Once I taste you…”

“I want you to do it” she breathed, her teeth scraping seductively over her bottom lip. “I need you to do it. Alpha…”

She yelped as his grip on the back of her neck tightened and he swung her down so that she was lying on her back on the sofa with him kneeling over her, his nostrils flaring with the intensity of his breathing. Mesmerised by his gaze she wriggled out of her pants and kicked them to the floor, leaving her in sodden panties and gaping open blouse, her breasts swollen and falling tantalizingly out of her bra where he had fondled her.

His darkened eyes roamed over her, flushed and dishevelled beneath him, and she heard him growl deep in the back of his throat.

“No one is to see you like this except me, do you understand? No one is to touch you except me.”

She swallowed, a little afraid of his tone – she hadn’t thought about what this would mean, she couldn’t think about it – all she knew was what she needed right now. Her inner omega whined desperately in her head for her to submit, to forget her doubts, her fear of him, the warnings she had received from colleagues and criminals alike. She wasn’t herself at the moment, and, she reasoned, neither was he.

She nodded tentatively. “I understand.”

It came out as more of a whine; she didn’t understand, not really, but in that moment she didn’t care.
A flash of some indecipherable emotion passed across his face, but his only response was a gentle nod as he released his grip on her.

Sitting back, he gently parted her legs so that she was spread wide in front of him. She went to push her panties down but he stopped her with a slight shake of his head. He turned then to kiss the side of her knee, running his nose and mouth down the inside of her thigh placing soft kisses there, his teeth and tongue ghosting across her flesh, licking, teasing, nipping until she was trembling so much it was difficult to keep her thighs open for him.

She gasped when he reached her underwear; she expected him to tear the soaked scrap of material from her, but instead he laid his cheek against her, resting his head against her plump sex with his eyes half closed in pleasure as he surrounded himself with her scent. Her clit began to throb with need and she pushed herself against him, desperate for him to remove the barrier between them.

Turning his head slightly, he placed a deep, open mouthed kiss onto the material between her legs, slow and almost reverent. Between the sound of her short, trembling breaths she was certain she heard him murmur against her - “Lizzie” - his deep voice vibrating on her clit.

Then in a heartbeat he had pulled her panties down and his mouth was directly on her, his groan of delight as he buried his tongue between her folds chiming with her soft moans of ecstasy. Open and exposed as she was, the cool air of the room mixed deliciously with the heat of his mouth and she whimpered in exquisite pleasure as his tongue began to explore her most intimate places.

She thought back to when he had licked her wounds after her ordeal at the hands of Kyle Davenport, and her belly filled with a peaceful sensation that this was the natural conclusion of his actions towards her, that she was loved and cared for beyond any doubt, and beyond all others. Her orgasm came quickly but gently this time, rolling pleasure that ached sweetly like being cradled deep inside. He moaned in appreciation as he felt her clit pulse against his tongue, his nose buried in her short, dark curls.

She went to move then, but felt the pressure of his hands on her hips, gently demanding that she remain where she was.

“Oh no” he murmured. “I’m not nearly finished with you sweetheart.”

It sent a shiver through her, his proprietary tone simultaneously arousing and frightening. It occurred to her then that she had crossed a line, some invisible barrier that she would never be able to replace. What had she done?

He began to tease the delicate skin behind her opening and she tensed uncertainly as he slid his hands underneath her ass and proceeded to bite and suck the soft flesh of her thighs and bottom. When she felt his tongue ghost between the cleft of her ass she was flooded with the strangeness of the sensation, and a sudden bolt of shame ran through her.

She mewled her displeasure, wriggling away and instinctively hiding her face in the cushions, the reality of what they had done stirring a sick feeling in her stomach. She thought back to Ressler’s warning, that she couldn’t give Reddington a reason to think that she belonged to him. But she had. They’d been every bit alpha and omega, touch, scent and taste. He’d held the back of her neck and she’d completely surrendered to him, the very thing she swore she would never do. Out of the corner of her eye she could see the figures carved on the harp, the imposing alpha man reaching for the diminutive omega girl, vulnerable and small with her breasts exposed.

She shivered again, and felt him lay his hand gently on her head, the weight of it comforting her
despite the unease she felt towards him.

“Shhh sweetheart, it’s ok” he said softly. “You’re ok.”

“I don’t know what you want from me” she whispered.

He let out a small sigh and drew her to him gently, bringing her head to rest on his shoulder as she sat beside him. “I want you to stop denying your nature, Elizabeth. To understand that where you see only weakness… I see power. There’s strength in it, Lizzie. In your own time you’ll discover that for yourself.”

She exhaled shakily, buttoning up her shirt. “I should go.”

“Out of the question” he responded matter-of-factly. “You’re staying with me tonight.”

Her eyes widened uncertainly. “In your bed?” she asked hesitantly.

“Just to sleep, Elizabeth” he replied gently, his head tilted to the side. “Come. Let’s find you a robe and I’ll draw you a warm bath.”

He rose from the sofa and extended his hand, and she realised just how tired she was, her limbs aching and her eyelids drooping. She took his hand wordlessly, grabbing her crumpled pants and following him down a corridor to a back room, swaying slightly on her feet as he filled an old, claw foot tub. The water splashed his shirt sleeves as he stirred in oil from a green glass vial. Fragrant steam began to waft around her and she smiled wryly at the scent of lemon balm and a tangy mint that tickled her nose.

“Cat nip?” she said, raising her eyebrow. “You really think that works on omegas? Isn’t that just an old wives’ tale?”

He straightened up from where he had been leaning over the bath, his eyes glinting in amusement.

“In my experience, old wives often provide the most valuable information if one is prepared to listen. And at the very least it will help ease the tension in those muscles of yours. Now” he continued, brushing his thumb over her cheek affectionately. “I’ll give you some time to collect yourself. But Lizzie…”

“Yes?”

“Keep the door unlocked – I don’t want you falling asleep in the water.”

She nodded, her teeth sinking into her lower lip, and he squeezed her shoulder before pulling the door to behind him.

By the time she sank into his bed her muddled thoughts had muted into a soft haze of lemon balm, mint, and him, the wonderful scent of the place where he slept engulfing her senses. The soft silk of the robe he had given her slipped pleasingly over the cool cotton sheets as she curled up exhausted, her nose pressed into his pillow. She was barely conscious when the bed dipped as he climbed in beside her, her eyelids fluttering as he gently rolled her onto her back, his hand coming up to cradle her face.

As he leaned up over her she was dimly aware of the bulge of his erection in his pajama pants
pressing against her thigh and whimpered faintly. Perhaps this was it, she thought with a tinge of fear. She was weak and alone in the alpha criminal’s bed. A simple tug and her robe would fall open, revealing her nakedness beneath the silk. He would take her now, make her his, and she could offer little resistance. Special Agent Elizabeth Keen would give way forever to the omega inside.

She opened her heavy lids to see him looking down at her, his stormy, blue-gray eyes filled with unfathomable emotion.

“You’re safe, Elizabeth” he said heavily, his deep voice caressing the air around her as though he had read her thoughts.

She closed her eyes again and felt his lips brush her forehead, her eyelid and finally her cheek before he drew her to him, and she fell into a dreamless sleep in the warmth of his arms.
Chapter 18

Over the years Reddington had woken more than once with a gun to his temple or a knife at his throat, but he had never been more surprised on waking than to find her asleep beside him. The masculine scent of his bed was now deliciously tinged with cat mint and the waft of her skin on the back of her neck as she stirred on the pillow. She seemed younger when she slept, almost like a child, the same freckled, turned up nose he remembered from many years ago. The thought settled uncomfortably in his gut like sour milk and he removed himself quietly from the bed so as not to wake her.

He showered and dressed quickly, donning a charcoal suit with an Oxford shirt, and found himself back on the sofa in the old firehouse, drawn, he supposed, by the lingering scent of their mixed arousal. He wondered fleetingly what Dembe would say if he asked him to ensure that the sofa was packed up and taken with them when they moved on later that day. He smiled affectionately; no doubt the man he loved as a brother would understand without the need for a word of explanation. But then he would have to have it packed again in another two days, and another, until eventually it would become sullied by many hands and the wear of travel – such was the life of a fugitive.

Sighing, he shook his head and looked down to see her jacket lying crumpled on the floor. He reached down to retrieve it but stopped short, distracted by the memory of her kneeling before him, her beautiful eyes great pools of longing. It had pained him deeply to see her so distressed, and still more to have her kneel at his feet when it was he who should fall to his knees before her. He winced at the memory and picked up her jacket, as if to erase the evidence of what she had done. As he did so her black panties fell from the garment onto the carpet and he closed his fingers around them, his eyelids fluttering with the exquisite memory of her taste.

It was enough to elicit another painful erection, and he ground his teeth together, suppressing a snarl. It would have been wrong, somehow, to relieve himself like a teenager while she was still here, sleeping innocently in his bed. Still more so because she was clearly still afraid of him; regretfully he recalled the look she had given him before she had succumbed to sleep, as one who in finding herself utterly helpless, had no choice but to accept her fate. That was not how he wanted her.

Liz entered the room then, her pants crumpled and her hair tied hastily off her face. She saw him on the sofa just where he had been the night before, apparently deep in thought. She stepped forward quickly and grabbed her jacket, tucking it under her arm.

“Ah… I can’t find my panties. Have you seen them?” she asked with as much dignity as she could muster.

He turned to her and raised his hand slowly, revealing her black cotton panties dangling from his fingers. He paused for a moment before offering her a tight smile.

“I wonder… if you might see your way to leaving them behind.”

Liz’s cheeks instantly turned beet red with embarrassment and indignation, and she was just about to tell him absolutely no, when she remembered the nights she’d been spending alone, craving his scent, aching just to be held by him. What she wouldn’t have given for something of his to keep under her pillow, though she would never admit it. Swallowing, she gave him a brief nod.

His smile broadened and his eyes twinkled in pleasure but she had looked away, her fingers nervously tracing the edges of the scar on her wrist.
“I have to go” she said, glancing down and then back at him. “And you’re not going to stop me this time.”

Reddington canted his head, his gaze unwavering. “You’re not my prisoner” he responded evenly.

They looked at one another in silence for a moment before Liz nodded briskly, and left the old fire house with her head held high.

When she returned home Liz’s mind was swirling with everything that had transpired; how gentle he had been, how considerate, the sheer pleasure… But she was troubled too, both by his possessiveness and by his insistence that she not touch him. She frowned at the memory as she turned her key in her front door.

It had been exactly what she needed, and yet it wasn’t a meeting of equals; he hadn’t wanted to sleep with her, hadn’t allowed her to reciprocate. Perhaps he didn’t really want to be intimate with her at all, at least not in that way, like she was too inexperienced for him and wouldn’t know how to please him. In the midst of her racing thoughts and the scent of lemon-mint from her hair, she didn’t realise she wasn’t alone until she’d rounded the corner into the sitting room.

“Hey babe”

She flinched as she saw her estranged husband sitting casually on the sofa they had picked out together. Today he looked nothing like her husband, and nothing like the pathetic, bespectacled man she’d seen in court. He looked mean. The tousled hair he’d sported at the trial was long gone, his head closely shaved, giving his thin face a pinched, spiteful edge.

Summoning all her strength she addressed him as calmly as she could. “What are you doing here?”

He smiled coldly at her. “You weren’t there for the verdict.”

Liz folded her arms, grateful that as a beta he couldn’t smell her fear. “I had somewhere better to be.”

His thin smiled remained but she saw anger flash in his eyes. “Yeah? What was so important?”

Liz swallowed, the painful memory of the events of the previous day coiling in her gut. “There was a girl… she needed me.”

“Right - Liz Keen, big shot omega FBI agent” he said derisively. “Did you save her? The girl?”

“No.” It pained her to admit it, especially to him, but she couldn’t lie about the omega girl’s death – it would be wrong to do that.

Tom sucked in a breath between his teeth and shook his head as though he were disappointed in her.

“That’s too bad. You know, when you didn’t show up in court I figured I’d wait for you here so we could talk. Work things out. You’ve been gone all night, Liz.” His voice remained calm but she could sense the cold anger simmering beneath the surface.

When she didn’t respond he nodded slowly. “You went running to him. To Reddington.”

Liz glanced away from him then, and then back, feigning nonchalance to hide the pounding of her heart at his mention of Reddington’s name.
“You’d think I’d be upset that you’re not going to prison. You’d think I’d be devastated but I’m not, because even if you’d been convicted, nothing, no sentence, no punishment, no revenge could ever come close to making up for what you’ve done.”

Tom smiled coldly. “You know I always figured he was your father” he said with a grim chuckle. Suddenly his eyes hardened, glinting cruelly. “Were you a good little bitch for him Liz?”

“Get out” she whispered.

“Does daddy like it when you spread your legs for him? When you suck his cock?” Tom continued in a nasty, sing song voice. “Do you even care that you’re still married? Did it even cross your mind?”

“I said get out!” Liz was trembling now but his comment about their marriage had enraged her and she couldn’t stop herself. “There’s no marriage if your husband is a fake, Tom” – I don’t even know your real name!” she paused, taking a breath. “I’m getting an annulment.”

She triumphed at the look of shock that came over his face as she said it, and watched him warily as he got up from the sofa. His face was ashen as he walked slowly towards her, and her muscles tensed in anticipation – she would be ready for him this time. He stopped as he reached her and lifted his hand gently to her face.

“Don’t” she said firmly, swiping his fingers away.

He gave her an odd smile, and suddenly grabbed the back of her head and pulled her to his chest, before shoving her face firmly under his armpit and holding her head there.

The vile stench of stale sweat was overpowering; he was rubbing her nose in it, her hair, covering her in his foul scent and making her gag.

“Let’s see” he said hollowly as she struggled, “let’s just see how alpha daddy likes it when you come home smelling of me.”

At that, Liz summoned all her strength and elbowed him in the stomach as hard as she could. He groaned and staggered backwards but before she could react she heard the sound of breaking glass and a bullet ripping through flesh. Confused, she smelled the scent of blood in the air, and saw a crimson stain appear on his shoulder. Someone was shooting at them.

Gaspig, she dropped flat on the ground to shield herself from their assailant but it was no use – Tom was dragging her up off the floor, the metallic scent of blood from his wound aggravating her senses. She blanched in terror as she realised he was holding her in front of him, like a human shield, his good arm like cast iron across her neck.

She closed her eyes and waited for the second shot to come, the shot that would kill her. But none came. There was nothing but silence and the sound of Tom’s ragged breathing in her ear.

“I fucked this up Liz” he panted, “I know that. I never meant to hurt you, you’ve got to believe it was never about that.”

Terrified of the sniper, she tried to twist out of his grasp - to find the safety of the floor - but he held her fast in front of him.

“You need to know the truth about him. There’s a key hidden in the lamp, take it to Radford Bank box number 3929. Reddington isn’t who you think he is. Goodbye, Liz.”
With that he pushed her forward and she stumbled on her feet while he fled out of the back door, leaving a trail of blood drops behind him.

Diving to the floor, Liz sat with her back pressed against the wall and reached for her cell, all the while glancing at the windows with the vain hope that she could see where the sniper was. Just as she grasped the phone the screen lit up - Nick’s Pizza was calling. She answered before the phone made a sound.

“Red there’s a sniper, across the street from my house, you need to call the FBI-”

“Elizabeth are you hurt?”

His tone was serious, but lacking the urgency she expected under the circumstances and she frowned.

“I’m ok but I need back up fast, I don’t have a clear line of sight-”

She heard him sigh, his breath slightly crackling the phone line. “I assure you you’re quite safe. Stay right where you are and I’ll be there shortly.”

He hung up without waiting for her to respond and she stared speechlessly at the phone.

She stayed there on the floor, moving only to wipe the tip of her nose on her sleeve, desperate to free herself from the disgusting scent of Tom’s sweat, until she heard the sound of footsteps in the hall.

She looked up and met Reddington’s penetrating gaze. He stood in the doorway to the living room, his eyes scanning her up and down as she sat hunched on the floor.

“The sniper” she said slowly. “He’s one of yours, isn’t he.”

“Yes” he answer heavily.

Liz exhaled loudly, shaking her head. “I guess you take protecting your omega pretty seriously” she said bitterly.

He didn’t respond and she looked up at him again. He was staring at her with that strange look that was almost like longing, and then she realised.

Your omega, she’d said.

He stepped towards her and she shrank back instinctively, keenly aware of her estranged husband’s obnoxious scent on her face and hair.

It was too late though; Reddington stopped abruptly, his nose twitching and his face darkening terribly.

“What did he do?” he said, his growl barely audible.

“Nothing” she snapped, her cheeks burning with humiliation. “I just need a shower.”

She scrambled up from the floor and walked round him towards the hallway, giving him as wide a berth as possible. She could feel his eyes burning into the back of her head as she ascended the stairs, but he didn’t follow her, and she wondered if he would leave now.

She got her answer half an hour later when she padded cautiously downstairs, running her fingers through her damp hair, to find him sitting on the couch, his fingers drumming against the arm. He turned to look at her as she stepped slowly into the room.
“Much better” he said approvingly, and she hated the extent of the relief she felt that smelling another man on her – a man he hated – hadn’t dampened his interest in her. Tom had been wrong about that, she thought wryly. But that didn’t mean he was wrong about everything. She thought fleetingly about the lamp and made a mental note to check there as soon as Reddington left. She folded her arms.

“We need to talk” she said firmly.

Reddington leant back casually on the couch. “I agree, though you were in such a hurry to leave this morning it was like Benjamin Lepley racing out of his mother’s house after catching her with the gardener. Poor Benji, strange kid—”

“I meant about the fact that you have a sniper following me.”

Liz kept her tone cool, but his comment had stung. He was right, she had left abruptly; she needed time to think - to consider how her moment of weakness would affect things – but he was clearly displeased with her now. He regarded her in silence and she took a deep breath.

“He could have shot me.”

Reddington laughed abruptly. “Out of the question.”

Liz raised her eyebrow defiantly. “You’re saying it couldn’t happen?”

“I’m saying that if being certain of your wellbeing beyond all doubt wasn’t the priority, Tom Keen would have a bullet in his head instead of his shoulder.”

Reddington’s eyes flashed as he spoke, the hard, low tone of his voice acting on the creature inside her like a hypnotist, demanding that she not press the point further.

“Did he say anything useful?” he continued, his eyes fixed on her. “Anything that could lead us to his employer?”

Liz felt her gaze drawn briefly to the base of the lamp where Tom had said she would find the key. She looked away quickly and shook her head. “No. He was angry I wasn’t in court to hear the verdict. That’s all.”

She saw Reddington’s lip twitch and he stood up, advancing on her slowly until he was standing close enough for her to decipher the faintest scents he carried with him; he’d smoked a cigar after she’d left, and if she wasn’t mistaken there was still a trace of her on him. The realisation sent a warm shiver through her as she thought of the fact that he’d kept her panties, but when she looked up at him his expression was stern.

“Desperate men slip up Lizzie” he said in a hard tone, scrutinizing her. “You’re sure he didn’t inadvertantly reveal something of note?”

She held his gaze and nodded. “I’m sure.”

He continued to stare at her in silence, and she stood serenely, ignoring the whining of her inner omega who shrank in terror at the thought of lying to him. Thankfully the moment was broken swiftly by the sound of someone entering the house.

“Hello dearie. Good lord it smells like a Vincent Castiglia exhibition in here.”

The voice sounded familiar. Turning to face its owner, Liz immediately recognised the angular, alpha
woman who’d brought her room service in the hotel she’d sought refuge in when she had been in heat, though today she was wearing an expensive cream suit and low heels. Liz looked accusingly at Reddington but he ignored her glare, stepping forward to greet the woman with a kiss on each cheek.

“Kate, thank you for coming at such short notice. Lizzie, meet Mr Kaplan” he said, turning to Liz with a smug smile.

“We’ve met” Liz responded sourly. “You work for him. What exactly is it you do?”

The woman regarded her neutrally over horn-rimmed glasses, her prim handbag hanging neatly in the crook of her arm. “I’m Mr Reddington’s cleaning lady” she responded without a trace of humour.

Reddington laughed jovially. “Mr Kaplan will have the place as good as new in no time and won’t miss a spot - nose like a blood hound” he said proudly.

Kaplan tutted as she began to pry a bullet out of the wall with a pair of tweezers. “It’s a blessing and a curse in this line of work” she muttered.

“Indeed” Reddington said, straightening his fedora. “Now I'm afraid duty calls. I'll see you on Monday, Elizabeth.”

Liz looked round from watching the strange woman erasing evidence from her house. “What happens on Monday?”

Reddington gave her a tight-lipped smile. “I bring you a new case.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Liz stood in the briefing room of the black site, the large screen behind her lit up with the smiling face of a beautiful, regal looking alpha woman in her mid 40s.

“Madeline Pratt is the next name on Reddington’s list” she said, briefing the taskforce in the most dispassionate voice she could muster. “She’s a thief.”

“A thief? We’re here to catch terrorists, murderers, criminals who matter” Ressler cut in indignantly.

Liz shrugged. “According to Reddington she’s the best in the business. The items she’s stolen have help fund terrorist operations, in addition to bringing several multinational corporations to their knees.”

“She looks like a woman who could bring anyone to their knees” Aram said, earning him glares from the rest of the team. He looked about him, realisation dawning. “Not like that! I didn’t mean… I just mean she’s obviously very… alpha.”

Liz looked at him stonily, but sighed inwardly. He was right, and it was a fact that she hadn’t been able to let go of ever since Reddington had given her the information on the latest blacklister. He had spoken animatedly about the stunning alpha woman, and Liz was left with the distinct impression that they had been intimate. Added to that, and somehow worse, was the fact that he clearly admired her.

She wondered fleetingly whether he was punishing her for her hasty retreat from his safe house the previous week, but that wasn’t his style. It was more likely that he had a genuine regard for the woman, and it occurred to her bitterly that this was exactly the sort of person who would pique his interest; a sophisticated, intelligent, glamorous criminal mastermind… and a fellow alpha. This woman wasn’t subject to biological imperatives that played with her heart and her mind, or to physiology that endangered her. She wasn’t forced to have sex in order to survive. She was free.

Liz wrinkled her nose involuntarily, imagining how the alpha woman might smell. She wondered whether she wore perfume to cover up her natural scent as some alphas and omegas did when they wanted to be modest. Glancing at Pratt’s image on the screen Liz doubted that she was the type of woman who would hide her sexuality. She wasn’t looking forward to meeting her, but she would have to – soon.

She came back to herself when she heard Cooper clear his throat. “How do we find her?”

“Reddington says finding her is easy, it’s catching her that will be difficult. Apparently she’s approached him in a professional capacity. She wants the concierge of crime to help her pull off a bank heist.”

“Is that all?” Meera cut in sarcastically.

“No” Liz responded evenly. “There’s more. Pratt’s record is spotless and she’s got some friends in very high places; she forges relationships with powerful people – politicians, military, CEOs – and she exploits them in ways that threaten national security. If we want to get her, we’ll have to catch her in the act. She’s meeting with Reddington tomorrow to discuss the job. He wants me to go with him – to pose as an accomplice.”
At that point Ressler scoffed. “That’s ridiculous. It’s one thing you posing as a guest at a society benefit, but a bank heist? Even if we signed off on a member of the task force going undercover to rob a bank, how are you going to convince this woman that you’re the real deal?”

Liz rolled her eyes. “I don’t know agent, maybe check your cell.”

She watched in satisfaction as he frowned, his hand moving quickly to his now empty pocket.

“Hey!”

Liz nonchalantly tossed him the phone she had palmed, and turned to Cooper. “Sir, I believe my work speaks for itself. I can do this.”

He sighed, pursing his lips. “We’ll take the case. But understand Agent Keen, this will be completely off the books. The FBI doesn’t sanction bank robberies, and it certainly doesn’t facilitate them. If you’re apprehended by another law enforcement agency I won’t be able to protect you.”

“Reddington will protect me” Liz said without thinking, and instantly regretted it as she sensed the large alpha’s hackles rise, his forehead creased in concern.

“Something I should know, Agent Keen?” he asked pointedly.

“No sir” she responded firmly. “Nothing.”

Liz left the operations floor feeling the eyes of her team on her back, the hairs on her neck prickling. It was no business of theirs anyway, she thought, reaching huffily for the handle on her office door.

“What’s going on with you?”

Liz had known Meera was following her – her scent was like fresh air and cinnamon - but hoped she would back off. She didn’t want to face her friend right now.

“Nothing” she said flatly, turning to her in the dark post-office corridor.

“I don’t believe you” the omega woman challenged, her British accent taking on a caustic edge.

Liz folded her arms. “Believe what you want.”

Meera’s expression softened. “No one, alpha, beta or omega, could go through what you have and be ok. It would be completely understandable if you’d gone to Reddington… for comfort” she said slowly. “But he’s no good for you Liz. The amount of power he has over you-”

“Tom came to my house” Liz said, cutting her off. It wasn’t information she wanted to share, but she wasn’t in the mood to hear Meera echo her fears about Reddington. It made her omega self feel desperately vulnerable.

Meera’s large, dark eyes widened. “What happened? Did he hurt you?”

“No… Reddington had someone following me. A sniper. He shot him – in the shoulder” she added hastily. “He got away.”

Meera’s soft, omega features had twisted into a glower as Liz imparted the story. “Bloody hell” she whispered. “Your ex – a fugitive – turns up at your house and is shot by a sniper that Reddington hired to follow you, and you don’t report it?” she said, shocked. “You should tell Cooper.”

“No” Liz shot back, her blue eyes glittering icily. “You saw how he reacted just now when I
mentioned Reddington. The last thing I need is a protective alpha papa bear breathing down my neck, stopping me doing my job – you of all people should understand that.”

Meera stepped back, her expression grim. “What I understand is that a dangerous, manipulative alpha has taken advantage of you, and you can’t see it. Wake up, Liz” she finished meaningfully, before marching off down the corridor.

The next day, Liz accompanied Reddington to an opulent town house where they were to meet Madeline Pratt. She’d pushed Meera’s warning aside – she needed to focus if she was to pull this off, especially as Reddington appeared to enjoy exploiting the thrill of the pretence. He seemed completely at ease in the drawing room of the house, his expression one of smug amusement as he watched the two women, the alpha and the omega, observe one another with barely disguised disdain.

Liz’s suspicions had been correct; not only was Pratt not wearing perfume to conceal her scent, but under her smart, figure-hugging dress she had slight glow - the lightest sheen of perspiration - as though she had exerted herself on purpose before their arrival to ensure that her scent was as enticing as possible. Liz allowed herself a slight eye-roll, and noted the woman’s mouth stretch into a plastic smile.

“Raymond, your associate is quite charming. You never mentioned she was an omega – how quaint!”

Liz’s eyes flicked to Reddington and saw him calmly observing Madeline, a small smile on his lips.

“I’m sure she’s exceedingly talented” the woman continued lightly, “but how will she respond under pressure? This is a national bank, security, cameras, armed guards everywhere. I’m sure you’ll forgive me, but omegas aren’t noted for their serenity when threatened.”

Reddington cocked his head slightly, but his expression showed no sign that his amusement was lessening. “Nicole here is as calm as a Hindu cow. She’s quite an unusual breed, aren’t you my dear. Tell her that story about Frank.”

“Who’s Frank?” Madeline inquired with faux politeness.

Liz was scandalised at hearing him talk about her in that way, but, determined not to blow her cover, she continued coolly.

“A guy I knew. A beta I met in high school who did mostly small jobs. He was smart; he realised having an omega onside would work for him – no one suspects omegas are up to no good. They assume they’re too weak and innocent for that - like you did. Frank and I made quite a team” she continued, glancing at Reddington. “We’d target alphas – store managers, bank managers – they can’t resist an omega in distress. One time in Omaha there was a drug store. Thursday night. They made bank deposits on Friday. The local alpha police chief happened to be driving by, saw a light in the store. When he came to investigate he found me - a lost omega girl with huge sorry eyes and a sad story about being abandoned by her alpha. An omega who’d do anything for his protection. Seducing him for long enough for Frank to get out of there was easy. Getting rid of him was hard” she finished sardonically.

She glanced back at Reddington and for a moment thought she saw his lip curl in distaste before he laughed jovially.
Pratt, however, did not seem impressed, and Liz wondered whether she had caught the faint scent of Reddington’s displeasure at her tale.

“A titillating story, I’m sure” she commented icily. “But I’m looking for someone who can pull off a major bank heist, not a small town omega wh—”

Reddington laughed again abruptly and rose to his feet, cutting her off. “Ladies, really” he twinkled, shaking his head. “I can practically see the fur flying. The scent you two are stirring up in here… well it’s positively arousing” he continued humorously. “I’d hate to embarrass myself.”

Liz fought hard to keep the blush out her cheeks. She realised he was right; with their hackles raised, she and Pratt had created quite a heady atmosphere in the room.

“I didn’t come here to audition” she said, turning to leave.

“Wait” Pratt called after her. “The job’s yours – on one condition.”

“And what’s that?” Liz asked disdainfully.

The alpha woman smiled smugly. “That you meet me tomorrow at 3pm to discuss the details… At the Fenrir Club.”

Liz sucked in a breath. An alpha only club. She had challenged her to get into an alpha only club.

“Perhaps-” Reddington began but Liz stepped in before he could make excuses for her.

“Fine. I’ll see you there.”

“Splendid!” Reddington exclaimed. “See I knew you two would work something out. I can’t wait to see what you come up with” he finished, turning to look at Liz intently.

Liz wasted no time after that, and went straight home to research the Fenrir Club – if she was going to sneak in, she’d need to learn everything she could about the place. She was fuming. Alpha clubs had an obnoxious legacy of elitism and discrimination, and it was only in recent times that they had even started admitting alpha women. Liz guessed that Madeline Pratt wasn’t the sort to be put off by that – alpha clubs were a rich resource for her, full of elite and wealthy alpha men for her to exploit.

The club itself was attached to a golf course, and situated in several acres of unspoilt land, the lake and woods making it an ideal place for alpha men to imagine their ancestors roaming free under the moonlit trees. There was no way to sneak up on a place like that – no cover, no crowds, and grounds full of alpha security guards and dogs who would scent an omega a mile away. Heat suppressants could only achieve so much.

She smiled wryly at the thought of the uproar in the building that would occur if an omega were to come inside – the refined alphas’ true nature would be revealed as soon as they caught a hint of the pheromones that she emitted naturally, their great schemes thwarted by a base and overpowering desire to fuck her. She doubted it would be that different from when she had visited the men’s prison wing with Ressler.

But it was different – Reddington was counting on her. He’d tried to step in of course, but never being one to back down from a challenge, she had accepted Pratt’s invitation. Now she had to find a way to get into this establishment, as a non-member, and as an omega, who wouldn’t be allowed into
any club of its kind in order to ensure that alpha members weren’t distracted by her scent.

She spent several hours brainstorming elaborate schemes involving copious amounts of perfume and commandeering catering supply delivery trucks, growing more and more outraged, both at the stupid alpha club, and at Madeline’s obvious attempt to embarrass her in front of Reddington. Pausing to brush her hair exasperatedly out of her eyes, she caught sight of her badge and gun on the table where she had tossed them when she came in. A small smile spread over her lips and she got up to pour herself a glass of wine. She knew exactly what to do.

The next afternoon, Reddington sat opposite Madeline Pratt in a private room at the club, a heavy tumbler of scotch dangling nonchalantly from his fingers. The alpha woman was eyeing him slyly from her luxurious leather chair, sipping daintily from her own glass.

“The girl” she began conversationally. “I like her.”

Reddington broke into a hearty laugh. “No you don’t. Maddie, you’re as full of guile as the day I met you but your scent never lies. It’s something I’ve always appreciated about you” he said, raising his glass to her.

She smiled knowingly. “How did you pick her?”

His smile tightened a little before he answered. “Fate.”

“A pretty omega girl. Raymond…” she tutted, taking a sip of her drink. “I thought better of you. Not to mention, she’s a little young.”

Reddington laughed hollowly. “You think?” he said sarcastically.

Madeline set her drink down and leaned forward, her expression serious.

“What happened in Florence, Raymond?”

Reddington’s eyes flicked quickly to his watch. “My associate should be joining us shortly.”

But Madeline wasn’t deterred, her expression suddenly serious. “Do you ever think we’re getting too old for this – bank robberies, subterfuge… Say the word and we can leave now. Forget the heist. Leave it all behind. We could be in Tegucigalpa by breakfast.”

Reddington didn’t respond, only smiled sadly at her, his head titled to the side.

The moment was broken by the sound of boots clicking on the polished wooden corridor. The door opened and Liz entered, flanked by a rather flustered looking desk clerk.

“Thank you for your assistance – I can take it from here” she said to him. “Please clear the area.”

The man nodded, swallowing, and closed the door on his way out.

Reddington and Pratt rose from their seats as she entered; they both looked at her quizzically, but Liz noted with satisfaction a hint of pride in Reddington’s expression.

“How did you-” Pratt began.

Liz pulled back her jacket to reveal an FBI badge and holstered weapon. Reddington’s smile
broadened.

“It was easy. I told them I was an FBI agent who had it on good authority that two wanted criminals were having a meeting on the premises. Whatever the rules, no club has the right to obstruct an officer of the law in the execution of her duties.”

Pratt raised her eyebrows. “Well it’s certainly an original ruse. Even if it is hard to imagine that an omega would ever be an agent with the FBI. I wonder how you were able to obtain the forged credentials so quickly…”

“Put it this way… I’ll be in trouble if anyone looks too closely at the badge” Liz responded solemnly, flicking a glance at Reddington whose cheek twitched a fraction.

The exchange appeared to go unnoticed by Pratt, who tossed her hair nonchalantly. “Well you’ve convinced me you’re up to the task. Now let’s get started.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Catherine Medici for the alpha club prompt - hope you enjoy! NTD xxx
Chapter 20

Liz stood in front of the mirror in her room, eyeing herself critically. She wore dark jeans with a hoodie tied round the waist, and a distinctive Rolling Stones T-Shirt which bore the lips logo, tongue protruding, stretched across her breasts. She would never wear anything like it in real life, not least because she spent most of the time trying to distract from her omega sexuality rather than advertising it. But it was all part of the plan.

The bank robbery was on for that day. She would have a ‘double’ on the premises posing as a customer, a lookalike wearing an identical memorable outfit. This person would be like her enough to fool the guards watching the cameras that she hadn’t left the customer floor, and, if anything went wrong, would be ready to be apprehended by the police who would not realise their mistake until Liz was safely away. It should be a quiet, clean job.

She’d been surprised to learn that they weren’t going to steal money or jewels; in fact, the only thing they were going to take was a single document. The file apparently contained information about where and how some of the most powerful people in the world hid their money – offshore tax-havens, money laundering services, corrupt financial advisors – information so sensitive and valuable that it was kept in paper form only and locked in a safety deposit box in a bank vault.

Madeline Pratt had supplied Liz with a key card and an auto-dialler which would circumvent the security doors and the electronic keypad on the vault, and Liz had obtained the safety deposit box key from its innocuous custodian in a classic brush pass earlier in the week.

Tying her hair into a ponytail, Liz turned to stare at her nightstand, her lip drawn between her teeth. After a moment she strode forward, opened the drawer, and removed the safety deposit box key that Tom had given her. She could hardly believe her ears in the wretched alpha club when Madeline Pratt had given her the name of the bank where the heist would take place. Radford.

It was unlikely to be a coincidence that a bank safeguarding the criminal secrets of the rich and powerful would also be used by whoever Tom worked for, Liz thought bitterly. She slipped the key into her back pocket. She was going to leave that bank with two secrets today – the file they were hired to steal, and whatever dirt Tom had stashed on Reddington.

She froze when she heard the front door open and shut quietly. It was him, coming to pick her up like a boy on a date. Except he didn’t knock, and this wasn’t a date. It was a bank robbery.

Liz did her best to suppress the uncomfortable pang of guilt her omega self felt at keeping the safety deposit box a secret from him. She felt like the key was burning a hole in her back pocket.

As she walked down the stairs she could see Reddington inspecting the spot where the sniper’s bullet had entered the wall, his finger swiping over the paintwork.

“Remarkable” he said without looking round. “Not a trace!”

“Your cleaner is certainly very thorough” Liz said guardedly as she approached him. “Like it never happened” she finished, her tone turning distant.

Reddington turned to look at her then, his expression serious. “It did happen, Lizzie. And we’ll find him. Have no doubt about that.”

“What happens when you do?” Liz asked quietly.
He stared at her in silence for a moment, before his eyes flicked down to her chest and the Rolling Stones T-Shirt she wore. His expression broke in to a nostalgic smile.

“You know I once travelled near half of route 66 with Mick Jagger and his crew on their ridiculous tour bus” he said chuckling. “Helped me lay low for a bit after a particularly sour exchange with some relics from the days of Prairie Fire - frankly, the only bang bigger than Mick’s bigger bang tour would have been the one in New Mexico if that Semtex had gotten into the wrong hands… Nasty business” he sniffed, shaking his head.

Liz looked at him incredulously. “You’re buddies with Mick Jagger…”

The corner of his mouth twitched at that. “I don’t have buddies.”

“What about Madeline Pratt?” Liz shot back. “Or is she more than that to you?”

Reddington canted his head and looked at her curiously in silence.

“We’re going to arrest her you know” Liz continued firmly. “She’s going to prison.”

Reddington laughed sharply. “Oh I’m sure Donald will do his very best, and no doubt fail admirably. Maddie hasn’t had so much as a parking ticket in her mischievous little life.”

Liz felt nauseous at hearing him talk about the alpha women with pride, and rage at his arrogant certainty that the FBI would not be able to apprehend Pratt. She felt the hairs on her neck prickle in indignation and her expression hardened.

“Don’t think that because you obviously have history with this woman that we’ll go easy on her. The FBI is not in the business of picking and choosing who they arrest based on the preferences of criminal informants” she said haughtily.

To Liz’s dismay, Reddington laughed heartily. “The FBI is in the business of my business – why else would I be in business with the FBI?”

Liz snapped angrily. “If you think for one moment that I’m going to steal this blackmail file just so you can disappear with that woman-” She stopped short, suddenly very aware of her own scent becoming clearer and more territorial the more agitated she became.

He had noticed, of course, his eyes darkening and his nostrils twitching slightly.

“As a rule I consider jealously to be a base emotion. But on you…” he said softly, inhaling deeply. “It’s delicious.”

Liz reddened. “I am not jealous!” she spat indignantly.

Reddington smiled wolfishly. “Oh, I think you are Elizabeth. One of the reasons I’m still alive is due to my nose – my ability to interpret how a person feels not by what they say, but by deciphering their scent.”

He began to advance on her slowly. “You can’t lie to me, Lizzie.”

Liz felt her pulse quicken and she stepped back away from him instinctively, keenly aware of the key hidden in her back pocket.

He paused, his expression softening. “I assure you that whatever business I have with Madeline will in no way compromise our relationship.”
Liz felt her stomach coil in pleasure, an involuntary reaction at hearing the reassurance from the man she had called alpha, the man who had protected her… The criminal who had turned her life upside down.

“Our relationship?” she asked slowly.

They hadn’t defined it. He’d given her what she needed but nothing more. Suddenly, she felt a visceral need to know how he defined their relationship, as he put it. But his expression had shuttered.

“It’s much more than a blackmail file” he said casually.

“What?” she asked, confused.

“The item we’re going to obtain today” he continued conversationally. “You don’t know it yet, but one day, sooner than you think, it will be very useful for you to know how the powerful hide their money” he said, smiling tightly.

Liz raised an eyebrow. “Really.”

He simply smiled with amusement, gesturing at the front door. “Come Lizzie – let’s go rob a bank. This is gonna be a gas!”

They sat in silence in Reddington’s black Mercedes parked opposite the bank, watching the entrance. The scent in the car was like a cocoon of safety – the buttery leather of the seats, Dembe’s reassuring musk, and Reddington’s unique aura of power and protection.

For a brief moment she entertained a treacherous thought that it would be nice to curl up on the warm seat next to him and forget breaking into not one, but two safety deposit boxes. But she was going to find out the truth about him. Today.

Reddington sniffed gently. “You’re nervous” he stated quietly.

Liz’s mind flew to Tom’s key hidden in her pocket. “Of course I’m nervous – I’m about to break into a bank vault with no back up!”

He turned his head towards her, his expression serious. “You have me. And I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

Liz glanced up at him uncertainly. “Because you’re my alpha?”

He stared at her for a moment before smiling affectionately, but Liz didn’t miss the pain in his eyes as he turned away from her to look back out of the window. She wondered why the thought was so difficult for him – did he not want her as his omega? She pushed the thought aside as he spoke.

“Never go in without a contingency plan, Lizzie. I understand Aram has provided you with an alternative escape route should things not go as smoothly as we’d hoped?”

Liz nodded. “Through the basement - prohibition-era passageways concealed by the architect before the bank moved in. If this goes sideways the FBI will deny any involvement. The best they could do was give me a chance of getting out on my own.”

“How thoughtful of them” he responded drily.
“Raymond” came Dembe’s accented voice from the driver’s seat.

“Yes I see her” Reddington responded.

Liz watched as an omega woman wearing the same outfit as her walked through the door of the bank. From the back they looked identical – it was uncanny.

“We’re on. So where’s your double?” she inquired lightly.

He flashed her a smug smile as he went to open the car door. “There’s only one of me.”

“Thank God” Liz muttered as she exited the car.

Liz was surprised to feel Reddington slip his arm through hers as they stepped through the door of the bank. It was a ruse of course; as soon as the security guards changed shifts she would slip away, and be replaced by her double. She ignored the annoyance she felt that another omega would be close to him, however briefly.

She must have stiffened involuntarily because she felt his grip on her arm tighten slightly. “Relax, Lizzie” he murmured. “You’re not a domestic FBI cat today. You’re a lioness. Calm. Controlled. There you go.”

At that moment he pushed the small of her back gently and, key card secreted in hand, she slipped unnoticed through the door during the security guard changeover.

By Aram’s calculations, she had a ten-minute window to get into the vault and obtain the incriminating file on the financial secrets of the rich and powerful. It was more than enough time... Enough to open another safety deposit box as well, assuming all went to plan.

Taking a breath, she slipped on the hoodie and walked quickly along the corridor with her head down, until she reached the entrance to the vault in which the safety deposit boxes were kept. She removed the plastic auto-dialler from her waist band and attached it to the key pad, the digital screen spinning numbers so fast it was dizzying.

“C’mon, c’mon…” she murmured. A wave of fear washed over her at the thought that Madeline had set her up to fail somehow. But just then there was a satisfying click and the locks sprang back on the vault.

Sighing with relief she stepped inside and went to the safety deposit box she had been hired to raid. She opened it quickly and removed the file, slipping it inside the lining of her hoodie. Officially, her job was done.

She looked over her shoulder and pricked up her ears. Hearing nothing to alarm her, she scanned the room for the box Tom had directed her to. Box number 3929. Her heart jumped when she saw it; it looked identical to all the others, but what it contained could give her the answers she so desperately needed.

As she removed the key from her back pocket with shaking hands, she realised why it was that she needed them, why she needed to know if Meera was right. She smiled as she thought of her friend, because Meera had known even before Liz. She was falling in love with Reddington.

As she opened the box she frowned, a pang of disappointment running through her. It was empty
except for a small, sealed envelope – surely whatever it contained couldn’t be enough to explain why Reddington had come into her life, what he knew about her family, the fire…

She was shocked back to the present by the shrill sound of an alarm going off, the glare of red lights licking the walls of the vault.

“Crap” she breathed, shoving the unopened envelope into her back pocket.

She froze as she heard sound of a gunshot from the customer floor above. The scent of the bank – the usual mustiness of public buildings – had transformed into a cacophony of fear and confusion. No blood though. She smiled to herself. Reddington was creating panic, buying time for her to get out.

Muscles springing into action, she fled from the vault and down another flight of stairs into the basement, the shouts of security guards echoing from the floor above her. She ran silently though the old corridors and twisted pipework Aram had made her memorise, saying a silent prayer of thanks to the nervy, beta technician. When she reached the door to an old furnace she wrenched it open and slipped through to the passage way concealed behind it.

As her boots pounded along the dark stone corridor she felt the thrill of knowing she would make it; she was out of the bank and would come out in an empty office building a few blocks down, far away from the local PD who would be first on the scene. When she had the end of the tunnel in her sights she paused, her nose twitching. The passageway was damp and filled with the tang of putrid city water, but now there was something else, a strange, strong chemical smell. It was fresh, and shouldn’t be there.

Fleetingly she thought about going back, but if she did she would surely be apprehended, and Reddington would be disappointed in her. He would think she was a coward. The scent could easily be from fresh paint or building works on the block, she reasoned. Swallowing, she pressed on, and climbed the rusty metal bars at the end of the tunnel that opened into the basement of the empty building.

As she scrambled through the trapdoor in the floor she caught the scent that the chemical smell had no doubt been put there to conceal. Men. Several of them. She whimpered as one grabbed her arms and pulled her from the trap door, holding a gun to her head.

“How had this happened? No one knew about her escape route, no one except the task force... and Reddington.

“Move” the first man said, shoving her forward.

She walked numbly up the stairs of the empty basement, the man with the gun in the small of her back directing her down the corridor of the empty office block and up more stairs.

When she turned the corner into a sparsely furnished, guarded office space she saw Madeline Pratt first, her hand resting on the chest of the man standing in front of her. Liz’s stomach dropped. It was Reddington.

His eyes flicked sharply to her when she came in, looking her up and down. He was anxious. It was then that she realised that his wrists were bound too.

“Are you hurt?” he asked her in a low voice.
She shook her head silently and Madeline laughed, the sound echoing eerily in the empty office space.

“Oh I wouldn’t dream of damaging your pet myself – the stench of fear would be unbearable” she said smiling at Liz unpleasingly.

Liz felt the hairs on her neck prickle. “Go to hell. The only reason I didn’t scent you a mile off was because I was walking through sewer water – the smell is practically indistinguishable from yours.”

“Lizzie” Reddington said sharply. His tone filled her with apprehension – he was afraid for her.

Madeline approached her slowly, her eyes glittering with cold amusement. “Listen to your alpha, there’s a good little agent. He knows what you’re too ignorant to realise. You’re not getting out of this alive.”

“This was all some elaborate plan. You weren’t hired to steal anything, were you” Liz breathed.

“Oh I was” Madeline said conversationally. “Just not a thing. A person – two people in fact. Although my employer will be relieved to know that this document is in safe hands” she said, reaching inside Liz’s hoodie and removing the file.

She smiled coyly. “You know I suspect that if one of you were to effect a cunning escape I would find a way to…mollify my employer” she said suggestively, turning to Reddington.

“Raymond. It would be simply heart-breaking to end things like this… How about a deal? You walk out of here unscathed and let us take the girl. No threats, no retribution.”

“And yet I do so enjoy retribution” Reddington answered drily.

Liz watched, sickened as Madeline ran her finger delicately over the cable ties on his wrists. “But if I recall, you don’t enjoy being restrained. Remember what it was like” she whispered in his ear.

“Fighting for dominance. Like wolves at the beginning of time. We could have that again.”

Reddington ran his tongue seductively over his lip and bent his head slowly to murmur in her ear. “Harm her… and I’ll rip your throat out.”

Madeline breathed in sharply. “You’d sacrifice yourself. For an omega. For her” she sneered.

Just then one of Madeline’s men appeared at the door, an assault rifle slung over his shoulder, and she turned to him. “We need to go” he said gruffly. “The cops are setting up a perimeter.”

Liz looked at Reddington. He returned her gaze and for a moment his eyes flicked to a small, open window to her left. She gave him the faintest nod, her heart pounding.

There was a yelp as Reddington stamped on the shin of the guard to his right, and then brought his knee up sharply into the stomach of another guard who lunged at him.

“Stop him!” Madeline cried.

Liz felt the man holding her let go of her and run forward into the fray, and took her opportunity. She sprang towards the window, leaping up on a table with the feline agility her omega status afforded her, and squeezed through the gap.

It was truly a leap of faith – they weren’t that high up but the wrong landing could break her ankle. A second later she landed gratefully on a corrugated iron roof and rolled off it, landing neatly on the
ground in a squat.

Immediately she began to run, away from the empty office building and back towards the bank, not stopping until she reached the innocuous black van parked down street from the bank, which was now surrounded by cops. Slipping unnoticed behind the gathering crowd, she banged on the side and a moment later the door slid open and Ressler hauled her inside.

“Jesus Keen, what the hell happened? Here” he said, removing a pocket knife and slicing through the cable tie binding her wrists.

“It was a set-up” she breathed, “the whole thing. Pratt was after me and Reddington - Ress, she knew about the passageway!”

“It’s alright” he soothed, “you got away.”

“You don’t understand! I left Reddington there, they’ve got him, we have to go back-”

“Easy, Keen. When the local PD arrested your doppelganger I sent a special ops team to the building where the passage comes out. If he’s there they’ll find him.”

Her heart in her throat, Liz scrambled across Ressler and grabbed the radio.

“This is Special Agent Elizabeth Keen, report. Did you find anyone on site? Report!”

Ressler frowned at her and she returned his gaze, her eyes wild with apprehension. The radio crackled in her hand for what seemed like an eternity before a response came.

“Negative, that’s a negative. The building is empty.”

Liz stared ahead, her hands shaking. Ressler stepped forward and took the radio from her unresisting hands, barking instructions at the team.

After a moment, she reached into her back pocket and removed the small envelope she had secreted there. She opened it with trembling fingers and withdrew a single photograph. It was Reddington, her alpha, the man she had left behind. Her eyes widened. It was him, walking out of the hospital where her father had died.
When Reddington came to his senses it was to the pungent smell of leather and blood. His temple ached with the familiar throb of having been hit with the butt of a gun, blood from the wound stinging his left eye. There was a sharp pain in the side of his neck, and he grimaced with the realization that his tracking chip had been removed.

His arms were stretched above his head, his wrists cuffed to chains hanging from a hook in the ceiling of what he guessed was an old factory. He was wearing a leather collar, a leash stretching out into the darkness of the room. He felt a sharp, painful tug at his neck, causing him to stumble forward a step or two.

“Hello Raymond.”

He smiled grimly, recognizing Madeline’s accented English instantly.

“Maddie – keeping me on a short leash, I see.”

Her laughter echoed round the walls of the space, and she emerged from the darkness, the leather leash wrapped around her hand.

She wore an immaculate white skirt suit, her blonde hair cascading neatly over her shoulders while her heels clicked on the stone floor.

“It didn’t have to be this way” she said conversationally, gently testing the pull of the leash. “I gave you every chance.”

Reddington swallowed, his throat dry and sticky. “It’s not like you to get your paws wet. If I recall, you usually have someone do your dirty work for you.”

“Oh my employer has someone waiting” she smiled. “Someone who specializes in extracting information from reluctant alphas.”

Reddington nodded as much as the collar would allow. “I see. But you want something from me first.”

“An explanation” she said quietly. “You left me alone. When you didn’t show up in Florence I realized you were always a lone wolf. I understood that. I even respected it…But then her. You tried to pass her off as a mere associate. I always knew she was more than that but it wasn’t until you brought her to my house that I understood who she was to you. I never fail to interpret where an alpha male's interests lie, however much he attempts to hide it. My business depends on it.”

As she spoke, Madeline twisted the leash daintily around her hand until her fist was at his throat. He observed her passively, but coughed as she squeezed the collar tightly, the leather biting into the wound on his neck.

“You risked your life for her. An omega. The least worthy of your love. And a child. You should be ashamed” she hissed, releasing his collar in an exasperated gesture.

“I know something about shame” he said slowly, his voice hoarse. “It’s a vicious taskmaster. But to save a life… there’s no shame in that.”

“The life of an omega” she sneered.
Reddington shook his head, his lips pursed in displeasure. “That was always your weak spot, Madeline. You’re blinded by prejudice. You want to live in a world run by alphas, where betas and omegas are slaves? It would be hell on earth.”

“You may not be around to see it” she rejoined crisply.

Reddington nodded grimly. “Then go ahead and put me down.”

“Not so fast” she said conversationally, walking slowly around him like a cat circling its prey. “I’m being paid an extraordinarily large sum of money because my employer is eager to hear what you have to say. Let’s see if we can’t loosen your tongue.”

Back at the black site Liz paced around the operations floor like a trapped animal, not caring that the scent of her anxiety was palpable.

“Why can’t you find him? What about the tracking chip?”

Aram looked up at her sympathetically. “It went dark not long after you escaped. Best case scenario is that it’s stopped working…”

Liz shook her head. “They knew it was there, they took it out. They knew everything!”

Meera approached her wearing a conciliatory expression. “We will find him, Liz. And Reddington knows how to look after himself.”

Liz fixed her omega colleague with an icy stare. “Do you care? Last time we spoke you were convinced he’s a terrible person.”

“It doesn’t matter what I think” Meera responded matter-of-factly, walking away.

For a moment Liz felt a pang of guilt for snapping at her friend. The reality she could barely admit to herself was that she was afraid that everything Meera had said about Reddington was true. That she couldn’t trust him. But a photograph proved nothing.

She walked over to Aram where he was scanning surveillance footage of the area surrounding the bank.

“Agent Keen, there’s nothing so far I’m afraid. But we’ve got teams searching the area. It looks like they got away in an ambulance - with all the emergency vehicles in the vicinity because of the bank heist it’s impossible to trace. Do you have another idea for the surveillance?”

Liz chewed her lip for a moment. “There is some surveillance I’d like you to access. But it’s not from today.” She handed him the photograph. “I need you to find out if Reddington was at the hospital when my father died.”

Aram’s eyes widened. “You don’t think…”

“I don’t think anything” Liz said evenly. “But if I can find out why he was there it may help me figure out what happened today.” She lowered her voice. “You know we have a mole. Today was a set up.”

Aram looked about nervously and nodded. “I’ll let you know what I find.”
Liz nodded stiffly. “Thank you.”

“Keen!”

She turned around to see Ressler marching towards the exit, waving at her to follow. “Unis have found the ambulance used to transport Reddington. It was ditched less than a mile from a decommissioned black site.”

Liz sprang after him into the yellow elevator. “A black site? That can’t be a coincidence. They knew about the tunnels, our plan... Someone in the FBI was working with them. One of ours.”

“I know” Ressler said quietly, and Liz could detect his scent turn slightly acrid with anxiety in the confines of the elevator.

Reddington’s Italian leather brogues scuffed against the dusty floor of the factory as he shuddered on the hook, the ground swimming in and out of focus. He could make out dark, red spots in the dust, the scent of blood mingling with years’ worth of grime. It was a singularly unpleasant odor, but it grounded him, gave him a focus other than the wolfish alpha man peering at him over glasses, a large needle in his hand.

Madeline stood by, observing, leaning casually against a table. “I understand that a needle inserted directly into the gland behind one’s ear is one of the most painful experiences imaginable. Tell me, is that correct?” she asked lightly.

Reddington attempted a wry smile, though it came out as more of a grimace. “Feeling a little inadequate are we, Maddie” he grunted.

The comment earned him another stab of the needle from the bespectacled man, penetrating the most sensitive spot and hitting bone.

He blinked tears from his eyes, the pain like an excruciating red smear muddling his senses, the scent of blood agonizing. The tips of his shoes now drew sticky trenches on the floor as he struggled to support his weight, his broad shoulders screaming.

"Keep up the foreplay...and I'm afraid you'll find the main act disappointing" he breathed raggedly.

The man with the needle frowned, his bushy, silver brows knitted together. "He's got a point - he's no use to you dead. His heart could give out."

Madeline's lip curled disdainfully. "Keep going. If I remember correctly, he has more than enough stamina."

The alpha man reached for another tool and Madeline turned her attention to Reddington, her head tilted coquettishly. “The girl. Tell me about her. What makes her so special.”

Reddington didn't make a sound this time, not even when the alpha man injected an agonizing substance into the gland on his neck, a liquid that burned like the familiar torment of fire in his nerves.

At that moment the speckled stench of blood and dust was no longer enough to keep him sane. He needed another scent. Forgiveness. Pleasure. The scent of home. Closing his eyes, he pictured her dark lashes closed against her rosy cheeks as she slumbered in his bed. Then it came, the scent-
memory of lemon balm and catmint and sun-ripened skin, the complex tinge of her arousal that seemed designed exclusively for him.

"He’s resisting somehow" the alpha man commented, perplexed.

"That sounds like Ray Reddington" a man’s voice said from the shadows. "Let him down. Get him a chair, for God’s sake. And make yourselves scarce. It's time Ray and I had a chat, cat to cat, so-to-speak."

Reddington sank into the proffered chair, his shoulders sagging and collar soaked in blood, while the man, an older alpha, sat down genteelly in a chair opposite him, shaking his head.

"None of this had to happen, Ray. We had an agreement."

Reddington blinked, attempting to focus on the man he hadn’t seen for so many years. “We still do” he ground out.

The man sighed. “Well I don’t know about that. This business of turning yourself in to the FBI. My people are very nervous – they’re your people too, don’t forget Ray. And you betrayed them. You betrayed your own kind. It saddens me” he said regretfully.

Reddington shook his head fractionally. “No. I’ve told the FBI nothing.”

The older alpha frowned quizzically. “Then why put yourself through this. And what about this bond with the girl? Trust me, under normal circumstances we’d be delighted to see you accept your nature, take a lovely young omega. But this…”

“My reasons have nothing to do with you, or your people” Reddington said heavily.

The man stared at him intently for a moment and then nodded, standing from his chair. “I hope so. We took you today to show that we can. Let me be clear. The FBI is no safe haven for you. Your only security is the information that you have about us. If we suspect that information is no longer… secure… Then the only thing keeping you alive will be gone. Remember that when you’re deciding who to lie down with.”

With that he was gone, and, shortly after, Madeline appeared, her expression cold and bitter.

“I’m sorry Madeline” Reddington chuckled, his breath labored. You’re going to have to get your pound of flesh another time. We both know Fitch won’t let you finish it.”

She stared at him, her dark eyes hard and glittering. “Sometimes I think that’s what you’d want. To end it” she said sulkily. “You hate your own kind.”

“No” he responded in a low voice. “I hate what they do. Their thirst for power will bring the world to its knees. We’re headed for another cold war Madeline, you just can’t see it” he slurred.

“Perhaps not” Madeline said with a sigh. “But I see her. The way you care for her. I don’t need to touch you at all to have my revenge.”

She approached him slowly, anger simmering below the calmness in her voice. “There are alphas I know who will be only too delighted to ruin her. They’ll do things to her that will make our mating seem tame. Perhaps she’ll even enjoy it before they kill her – omegas are made that way, after all.”

Reddington was silent, the only sound the drip of blood from the wound in his neck onto the floor. He sagged in the chair, his head bowed as though defeated. Madeline took a last step towards him,
stopping when she was close enough to bend down and whisper triumphantly in his ear.

“You have nothing to say now? Cat got your tongue?”

It took seconds only for him to spring up and wrap the leather leash around her neck, pulling tightly with his fist. Crying out, she scrabbled desperately against him, her heels scraping ineffectively against the filthy floor while her nails clawed at his hand at her throat.

As an alpha she could have had the potential to present a challenge to him in his weakened state, but Madeline had not cultivated her strength over the years, preferring instead to allow others to conduct any business that required combat skills on her behalf. It was not a mistake that Reddington had made.

He pulled her against his chest, his knuckles white as he squeezed the leather tightly around her delicate throat.

“You were right Madeline” he growled quietly. “It didn’t have to be this way.”

As her struggles grew weaker he closed his eyes, his features tense with the pain of regret. They were strangely still as he squeezed her last breath from her, like a ghastly tableau, until her eyes slipped shut and her hands fell limply to her sides.

Only then did he relax his grip on the leash, his chest heaving with the exertion. Turning the woman’s head gently, he pressed a kiss onto her temple before allowing her lifeless body to drop to the floor.

It was still there when Liz arrived at the factory with Ressler and a SWAT team, though there was no sign that Reddington had been there except a hint of a clear, woody scent that she knew instantly to be his.

She stood over the body of Madeline Pratt, her teeth sinking into her lip. She didn’t need the coroner’s verdict to know what had happened. The alpha woman’s graceful neck was stained with deep red welts, marks no doubt left by the leash that lay on the floor beside her, the leather collar torn open.

Liz had disliked the woman more than she cared to admit, but looking at the scene in front of her she felt bile churning in her stomach. She imagined Reddington’s powerful hands - hands that had been so gentle with her – choking the life from this woman. A woman he had been intimate with, Liz thought hollowly. She shuddered and turned away just as her phone rang in her pocket.

“Aram?”

“Agent Keen, hi. I know you’re busy but about that thing you asked me earlier… I think I’ve found something.”

Throwing a glance over her shoulder, Liz walked away from the team at the crime scene to a secluded corner.

“Go ahead Aram.”

“Reddington was there. There’s no doubt about it. A surveillance camera caught him leaving St Adrian’s Hospital on the day your father died, at 4:37pm.”
Liz let out a sigh of relief. “My father died at 5:30, almost an hour later. Reddington must have been paying his respects.”

There was a pause on the line and she heard Aram take a deep breath.

“Agent Keen… Liz… I checked the hospital’s internal report. Your father was found at 5:30pm. But the medical examiner estimated time of death for a little under an hour before he was found.”

The hairs on Liz’s neck and arms began to prickle like flakes of ice were settling on her skin. “When Reddington was in the room” she whispered. “He was there when my father died.”

Eyes wide, she hung up the phone and turned slowly back to stare at the dead woman on the floor.

It hadn’t taken much to persuade Dembe to give her an address where she might find him. She hadn’t asked about the case or posed any questions at all this time. She’d simply said quietly that she needed to see him.

When she entered the living room of a quaint, cluttered cottage, he was sitting in an armchair, not wearing his customary suit but a dark, loose hoodie and jeans. He was bathed in shadows from low lamplight, and she saw him first not with her eyes, but with her nose. She whimpered involuntarily. The room reeked of blood, a metallic sheen worrying her senses, doused in a haze of antiseptic. He had been injured; how badly, she couldn’t tell.

“Lizzie” he said in a low voice. “No doubt you’ve realized by now that you have a mole in the FBI. Somebody leaked the details of your escape route.”

“You’re hurt” she said slowly.

“It smells worse than it is” he responded quietly.

The photograph, she thought numbly. Did that smell worse than it was? She fought the urge to run to his side, to paw at his clothing until she’d found the wound, licked him clean, comforted him.

“I came for you” she said hollowly. “At the factory. I came but you were gone.”

His eyes creased as a pained smile touched his lips. “As I said Lizzie, I always have a contingency plan.”

It wasn’t convincing. He hadn’t this time, Liz thought. He hadn’t, and it was because of her. He’d been there because of her. But none of that mattered now.

She exhaled heavily, biting back a sob. “I know you were there. When my father died. Did you kill him?”

He didn’t answer, but she could smell his anxiety, even through the filter of blood. She stepped towards him and asked again. “Did you kill him!”

He inhaled as though bracing himself before he answered. “Yes.”

A low, soft cry escaped her, as though squeezed out by an invisible hand closing around her throat. Her alpha. Her alpha had taken her father away.

“He was going to tell me the truth, and you didn’t want me to know” she whispered, her voice
shaking.

“It’s more complicated than that” he answered in a low voice. “More so than you can imagine.”

Liz paled, the omega inside her weeping and clawing in despair. “I trusted you. God, I let you touch me. Do things to me… And all the while—”

Reddington flinched as she spoke and he cut her off as though he couldn’t bear to hear her continue. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

Her expression crumpled with grief. “Understand… Is this more insane alpha logic? Kill the father and take the daughter?”

“Listen to me” Reddington said sharply. “I’ve been friends with Sam for all of yours and most of my life. He was dying, slowly and painfully. I could smell his body rotting from the inside out.”

“Stop” she whispered, tears slipping silently down her cheeks.

“He was impatient for it to end” Reddington continued gently. “He wasn’t thinking clearly. If he was he would never have chosen to tell you any of it. It wasn’t his choice to make. I put him out of his misery.”

Liz shook her head, the salt taste of her tears like acid on her lips. “This thing between us. It ends right now. I’m done. You’re cruel… Ruthless… A true alpha. But not mine” she choked.

She turned to leave and then paused, taking a breath to steady her voice. “You are not my alpha.”
Reddington’s footsteps echoed on the concrete floor of a dank basement somewhere near the dockyard. The entrance had been cleverly concealed inside a dilapidated wooden boathouse, but he was in no mood to appreciate the ingenuity of that. He strode through the dark space and pushed open the rusty door in front of him, pausing to stare dispassionately at the occupant of the room.

Meera Malik sat in a modest wooden chair, her wrists and ankles tightly bound with nylon fishing rope. He knew from personal experience that it bit cruelly into flesh if one struggled, but despite her slight figure and soft omega features, the CIA agent was not to be underestimated. She regarded him coldly, her eyes large dark orbs glittering in the gloom. To her credit, her scent barely betrayed any anxiety at all, only a hint of additional sweetness which Reddington recognised as her body’s attempt to endear her to him, to discourage him from harming her.

He took another chair and placed it carefully in front of her, before sitting down and removing his fedora, balancing the hat on his knee, his fingers drumming the brim.

She raised her eyebrows, her expression unimpressed. “I’ve got a husband and two kids at home who think I’m being really shit right now, late back from work again. So why don’t we get to the point. After the bank heist was compromised you realised that we have a mole, and you think it’s me. It’s not.”

Reddington pursed his lips and leant forward conversationally, his fingers loosely intertwined. “In my line of work I so rarely encounter honesty. Yet after all these years being lied to is still so disappointing.”

“I’m not lying” she snapped. “Why would I? I know who you are.”

He sighed and shook his head. “You see I would give marginally more credence to that had my people not discovered an RFP in the trash of a government contractor signed by Meera Malik. At first glance it appears legitimate, you provide blueprints and invite contractors to bid for a security appraisal. But if one is prepared to dig a little deeper into the government’s trash there are all kinds of nasty surprises lurking, not least the schematics to a branch of one Radford Bank. It was a message.”

Meera looked at him warily, her sardonic expression gone. “I didn’t know what it was for.”

“‘I don’t believe you’ he responded quietly, his voice tinged with regret. He rose from his seat, and palmed his hat on his head, sliding his fingers over the brim as he straightened it.

“So what happens now?” Meera asked coolly. “Enhanced interrogation? You’re going to torture me?”

Reddington sighed. “No. That unfortunate task falls to my associate.”

He looked down at the omega woman who was valiantly attempting to remain calm. “It’s a sad fact that omega constitutions are uniquely suited to torture” he said in a low voice.

Meera gave a short, bitter laugh. “‘You know Liz once told me you wouldn’t hurt an omega. She’s so naïve. It’s pathetic what you’ve done to her’ she scoffed, looking away from him.

Reddington observed her warily, the dark circles under his eyes more pronounced in the gloom. When he spoke his voice was almost wistful. “‘I wouldn’t be so quick to condemn innocence, Agent Malik. It’s a rare… precious commodity. One that once lost, can never be recovered.’”
Meera turned back to look at him, her sleek brows drawn together in a frown. “You actually care about her” she said slowly. “You know she could never love you, right?”

Reddington paused in silence, before nodding fractionally and turning away from her, striding back towards the door.

As he exited the dank room he passed Mr Brimley, the wheels of the strange man’s oxygen tank emitting a sinister squeak as he entered the room where agent Malik was being held.

Walking down the corridor, Reddington caught the sounds of the girl beginning to struggle against her bonds, and then that sweet scent again; it filled the entire corridor this time, like freshly baked cinnamon buns caressing his senses as she began to scream.

The hairs on Liz’s neck prickled as she exited the elevator at the black site. She didn’t need Aram and Ressler’s surreptitious glances in her direction to know that Reddington was in the building. She could smell him.

She stalked up the metal mesh stairs and down the gloomy corridor to Cooper’s office, marching past Dembe and throwing open the door.

Reddington greeted her formally, though his tone was soft. “Good morning, Agent Keen.”

The rich timbre of his voice settled warmly in her belly in spite of her distress, and she couldn’t bear to look at him in case the tears came. Taking a deep breath, she focussed on Cooper who peered at her from behind his desk.

“Sir. I’m requesting an immediate transfer out of the task force. It’s no longer appropriate for me to work here.”

Cooper frowned, glancing at Reddington and then back to the beautiful omega agent staring earnestly down at him.

“Agent Keen, I’ll be the judge of whether it’s appropriate for you to work here. If you’re concerned about your safety after the incident at the bank, I can-”

“I’m not concerned about my safety” Liz cut in.

“But I am” Reddington interjected. “I’ve brought you an urgent case. And I can assure you that yours and countless other lives will be at risk if the events I’ve learned of go unchecked.”

Liz shook her head, and kept her focus on Cooper. “He’ll have to give his information to someone else.”

“That’s not going to work” Reddington said evenly, and Liz could feel his gaze on her.

Cooper sat back in his seat,pinching the bridge of his nose. “Agent Keen, while I fully support you as a member of this task force, the bureau has reservations. Now these are doubts they are willing to put to one side, but only on the understanding that you are willing to work with Reddington.”

“Which I no longer am” Liz responded as firmly as she could manage. She paused, swallowing. “Reddington killed my father. He went to the hospital in Nebraska. When he left, my father was dead.”
Cooper’s concern registered both on his face and in his scent, which became redolent of woollen
blankets, betraying his desire to comfort her. “I’d like to have a word with Agent Keen privately
please.”

Liz heard Reddington shift in his seat behind her, his hackles raised. “No” he said firmly, and she felt
a frisson of cold anger at the thought that he selfishly wanted to prevent Cooper from comforting her.

“The events that are about to unfold relate to the incident at Radford Bank, and to why the operative
known as Tom Keen was here. I have reason to believe that a disaster of grievous proportions is
immanent” Reddington continued. “People are going to die, Harold.”

Cooper gave Liz a gentle look. “Agent Keen, I understand how difficult this must be for you. And I
promise to give very serious consideration to your request after this is done. But national security is
and always will be our top priority.”

Liz shook her head numbly. Her chest tightened and for a moment she felt like she was back in that
hotel room, at Reddington’s mercy, knowing that Cooper had handed him the key.

Slowly, she turned to face Reddington for the first time. “Don’t make me do this” she said quietly.

For a moment she thought she saw a flicker of pain cross his face before his enigmatic expression
returned.

“Risking the lives of innocent people to assuage your anger at me. That isn’t like you, Agent Keen”
he said neutrally.

Liz pursed her lips. “But leveraging those innocent lives to manipulate me is exactly like you.” She
turned to Cooper. “I’ll do the case. But then that’s it. I’m done.”

Cooper sighed and nodded. It occurred to Liz suddenly that she would like a hug from the man who
was not only her boss, but had become her mentor, but Reddington broke in.

“Our abduction at the bank was made possible by a security breach in the FBI, a leak that tipped off
certain individuals as to our plans. I’ve recently learned from a reliable source that the bank wasn’t
the only site for which schematics were released. It was one of a number of places in strategic points
throughout the city.”

He removed a file from his jacket as he spoke, which Liz snatched from his hand and took to the
other side of the room, flicking through the pages.

“A credit union, a discount mall, a dive bar… These aren’t exactly prime terrorist targets” she
snapped.

“I have to agree with Agent Keen” Cooper said, puzzled. “If these venues became targets that would
be regrettable of course. But I don’t see that this is a threat to national security.”

Reddington nodded tightly, his expression irritated. “They may seem innocuous to you. But
someone in your government went to a lot of trouble to leak the blueprints to these specific buildings.
I want to know why.”

Liz shook her head exasperatedly. “What about Tom? You said this had something to do with him.
Why he came into my life.”

Reddington rose from his seat and palmed his hat onto his head. “Bring me the answers I’m looking
for Agent Keen, and you may find some of your own” he said in the same infuriating, neutral tone.
Liz watched, seething as he swept out of the room, but she didn’t miss the hint of his scent as he brushed past her. Under his calm exterior, he was deeply troubled.

After a few moments she stepped slowly out onto the walkway to watch him depart, his figure imposing as he moved silkily across the operations floor below her towards the elevator, his body guard in tow. Just as he reached the clanking yellow contraption, the doors opened and Meera stepped out, freezing when she saw him.

Liz frowned as she observed them. Reddington touched his hat respectfully and continued past the diminutive CIA agent into the elevator, but Meera was still standing perfectly still in the same spot by the time Liz had walked down onto the operations floor.

“Meera… hey, are you ok?” she asked awkwardly, aware that they hadn’t been on the best of terms.

The omega woman looked up at her then and Liz saw with surprise that her eyes were large and haunted, her complexion sickly.

“Yes. My kid was sick, that’s all. It’s been a long night.” Her eyes flickered down to the floor and before Liz could question her further, she’d walked off into the gloom of the black site.

Liz wrinkled her nose as she and Ressler approached the dive bar that appeared in the file Reddington had brought in. It was even more run-down than it appeared on paper, and the acid tinge of urine in the air told her which of the outside walls was the popular pissing spot for inebriated regulars. The paint on the mucky brown fronting was peeling, and a neon sign flickered pathetically in the afternoon light. It read ‘Dons Lounge’, while a handwritten card in the filthy window said ‘open 8am-late’.

Liz smiled teasingly at her partner. “Hey Don, do you come here often?”

Ressler grimaced. “I’ve had some rough days on the job, sure, but you wouldn’t catch me in a place like this when I’m off the clock. In fact, maybe you should wait outside” he said, glancing at her uneasily.

Liz rolled her eyes at him and yanked open the door. As they entered they were hit with the stench of stale cigarettes and beer, and Liz cringed inwardly as the soles of her boots stuck to the grimy floor. The bar was fairly empty, with just a few patrons huddled in corners, nursing pints of warm Guinness. Liz was thankful that her presence went mostly unnoticed; unlike in the alpha-only club, the men here were mostly older betas who were too drunk or depressed to pay her much attention.

They approached the bar and were met by a ferret-faced beta man with thin gray hair, wiping out a glass with a dirty cloth. He observed them warily, and when he spoke it was with a thick Irish accent.

“We don’t want trouble.”

“Good, neither do we” Ressler responded smoothly.

The bartender nodded and put two shot glasses down on the counter. “You drinking?” he inquired, glancing curiously at Liz.

She showed him her badge, shaking her head. “Have you seen anything suspicious here in the last few weeks? Anything out of the ordinary happen or strangers come in?”
The ferret-faced man regarded her carefully. “With all respect to you miss, you’re the only thing out of place here. Don’t get many of your sort. Not yours either” he finished, glancing apprehensively at Ressler.

It occurred to Liz that her partner was large even for an alpha, and the betas in the bar looked small and woeful compared to him. The contrast too between their haggard faces and hands and her own smooth skin was profound, and Liz felt herself wondering regretfully whether they had lost out on jobs to alphas or lost lovers to their confidence and charm. She was sure that under the stink of hops she could detect a tinge of resentment.

“Look if you’re not drinking I’d be much obliged if you could be on your way” the bartender continued quietly. “People come here to be left in peace. This business of alphas hanging around asking questions is disturbing my customers.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “So my partner here isn’t the only alpha that’s been in here recently.”

“The quicker you tell us, the quicker we’ll get out of here” Ressler said, leaning territorially on the bar.

The bartender shook his head uncomfortably. “There was an alpha guy here a week or so ago. Older chap with a fancy suit.”

Ressler shot a meaningful look at Liz as he drew his cell from his pocket, tapping on the screen. “Is this the guy?” he asked, showing the man the grainy photograph on Reddington’s wanted poster.

“That could be the Bunworth Banshee for all I know” the bartender said dismissively. “He was a talkative sort though, ruffled a few of the boys’ feathers asking about their families. Like I said” he continued pointedly, “we don’t need alphas in here sniffing our backsides if you know what I mean.”

“That’s fine” Ressler said grimly. “We got what we came for.”

He turned to leave but Liz paused and turned back to the bartender. “The alpha – what did he drink?”

The beta man shrugged. “Whiskey – like half the other folk who come in here.”

Liz nodded her thanks and caught up with Ressler, grabbing his arm. “You think Reddington is behind this?” she asked in a low voice. “He wouldn’t have whiskey in a place like this. He drinks scotch – the good kind. If it was him he’d have ordered a beer.”

Ressler sighed sympathetically. “Look I know you think you know him. But that’s a pretty big leap.”

Liz bit her lip uncertainly. “Why would he tip us off about an attack that he was planning himself? Why send us here?”

“Maybe there never was going to be any attack, or maybe this is a decoy” Ressler said exasperatedly. “Who knows why Reddington does half the stuff he does. But there’s one thing I’m sure of – I’m done playing his games.” His expression softened and he placed a protective hand on her shoulder. “I know this must be hard for you, but you need to accept that you can’t trust him.”

Liz looked up at him, her eyes steely. “Trust me when I say know that. And after this case is done, so am I. But I’m not leaving the task force until I know that there’s not going to be a disaster I could have prevented.”
As she spoke, Ressler’s cell rang and he put it to his ear. A few moments later he hung up, his face white.

“Looks like you’re too late” he breathed. “That was Cooper. The CDC have reported what they think is a biological attack. There are six suspected cases of Marburg disease at different hospitals throughout the city. It’s one of the deadliest viruses in the world - if it spreads it could wipe out half the city in weeks. You know what this means, right?”

Liz nodded, swallowing. “We need to bring Reddington in.”
Liz fought back nausea as she entered the park to meet Reddington. He had agreed to rendezvous with her unquestioningly, which only made her deception worse. Her inner omega whined and clawed in distress, both at the thought of betraying the alpha, and fear of what he might do when he realised. By the time she saw him sitting quietly at a table she was in turmoil she knew he would scent a mile away.

He looked round as she approached, squinting over his sunglasses in the warmth of the afternoon.

His look of concern deepened as she reached him, and once again she had to quell a bizarre urge to kneel at his feet and beg forgiveness. When he spoke his voice was deep and comforting.

“Sweetheart, what’s happened?”

“Like you don’t know” she said, looking about her nervously. “Your plan worked – we ran down pointless leads while your people released a deadly virus into the city.”

Reddington’s expression barely altered as she spoke, though she wished that she could see his eyes behind his sunglasses.

“My plan?” he inquired evenly. “Is that what you think, Lizzie?”

She swallowed, desperate to keep her composure. “The FBI-”

“I didn’t ask the opinion of the FBI, I asked you. Again, do you think I am responsible for unleashing a deadly pathogen that will cost many thousands of lives?” he asked sternly.

Liz paused uncertainly, her head titled slightly in a gesture that unconsciously mirrored his.

“I don’t know” she said, her teeth worrying her lower lip, before she sighed, shaking her head. “No. You’ve ruined my life but you didn’t do this.” She paused fitfully before coming to a decision. “You need to go – now.”

His jaw tightened, his lips pursed disapprovingly in a way that made Liz’s inner omega tremble.

“Elizabeth, what have you done?”

She looked about her again and saw the tell tale signs of plain clothes officers calmly removing members of the public from the park.

At that moment Reddington sprang up with lightning agility, spun her around and pulled her against his chest, his hand resting gently around her throat.

She cried out in surprise and fear, but instantly he began to soothe her, his breath warm on her ear as he spoke softly to her.

“Shhh, I’m not going to hurt you. Forgive me, but I’d like to finish this conversation and I wouldn’t want the FBI to think we were in cahoots. Now, please continue.”

“You’re insane” she breathed, her eyes closing involuntarily at the delicious scent of him, the warmth of his body behind her.

“Perhaps” he said casually. “But before I’m arrested – or indeed, committed – I’d like to know how you came to the conclusion that I am innocent of this crime. Have you decided to trust me, Lizzie?”
From her current vantage point she could see the FBI tactical team assuming their positions around the park and her pulse was thundering in her neck under his hand. “There’s no time!” she pleaded plaintively.

She felt his thumb press gently into her carotid, slowing her heart rate and flooding her with a sense of calm.

He began to speak, his voice low and comforting despite the army of special ops lining up around the park.

“Do you ever think of our ancestors, Lizzie? I do. There’s a legend my father used to tell me. The besieged alpha Seff is banished to the underworld, doomed to reign in darkness. He lives in misery and solitude for years until on a rare visit to the the mortal world he sees the omega Lucephia, the young daughter of his one-time ally. Her soul shines so brightly it penetrates the darkness in which he lives. Her existence in the world brings him the hope he needs to survive. The knowledge that he might be redeemed through her.”

They were surrounded now, the clicks of bullets being loaded into chambers echoing round the park, but she felt a strange sense of calm, as though she – the most vulnerable – were the one in charge.

She closed her eyes again and spoke under her breath.

“The bartender at Don’s Lounge told us an alpha man came to scope out the place. The description matched yours. But I know it wasn’t you.”

She thought she felt him tense a little behind her, but before she could think further about what could have rattled him, he had gently removed his hand from her neck. When she turned around he flashed her an enigmatic smile and sank to his knees with feline grace, removing his fedora and placing his hands calmly on his head.

She frowned in confusion and then felt herself being pulled back out of the way of the tactical team as they moved in to surround Reddington.

She could smell Ressler’s concern like fresh bread, but she wriggled exasperatedly out of his grasp.

“Easy, Keen. You ok?”

“I’m fine” she snapped.

“What the hell was that back there?” Ressler continued, oblivious to her agitation. “I know Reddington is dangerous, but I didn’t think he would try to hurt you like that.”

Liz shook her head in frustration. “He didn’t! We’ve got this all wrong.” She paused, biting her lip. “Diseases are like people, right? They move around, they have patterns we can interpret, things that tell us where they’ve come from, where they’re going. It’s time we talked to the CDC.”

As they entered the foyer of the hospital where the latest Marburg victim was being treated, they were met by an agitated looking woman with silvery hair, her white lab coat creased.

“Agents, welcome. I’m Dr Anna Gruber, I’m heading the rapid response team from the CDC. I’m sorry we’re meeting under such grave circumstances.”

She beckoned them to follow and they walked briskly with her through the hospital until they
reached a busy laboratory with large screens showing maps of the city.

Dr Gruber’s fear was as palpable as smoke in the air, and Liz struggled not to let it distract her.

“What’s the latest status update?”

The woman gave her a grim look. “We’re on high alert. There’s no cure for Marberg, all we can do is try to control the spread. It’s extremely serious generally speaking, but what we’re seeing here is even more concerning. It’s spread more rapidly than we would ever have predicted, and the pattern of transmission is also outside normal parameters.”

She pointed at a map of Washington DC on one of the screens, the spread of the disease plotted with red lines and markers. “There’s no doubt that this virus was released deliberately, but for what purpose, I can’t say.”

Liz looked at the map, scanning the sea of red markers. She sucked in a breath as she saw the neighborhood they had visited to check out Don’s Lounge, red markers appearing on the screen around the area.

“What’s unusual about the spread?” she asked. “These are poor neighborhoods, surely you’d expect it to spread faster in those areas.”

Dr Gruber nodded. “Faster yes, but not exclusively. Plus, if you look at the map you can see it spread from this district to this one, but then all the way over here” she said tapping the screen. “It jumped over other neighborhoods, infecting barely two or three people. Even if we had multiple patient zeroes throughout the city, it doesn’t explain the lack of impact in these areas.”

“It doesn’t make any sense. Terrorists go after rich, high profile targets. Why target poor areas?” Ressler asked.

Liz sucked her lip between her teeth. “The targets Reddington gave us were all in low-income neighborhoods, the bar, a credit union, the discount mall… But what if they’re not targeting poor areas exactly? Remember what the bartender said? That they don’t get alphas or omegas in there? Dr Gruber, were any of the victims betas?”

The woman paused and frowned before answering her. “Yes – in fact they all were.”

Ressler raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t think that was strange?”

“Not really” Dr Gruber answered defensively. “There are more betas in the population than alphas and omegas, and alphas are less susceptible to disease. But if we don’t get control of this thing I’d expect to see alpha and omega casualties soon. Especially omegas” she continued glancing at Liz as though embarrassed. “Their immune systems are a little less effective.”

Liz ignored this and continued her point. “What if it’s not a coincidence? Is it possible to genetically engineer a virus so that it only targets certain types of people?”

Dr Gruber paled. “We already know that this virus has been generated in a lab – it’s more deadly than any specimen we have on record. But to engineer it so that it targets only betas…” she trailed off, shocked. “It’s a horrifying thought. But yes, it is possible.”

Liz looked at Ressler, her eyes wide. “This isn’t just a terrorist attack. It’s a genocide. Dr Gruber, we suspect that whoever’s behind this may not be finished yet – we know of potential targets here, here and here” she said pointing to the map.
“You tell us” Ressler said grimly. “Where would another attack do the most damage?”

The distinctive, smoky odour of the woman’s fear began to fill the room again.

“They’d all be terrible, but this one, the mall… Thousands of people go through there everyday from all over the city, they’ll take it home to their families… It would be catastrophic.”

“The bar was a dry run” Ressler said, appalled. “They’re gonna hit the mall.”

They were met outside the mall by Meera and a tactical team, but their guns would be no use against the virus, Liz thought bleakly. The venue was chaotic, with stalls and stands outside as well as in, multiple exits and stores on three cavernous levels. Liz’s eyes flicked suspiciously from a soda pop vendor handing out drinks to a crowd of people, to a homeless guy sitting on a bench. The un-sub preparing to release the virus could be anyone she thought, her heart pounding.

Meera approached them hurriedly. “We’ve got units setting up around the building, mall security is getting us access codes to all the secure doors on the premises and we’ve got live feeds from security cameras. But the fact is we’ve got no way of knowing who it is. The best we can do is try to evacuate as quickly as possible.”

“No” Liz said, shaking her head vehemently. “If the virus gets out it will only be a matter of time. We’ve got to stop this from happening. Show me the camera feeds.”

Ressler, Meera and Liz stood inside a black FBI tactical van staring at the screens in front of them. The mall was crowded and full of families, and Liz’s stomach lurched every time she saw a couple with young children or a pregnant woman. It was the life she had wanted for herself, she thought numbly; it had been torn away from her and now their happiness was going to be destroyed as well.

“There!” Meera said with conviction, her finger stabbing one of the screens. “Alpha male, mid twenties with a back pack. He’s standing by the north entrance. We need to move in fast.”

“Wait” Liz said urgently. “We can’t assume that he’s the one just because he’s an alpha. If we make a mistake and swoop in it could spook the un-sub into releasing the virus. He’s too calm.”

Meera frowned. “Someone who would release a virus that could kill thousands of people is obviously a psychopath - of course he’s calm. Besides, he’s a white alpha male in his mid-twenties to early thirties, he fits the profile for a bio-terrorist” she snapped.

“Except we don’t think this is a simple terrorist attack” Liz countered. “We believe the disease was engineered to target betas. This isn’t about causing random destruction, it’s ideological - that means they’ll most likely have recruited someone to the cause through brainwashing or coercion, and that person would not be calm!”

At that moment the head of mall security appeared out of breath at the doors to the van. “Agents, one of our security guards is unaccounted for, Molly Hubbard. She clocked in this morning but hasn’t reported in since.”

“Is she armed?” Meera asked sternly.

“Um, yeah” he said apologetically. “All our people are. We have a real problem with shoplifters.”

“For Pete’s sake” Meera muttered under her breath, turning back to the cameras.
“I got her” said Ressler, pointing at the screen in front of him. “On the south side – damn, we’re too late, she just entered the building!”

Liz threw off her jacket and gestured at a member of the tactical team. “Quick, get me a Kevlar vest.”

Ressler turned on her. “There’s no way Keen, not this time. A vest isn’t gonna protect you if that virus gets loose.”

“And I’m trying to make sure that it doesn’t” she said firmly. “I’m an omega, I should be ok.”

“We don’t know that that virus is just meant for betas – it’s just a theory!” he shot back. “It could be that no omegas are sick yet just because there aren’t as many in the population.”

As they argued, Meera stepped quietly away and put her cell phone to her ear.

“Aram? There’s something I need you to do…I need you to get a phone in to Reddington in the box…Yes I’m aware of that…No I don’t want you to lose your job. Look I know you can do it, and it’s life or death here. I’ll owe you.”

A minute or so later she heard Reddington’s soft growl on the line and it sent unpleasant shivers down her spine. “Agent Malik, you’ve gone to extraordinary lengths to speak with me. What do you have to say?”

“Earlier you made it very clear that I’m in your debt. So I thought you’d like to know that Agent Keen is about to risk her life chasing after a suspect we believe is carrying a deadly virus.”

There was a brief pause on the line before Reddington responded in a clipped tone. “Put her on.”

Meera closed her eyes for a moment, and then turned back to where Liz was pulling on her vest. “You need to take this call.”

Frowning, Liz put the phone to her ear. “Yes?”

“Elizabeth don’t do this” she heard Reddington growl.

She breathed in sharply. “How did you-”

“Don’t change the subject. This is too dangerous for you” he continued, his voice deep and urgent.

Liz shook her head exasperatedly. “There are hundreds of people in there – we’re wasting time!”

“Elizabeth no. You have no idea what effect exposure to the virus will have on you. I’m telling you no.”

She winced at his commanding tone, the omega inside screaming at her to obey. Swallowing, she took a deep breath.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

With that, she thrust the phone into Meera’s hands and ran full pelt across the courtyard and into the building after the security guard.

“Elizabeth!”

“She’s gone” Meera said quietly into the phone.
She flinched involuntarily as she heard his hiss of anger on the line.

“Well then, agent Malik. It appears I’ll be collecting your debt earlier than anticipated - you’re going to get me out of here.”
When Liz entered the crowded mall she scanned the area for the security guard, Molly Hubbard, and for a moment she thought she had missed her chance. The tannoy was blasting sickly Christmas jingles, strings of blue, red and green lights catching her eye, while the cacophony of scents from cheap sweets, perfume and thousands of people was making it hard to concentrate.

Then a flash of blue caught her eye on the level above and she saw the woman sprinting across the concourse. She sprang up the escalator after her, ignoring the bemused glances of beta shoppers wondering at the sight of a security guard being chased by an omega. She could see the woman glance back over her shoulder at her as she ran, her expression one of utter terror.

“Stop!” Liz yelled as she closed in on the woman, the sound of her boots echoing as they pounded the floor. “You don’t have to do this!”

The security guard skidded to a halt and spun round, dragging an aerosol can from her belt and brandishing it in front of her.

“You don’t understand! Just leave me alone! Please go away. Please.”

The moment they stopped Liz drew her weapon, but as she looked at the frightened security guard standing in front of her she frowned.

“You’re a beta” she breathed slowly. “If you release the virus it will kill you as well as the hundreds of people here.”

The woman swallowed, nodding fractionally. “I know. I don’t have a choice” she said, her voice quavering.

Liz paused before slowly holstering her weapon, her hands raised in a conciliatory gesture. “Let’s just stop, take a breath. Why do you think you don’t have a choice?”

The woman stared at her for a moment, her eyes darting fearfully between Liz and the aerosol can. Then Liz saw her take a deep breath and in that second, she knew that no amount of reasoning would reach the unlikely bioterrorist. She lunged forward, crashing into the woman and pushing her into a vacant shop, the windows whitewashed and cardboard boxes strewn over the floor.

The woman screamed, scratching and wrestling in a blind panic, and the can rolled out of her hand across the floor. Her heart thundering with adrenaline, Liz went to grab it, but felt the tell tale coldness of gunmetal on her neck. The women’s hand was shaking as she held the gun, and Liz could smell her fear, desperate and stale like old cookies.

Without hesitation, Liz reached back and grabbed the woman’s wrist, reckoning that her FBI combat skills were superior to those of a mall security guard. However, what the woman lacked in training, she made up for in strength that Liz lacked as an omega, and after a brief, violent struggle the gun went off and the woman fell back, a red stain appearing on her thigh. They both paused, momentarily shocked, before the woman rolled over, made a desperate grab for the aerosol can, pulled the tab and held down the nozzle.

Liz watched in horror as a thin cloud of moisture burst into the room, disseminating its deadly
contents. She sprang up from the floor and raced to the door of the shop unit, slamming it shut and scrabbling against the wall until she found the button to lower the security glass. She had failed to stop the security guard from releasing the virus, but she might be able to stop it spreading beyond the shop.

As the glass came down across the front of the shop, she ran back to the woman’s side and pressed her hands against the gunshot wound on her thigh.

“It’s Molly, isn’t it? I’m Liz.”

The blood was coming fast and Liz realised to her dismay that the bullet had hit the femoral artery. She reached for her cell but the woman grabbed her hand, her features twisted in pain and terror.

Her voice when she spoke was ragged and urgent. “My son… Please, they have my son Joshua. He’s five years old.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “Who are they? Who has your son?”

The woman shook her head, her face crumpling in fear. “I don’t know who they are” she breathed, grunting in pain. “They contacted me from a number I didn’t recognise with a video of Joshua. They said they’d kill him if I didn’t do what they asked. I’m sorry” she said, her voice weakening.

“We’re gonna find him, ok?” Liz said as she held her cell to her ear. “Ressler, the suspect is down, repeat, the suspect is down. I need a medic up here right now, and tell them to bring a hazmat suit – the virus is out but I’ve got it contained in an empty unit on the second floor.”

Liz shoved her cell back in her pocket and returned her hand to put pressure on the wound in the woman’s thigh, but she grabbed at her hand again, her fingers sliding in the blood.

“My son” she rasped staring at Liz with drooping eyes. “Find my son.”

Minutes later Ressler appeared at the shop front with a hazmat team, but it was too late, as Liz had known it would be. Even if the security guard had survived the gunshot, the virus would have killed her.

Liz got up from the floor and ran to the window to speak to her partner. “She’s gone. She told me that she was coerced – they kidnapped her son and used him as leverage. We need to-”

Liz paused as a wave of nausea crept over her, followed by a rushing in her ears and a feeling almost as though her head were being held under water.

She looked at him through the glass as she swayed on her feet, realisation dawning.

“Keen” she heard him say as he banged his fist on the glass. “Liz!”

“I can’t…” she murmured before sinking unconscious to the floor, darkness engulfing her.

Reddington waited patiently in a deep leather armchair in the drawing room of Diane Fowler’s house, a revolver resting on his knee. As his sharp ears heard her approach, he reached out and tugged on the string of a table lamp, illuminating himself in low light. As she appeared in the doorway in her nightgown, the room was filled with an unpleasant stench, and he was reminded that nasty old alpha women dislike being cornered more than just about anyone else he’d come across.
He uncrossed his legs and flexed his fingers on the gun. “This isn’t a pissing competition” he growled, gesturing to the chair opposite him. “Sit your ass down.”

She took her seat, glowering at him, her cold, wrinkled eyes gleaming. “You impetuous fool” she hissed. “You are permitted to live because we allow it. You interfered with our business and now you have the audacity to come into my house. I ought to feed your gall bladder to my dogs.”

Reddington’s mouth twitched in distaste. “You’re a tough old bitch, Diane. But it’s too late. I know the truth. You are the one who gave the orders for our kidnapping at the bank, and today you and your megalomaniacal conspirators tried to murder hundreds, maybe thousands of innocents with a genetically engineered virus.”

“**Innocents**” she scoffed dismissively. “If I’d known you’d come straight to my door I wouldn’t have facilitated your escape today. Interesting touch having agent Malik do your dirty work.”

“I could say the same to you” Reddington said caustically.

“What do you want?” Fowler snapped, her lips curled into a snarl.

“Oh so many things” he quipped, brushing an imaginary speck of dust from his suit. “But right now I’ll settle for the antidote to your Marburg concoction.”

Fowler laughed drily. “Ah yes. I heard about Agent Keen. Such a pity” she said mockingly. “There’s no cure.”

Reddington shook his head, his expression dark. “You’re nothing if not careful, Diane. You wouldn’t unleash a weapon you can’t control. So I’ll ask one last time” he said, twitching the gun in his hand. “The antidote.”

Fowler rose serenely from the chair and walked over to a tapestry hanging on the wall. Rolling it up, she revealed a safe behind it and entered the code. She returned shortly with a blue plastic-topped vial which she handed to him disdainfully.

Reddington slipped it into his breast pocket, but made no move to leave.

“Well?” Fowler snapped.

“Honestly I find myself growing greedy in my advancing years” he laughed humorlessly “but there is something else I believe you can help with. There’s a young boy by the name of Joshua Hubbard, I understand he’s being held by some rather unsavoury associates of yours. I need a location.”

The alpha woman’s face hardened. “I’m sure I don’t know anything about that.”

Reddington snarled, his lip momentarily revealing one of his canines. “And I’m sure there’s a shallow grave with your name on it if you continue to huff and puff while the lives of a young woman and a child are at risk” he said darkly.

Fowler bristled visibly, but silently jotted down an address on a piece of paper which she handed to him. As he tucked it into his pocket along with the vial, she began to speak nonchalantly.

“Curious, this situation with the girl. Perhaps you’ll accept your true nature when you’re buried to the hilt in her” she said nastily. “But then, perhaps she isn’t worthy of you - it seems her blood isn’t as pure as one might think. You could test her, you know. Withhold the antidote, see if the pretty little bitch survives the night. If she does… her omega heritage is strong enough to be worthy of belonging to an alpha.”
Reddington was perfectly still, though the sharp scent from his raised hackles was powerful enough to choke on. “How unimaginably cruel” he said quietly.

There followed six shots as he emptied the gun emphatically into Fowler’s body, her face frozen in an expression of surprise, as though in her last moments it hadn’t occurred to her that he would dare to make good on his threat.

He rose from his seat and looked down dispassionately at the woman’s corpse as he wiped his prints from the gun with a cloth handkerchief. “Don’t worry, it won’t be a shallow grave. Quite the opposite in fact. Mr Kaplan is as thorough in her attention to detail as you were.” There was the faint sound of the front door opening. “And there she is now” he murmured genially. “I’ll leave you in her capable hands.”

After staring down at Liz for some time, pale and motionless in the hospital bed, Reddington finally pulled up a chair and sat down heavily, his eyes fixed on her face. In some ways she was more beautiful now than he had ever seen her; her skin was drained of color save the slightest pink of her lips, as delicate as apple blossom. Her dark hair framed her face and tumbled against the pillow like a fairy tale princess. But she wouldn’t be woken with a kiss, he thought hollowly, and if she were to be, he surely wasn’t pure and noble enough to be the one to do it.

His eyes flickered to her hand resting on the blanket, an IV needle administering the antidote he had confiscated from the late Diane Fowler. He suppressed a snarl and reached out, gently taking hold of her fingers, stroking her with his thumb. They wouldn’t be disturbed, not tonight. He’d made sure of it. An alpha on an omega hospital ward outside of visiting hours would not be tolerated; their scent and power would undoubtedly be distressing to many vulnerable patients, and so at his insistence, Harold had arranged a private suite in the hospital to be reserved for her.

In his peripheral vision he could see blue and white lights twinkling from a plastic Christmas tree in the deserted hospital hall outside her room. He hadn’t noticed the seasons change, partly because of a considerable amount of international travel, but it was also the case that he simply wasn’t attuned to it anymore. There were no hams to cook, no more oyster stews. The girl lying there fighting for her life was his last link to any of it.

He squeezed her fingers, and then gently lifted her hand to his face, clinging to the signs that she was alive, inhaling her scent and feeling her pulse thrumming in her wrist.

“Lizzie… You’re strong. Stubborn. You will beat this. That iron will of yours brought you here and it will get you out. Perhaps even in time for Christmas.” He broke into a soft laugh. “Your mother used to tell you Christmas stories from her homeland. I couldn’t begin to do justice to the Russian language” he said, shaking his head, “but I do remember one story – Babushka, the grandmother who encountered the three wise men following the star on their way to attend the birth of Christ.”

He leant forward animatedly. “She invites them to her home for soup and the warmth of the hearth. And when she learns the reason for their long journey she asks to go with them. Bring her own gifts for the child. They tell her to come but they must leave quickly. Babushka insists that she will follow the star, catch them up once she has gathered toys. And so they leave, and she tidies the hearth, collects the toys and sets out on her way. But try as she might, she can’t find the star to follow. She knows it’s there… but sometimes it isn’t clear which way to go, even if you know the light is there, somewhere.”

He paused, staring at her porcelain face, his eyes dark and distant. “Of course Babushka never found
the child. She wanders the earth searching, handing the toys she carries to poor children she meets along the way. I wonder if you’d remember that story, Lizzie. Or if I’ve taken that from you too.”

He raised his eyebrows as he detected a soft noise from the bed, a glimmer of movement. A moment later, he was staring into a pair of deep blue eyes, as clear as mountain lakes. He smiled softly, sweeping his thumb gently across her fingers.

“Hello Lizzie. You’re going to be fine.”

She blinked, her face creasing with sleep and confusion. “Her son. The security guard’s son.”

Reddington nodded. “Ah yes, young Joshua. He was safely retrieved and is now in the care of his grandmother, an excellent woman, makes the most incredible pineapple upside down cakes.”

He paused, his expression becoming serious. “Elizabeth what were you thinking” he said in a low, fierce voice that made her inner omega cower inside. “Running after someone carrying a deadly virus. Locking yourself in with them.”

Liz pursed her lips, looking away and withdrawing her hand from his, defensively. “I thought I would be ok because I’m an omega. I don’t understand…” She looked back at him, her eyes shimmering. “Am I not a true omega? Did you know my parents? Were they betas?”

Reddington stared at her, his expression pained. “Most people aren’t pure alpha or omega” he answered carefully. “We’ve been breeding with betas for centuries, and it’s a good thing too. The notion of purity is insidious. People who want to rid the world of betas may find themselves very lonely should they succeed.”

“I always thought that my mother was an omega” Liz said wistfully. “I thought that she would be so beautiful. Like a princess.”

Reddington’s jaw tightened a moment before he spoke in an almost resigned tone. “She was beautiful, Lizzie.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “What happened the night of the fire? Were they killed because of who they were? If they were betas, did they know Sam?”

Reddington shook his head emphatically. “Sam’s only involvement was as your father. He took you in that night. Cared for you as his own.”

“And you killed him for it” she whispered bitterly. “You knew he would tell me the truth. Challenge you.”

“I killed him because he was desperate for the pain to end, and because I had to protect you from the truth” Reddington said gently. He paused, his expression desolate. “Taking his life was… Of all the difficult things that I’ve done that may be the most. And having done that to protect you I certainly won’t jeopardize your safety now by telling you the identities of your biological parents.”

Liz closed her eyes in frustration, a tear squeezing out from between her lashes.

“Elizabeth” he began softly. “I know you’re aware that the events you’ve witnessed since we began our work aren’t random, but part of a much larger puzzle.”

Liz nodded, sniffing. “I knew the moment you brought us the Ford case that something bigger was going on. Something to do with your work in Russia.”
She watched as his eye twitched and he nodded fractionally. “The Marberg virus was released by a very powerful organisation. Their agenda is darker and further reaching than you can possibly imagine. This was just the beginning. You are at a crossroads, Lizzie. You can run from this. From me. Or you can fight. And just maybe, you will prevail.”

She looked at him with heavy lids, her eyes glistening. Finally she shook her head fractionally, her expression defeated.

Reddington nodded and rose from his seat. “I understand” he responded in a low voice. “I’ll leave tonight.”

He stepped away but stopped short when he felt her grip his hand with all the strength she had left in her exhausted little body.

“Stay” she whispered. “Just for tonight. Stay.”

Swallowing, he nodded silently and returned to his seat by her bed, his hand in hers where it lay on the blanket.

Finally, her eyes slipped shut as she fell asleep, and Reddington settled into the chair from which he would guard her bedside until the break of Christmas dawn.

Chapter End Notes

To all Lizzington Shippers, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! NTD xxx
Chapter 25

It was New Year’s Eve and Liz sat in her office at the black site, a mountain of folders stacked on her desk. She exhaled loudly, momentarily disturbing the lock of hair that seemed to be permanently in her eyes. That was, except on the occasions on which Reddington had carefully tucked it behind her ear. Not for the first time, she wondered how such murderous hands could be so gentle when he chose them to be. She pushed the thought away as Meera entered her office, the omega CIA agent’s face grimacing at the sight of Liz’s desk.

“Catching up on a few reports?” she asked sardonically.

Liz sighed. “Working with Reddington hasn’t exactly given me a lot of time for paperwork. And now I’m taking a transfer… it has to be done before I leave” she finished, looking away uncomfortably.

“You’re really going then” Meera said flatly.

Liz nodded silently.

“Right then, we’d better give you a good send off! Got any plans for later?”

Liz shrugged. “Take out from Wing Yee’s and watching the ball drop on TV.”

“I’m at a loose end too” Meera offered. “My lot are in London now seeing my husband’s family - I had to work this week in exchange for Christmas off. I reckon we can do better than a takeaway and shit TV, don’t you?” she said determinedly. “Let’s celebrate in style.”

“It doesn’t feel like I have much to celebrate” Liz replied hollowly. “At the start of this year I had a father and husband who loved me. Now my father is gone, my husband is a stranger, and I’ve allowed myself to be manipulated by a violent sociopath who is hiding the truth about my family from me. The truth about who I am.”

Meera regarded her sympathetically. “Look, I know we haven’t seen eye to eye about Reddington, but you can tell me – he’s more than that to you, isn’t he” she said in a low voice.

Liz looked up at her friend, her cheeks reddening. “I don’t know” she answered uncomfortably, before sighing. “It’s like I was a normal person with normal feelings and then…”

“You bonded with an alpha” Meera said quietly. “It changes you.”

Liz looked down at her hands, her fingernails scraping lightly over the scar on her wrist. “I guess it doesn’t matter now.”

“Yeah” Meera agreed, resigned. “Look, you’ve saved lives. Done things not many omegas ever do. I say we see the year out in style; the reports will still be there in the morning, let’s let our hair down a bit, head to a club. Go twerking to damn Beyoncé if that’s what it takes to shake off this year.”

“You can’t be serious” Liz laughed.

“Oh I’m perfectly serious” Meera said sternly with a hint of a smile. “Go and buy a brand new outfit, something fun. And don’t forget lingerie” she said with a glint in her eye. “There’s nothing like good underwear to make you forget about a psycho ex husband – especially if you pull” she finished mischievously.
Liz shook her head, smiling. “I’ll think about it. I-”

“Keen!”

Both omega women looked round as Cooper entered Liz’s office, a cell phone in his hand.

“Reddington is asking for you” he said, holding out the cell.

Liz opened her mouth to protest but Cooper cut her off, his voice low and authoritative.

“Today at least you are still officially his handler. Apparently he’s been calling you for days – I’m not your intermediary” he finished sternly, handing her the phone and sweeping out of the room.

Meera followed him out, closing the door behind her with a sympathetic expression as Liz put the phone to her ear, her lips pursed.

“Well?”

“Calisthenics, Spaghetti alla puttanesca, a peace negotiation between two small Columbian cartels and a Swedish foot massage” Reddington rattled off immediately.

Liz frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“Do you know what those things have in common, Lizzie? They can all be achieved in ten minutes, the same amount of time I have spent leaving messages with your answering service this week. You should really change your greeting - to be perfectly frank, it’s a little terse.”

Liz raised her eyebrows. “You can conduct a peace negotiation between Columbian cartels in ten minutes?”

“I didn’t say it would be a successful negotiation” Reddington responded glibly.

Liz closed her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose exasperatedly. “Aren’t you supposed to be gone?”

“If you’d picked up the phone you would know that I have information you need to hear” he said curtly. “Circumstances have changed.”

“Not for me” Liz said with nonchalance she didn’t feel. “Whatever it is you have to say you can say it to someone else. I’ve put in for a transfer.”

“Even if it concerns your husband” he shot back.

“Tom?” Liz frowned. “What’s this got to do with him? Do you know where he is?” she asked, lowering her voice.

“Three days ago my team raided a safe house in Pittsburgh that I believe was used by the operative known as Tom Keen. In it they found a dossier – a comprehensive set of tactical information with detailed notes about you and your team.”

Liz swallowed, silently shaking her head. “That sounds serious. You should give it to the team so they can investigate.”

There was a pause on the end of the line, and Liz chewed her lip, ignoring the feeling curling inside her that made her wish he was in the room and not on the end of a phone so that she could scent him.
When he finally spoke his tone was quite different, soft, as though he had sensed her hesitance and was now speaking to her inner omega.

“What are your plans for tonight, Lizzie… The new year.”

Immediately she thought of the evening she had planned and it suddenly seemed small and sad, alone with Chinese take-out she would once have shared with her husband. Inexplicably, she didn’t want him to think of her like that.

“A girls’ night out” she blurted before she could think too hard about it.

“Excellent” he responded neutrally. “Well in that case have fun. And be careful.”

She frowned, but before she could question him further he had hung up. She was still staring at her phone with an odd feeling in the pit of her stomach when Meera stuck her head round the door.

“Are we on then?” the omega CIA agent enquired with faux innocence.

Liz broke into a smile, laughing at her friend. “We’re on.”

Liz’s heart fluttered as she stepped into the club, the deep, pulsing sounds and sparkling lights dizzying her heightened senses. She walked down a mirrored staircase and smiled to herself at the sight of her reflection; even she, who was usually so intent on downplaying her appearance, had to admit that she looked incredible. The more she had thought about Meera’s offer of a night out, the more she had become enticed by the prospect of leaving Elizabeth Keen and all of her baggage behind for a while.

Tonight she was just Liz, a beautiful omega wearing an exquisitely embroidered sequin top and dangerously short skirt. Her smile wasn’t just for that though; on Meera’s advice she had purchased an eye-wateringly expensive sheer bustier which, despite being barely there, made her breasts and ass look lusciously full and round. It felt daring, a kind of thrill she hadn’t experienced in a very long time.

As she made her way onto the dance floor she was aware of admiring glances from men, her nose picking up the distinctive scent of alpha arousal from various directions. Seeing Meera at the bar she slid in gratefully next to her omega companion, who greeted her with a wry smile.

“You scrub up ok, don’t you?”

Liz smiled coyly. “Just taking your advice. I’m glad you’re here though – I’d forgotten what it’s like being out in a crowd like this, the noise, the scents... It smells like-”

“Sex” Meera deadpanned, taking a sip of her martini. “Here” she said, handing Liz a glass garnished with a sprig of candied mint. “Omegas get one on the house.”

Liz rolled her eyes but accepted the drink, the crisp liquor exciting her taste buds as the low beat of the bass vibrated through her body.

Before long they were dancing, and Liz watched, amused as Meera smiled and gestured to the wedding band on her finger again and again as men approached her. It felt odd to Liz that she couldn’t do the same; she no longer had a ring to ward off predatory alphas, or betas who thought they’d try their luck. She was free, though in that moment freedom felt a more than a little like
loneliness. She banished the tinges of jealousy she felt towards her friend and her idyllic family, and returned to the bar for another drink, tutting as she was bumped by rowdy club-goers.

An hour or so later, her senses pleasantly softened by alcohol, she twisted gracefully on the dance floor, enjoying the thud of the music inside her as a delicate sheen of sweat formed on her body. She knew that it would excite the alphas in the room but she didn’t care; she would be fine as long as Meera was there. She felt better than fine, in fact – euphoric, even. She looked around her to catch a reassuring glimpse of her friend but couldn’t see her in the crowd. Her eyes settled on an ornate silver clock behind the bar which told her that it was nearly midnight.

Pausing, she frowned at the room, her eyes scanning the mass of glitter and bodies writhing on the dance floor for any sign of Meera, but to no avail. She began to move through the throngs of people, a little unsteady on her heels, the scents, colors and thumping bass becoming increasingly overwhelming as she was jostled by sweaty bodies.

“Ten!” yelled the crowd as midnight approached. “Nine! Eight!”

Liz looked around her desperately trying to find where Meera had got to, annoyed that she couldn’t scent her friend in the midst of all the strange smells. Suddenly her stomach dropped as a familiar face appeared, illuminated for a second by a strobe light – Tom. She let out a cry of shock but he had vanished so quickly she couldn’t be sure it was him, and the crowd around her was continuing to shout the countdown.

“Four! Three!”

Spooked, she spun round and her heart seized; this time it was Reddington approaching her through the crowd, bodies parting seamlessly for him as he moved swiftly through the club like a lion stalking its prey. Her chest tightened as she met his eye, his expression blank and determined.

“Two! ONE!”

The room seemed to explode at the stroke of midnight, with glitter and streamers falling from the ceiling, obscuring Reddington in the throng. All around her people were cheering and kissing, the pheromones, noises and strobe lights making her feel nauseous and panicked. Stumbling a little, she turned and pushed her way through the crowds, fighting blindly through the celebrations until she reached a door off the main room.

It opened onto a dimly lit corridor and Liz leant gratefully against the cool wall and closed her eyes, her ears ringing as the pulse of the music was dampened by the closed door. A moment later her eyes shot open as she heard a scuffling sound in the gloom followed by a faint metallic scent that hadn’t been there before.

Swallowing her nausea, she crept down the corridor, wishing fervently that she hadn’t decided to be off duty, leaving her badge and gun at home. As she neared the stairwell by the restrooms the scent became more distinct; it was the unmistakable odor of blood. She jumped as the door to the ladies’ bathroom opened, and a man stepped out, his face obscured by a hoodie.

“Hey” she said, puzzled, but as soon as she spoke the man set off at a brisk pace in the opposite direction.

“Hey wait!” she tried again thickly, and began to follow down the corridor on unsteady feet.

Then, out of nowhere, she felt a strong arm coming around her body and she yelped in fright before closing her eyes. The scent of power and safety that engulfed her was unmistakable; it was
Reddington.

She pushed weakly on his arm in an attempt to turn around, but he seemed to have no intention of allowing her to move yet. She blinked fuzzily and tried to focus on the carpet beneath her feet.

A moment later they were surrounded by men she recognised from his team, lining the corridor like a tactical assault squad.

“Clear” said a silver haired man in black combat gear, and she felt Reddington nod behind her.

“Secure the area and keep me informed” he responded brusquely.

She tried again to slip out of his hold, but he began to steer her quickly back down the corridor towards the back exit, his body like a brick wall behind her, propelling her along with his arm around her.

“Stop!” she protested, wishing that she could just concentrate for a second. “Where’s Meera?”

Reddington didn’t answer, but continued to walk her at a swift pace out of the back door into the night, blocking her attempts to turn around. Dembe was waiting by the black sedan, his weapon drawn at his side, and he opened the back door as soon as he saw them approaching.

As they reached the car Reddington moved his large hand to her shoulder to usher her into the car.

“Wait!” she mumbled as loudly as she could, bracing herself against the car. “Just wait a minute. I’m dizzy.”

“I’m sorry Elizabeth” he said quietly, his mouth set in a tense line. “But we need to go. Now.”

She looked up at him and tried her hardest to focus. He was angry, yes, but there was something else there too, something that smelled almost like fear, though on him it was hard to decipher. It was enough to make her pause, and he took advantage of the moment, pushing on her shoulder and manoeuvring her into the backseat before following her inside.

They sped out of the parking lot the moment the car door slammed, and she glared at him, angry and confused.

“Where are we going?” she demanded.

He turned to look at her, and for a moment she became very aware of how short her skirt was when she was sitting down. She shifted a little in her seat under his indecipherable gaze, and noted the sharp tension in his jaw.

“I need you to trust me” he answered heavily, looking at her intently.

“Well I don’t” she retorted shakily. “How can I? After everything that’s happened.”

He continued to stare at her, his forehead slightly creased, and feeling self-conscious, she looked away. The moment she did she felt his hand cup her chin and gently turn her to face him again, the same appraising frown knitting his brow as he scanned her face.

“How much have you had to drink?” he asked matter-of-factly.

The question sent an indignant jolt lancing through her. How dare he treat her like she had somehow been irresponsible. Like a child. But under his calm exterior he was agitated, concerned even, and the pieces began to fall into place.
“You think I’ve been drugged?” she murmured, frowning.

“I’m sure of it” he answered in a clipped tone, releasing her chin.

She felt a strange bubble of laughter spill up from out of nowhere, but under that there was a hint of doubt that gnawed at her insides.

“I’m fine except for being kidnapped” she retorted belligerently.

He let out a short, humorless laugh and looked away from her. “Kidnapping. Is that what this is.”

“What would you call it?” she challenged.

“Rescue” he answered immediately in a hard tone. “Elizabeth, you and your team became targets tonight.” He paused and ran his tongue inside his lower lip in an agitated fashion. “Do you have any idea of the danger you were in?”

“How did you know?” she questioned him. “How did you know where we were?”

He looked at his watch without answering her, and then ahead at the dark road.

She huffed a sigh and stared out of the window, though it was too dark to tell where he was taking her. He’d had her followed tonight, she was almost sure of it. She thought back to all the men she’d seen in the club, and wondered bitterly which of them he had carefully selected to spy on her. Maybe she’d even danced with them.

She huffed loudly again, and although she didn’t look at him she knew he would be more than aware of her feelings; the atmosphere in the car was becoming heady with their collective scents, her displeasure and the bitterness of alcohol embarrassingly pungent in the confined space.

Exhausted and faint she closed her eyes, and as she did so Meera’s face swam before her eyes. How annoyed her friend would be that she’d left her alone in the club. It was her last thought before she slipped into a fitful sleep, as Reddington spirited her away to an unknown destination.
Before long they pulled into the driveway of a large house, and Liz woke with a start as the car came to a halt. She blinked blearily, dizziness and tension flooding back into her body as she recalled the evening’s events. She glanced warily at Reddington, who returned her gaze unwaveringly.

“Can you walk?” he asked in a low voice.

She grabbed the door handle in response, shoving it open and exiting the vehicle unaided, ignoring his attempt to reach across the back seat to steady her. He followed a moment later, pursing his lips disapprovingly as he watched her wobble to the front door on long, delicate legs.

Once they were inside, she removed her heels and padded over to a chaise in the drawing room of the grand home, an unpleasant floating feeling crowding her senses. Swallowing her nausea, she looked up at him sceptically.

“What is this place? Did you put a want ad out for a criminal mastermind’s lair?” she mumbled scathingly.

He received her weak barb without apparent injury, and turned as Dembe entered the room carrying a glass of cloudy liquid.

“Ahh, thank you Dembe” he said softly, taking the glass and offering it to Liz. “Drink this. It’ll make you feel better.”

At his command she accepted it, automatically raising the tumbler to her lips, but then stopped and lowered her hand.

“What happens if I drink this?” she murmured slowly. “I told you I was taking a transfer. That I was leaving.”

She looked at him then with wide eyes, her pupils impossibly large. “What happens if I drink this?” she asked, her lip trembling almost imperceptibly. “Is it going to make me feel better? Or is it the same thing you had your people give me this evening” she continued, her voice cracking. “God, you even told me once if you were going to take me this is how you’d do it.”

Reddington bristled as she spoke, and although he stepped back, she could smell his agitation.

“I assure you it’s perfectly safe, but if you’d prefer to suffer the dizziness, nausea, the no doubt terrible headache that will occur when the drug wears off, be my guest” he said in a clipped tone.

“I need to go back” Liz slurred quietly. “I need to find Meera.”

“You’re not going anywhere in this condition” he snapped in a low, authoritative growl.

She flinched as she caught a flash of his temper, a pungent, leathery smell tinged heavily with what
seemed like regret. Her eyes lowered, she raised the glass to her lips with a trembling hand and drank the contents, wincing at the salty taste.

He gave a shallow nod of approval and walked over to Dembe who was standing beside the door, a phone in his hand.

“Raymond. They have found nothing more at the scene” he said quietly enough to ensure that Liz could only make out a murmur.

Reddington sucked in a breath, and shook his head fractionally. “Tell them to keep looking” he responded in an equally low voice. “Send Kate if you have to.”

Dembe nodded silently and left the room.

When they were alone, Reddington sighed wearily and slipped his suit jacket off, before loosening his tie.

Liz looked up at him from the chaise, her eyes shimmering. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve done something awful. I don’t know what it is. But it’s like I’m a terrible person” she whispered brokenly.

He turned to look at her and for a moment he was silent and still. Then he walked slowly over and looked down at her, his expression unfathomable.

“Has the dizziness passed?” He spoke softly, though his tone was a little strained.

She nodded distantly and he held out his hand to her. “You need rest” he stated, his voice deep and resonant.

She accepted his hand wordlessly and allowed him to guide her up the marble stairs of the enormous house and into a large bedroom. The furnishings were so ostentatious that on a different night, Liz might have laughed. A large, ornate mirror hung over a stone fireplace, and opposite stood a monstrous bed of heavy, elaborately carved oak.

She inhaled slightly and found herself disappointed to discover that there was no scent of him in the room to suggest that he slept in there. This time, he had not taken her to his bedroom and it made her feel inexplicably alone.

She fumbled absently with the zipper on the back of her skirt, tugging fruitlessly, until she felt his hands come to rest on her hips behind her.

“Let’s get you out of these” he said quietly. “I imagine defending yourself would have been rather difficult while wearing a skirt tighter than a ligature” he finished drily.

Liz stood there numbly, her arms limp at her sides as he unzipped the back of her skirt and slid it perfunctorily over her hips and to the floor.

“I didn’t think I’d need to defend myself” she bit back.

He didn’t respond, and she felt him pull her halter top unceremoniously up over her head, the only sound the soft swish of material as it hit the floor.

Her nose caught a sudden flash of anger, the rich, leathery smell from before returning, and she turned to look at him fearfully. The lingerie – she’d forgotten. She wrapped her hands around herself self-consciously but it was too late; the provocative one-piece left little to the imagination. The fine black mesh and ribbon stretched between her round ass cheeks and curved up to cup her breasts, her
peaked nipples clearly visible through the transparent material. She’d felt like a million dollars in the shop, but now she felt like a silly teenager playing dress up.

The expression in his eyes when she turned to him was dark and unfathomable, but the omega inside her knew enough to tremble.

“You should have come to me” he said in a low voice “if you needed a man’s attention.”

He’d made no move to touch her or cover her, and Liz’s mind swam with shame, anger and confusion compounded by the dosed alcohol.

“You were going to give yourself to a stranger. A man who isn’t worthy of looking at you. Who sure as hell isn’t worthy of being your lover” he continued, his voice a low growl that resonated deep inside her.

“You have no right” she whispered, swallowing the lump in her throat. “I’m not yours. I don’t belong to you!”

Her cheeks burned with humiliation as he stared at her, and in that moment she had never hated her omega body more, not even when she’d gone into heat. She could feel her body responding under his gaze, the omega inside her enjoying being on display for him - enjoying that he cared. She gasped inwardly as she realised she’d wet the tight, delicate crotch of the one-piece with aching slick. For a second she was overcome with the blissful memory of his talented tongue pushing determinedly between her legs, before she remembered. It could never happen, not now.

His eyes flashed, his nose and mouth betraying a twitch which told her he could scent her need clearly. His lips parted slightly and she stepped back, panicked.

“No” she choked. “Don’t! God I hate this – I hate feeling this way, why do I feel this way!” she gasped.

He closed the gap between them and she let out a sob of fear.

“Shhh” he said gently. “Shhh sweetheart, it’s alright.”

She whimpered as she felt his large hand gently grip the back of her neck, the weight of his palm muddling her senses and undermining her instinct to push him away from her.

As it was, she stood still and rigid, trembling as she looked up at him, though his expression was unexpectedly gentle. When he spoke his voice was so soft, the timbre so magnetic it was almost like he was speaking directly to her omega DNA.

“Lizzie, try to focus. Just listen to my voice. There’s something you need to understand. It’s in your nature to conflate a need for comfort - the need for a guardian – with desire. In time you’ll accept that. Learn to control it.”

He seemed to consider for a moment, before gently propelling her towards the bed with his hand at her neck.

“What are you doing?” she whispered urgently, panic coursing through her. “Please don’t, I don’t want-”

“Hush now” he told her sternly. “I’m not going to touch you sexually. You’ve made your feelings perfectly clear on that score. Now put your hands on the end of the bed.”
Confused, she remained motionless, the sick feeling in her stomach worsening. What was he doing?

“Lizzie” he growled, and, taking a deep breath, she leant forward and gripped the deep mahogany bed frame, the omega inside her willing her to submit.

“Good girl. Now move your legs a little further apart. That’s it. Now I need you to try and relax.”

She felt his fingers flex slightly on the back of her neck and closed her eyes, willing her legs to stop shaking.

His touch when it came was not what she expected. He landed a hard slap on her right buttock, her flesh stinging with the force of it. She cried out in surprise, but before she had caught her breath he had spanked her twice more in quick succession, once on her left buttock and once across the back of her thighs.

The last blow had been by far the most painful, and she stayed paralysed in shock, her heart fluttering in her chest, while her mind tried to make sense of what was happening.

This sort of behavior between an alpha and omega wasn’t even really a kink, her brain supplied. It’s almost as normal for alphas to discipline their omegas as it is for parents to discipline their children. But this was him. She’d never thought of it, never imagined...

The spell broken, she jerked round, her face burning with humiliation. “What the hell…” she choked out.

“How do you want me to stop?” he asked quietly, his gaze alarmingly calm.

She took a stuttering breath, her teeth sinking into her lower lip. “What kind of question is that?”

Reddington cocked his head to the side, though his expression was sincere rather than playful. “Is that a yes?”

“I…” Liz paused, a strange well of emotion bubbling inside her, robbing her of words. She stared at him in silence, her breathing shallow, and he simply returned her gaze. In the warm half-light, his eyes seemed almost kind.

“Why?” she asked finally.

He paused for a moment before answering her, his voice quiet and resonant. “Because you needed it. You desperately need to feel cared for. To know that, having lost the people who bore witness to your life, your…behavior…hasn’t gone unnoticed.”

His mouth twitched sympathetically and she stood, transfixed as he continued, his measured words both as painful and as strangely comforting as the strike of his hand had been.

“You’re looking for answers to questions you haven’t even thought of yet. You’re in pain. And you need to externalise that pain, because turning it inwards…” He paused, working his jaw. “That kind of pain corrupts, Lizzie. It can keep you from ever feeling the light. So I’ll ask you again” he finished softly. “Do you want me to stop?”

Liz stared at him with wide eyes, her breath shallow. Swallowing, she turned wordlessly away from him, and gripped the bed frame again with trembling hands, her knuckles white.

She sank her teeth hard into her lip as he silently took hold of the back of her neck again, the wool of his pants brushing against her bare bottom as he took his position behind her.
It seemed like an eternity before it came, a hard smack of his hand over her buttocks that seemed to push the air out of her lungs. He waited just a moment for her to take a shaky breath before bringing the palm of his hand down again, this time delivering a low, sharp slap that sent a pleasurable stinging sensation under her bottom and right through her swollen vaginal lips.

She cried out a little, unable to stop herself, and closed her eyes in humiliation. This wasn’t supposed to be about sex. It was about taking her life in hand – it was about everything; losing her father and her husband, the horror she faced at work, and the pain in her heart that sometimes pressed on her so hard from the inside out it was unbearable.

“Are you alright?” he asked quietly.

Blinking tears away she nodded shakily. “Yes” she whispered, and relished the reassuring brush of his thumb on the back of her neck before the next blow came.

She kept her eyes closed after that, embracing the strange floating feeling that came with the strike of his large palm on her flesh, a growing feeling of warmth inside that she hadn’t really felt since she was a girl.

All too soon he stopped, and she came back to earth with a soft whimper as he felt him remove his hand from her neck. The effect was as though she were a puppet and he had let go of her strings. She felt her shoulders drop and her knees wobble before his arm came about her waist, steadying her.

“Easy” he warned softly. “You’re ok.”

She turned to look at him, feeling bereft. “Don’t stop” she said plaintively. “I can take it – please.”

“It’s enough, Lizzie” he responded gently.

She shook her head urgently. “I’m fine, I…” She paused and looked up at him with wide eyes. “I deserve it. I deserve to be punished. To be hurt” she whispered, lowering her gaze. “Deep down I’ve always known it. That I’ve done something awful. But it’s like I can’t remember what it is.” She paused, taking a shaky breath. “Maybe that’s why I married Tom – part of me knew what he was.”

She closed her eyes as Reddington’s arms engulfed her trembling little omega body, his scent powerful and complex like soft wooden tobacco boxes and warm pillows after a deep sleep. When he spoke his deep voice rumbled through her body, from where he cradled her cheek against his chest, right down to her toes.

“I’m sorry for your suffering. You don’t deserve any of it. This wasn’t punishment, Lizzie. Discipline is intended to help, not harm - you’re going to be just fine, sweetheart. I promise it.”

He spoke the last words like an oath, and she nodded solemnly into his chest, her cheek brushing against the fold where his shirt met his vest. It occurred to her then that he hadn’t really hurt her. On the contrary, he had carefully ensured that he didn’t strike exactly the same part of her twice. She wouldn’t bruise; the only remaining sensation from his discipline was a warm, tingling sensation throughout her bottom and thighs that made her feel content and sleepy.

She shifted against him and he grunted quietly, his scent becoming deeper and weaving with her own like silk in the air. She was suddenly reminded that she wore nothing other than the black, transparent one-piece and her cheeks flamed as she looked up at him nervously.

“You’re aroused” she stated hesitantly.

“Yes” he said simply.
Seeing her stricken expression, he broke into a soft laugh. “I’m only human, Lizzie.”

She stared up at him, her wide eyes searching his face. “I don’t know what you are.”

He returned her gaze silently for a moment, his smile fading.

“You should get some sleep” he said quietly, drawing back from her. “You’ll have to wear one of my shirts – I’m afraid the individual to whom this house belongs isn’t used to accommodating the requirements of young women” he finished with a stiff chuckle.

She nodded silently but he had already turned and exited the room.

The call he’d been expecting finally came at first light. Reddington listened to the news respectfully before replacing the phone in his pocket and shaking his head. After a moment he walked down the corridor to the room where she slept, turning the door handle and opening it silently. She lay on her front in his shirt, the top of her thigh just visible between the hem of the soft cotton and the bed sheets. His mouth watered in spite of himself as he observed the pink glow on her creamy flesh where he had marked her.

She had no idea how alluring she was. That her body and her scent were like catnip to him and no doubt to all the other alphas in the noisy, sweaty club in which he’d found her. He supressed a snarl as he thought of her in that ridiculous lingerie, the way the soft, transparent material clung obscenely to her modest curves. He smiled wryly at the thought; she wasn’t mature enough yet to wear such a garment, not if she didn’t understand exactly what it would do to a man who saw her in it. For all her hard edges there was an innocence about her that was truly remarkable.

In that moment he felt he couldn’t bear to wake her from the pitiful sleep that she’d had, to tell her the news that would crush her. He made to leave but stopped as he heard the bed sheets rustle.

“What’s happening?” she murmured, her voice heavy with sleep.

Steeling himself, he walked slowly to the bed and sat down on the edge, his face solemn and eyes gentle. She looked up at him confused, and he took her hand.

“Lizzie, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He paused and she began to shake her head. “No” she whispered, her forehead creasing as the painful truth that he was about to impart dawned on her. “Meera…”

“I’m so sorry” he said gently, and stroked her hair as she leant into his shoulder, her body shaking with tears.

“It’s my fault” she whispered with a shuddering sob. “All of it is my fault.”

“Shhh. No, sweetheart. The only people to blame are the people that did this.”

“I want to find them” she said suddenly, drawing back from him with eyes like blue flame. “I want to make them pay. And I can’t do that without you.”

He swallowed and nodded before grabbing her trembling hand and pressing her fingers to his lips.

“We will find them, Lizzie. Together, we will find them.”
Chapter 27

Reddington smiled broadly, the scorching Congolese sun glittering lustrously on his sunglasses. He sat on an ornate wooden stool in a clearing surrounded a lush valley of trees, taking in the view of the rolling green landscape. The breath-taking scene was marred by a patch of scorched trees in the distance, the rank odor of burning vegetation tickling his nose even from several miles away. Regardless, the vista would have been extraordinarily tranquil were it not for the group of alpha women who surrounded him, their displeasure at his presence quite evident.

“You must leave. There are no men here”, one of the women informed him angrily.

“Yes, yes, I’m aware your clan don’t look favorably on my kind, except when it’s mating season of course” Reddington chuckled. “That must be quite an experience” he continued, shaking his head with a wistful sigh. “Forgive the intrusion ladies, but I really must have a word with your fearless leader. Perhaps you’ll be so good as to tell her I’m here.”

At that moment silence fell abruptly, and the group stepped back as a tall, muscular woman with elegant features approached them, her rich blue and gold wax cloth skirt stirring the red dust of the ground into dramatic clouds around her.

“Raymond Reddington” she said slowly. “I could scent you a mile away.”

Reddington rose from his seat and bowed respectfully. “Your majesty. I very much doubt that, given the overpowering stench of scorched earth.”

The alpha queen shrugged guardedly. “Forest fires. A fate much better than will befall you for your trespass here. You know the penalty for disturbing our peace, he wolf” she sneered disdainfully.

“Which is why I wouldn’t dream of rocking the proverbial boat unless I considered it to be to our mutual advantage” he responded smoothly, leaning over cheekily to retrieve a slice of succulent pineapple from a tray carried by one of the women.

“Mmmmmm” he groaned exaggeratedly, licking the juice from his fingers. “Delicious.”

The clan queen’s expression darkened suspiciously. “We are not allies.”

He turned to stare at her with a steady gaze. “No, but I believe we have the same enemy. In my business that’s tantamount to the same thing. Yesa my dear, you’re not the slightest bit curious?”

She drew herself up to an impressive height; she was taller than him, and her arms, though lean, were rippled with powerful muscles.

“I am more curious to learn if you are as confident in bed as you are in business” she responded slowly with a sinister smile, and the women surrounding Reddington laughed softly.

The scent of offense in the air gave way to sudden tension, as though the women had tasted blood and were waiting intently to see whether their queen would go in for the kill. Reddington chuckled, seemingly oblivious, and drew his tongue over his lower lip salaciously.

“It’s true my bed accommodates a very broad spectrum of behavior, but I do find it’s much more fun when both partners are alive at the end of the event, which is more than can be said for several of your previous conquests as I understand it.”
The woman looked at him, unamused. “You defied me once” she snapped. “I told you what would happen if you entered our territory again. Take him!” she finished, and four women came up on either side of him, viciously grabbing his arms.

He merely smiled, allowing himself to be hauled to his feet. “I admit I’m extremely tempted, but unfortunately I have urgent business that can’t be delayed. I’ve recently acquired several hellfire missiles, and I’ve instructed my associates to drop one in the vicinity every ten minutes unless they hear from me-”

At that moment there was a dramatic explosion less than a quarter mile away, close enough to shake the red earth under their feet. The women holding Reddington stepped away in alarm and he looked at his watch quizzically.

“Would you look at that – they’re a little early” he shrugged, shaking his head. “Punctuality was never their strong suit.” He turned then to address the chastened clan queen, his voice suddenly stern. “So perhaps we can skip pleasure and turn straight to business.”

“What business” she spat sulkily.

Reddington’s gaze drifted to the area of scorched land on the horizon, the scent of burning renewed by the destruction wrought by the missile a little way off.

“That patch of blackened earth isn’t from any forest fire, and you know it. What you don’t know is that these fires aren’t being set by a rival pack – that information is false, and a deliberate attempt to mislead you for the purposes of creating conflict. I believe you’ve recently been approached by a person or persons claiming that your land is being torched by a beta clan – your neighbors, the Obarim. I need a name.”

“Obarim” the queen hissed, while the group of gathered women jeered at the mention of their enemy. “Ours was a fragile peace, which they have broken. They will pay for what they have done.” She muttered something else in dialect and Reddington threw back his head and laughed.

“Aside from leaving an incredible mess behind, that would be an unfortunate move. Whatever atrocities your neighbors have committed in the past, these fires are the work of another group entirely. The person who placed the blame with the beta clan did so because they want to fan the flames of historical conflicts for their own purposes, set alpha against beta. I’ll need that name now” he finished, looking at his watch again expectantly and then up at the sky.

“He didn’t tell me his name!” the woman said hastily, her eyes nervously following his gaze above the tree line. “Just a nickname, something grand - The Diplomat? The Agent?”

“The Ambassador” Reddington said, recognition dawning on his features. “Ladies, thank you for your time, and I hope you will reconsider whatever vengeful schemes you have planned for your beta neighbors. I assure you they’re quite innocent.” He straightened his beige fedora and made to leave.

“Wait!” the alpha queen cried. “How do we know that what you say is true?”

Reddington smiled. “Well of course you can’t be sure, but I will say that I probably wouldn’t still be here persuading you to spare them if I wasn’t convinced of their lack of complicity, given that in about thirty seconds my associates will fire another missile. Have you tried getting a cell signal round here? Would you believe it seems I can’t call it off!”

A second missile dropped then with a deafening woosh, close enough this time for ash and debris to
Liz walked up to the nondescript downtown DC bar at which Reddington had instructed her to meet him. He had been absent in the days after Meera’s death, and Liz had become suspicious that after offering to help her pursue the truth, he had gone to seek it on his own. Her suspicion had turned to annoyance when he sent the message through Dembe that she should meet him at a bar at 10pm, the memory of her last evening out still painfully present.

She had thrown a work jacket on over her jeans and scraped her hair back off her face before leaving the house, determined to send the message that she did not consider their meeting to be a social call, or worse, a date. She shook her head at the idea of Reddington inviting her on a date. He was a criminal informant, a man who had ended her father’s life, a man who, not two weeks ago, had spanked her. This wasn’t a date.

When she entered the bar she found that on the inside it was far more lavish than the plain exterior suggested, the small stage and old fashioned leather booths giving the impression of a prohibition era speakeasy. A sharply dressed boy not much older than twenty swayed behind the microphone, his quiet, crooning voice filling the room unobtrusively.

She spotted Reddington sitting alone in booth set back from the stage, and slipped in opposite him. He looked at her in silence for some time as though deep in thought, before taking a sip of scotch and nodding towards the stage.

“He’s a talented kid. But to sing the blues… to sing about loss… you need to have experienced it” he commented in a low voice.

Liz drew her arms about herself defensively, surveying the dimly lit room. “What’s so urgent it couldn’t wait till tomorrow?”

He turned back to look at her with an affectionate smile, gazing at her in the same enigmatic manner that he had when she arrived. “I’ve missed you” he said finally.

Her lips parted slightly in surprise at his frank admission, and the dizzying thoughts it generated. Her inner omega was undeniably pleased by the idea of him thinking of her, and she couldn’t help but wonder whether he had chosen to call her to mind at night during his absence, her cheeks flushing at the thought of him pleasuring himself.

But as she recalled the badge in her pocket, she was struck by the desolate implications of being an inexperienced omega FBI agent belonging to a worldly alpha crime lord. Would he continue to have her followed? Use her to his own advantage, manipulating the cases he brought? Would he expect to discipline her again? And how long would it be before he demanded more than she was prepared to give, or before she gave herself to him because she could no longer resist the devastating pull inside her?

Before she could think of a response he spoke again, his tone now conversational as though he had read her thoughts and was gently guiding her back to safer ground.

“The FBI tend to focus their efforts on catching criminals at the front of the frame - drug dealers, murderers, terrorists. Have you ever wondered what goes on behind the scenes? The people that make a criminal enterprise tick are a manifold, and wonderfully diverse bunch.”
Liz stared at him sceptically but he continued his lecture un-phased, reminding her a little of an enigmatic criminology professor who had taught her for a semester at college.

“Our enemy operates like a cabal, and in order to pursue their alpha agenda on a large scale they need operatives performing vital services, brokering relationships, smoothing pathways, that sort of thing.”


Reddington nodded. “Among other services, but I’ve occasionally been pipped to the post by those with certain skills and less compunction about how they use them. The Ambassador is particularly talented at brokering both alliances and discord where required, though the methods he uses are somewhat unorthodox.”

Liz shot him a sceptical look, disappointment gnawing at her insides. “So you called me here to get rid of your competition? What about finding the people who killed Meera, finding how Tom is involved?”

“Lizzie” he said gently. “This cabal aren’t going to take time to lick their wounds after a single thwarted bioterrorist attack. They’re laying groundwork on a global scale, sowing seeds of dissent, fanning the flames of prejudice among alpha and beta groups, and they’ve hired an expert to achieve that end.”

“The Ambassador” Liz said slowly.

“Yes” Reddington nodded, swirling the glistening amber liquid at the bottom of his tumbler thoughtfully. “And by Saint Peter’s Church he shall not make her a joyful bride” he murmured.

The corner of Liz’s lips curved into a quizzical smile in spite of herself. “Shakespeare?” she queried.

“But all the cruelty society has invented to torment omegas, forcing them to marry seems to me to be one of the worst” he continued, his voice low and almost regretful. “The criminals working behind the scenes have any number of deals on the table at any one point. The Ambassador may have been tasked with causing unrest in central Africa, but this week my sources tell me he is right here in your backyard on quite a different matter.”

“Arranging a marriage?” Liz asked uncertainly.

“And destroying a girl’s life in the process” Reddington continued darkly. “For many well-to-do Washington families, alliance by marriage is the most effective way to ensure their prosperity, and those with omega daughters have the greatest bargaining chips. Sofia Hale is the latest to face this unfortunate practice and she has reached out to me – normally I wouldn’t do business with someone so…inexperienced…but this is rather a unique case.

“Sofia Hale the heiress?” Liz asked, incredulously. “She can’t be older than twenty? She reached out to you?”

Reddington’s lip twitched. “Her intended husband is a partner in one of Washington’s oldest law firms, and over thirty years her senior. If the marriage arranged for her goes ahead she’ll lose her freedom and her fortune. A young woman with her whole life ahead of her” he continued slowly, “bound to a corrupt, old man. Her life wasted.”

Liz’s cheeks reddened furiously, the parallels he was drawing settling uncomfortably in her stomach, and she looked away.
“So you want to rescue this girl” she asked flatly.

“No” he responded brusquely. “I want you to rescue her. Helping her will give you The Ambassador” he said, draining his glass with a swift gulp. “Find him, and we’ll be one step closer to achieving our goal.”

It was the first time Liz had entered the black site since Meera’s death. She’d endured a week of mandatory leave followed by an FBI psych evaluation conducted by a beta man who clearly expected that as an omega she would fall apart with grief. He’d asked her if she had an alpha boyfriend to comfort her, and when she’d answered no, even suggested that she devote some time in her schedule to the pursuit of one. She’d looked daggers at him until he hastily signed the form clearing her for work.

When she arrived on the operations floor she found Aram and Ressler deep in clandestine conversation by one of the consoles, their brows furrowed.

“It doesn’t feel right here without Meera” she said quietly.

“Nothing feels right here” Ressler said cryptically.

Liz frowned and Aram looked at her sympathetically. “I guess you haven’t heard – Cooper’s been suspended. We have a new director.”

Ressler scoffed loudly. “Interim director. The sooner they realise that none of this was his fault, the sooner we can get back to doing our jobs.”

A terrible sense of uneasiness descended on Liz, not least at the thought of having lost not only her friend, but the man she had come to think of as mentor.

“It’s no one’s fault but the people who did this” she said firmly, echoing the words that Reddington had spoken to her as she wept in his arms. “And we’re going to find them.”

“Yes we are” said a confident, unfamiliar voice behind her, and she turned round warily.

The scent of mistrust among her colleagues was palpable as a tall alpha man approached, his blond hair neatly parted and suit immaculately pressed.

“Now now folks, we’re all friends here. I’m Lukas Allan Colfax, your interim director. And you must be Elizabeth Keen” he said extending his hand to her.

She accepted it hesitantly and winced as he grasped her fingers tightly with both of his hands before releasing her.

“Well you look at you” he continued with an appreciative, thin-lipped smile, his accent momentarily betraying a slight Virginia twang. “I must say it’s an honor to meet the girl Raymond Reddington turned himself in for. May I call you Lizzie?”

Liz stiffened before forcing a smile. “Actually it’s just Liz.”

He laughed genially, shaking his head in amusement. “Well, I think maybe I need to employ more omega agents, maybe then all the guys on the most wanted list will start giving themselves up.”

The joke fell utterly flat, but he seemed unconcerned as Aram, Ressler and Liz stared at him
“I understand Reddington has a new name for us, a blacklister as you call it. Agent Mojtabai, why don’t you talk us through it?”

Aram’s eyes widened nervously. “Me? Ah, I only know the basics, it’s Agent Keen’s case, she-”

“Indulge me, Aram” Colfax said, his pleasant tone having taken on a harder edge.

Liz folded her arms and shrugged, and Aram began to speak hesitantly.

“So according to the information Mr Reddington gave to Agent Keen, the Ambassador is a sort of relationship guru. He arranges useful alliances and breaks down relationships between allies if necessary.”

Aram’s fingers swept across his keyboard, bringing up Congolese news reports from international agencies.

“I’m sure you all know about the conflict in the DRC between the Azana people, a matrilineal group led by alpha women, and the Obarim, a beta clan who have a claim on neighboring land.”

“I thought things were stable in that region now” Ressler cut in.

“Well here’s the thing” Aram said animatedly, before shooting an apologetic look at Liz. “They declared peace in 2012 and since then things have been quieter - they even recorded 8.6% economic growth last year. But it seems someone is going out of their way to break down the truce. A few months ago reports emerged of Azana land being torched, and according to Mr Reddington, the Ambassador is trying to break down relations between alpha and beta clans.”

“Well that’s a real shame” Colfax said unconvincingly. “But you’re talking about the Congo. We have no jurisdiction and I for one am not about to send a team out on a wild goose chase.”

“It’s a good thing he’s on American soil then” Liz commented drily. “Reddington says that the department store heiress Sofia Hale is being forced into a marriage arranged by The Ambassador. He’s right here in DC.”

“Sofia Hale” Ressler said, frowning. “She’s got to be one of the wealthiest people under twenty-five in the whole of the United States. How does she end up being forced to marry?”

“According to Reddington she doesn’t inherit her grandparents’ fortune until her twenty-first birthday. Until then, her father has complete control and he wants to marry her off before she comes into her inheritance” Liz explained.

Ressler raised his eyebrows, disturbed. “So the money goes straight to her husband. She’s being sold” he concluded grimly.

“Oh folks” Colfax cut in. “Let’s not jump to any conclusions. By all means talk to the girl, see what she has to say. But keep a light touch, people – the last thing we want is to upset the Hale family without just cause.”

The agents nodded though the atmosphere was subdued, and Liz went to her office alone to sort through some paperwork and pick up her badge. Just as she reached for the first file there was a knock at the door and Colfax stepped inside without waiting for her to answer.

“Director” she said warily.
“Ms Keen, just a few administrative things to address if you don’t mind.”

“Sure” Liz said more calmly than she felt. Although he seemed very friendly she found his entire demeanour unpleasant, and his alien scent difficult to decipher.

“Tell me, when did Reddington contact you?” he asked in a neutral tone.

Liz frowned. “You mean this week?”

“I mean before he turned himself in. My predecessor may have swallowed the ‘bond at first touch’ story but, if you’ll forgive me, I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“It’s true” Liz said evenly, though her heart was racing with indignation. “And it was investigated at the time. You can believe what you like.”

She expected him to probe her further on the topic but he simply nodded and looked appraisingly around her untidy office, before his watery blue eyes came to rest on her again.

“You’re on suppressants now, after what happened?”

Liz felt like she’d been punched in the gut; although she understood the FBI’s interest in ensuring omega agents were properly protected, his highly personal question made her feel anything but safe.

“I am, not that it’s any of your business”, she said slowly in a hard tone.

“I’ll need to see some evidence of that” he responded casually, as though it weren’t a difficult topic in the slightest. “Don’t trouble yourself now, just swing by medical when you get a moment, pee in a cup and you’re all set.”

Liz’s mouth opened in utter astonishment.

He paused and looked at her, his expression unreadable. “I’m a stickler for the rules Ms Keen. I’m sure you can appreciate that.”

With that he offered her a cheery smile and exited her office, leaving her alone feeling every bit as violated as she had when her colleagues had witnessed her beginning her very first heat.
Liz and Ressler sat on a bench opposite a large, omega-only gym in bustling Georgetown, hoping to catch Sofia Hale as she exited.

Ressler took a sip of his take-out coffee, staring out across the crowds. “So what do you think of the new Assistant Director? Colfax?”

“I think he’s not Cooper” Liz responded neutrally.

Ressler huffed his agreement. “He’s giving you a hard time” he noted dispassionately.

“You could say that” Liz said slowly. “He’s got me on mandatory drug testing. To check whether I’m taking suppressants.”

“If I were him I might do the same thing” Ressler said coolly.

Ressler smiled in spite of himself, and then nodded towards the gym. “Heads up.”

Sofia Hale had left the gym, flanked by a tall alpha woman in sunglasses. The agents approached them calmly, but Liz didn’t miss a flash of nervousness in the air as the girl observed them. She was small, even for an omega, with long dark hair that was ethereal, if a little unfashionable. Her eyes were blue, though lighter than Liz’s and would have been icy were it not for her soft, childlike features.

“Sofia?” Liz asked gently. “I’m Agent Keen and this is Agent Ressler, we’re with the FBI. “You’re not in any trouble, we just want to ask you a couple of questions.”

The alpha woman at her side stepped forward with her arms crossed. “I’m sure Miss Hale’s father would prefer it if the family attorney were present if you need to ask any questions.”

“Would that attorney be Edwin Proctor?” Ressler asked, unfazed.

The girl’s eyes flickered uncertainly and Liz stepped in. “We’d actually like to ask you about him. It won’t take long.”

“It’s alright, Marie” Sofia said softly. “Give us a few minutes please.”

The alpha woman scowled and stepped back, while Sofia gestured to a picnic table near a coffee cart where they could sit down.

“What’s the deal?” Ressler asked when they were out of earshot of the alpha woman. “Is she your bodyguard?”

Sofia smiled shyly. “More like a chaperone. I don’t see many people, but she’s there when I do. Did you know that queen Victoria had someone to look after her, even just to make sure she was ok going up and down stairs?” she informed them grandly. “Daddy says she’s there to keep me safe. But I think he’s worried, you know, that it, - a bond - will happen with the wrong person” she continued, leaning in conspiratorially with a coy glance at Ressler.

“And who’s the right person?” Liz asked gently. “Is it Edwin Proctor? Have you even met him?”
“Teddy?” she responded breezily, looking at her hands. “Of course. He’s been daddy’s attorney for years. They’re old friends.”

“Ok” Liz prompted. “So if he asked your dad for something, he’d give it to him?”

Sofia raised her eyebrow wryly. “You mean like his first born daughter?”

Liz shifted in her seat, taken aback by this insight from someone whose apparent childish innocence had otherwise bordered on naiveté.

“Have you ever been alone with him?” Ressler cut in bluntly.

“Not really. Not for long” Sofia answered him uncomfortably, her gaze darting nervously to alpha’s sour face. “Teddy holds an annual retreat at his place in the Hamptons for his long standing clients. Usually daddy goes but… I went this year. He said it was time I represented the family.”

“What about Marie? Your chaperone. Did she go with you?” Ressler asked gruffly.

Sofia shook her head hesitantly. “No. Daddy said it wasn’t necessary because Teddy has his own security team. And that I shouldn’t be afraid of Teddy” she added uncertainly.

“Why would you be afraid of him?” Liz pressed. “Has he ever done anything to hurt you?”

The girl blushed furiously at that, and looked over her shoulder warily to catch sight of the large alpha woman, Marie, standing several yards away.

“He wanted… he kind of tried to…” she began helplessly. “I pretended I was sick from the champagne” she finished tightly, before rising from her seat. “I’m afraid I really have to go now. Sorry I can’t help you.”

“Thanks for your time, Miss Hale” Ressler said politely and walked away at a brisk pace, leaving Liz behind with the girl.

“Sofia” Liz said gently as she got up from the table. “Is someone pressuring you into marriage? Is that what’s happening? Because no one can force you to get married if you don’t want to. We can help you.”

To Liz’s surprise the girl smiled then, her expression almost dreamy. “Thanks for your concern, but I’m going to be fine. There’s a man” she whispered suddenly, her eyes shining with excitement. “He’s wonderful - even more powerful than daddy - and he’s going to help me.”

Liz arched her eyebrows but the girl had already run back to her chaperone, leaving the scent of breathless excitement, and, if Liz wasn’t mistaken, a hint of arousal in the air.

Reddington had instructed Liz to meet him in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art. She could see him across the deserted polished floor, sitting on a luxurious leather bench in an alcove, his back to her as he stared at the painting in front of him. As Liz approached she could see that the watercolor was was of a little girl on a beach playing with a red bucket and spade, watched closely by her mother.

“Impressionists, huh?” Liz said as she took a seat beside him on the bench.

He inclined his head, his eyes squinting slightly as he observed the painting. “It’s fascinating” he said
slowly. “You can’t see their faces. The girl, or her mother. It’s the light that tells the story. The way it reflects off the sea, and on to them” he observed with a distant smile.

“We met with Sofia Hale” Liz said tightly. “She’s a beautiful girl.”

“Yes” he responded neutrally.

“She has quite a crush on you” Liz informed him with a nonchalance she didn’t feel.

She expected him to laugh it off, but was disappointed when he merely raised his eyebrows, as though he were considering the implications.

Liz sucked in a breath. “Her parents sent her alone to a party at Proctor’s house in the Hamptons. Told her to trust him. They’re meant to protect her” she continued quietly. “Instead they deliberately sent her there for him to prey on her.”

She glanced sideways at Reddington on the bench beside her. She saw his lip twitch out of the corner of her eye but he said nothing, only continued to stare at the painting, his lower lip curled as he focused on the brushstrokes depicting the child playing in the sand.

“Aside from being terrible it also doesn’t make any sense” she continued slowly. “Why would they hire The Ambassador? What could he possibly do that they haven’t done already?”

“He’ll kidnap her” Reddington said in a low voice, his eyes still fixed on the painting. “When the time is right, he’ll take her and deliver her to Proctor somewhere suitable for his vile business.”

Liz frowned in confusion, a terrible feeling of foreboding settling over her. “You think Hale would have his own daughter kidnapped?”

“I do” Reddington answered, his voice strained. “Unfortunately in these situations it’s not uncommon to force a bond and then arrange a marriage once the attachment has formed and the omega is unlikely to resist. Having the girl taken will allow Proctor the opportunity he needs while offering Sofia’s father deniability.”

Liz swallowed nervously and glanced behind her, but they were still alone in the dimly lit gallery alcove.

“How can he do that?” she asked awkwardly, her voice barely above a whisper. “I mean, how can he force a bond? You can’t control when it happens” she finished, with a bitter edge.

Reddington closed his eyes momentarily and inhaled slowly, his mouth tense and lip stretched so tightly across his bottom teeth that it turned white as the blood drained. It was clearly difficult for him to answer, and for a moment Liz almost wished she hadn’t asked.

“Abject terror combined with sexual stimulus is a potent mix in an omega” he responded bleakly, his eyes searching the painting in front of them as if it could offer a way to soften the harshness of reality. “Her instinct is to seek solace wherever she can, even if it’s with the man who hurt her. Who is hurting her.”

Liz stared blankly at the wall in front of her as she processed what he had said, the pieces falling together. She exhaled slowly, her throat hurting with the lump forming there.

“It’s a defense mechanism” she said slowly. “By going into heat omegas can make their captors want to protect them, like Stockholm syndrome. He’ll use her only defense against her. It’s so unfair” she whispered, swallowing sadness and rage.
“Yeah” he breathed softly.

“Her father betrayed her” Liz said numbly. “Sometimes I wonder, if my parents had been with me growing up, would they have looked after me? Would they have been proud to have an omega daughter? Or would they be disappointed?”

“They could never, ever have been anything other than proud of you” Reddington responded vehemently, turning to her with stormy eyes.

Liz looked distantly at the scar on her wrist, tracing the outline with her thumb. “My only memory of my father is of him protecting me. There was so much smoke, and pain – it hurt so much - but I remember him carrying me out of the flames. When he held me it didn’t hurt anymore. I felt so safe. And I knew that everything was going to be ok.”

She reached up to wipe a tear away from her dark lashes, before glancing at Reddington. He had a small crease of a frown, but he was looking at her with something akin to wonder.

When he didn’t respond, she rubbed her eyes and rose from the bench. Reddington seemed far away, mesmerised by the space she had just vacated, and she turned to leave before pausing and turning back.

“I wasn’t afraid of you” she said suddenly. “When they brought me into the black site that first time and you touched me. I don’t know why it happened. But it wasn’t because I was afraid.”

“I know” he said gently. “I know.”

He sat for some time after she’d left, a little unsure of his feet. She had no idea how much she’d revealed to him with that one, innocent memory. His eyes closed and for a moment he could feel the little girl clinging to him again, her tiny fingers curled around his singed collar.

Aware that it was unwise to linger too long in a public place, he let out a deep breath, palmed his fedora onto his head and made his way from the gallery. He stiffened on the steps outside, the thought hitting him on an almost subconscious level that he could not detect Dembe’s scent nearby. There was not enough time to act on it, however, as he felt a woman take his arm firmly in hers, and the muzzle of a gun press into his ribs, the angle perfectly titled so that the first bullet would enter his heart.

“There’s a catering van parked on the corner Mr Reddington” the woman said in a low monotone, her accent hailing from somewhere in the Middle East, though he couldn’t place it. “If you want to survive you’ll come with me now.”

Reddington laughed softly as they walked down the steps. “If you wanted to kill me you’d have done it already. But my associate, I suppose he’s dead?”

“Your bodyguard has suffered nothing more than a bang on the head and some bruised ribs. You care for him” she observed bluntly.

“An astute observation from someone who probably hasn’t maintained a single friendship. You’re a professional. Someone hired you to retrieve me – you hunt targets like me, that has to be an exhausting life” he commented, shaking his head as though he were sorry for her.

The dark haired women stared at him stoically. “Get in the van.”
Reddington complied, and no sooner had he sat down than she placed a black cloth bag over his head, plunging him into darkness for the duration of the journey.

When he finally saw daylight again he was sitting in a chair, his hands cuffed tightly behind his back. He squinted as he took in his surroundings, the alpha woman holding the cloth bag, pacing the floor of what looked like a disused barn. Her combat gear left little of her toned physique to the imagination, and his eyes raked over her, unabashed.

“Well aren’t you a surprisingly saucy minx” he said tugging at his cuffs for effect. “I usually don’t allow my more masochistic tendencies to out until I’ve extracted some assurances from my would-be dominatrix that she’ll at least leave me the key when we’re done, but on this occasion I could make an exception.”

Reddington finished this little speech while smiling lasciviously up at the woman, who shot him a disgusted look and muttered something in Hebrew. He tilted his head, recognition dawning in his eyes.

“You’re Mossad” he observed thoughtfully.

“And you’re mine, Mr Reddington” she responded, her calm affect betrayed by the somewhat fruity scent of her triumph.

“Oh if only that were true” he said, rolling his eyes to the heavens. “But I’m afraid someone far above your head is going to instruct you to release me within the hour. Your pride will be wounded, but you can comfort yourself with the knowledge that you managed to capture me at all. Many have tried but few have succeeded. How did you find me by the way?”

The alpha woman regarded him incredulously, her muscular arms folded across her ample breasts.

“What makes you so sure?”

“Oh no my dear, you first. You tell me how you apprehended me, and I’ll tell you how you’re going to lose me again.”

The woman’s smug demeanor had entirely dissipated, and she answered him truthfully, a concerned frown wrinkling her brow.

“We sniffed you out. Literally. You must know that multiple governmental agencies – national and international – keep scent records on file for their most high profile criminal targets. We have a sophisticated network of alpha operatives who are trained to recognise your scent. They picked it up several days ago and have been tracking you ever since.”

Reddington chuckled, shaking his head in amusement. “Excellent. Like bloodhounds. Though I’m sorry that the fine agents of Mossad don’t have anything better to do than sniff my armpits – good God I hope you didn’t get your sample after that little dust-up in Haifa, it was an exceptionally warm day-”

“That ‘dust-up’ claimed the lives of two agents and a Turkish diplomat” the woman retorted, unamused.

“Agent Navabi – that is your name, isn’t it? Your younger brother Shahin was killed in the 2009 Pishin Bombing.”

“How did you know?” she asked tightly.

“I know everything about the people tasked with finding me” he responded matter-of-factly.
“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.”

“Walid Abu Sitta” Agent Navabi intoned slowly, her features hard and distant. “He disappeared from his hotel room in Jiyeh last May. Police are baffled.”

Reddington gave her a small smile. “Are they. I fear our time has come to an end on this occasion – perhaps we can find a more opportune time to talk, Ms Navabi.”

At that moment a man cleared his throat behind them, and Colfax strolled in, shaking his head at the scene as though he were irritated to have been called there. When he reached them he handed the woman a warrant dismissively.

“Agent Navabi, your suspect is mine. The keys, please” he said curtly, his hand outstretched.

She shot Reddington an intrigued look before placing the handcuff keys in Colfax’s hand and exiting, leaving Reddington and Colfax alone.

When she was gone, Colfax turned to look down at Reddington, nonchalantly tossing the keys up and down in his hand.

“Mr Reddington let me introduce myself. I’m Assistant Director Colfax, I’m the head of this task force. That means I’m the one who has to come down here and bail you out when you get yourself into trouble. Let’s get one thing straight. I don’t like my time being wasted.”

Reddington observed him neutrally from his position tied to the chair, his eyebrow raised at a slightly cocky slant. “Perhaps you’re not yet familiar with the essentials of my arrangement with the FBI, so let me make it clear. You work for me.”

Colfax huffed an incredulous laugh. “I get it. You think you’re a big shot in your fancy suit, on the FBI’s most wanted list… But let me tell you something. It doesn’t matter that you’re out there wandering around, running your little empire – you’re just an animal in a mighty big cage.”

Colfax paused and looked down at Reddington, his eyes gleaming. “And she deserves more than that, your Agent Keen. Don’t y’think?”

Reddington remained silent, but his eyes sharpened at the mention of her name.

“Y’know I do like her” Colfax continued casually, tossing the cuff keys in his hand again. “She’s trouble though, a little firecracker.”

He bent down slowly then, his mouth next to Reddington’s ear. “I’m gonna work real hard to keep your girl in line” he murmured.

Stepping back again, he met Reddington’s searing glare with faux smile, before tossing the keys to the cuffs at his feet and walking away.
Liz and Ressler stood on either side of the entrance to the opulent ballroom of the Jefferson Hotel, surveying the gathering before them. The room was decorated with white flowers and elegant champagne towers, while a jazz band played innocuously in the corner of the cavernous marbled space. It was Sofia Hale’s 21st birthday party, and they had it on good authority from Reddington that this was the opportunity The Ambassador would use to take her.

Ressler wore his customary wrinkled gray work suit, looking every inch the law enforcement officer that he was. Liz had put more thought into her attire, and although she still wore minimal make-up, she’d slipped on a fashionable, dark silver dress that clung elegantly to her modest curves.

Her primary concern had been fitting in at the young heiress’s party, but as she looked around the room she realised she needn’t have worried. Aside from Sofia herself who was a vision in a virginal white chiffon cocktail dress, the majority of the guests were considerably older, and looked more like they were friends of her parents than hers. Ressler seemed to read her thoughts.

“ Weird crowd for a young girl like that. Doesn’t she have friends her own age?”

Liz grimaced. “My guess is her father has kept her isolated on purpose. They’re not here to celebrate her… This is her family’s entire social network come to congratulate them on her coming of age. As of midnight tonight she’ll be one of the richest young women in America.”

“So they’ve got until then to force her into marriage” Ressler said, the distaste evident in his tone.

He nodded towards the side of the room where Sofia stood under the watchful gaze of her father, smiling shyly at the polite nods and waves from the crowd.

“ Proctor’s here – look at him shaking her father’s hand, while the two of them are planning his daughter’s kidnap and rape. It’s disgusting. That bastard has real stones to show up here.”

Liz watched, sickened as Edwin Proctor approached Sofia, an unnatural smile adorning his sharp, fox-like features. She saw Sofia swallow and force a smile as the tall, silver-haired man bent down and kissed her hand gently. “I guess a crowd of two-hundred businessmen and celebrities makes a great alibi” she shuddered.

She was about to continue when she heard a familiar laugh and froze. Her eyes scanned the crowd until she saw Reddington standing in a small group, waving a glass of scotch animatedly. Unlike Ressler he was dressed perfectly for the occasion in a crisp white shirt with rich navy suit pants and vest, the absence of a jacket a nod to youth of the birthday girl.

“ Unbelievable…” Liz muttered.

She marched over to him impulsively, smiling solicitously at his interlocutors as she took his arm and steered him firmly to the side of the room.

He turned to her, his expression one of distinctly faux innocence which she found infuriating. His tongue ghosted over the inside of his bottom lip as he took in her appearance, and the omega inside her almost shivered in pleasure as he spoke to her in deep, appreciative tones.

“ You’re stunning.”

She recovered quickly and raised her eyebrows as haughtily as she could manage. “What are you
doing here? How did you even get in?”

He laughed breezily at that. “There isn’t a hotel in Washington where I don’t know someone.”

Liz frowned at his deflection, a feeling of unease creeping over her. “Why didn’t you tell me you
would be here? And why come if you wanted us to handle this? You could blow our operation –
The Ambassador won’t risk it if he thinks we’re on to him.”

Reddington suddenly raised his eyebrows and smiled softly over her shoulder. Confused, she turned
to see Sofia Hale approaching them, her shy smile still in place.

She nodded courteously at Liz and then turned to Reddington, her cheeks a little flushed. “Mr
Rathers, isn’t it? It was good of you to come.”

Liz’s stomach tightened as she heard his alias slip easily off Sofia’s tongue, a feeling that worsened
as she watched him lean down and kiss the girl on each cheek, before brushing his forefinger under
her chin affectionately.

“Sofia” he murmured. “Many happy returns.”

The girl blushed prettily and looked at Liz nervously out of the corner of her eye before settling her
gaze back on Reddington. “Um, I’m afraid something has come up and I think you might be able to
help me - if you’ll excuse us Miss Keen?”

It took considerable will power for Liz to suppress the urge to tell her to back the hell off, but she
managed to force a polite smile and watched, feeling faintly nauseous, as Reddington left the
ballroom with Sofia, the girl’s slender fingers wrapped around his muscular forearm.

After their departure, Liz returned to her surveillance task with considerably less enthusiasm than she
had begun. Edwin Proctor was still visible in the main room, moving from group to group making
polite conversation and giving nothing away. Aside from Reddington’s unscheduled appearance,
there was nothing so far out of the ordinary; they had all the exits covered, and eyes on Sofia at all
times.

Just as she was beginning to wonder whether Reddington had been mistaken about tonight being the
night the girl would be kidnapped, she saw Ressler striding over to her, a grim expression on his
face.

“Sofia’s gone” he said in low, urgent tones. “We lost her.”

Liz looked at him with alarm. “What do you mean, she’s gone? We have people on every exit, all the
guests are accounted for – no one has been in or out that we haven’t signed off!”

“Except for one person” Ressler said slowly. “Reddington. Our people followed him and Sofia to the
hotel drawing room, they went in and never came out. Turns out there was a service entrance hidden
behind a wall panel. Aram is working on surveillance footage now.”

Liz swallowed, and for a moment it was as though the marble floor under her feet was slowly falling
away. “What are you saying?” she whispered.

“You know what I’m saying” Ressler responded darkly. “He saw the opportunity to steal Sofia and
her fortune for himself and he took it. It’s what he does, Liz. He’s a predator. He manipulates
omegas to get what he wants.”

“No” Liz said vehemently.
“He did it to you” Ressler continued. “Think about it. He put you in heat and it gave him immunity and unprecedented access to FBI resources. Now he’s going to do the same thing to that girl.”

“Stop” Liz snapped, trying to suppress the feeling of panic welling up inside her. “He didn’t mean for it to happen, he wouldn’t do that.”

“I’m sorry Liz” Ressler said in a softer tone. “But you bonded with him - it’s no wonder you can’t see this clearly. Remember what he did to your father. Remember that and tell me he isn’t capable of this.”

At the mention of Sam, Liz felt tears threaten unexpectedly and she swallowed, forcing them down. “That was different. You don’t understand him – I know he’s done terrible things, things I’m not sure I can ever forgive him for…But he wouldn’t do something like this. Whatever motivates Reddington, it’s far more complicated than money or sex.”

Ressler grunted sceptically, but before he could comment further, his cell began to vibrate in his hand.

“It’s Aram with the footage of the service passage entrance - it comes out round the back of the hotel near the kitchen.”

Liz and Ressler peered at the screen, the grainy images showing hotel workers going about their business, followed by the Jazz band from earlier making their way from the hotel with their instruments.

“Wait” Liz said urgently, pointing at one of the men in the group of musicians. “That’s Reddington!”

Ressler frowned. “He left with the band.”

Liz stood still, a numbness creeping over her. Suddenly, she recalled Sofia’s excitement at the prospect of being saved by a man more powerful than her father, and Reddington’s gentle expression when he had greeted the girl. A sickening sense of doubt began to swirl in her gut.

She looked again at the grainy still from the footage on Ressler’s phone. “But where’s Sofia? They can’t have made her look like one of the band – they’re all men and she’s too small to pass for one of them. She’s definitely not there.”

“Don’t be so sure” Ressler said, tapping his finger on the screen, indicating the large double-bass case carried by one of the musicians. “Sofia is small… small enough to fit in there?”

Liz’s eyes widened in horror. “She could fit. But she’d be struggling and screaming inside there, someone would have noticed.”

“Not if she was drugged” Ressler said.

“Or if she went willingly” Liz said slowly.

Ressler grimaced. “Why would she go willingly? What are you getting at, Keen?”

“I’m not sure” Liz murmured. “But something doesn’t feel right here. There’s been something strange about her since the start. Don’t you see it? How does a sheltered girl like that know how to contact a man like Reddington?”

“What I see is the green-eyed monster. You’ve got it bad, Liz” Ressler tutted, shaking his head.
Liz looked at him icily, but before she could respond a thought struck her. She hadn’t seen Proctor since she’d been distracted by Ressler’s news. She scanned the crowd thoroughly, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She turned to Ressler. “Proctor’s gone. You still think Reddington is behind this?”

“It doesn’t matter now” Ressler responded, waving his phone at Liz. “Colfax has just given the order to consider Reddington a suspect in the disappearance of Sofia Hale. We’ve got to go after him. Aram is going through all the info we have on him now, known aliases, safe houses…”

Liz paled as he spoke. “That’s a waste of time! For all we know, they’ve both been abducted. Proctor’s a smart man, he could have waited for The Ambassador to kidnap Sofia and then gone to finish the job once he’d established his alibi.”

“It’s not up for debate, Keen” Ressler snapped, his scent becoming sour with agitation. “It’s an order. Keen. Keen!” he shouted after her, but Liz had already marched away out into the foyer, her phone clutched to her ear.

“Aram? I need a favor. Tell me what you’ve got on Edwin Proctor.”

An hour later, Liz pulled up to a large, white-panelled house on the outskirts of town, the bay trees on either side of the porch looming large in the night. According to Aram, Proctor’s estranged brother had inherited this house, but was currently serving fifteen years for a bar brawl that ended in tragedy. Proctor had disowned him, but Liz had a hunch that this large, unoccupied house in a quiet neighborhood would be the destination of choice for a cautious and calculating man like Proctor to take his prey.

There were no lights on and a stillness in the air that made her wonder whether she had made a terrible mistake in disobeying Colfax’s orders. Just as she was considering turning back, a breeze floated through the trees and her nose wrinkled at the distinct scents of chlorine and death. In a heartbeat she drew her weapon, and made her way cautiously around the back of the house, silently cursing Ressler for not having her back.

She reached a patio terrace with a large swimming pool, the moonlight reflecting eerily off the water. As she approached she saw the dark hue of blood marbling the surface, and then the body of a man, floating face down in the water.

Her stomach knotted painfully as she saw that the man was wearing a shirt and vest, but by the time she reached the edge of the pool she could see that it was Proctor, a bullet wound clearly visible in the back of his head.

Liz swallowed her relief, her eyes closing briefly, but she wondered then whether Reddington had put the bullet there himself; he’d certainly shown enough contempt for Proctor to think nothing of executing him.

She pulled out her cell and sent Ressler the emergency code requesting back up and medical assistance, hoping fervently that he responded quickly. She wasn’t sure what was waiting for her inside, but she knew she couldn’t afford to wait to find out. Steeling herself, she stepped slowly round the edge of the pool and through the open patio doors into the dark house. As she stepped round furniture, her heart racing, she heard Reddington’s calm, commanding tones floating up from a broad set of basement stairs ahead of her.
She couldn’t make out what he was saying, and in her experience, there was only one way in or out of basements. If Ressler was right and Reddington was behind this after all, what would he do with her, a scorned omega, when she showed up to ruin his plans? Cursing inwardly, she crept as silently as she could down the stairs and peered through a crack in the door, her weapon at the ready.

She had a fraction of a second to take in the scene before her, and it was somehow so unexpected that her limbs seemed to turn to ice. Despite the calmness in his voice, Reddington was on his knees on the polished wooden floor of what looked like a games room, his hands cuffed behind his back. Sofia Hale was free, and clinging to the arm of another man whose weapon was pointed squarely at the back of Reddington’s head. The Ambassador, Liz thought numbly, and as she looked at his face she recognised him as the bass player from the Jazz band who had likely carried Sofia from the hotel. The girl had betrayed them.

The man cocked the weapon and Liz heard Reddington murmur then, so faint another might have missed it, but to her it was a heart-wrenching, utterly primeval call to the omega inside her.

"Lizzie."

It was the jolt she needed to free herself from the paralysis of shock. She threw open the door and fired at The Ambassador, aiming as well as she could with Sofia clutching the man. He went down, groaning, while Sofia dropped to her knees beside him, sobbing with fright.

Reddington’s head whipped round, his expression one of pure shock that looked unnatural on a man who was always so self-assured.

“Lizzie” he gasped. “The handcuff key’s in his back pocket.”

Liz grabbed the key from The Ambassador’s pocket, kicking his gun away in the process. She bent down to free Reddington’s hands, catching his scent as she did so. It was so raw she almost whimpered, pure emotion that was so complex it was impossible to decipher.

When he was free she half expected him to embrace her, but as soon as he was on his feet he immediately bent down to pick up The Ambassador’s gun. She gasped as she saw him aim the weapon emotionlessly at the man bleeding on the floor, while Sofia cowered beside the fallen man, trembling.

Liz put her hand on Reddington’s arm, gently compelling him to lower the gun.

“We’ve got him” she breathed. “He’s not going anywhere. And neither is she” Liz finished firmly, shooting a hard look at Sofia.

Reddington’s lip twitched, but to Liz’s relief he tucked the pistol into the back of his pants while she went to cuff The Ambassador’s hands behind his back.

As she did so, Sofia began to claw at her desperately, crying. “No please, he’s hurt, you have to let me help him!”

Reddington strode over and gripped the girl’s upper arms firmly, pulling her to her feet and out of the way, while Liz removed her jacket and pressed it against where her bullet had lodged in the Ambassador’s chest.

“Don’t worry my dear” Reddington said drily as Sofia struggled ineffectually in his grip. “He’ll probably live, although I suspect he’ll be spending the rest of his natural life in prison. If you don’t want to join him I suggest that when Agent Keen here questions you, you tell her everything you know” he growled.
Sofia sobbed and nodded, her long dark locks sticking to her tear-streaked cheeks.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen, Mr Reddington” she sniffed. “I didn’t know that he wanted to kill you too, I’m innocent of that, you have to believe me.”

“No one knows the value of innocence more than those who have lost it” he responded distantly and Liz glanced up at him, not missing the hurt underpinning his words.

Suddenly she felt The Ambassador’s hand grip her arm and she turned back to look down at the man breathing raggedly on the floor.

“You’re Elizabeth Keen” he croaked in a hoarse whisper. “You should have let me kill him. He’ll do anything to stop you finding out.”

Liz frowned. “Finding out what? What are you talking about?” she asked urgently, but he shook his head, his eyes glazed in pain and terror.

At that moment the house above filled with the stomping of boots, and Ressler’s ginger head appeared from behind the basement door.

“What the hell, Keen” he said gruffly as he entered, flanked by a SWAT team.

“You’re welcome” Liz replied pointedly. “This man needs urgent medical attention; Sofia is safe and under arrest.”

Ressler shook his head in disbelief at the scene. “The Ambassador and Sofia… They were working together?”

Liz nodded as she looked around for Reddington, but he was no longer there. Frowning, she made her way out of the basement, relieved to be away from the heady scents that permeated the air, and soon found Reddington standing alone in the darkened library of the house. He turned as she entered, his eyes narrow and sharp.

“You came here alone tonight” he stated hollowly.

Liz colored and looked down for a moment, her stomach aching with the sad truth that she could no longer conceal from him.

“They assumed it was you who had taken her” she murmured awkwardly. “Colfax gave us the order to look into you rather than pursue Proctor. You didn’t tell us you were going to be at the party and you were the last person seen with Sofia” she continued defensively as Reddington’s expression shuttered.

“You went after a blacklister, without backup. Not to mention a would-be rapist” he said, his tone hard.

She nodded silently and the lines around his eyes deepened.

“Why would you do that, Elizabeth?” he breathed, shaking his head. “Why in God’s name would you do that?”

Liz’s lips parted a little in shock, tears stinging her eyes.

“Isn’t it obvious?” she whispered.

Reddington blinked a moment, staring at her in silence.
“I saved your life because I care about you” she said heavily, her large blue eyes shimmering.

He took a breath and swallowed, staring at her in consternation for a long moment. Finally he walked towards her, his hands coming up to cup her face gently on either side as he reached her.

For a breathless moment she thought that he might kiss her, and thought that whatever had happened in the past, right now she wanted him to, the omega inside her aching viscerally for his affection. His stormy gray-blue eyes searched hers pleadingly before he spoke.

“You must never do anything like this again, do you understand me?” he said emphatically. “Never again.”

The impact of his words was as though he had struck her, and it occurred to her then that throughout the time she had known him, the armor of his wealth and wit had kept her from really seeing how little regard he had for himself.

“You think you don’t deserve to be saved” she choked as the realisation dawned. “That’s why you can’t accept help from anyone - it’s why you can’t be vulnerable for a second.”

His jaw tightened and he stepped back from her in silence, his expression strained.

“You risked your own life too, tonight” she continued slowly. “To save Sofia. But she played you from the start, didn’t she?”

Reddington nodded tightly. “She did. It appears The Ambassador made contact with her weeks ago. Through a certain, twisted lens it could be perceived as romantic – the kidnapper falling in love with the girl he was hired to abduct…Earning her love in return” he said, with a brief, humorless smile. “Though of course there was a price to pay for sparing her – he used her to lure me into a trap, no doubt hoping to wrap up loose ends after my interference with the cabal’s operations.”

Liz nodded as the pieces fell together. “He was the one who told her how to contact you. It’s not like you to let yourself be deceived like that” she said quietly. She paused then and looked at him hesitantly. “I read your file… I know you had a daughter. Was she an omega? Did Sofia remind you of her?”

Reddington closed his eyes, his forehead creased in pain, and Liz stepped towards him, her expression soft.

“Ressler and Colfax thought you were a monster. But you wanted to save this girl, didn’t you” she said with a sad smile. “There’s no shame in that.”

She lent up and slowly pressed a kiss into his cheek, his skin slightly rough against hers, his scent as rich and full of distant longing as she had ever known it. His eyelashes fluttered faintly, and she allowed her lips to linger there for a moment before she pulled back and withdrew softly from the room.
As the clanking yellow elevator deposited her into the cold, darkened operations floor of the black site, Liz cursed herself for deciding to come there after the night’s events. Sofia Hale was safe in custody, while The Ambassador was being treated for the gunshot wound in a high security hospital. It was now very late indeed, but she was so wired she knew sleep would have eluded her had she gone home.

Every time she closed her eyes she heard his voice, saw his head turn, his expression the moment he realised he would live. She would have a lot of explaining to do in the morning. She had disobeyed orders; more than that, she had gone rogue going after Reddington - she had risked her career, even her life. But when she’d heard him say her name with what would have been his dying breath, nothing had felt more right. The omega coming for her alpha, as he had come for her.

She shook the thought away as she recalled The Ambassador’s words to her – *he’ll do anything to stop you finding out*. How did he know about her? What didn’t Reddington want her to know? Not for the first time she felt she was so close to a piece of the puzzle that was hovering just outside her grasp. She had to put it all together, and soon.

Her nose wrinkled as she walked down the corridor to her office; unlike most alpha males, Colfax wore cologne, a slightly sickly odour that lingered around the black site long after working hours had ended. She hurried to her office, grateful to be away from the intrusive scent, and began searching for any information she could find on The Ambassador.

A while later, suspicious news articles, rumours and incomplete reports from international agencies began to float on her laptop screen in front of her tired eyes and her mind began to wander again, this time to the pain on his face when she had mentioned his daughter, and the scent of his longing. She closed her eyes momentarily, but they snapped open again at the sound of her office door knob rattling.

She sprang to her feet as the door opened, and Colfax walked in, closing it behind him.

“What are you doing here?” she said, more defensively than she’d planned.

Colfax regarded her coldly for a moment, his eyes openly roaming over her body, making her wish fervently that she wasn’t still wearing the dark silver cocktail dress.

“Is that how you greet your superiors, Ms Keen?” he drawled. “Well I guess after tonight you think you don’t need to pay me any mind at all.”

Liz swallowed and looked down for a moment. “Sir, there was no time to argue the point. I know Reddington, I knew he wasn’t behind it. And we got a good result – we arrested The Ambassador and Sofia Hale is safe…”

She trailed off hesitantly, unnerved by Colfax’s rapacious stare. Under the offensive scent of his
cologne she could smell both anger and arousal, a dangerous combination that made the hairs on the back of her neck prickle with apprehension.

“You know Reddington” he said, repeating her words suggestively. “Well yes you do. Like butter wouldn’t melt in that sweet little mouth of yours” he murmured, his slight Virginia lilt becoming more apparent with the rage simmering under the quietness of his voice.

She stood frozen in place, her muscles twitching in response to the threat he posed, while Colfax continued in an unpleasant, paternal tone.

“Now I want to share something with you. I’m a patriot. I love this country. And I’m mighty proud of the bureau and all the work we do to protect the honest citizens that make America what it is. So you’ll understand that I take it personally when a notorious criminal like Raymond Reddington comes along and we just bend right over.”

Liz’s lips parted in disbelief; she was about to protest but Colfax continued, unabated.

“That’s right, Ms Keen. When you opened your legs for him he didn’t just fuck you… he fucked the bureau, and it breaks my heart, truly.”

Liz inhaled sharply, trying to stop her lip from trembling.

“We’ve saved countless lives working with Reddington” she answered him in a hard whisper. “I won’t apologise for that, or for what I did tonight. I recovered the girl and protected our asset. I did my job.”

Colfax’s expression darkened, his voice treacherously quiet. “What you did, was disobey my orders” he said slowly. “And I can’t stand for that.”

Liz took an unconscious step back, hyper aware that her desk was the only thing standing between them. The sweet scent of her fear was becoming more palpable with each passing moment, and to her dismay it began to mimic arousal, her body’s attempt to entice him to protect her.

She licked her lips nervously, and saw his nostrils twitch as he breathed in her scent with obvious enjoyment.

“Sir, I-“

“Do not interrupt me” he snapped, his voice dangerously low. “You omegas are all the same – no discipline. No room for respect in that pretty little head of yours. Well I reckon there’s only one thing your kind does understand.”

Liz’s eyes widened in horror as he began to undo his belt buckle.

Reddington sat in an armchair in a small but comfortable apartment, his fingers closed loosely around a glass of scotch. The room was dark and his complexion almost gray in the shadows. The electricity was always on in this particular sanctuary, but he hadn’t turned on a single lamp that night.

It wasn’t that he had almost departed the world in that basement room – it was a good day that saw him relatively free from the threat of death, and lately good days had been few and far between. It was that he could have taken her with him. He had chastised her for following him, yes, but it wasn’t nearly enough.
He shuddered as the alpha in him flexed powerfully; he wanted to warm her backside with his hand, to nip the soft skin of her neck and bend her to his will until she swore on all the oceans’ depths that she would never place his wretched life above her own again.

For all he had sworn to preserve her innocence, their lives were becoming entwined in ways that made it a near impossible task. How could he keep her safe, keep that pure flame burning when it flickered ever closer to the darkness that surrounded him?

There was a sound in the corridor outside and he looked up with heavy lids as the door opened abruptly and Dembe entered.

“Not a good time, my friend” he said wearily, and then frowned as the man approached him undeterred, holding out an iPad.

“Raymond, you need to see this now” Dembe replied, his voice low and urgent.

Reddington took the iPad and squinted at the screen. He immediately recognised the footage as the live feed from Lizzie’s office at the black site, a product of a nano-camera hidden in the bookcase by the door. She was standing behind her desk, still in her evening attire, her body visibly tense.

The alpha male in there with her stood with his back to the camera, but he recognised Colfax’s arrogant posture. There was no sound, only grainy images, but it was enough. He watched, his eyes narrow and sharp, as Colfax appeared to reach for his groin area, the look on Lizzie’s face telling him everything he needed to know. He inhaled sharply through bared teeth.

“Should I send in a tactical team?” Dembe pressed.

“No” Reddington said decisively. “Agent Navabi is standing by. I want her in there immediately” he barked, his eyes never leaving the screen. “It’s time she reported for duty.”

“What are you doing?” Liz asked slowly, her gaze fixed on Colfax.

He stared at her with calm, emotionless eyes as he pulled down his zipper over the growing bulge in his pants. “Teaching you a lesson, Ms Keen. Now are you gonna come out from behind that desk? Or am I gonna have to come get you?”

Liz’s heart was hammering so hard she felt dizzy; his scent was so powerful now, it reeked of sex in the worst way and she had to resist the urge to cower in the corner of her own office. He had her trapped like an animal.

“I’ll scream” she said sharply.

Colfax smiled in cold amusement. “You go right ahead. This is a government black site, Ms Keen - there isn’t a soul who’ll hear you” he continued, casually working himself to full hardness through his boxers with his large hand.

“Last chance to come here, sweet thing. Or I promise this is gonna be very difficult for you.”

Liz’s eyes darted fearfully around her for something, anything she could use as a weapon, any manoeuvre that would get her out of there. As if reading her mind, he lunged towards her suddenly, causing her to cry out, but then he froze as there came a loud knock at the door to Liz’s office.
Leaning over her desk, his eyes dark and hungry, Colfax raised his finger to his lips, warning her to be silent. The knocking came again, and this time the door opened and an alpha woman with long dark hair entered, her expression impassive, as though she hadn’t noticed the tense atmosphere or the heady stench of pheromones.

Still facing Liz, Colfax bared his teeth in frustration before quickly pulling up his zipper and spinning round, his face dark with rage.

“Now just who do you think you are?” he asked heatedly.

“Agent Navabi, Sir” the woman replied coolly. “If you recall, you stole my prisoner. Raymond Reddington? It seems I’ve now been seconded to your task force from Mossad. You’ll forgive my disturbing you at this late hour, but I have urgent business that can’t wait.”

Liz wet her dry lips as Colfax seemed to hesitate, and watched intently as Agent Navabi appeared to raise her eyebrow a fraction.

“It’s a matter of national security. I’m sure you understand” she added, staring at Colfax in a way that suggested to Liz that this woman was now the dominant alpha in the room.

Colfax paused a moment before plastering on a false smile. “Well in that case, lead the way Agent…Navabi.”

Liz was flooded with relief as the new agent held the door open for Colfax, who stalked out of her office and down the corridor. The woman then turned to her briefly, her dark eyes flicking over Liz dispassionately.

“Go home” she said in a low, firm tone before turning to follow Colfax down the corridor. Her alpha voice was so rich and commanding that to Liz it was almost like Reddington had spoken those words himself. She sighed gratefully, gathered her things, and slipped out of the office.

He should feel satisfied with the relief that she was safe, Reddington thought as he watched her leave her office unharmed. His scheme had come to fruition, and yet his fingers remained clenched with tension, pressed into the worn leather of the armchair. That he couldn’t be the one to save her, that once again he had to watch from the shadows while a predator threatened to ruin her innocence forever… It was unbearable.

He grabbed his tumbler and downed the contents in a brisk movement, before rising from his chair. Eyeing the scotch decanter on the sideboard, he strode over and removed the stopper, pouring himself another generous measure and taking a long, biting sip of the smoky liquid. He drained his second glass and moved to his writing desk, leaning on it with both hands while he tried to clear his head.

He closed his eyes, and was immediately assaulted with the image of her pinned in terror behind her own desk, the hem of that sinful silver dress riding up her creamy thighs. Colfax had planned to take her by force right there, the bravest girl who had risked her life that very night. For him.

Reddington swallowed as he recalled the gentle kiss she had bestowed on him, the curve of her breasts brushing tantalisingly against his vest. He grunted quietly with shame as the soft wool of his pants began to grow involuntarily tight with the ache of desire. *On tonight of all nights*, he thought desolately.
He shifted his hips reflexively, his inner alpha yearning to be the one to thrust forcefully inside her, to bite her porcelain skin and let her know in no uncertain terms that she was his and his alone. He winced at the thought of being no better than Colfax, at the idea of being anything but the most gentle lover to the wide-eyed, impossibly beautiful girl who had saved his life.

Bracing himself against the desk, he pulled down his zipper and reached inside his pants, freeing his aching erection. He tested his balls, and hissed as he found them tight and sensitive, as though reminding him that he had forgotten the benefits of self-care. In the quiet of his sanctuary, he began to squeeze his length firmly in long, practised strokes and allowed his thoughts to drift back to a bed in another safe house, where she had once lain for a night.

It wasn’t the memory of his fingers in her underwear, or even her delightful cries of pleasure as he had suckled her sweet little clit. It was the balmy scent of her neck on his pillow that aroused him most, her fragrant, silken hair curled on the soft white cotton as she slept. As he worked his hand over the velvety skin of his thick shaft he allowed himself the fantasy that she would one day come willingly to his bed.

He would coax her gently to her knees, his words caressing and commanding, and, finally, she would listen. There would be no more sleepless nights, no more threats to her, no chance that she would disobey him by neglecting her own safety. She would be his.

He would place his hand on her neck and bend her gently forward until her round little ass bobbed in front of him inviting him to mount her. He’d work her up beautifully first of course, and make sure her thighs were parted wide enough; when she wasn’t in heat he was sure it would be even more difficult for her to accept his cock and he’d be damned if he would hurt her.

No. He’d go as slow as she needed, coating himself in her slick and inching in, fondling her rosy little breasts as he went. She liked that, he thought as he massaged his aching length. It had brought him enormous pleasure to discover that his Lizzie, prickly as she could be, enjoyed being gently stroked and caressed like a kitten. He groaned, recalling her whimper in pleasure as he had slipped his hand inside her shirt, the way she had unconsciously tried to ride his knee, squirming against his hand.

Raising his hand to his mouth, he wet it with his tongue before returning his palm to his cock, pumping his shaft and then sliding his fingers over the head where pre-cum was now weeping freely. He felt the spongy tissue of his knot begin to expand and grunted as he imagined her tense as she felt it stretch her, and her reflexive struggles beneath him. He would bear down on her then, hushing her as he brought his quivering, swollen cock home, his hand massaging her mound until she orgasmed helplessly around him and coated him in her warm slick.

“Lizzie” he ground out, “God sweet girl”

He fumbled quickly for a handkerchief in his vest pocket and brought it down just in time for his balls to contract as he worked himself through the final throes of hot, sweet release.

As he stood there in the dark, breathing heavily, he was tormented once again by the image of her trapped in her office by Colfax. The Mossad agent’s intervention had saved her this time, but it was far from over; his girl was now prey to a crass, ruthless alpha who would not let go until he’d taken what he wanted.

Reddington zipped himself up without ceremony, reached into the desk drawer, and took out a revolver.
Chapter 31

Liz arrived at the black site to find Samar Navabi there in discussion with Ressler and Aram. She shot the Mossad agent a questioning glance, but Samar simply nodded at her professionally.

“Where’s Colfax?” Liz asked, her cool tone disguising the anxiety she felt; while his temper had probably subsided for now, as a profiler she knew it was only a matter of time before he accosted her again.

“He’s a no show” Ressler shrugged. “I’d count myself lucky if I were you. You may have been right about The Ambassador, but you still disobeyed orders.”

“If I understand correctly she single-handedly apprehended a terrorist and saved your informant” Samar cut in neutrally. “Where I come from we count that as a win.”

Ressler raised an eyebrow. “Round here, chain of command still means something. Keen, this is Agent Samar Navabi. She’s on loan from Mossad.”

“We’ve met” Liz said smoothly. “And while we’re talking about The Ambassador, I’d like to go speak to him.”

Ressler frowned. “You caught him in the act, isn’t that enough?”

“There’s something we’re missing” Liz persisted, shaking her head. “He knew who I was, he tried to tell me something about Reddington. We don’t even know his real name.”

“It’s true” Aram said. “We’ve linked him to countless terror attacks, uprisings, enemy criminal organisations that have mysteriously started working together. But it’s like he came out of nowhere. If I had his fingerprints, maybe we’d be able to find out more.”

“Fine - knock yourselves out” Ressler said. “I for one am fed up of taking down Reddington’s enemies without asking questions. Maybe this one will talk.”

“You make it sound like Reddington is untouchable” Samar observed drily.

Ressler huffed. “Yeah, well maybe not this time. Keen, go to the hospital. And take Agent Navabi with you.”

Liz looked warily at the brittle alpha woman and then nodded for her to follow.

As the two women walked down the corridor of the high-security hospital where the man known as The Ambassador was being treated, Liz could feel the Mossad agent’s eyes on her.

“I know what you’re thinking, and I don’t want to discuss it” Liz said in a low voice. “I’m grateful that you intervened with Colfax, I really am. But I have enough trouble being an omega agent in the FBI without having to talk about it too. And I’d appreciate it if you would keep what happened to yourself.”

Samar nodded. “Of course, if that’s what you want. But I was merely going to say that taking down The Ambassador alone took guts. It was pretty badass.”
Liz looked at her, searching her face for a hint of humor, but found none. “You mean badass for an omega” she said incredulously.

“Badass, period” Samar responded, and this time there was a hint of a smile that Liz found reassuring.

“Yeah well let’s see if he still feels like talking” Liz said, pushing open the door to a hospital room.

The man she had shot in the line of duty was lying in bed, hooked up to an IV, a bandage on his chest where her bullet had entered. His hand was cuffed to the side of the bed and a police officer stood watch against the wall.

“Give us a minute, please.” Liz showed him her badge and the officer nodded and left the room.

She turned to the man in the bed, his boyish face and dark hair making him look surprisingly young. It occurred to her that he looked much smaller now than when he had held a gun to the back of Reddington’s head.

The memory of it spread like icy tendrils on the back of her neck. She glanced at Samar, wondering if the alpha woman could smell her anxiety, but if she could it didn’t show; she was standing by the doorway, arms folded, with a blank expression on her face.

“You remember who I am?” Liz asked The Ambassador, approaching the end of the bed.

“Like I could forget” he said, coughing painfully.

“Good” Liz responded coolly. “Now I’d like to know who you are. Why don’t you start by telling us your name?”

He stared at her blankly in silence, and when it became apparent that he wasn’t going to answer, Liz rolled her eyes in a bored fashion.

“Fine – we can run your prints and see if we can get an answer that way.”

She lifted his hand, ignoring his weak resistance, and pressed his fingers to her phone screen before sending the captured prints to Aram.

“Finding out who I am won’t help you get answers about yourself” The Ambassador said enigmatically.

Liz frowned. “What has any of this got to do with me?”

The corners of the man’s mouth twisted into a smile of triumph and he nodded, licking his dry lips. “Not so fast. You’ve got to give me something.”

Samar raised her eyebrows, unimpressed. “You’re a terrorist wanted for crimes in sixteen countries. There’s not a chance you’re getting a deal.”

“I know that” he responded slowly with a hint of sadness in his voice. “Sofia… I just want to know if she’s ok.”

“Wow” Liz said, shaking her head. “That is so twisted. You actually think you care about her.”

“I love her” he shot back, and although his scent could not tell her all the same things an alpha’s might, Liz knew that his anger was real. It sparked an equal rage in her, the omega inside her rising indignantly.
“You used an innocent girl to help you commit a crime. You involved her in a murder and you were going to make her watch while you killed a man who only tried to help her. That isn’t love.”

To Liz’s surprise, The Ambassador gave a shallow laugh.

“The only person Reddington helps is himself – you should remember that before you get yourself in too deep.” He shook his head at her pityingly. “I can’t even imagine what it’s like being an omega belonging to a sadistic bastard like Reddington. Does he treat you right? Or does he enjoy hurting you. Somehow I can’t see Reddington being the sugar-daddy type” he finished sardonically.

Liz pursed her lips, as though unconsciously trying to ensure that her thoughts didn’t escape her. He was right – Reddington hadn’t gotten when he was by being a womanizer. But then, she wasn’t exactly a typical sugar-baby, she thought as she stared at the man she had shot without a second thought.

“I’m sure you know prison’s a difficult place for an omega. Especially a sheltered girl like Sofia” Liz said carefully, and watched as the man’s eyes sharpened with anxiety.

“We can put in a good word for her” she continued. “But we’re going to need you to cooperate.”

“I’ll give you whatever you need if it will keep her safe” The Ambassador said quickly. Then his face darkened for a moment. “You know, he said you were the sweetest thing he’d ever seen – like an angel. You don’t seem all that sweet to me.”

Liz frowned. “Who said that?”

But before he could answer, her phone began to vibrate in her hand and she waved it at him. “It’s the results of your prints – we’re going to find out who you are.”

She began to walk out of the room to take the call and Samar nodded at her. ‘Go – I’ll watch him.”

Liz strode down the corridor and pressed the phone to her ear. “Aram, what do you have?”

“A lot more than we had this morning” he said animatedly “but it’s sort of brought up a lot more questions too. Like, I really wasn’t expecting this.”

“What did you find? Why is he in the system? Drugs, money laundering-”

“Wrong - he’s not in the system because he’s a criminal. He’s there because he’s a victim.’

“A victim” Liz repeated incredulously.

“That’s right – his real name is Nicholas Walker – Nicky to his parents. He went missing from his school playground over twenty years ago.”

Liz exhaled, her lips pouting in surprise. “How does a kidnapped little boy become a criminal like The Ambassador?”

“I wanted to know the same thing” Aram said slowly. “So I spoke to our VCAC section to see if they had any leads on Nicky Walker in their database of missing and exploited children, and they gave us something. A few years after Nicky went missing his picture was seized from the computer of a pedophile during a raid, but the trail went cold and they never found him. My contact says they believe he was abducted by a small-time trafficking ring that was subsequently shut down; they don’t know what happened to him after that, but here’s where it gets weird. I mean weirder – child trafficking is abhorrent of course. All trafficking is’” Aram said hastily. “Anyway. My guy says he
heard a rumor that there was another underground organisation working around that time, one that was taking in troubled kids and turning them into criminals. Sort of like a criminal finishing school.”

Liz raised her eyebrows. “An underground school for criminals? Did they ever find proof?”

“Sadly no. The only thing he could give me was a name – The Major.”

Liz was about to respond when two doctors ran down the corridor past her, and raced inside The Ambassador’s room.

“Arar, I’ve got to go” she said, hanging up, and rushed down the corridor to the room just as Samar came out.

“What’s going on?” she asked the Mossad agent breathlessly.

“They said he may have thrown a clot. It doesn’t look good.”

Liz looked numbly into the room as the doctors pumped his chest, and watched in shock as eventually their efforts slowed. Finally, one of the doctors shook her head and called time of death, and Liz felt the Mossad agent shuffle slightly beside her.

“I’m sorry” Samar said neutrally. “It looks like you won’t be getting the answers you wanted.”

“Maybe not today” Liz responded slowly. “But I will. Someone knows why Reddington came into my life. I will find out.”

Samar raised her dark, sleek brows. “Has it occurred to you that he’s simply obsessed with you? That there is no big secret, only that you’re the center of a twisted alpha-omega fantasy concocted by Reddington? I’m sure you know that’s what some people are saying.”

Liz felt the color rise faintly in her cheeks, and shook her head dismissively at the alpha woman.

“It’s more than that” she said quickly. “You don’t know how he is. It’s like… Sometimes I think it’s like he doesn’t want to be with me at all. Be around me. It’s like he feels guilty or something.” She sucked in a breath and gave Samar a brittle smile. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“Because you can” Samar said smoothly. “You don’t know me. Sometimes it’s easier to talk to a stranger.”

Liz sighed as they stood aside for the crest-fallen crash team to leave the hospital room.

“I killed him” she said quietly.

“No you didn’t” Samar responded sharply. “He’s dead because of the choices he made. He chose to kill innocent people, to incite conflict. That kind of life comes with an expiry date.”

Liz looked at her uncertainly. “Aram said that he was a victim too. That he was on a list of missing kids.”

Samar’s expression tightened a little. “The past doesn’t excuse who people become. He was a killer.”

She turned and walked away down the corridor, and after a moment, Liz followed, wondering what it was that had the Mossad agent so rattled.
When Liz arrived home that evening she tried to shake off the increasing sense of emptiness that she felt gnawing inside. Hiking up the steps to her brownstone she swallowed at the realisation of just how alone she was.

Sam and Meera were dead, and Tom was like a ghost, an invisible and unexplained nightmare who was out there somewhere. Even Cooper was gone now, suspended from work indefinitely and unable to act as her mentor.

Then there was Reddington, who seemed more eager to admonish her than to show her affection. *Omegas aren’t good at living on their own,* she conceded to herself. She knew this well from her psychologist’s training. They need affection to feel secure, an established network of friends and family to make them feel protected. She’d always liked to think that it didn’t apply to her, but tonight, on the eve of her birthday, it hurt more than she cared to admit.

She bit her lip to stave off the wave of self-pity that threatened and reached into her back pocket for her keys. As she turned the key in the lock she paused, the hairs on her arms prickling expectantly. A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth, before she schooled her features into an expression of mild annoyance and entered her house.

Reddington was there, sitting on the couch, as she had known he would be the moment she caught his distinctive musk lingering around the door. Entering slowly, she leant against the sitting room door frame and tilted her head, purposefully mirroring one of his own quirks.

“Do you ever knock?”

He smiled at her and leant back, casually crossing his legs. “Very rarely. I once had a Sunday school teacher, Mrs Weppler - fanatical old coot. She used to say knock and the door will be opened for you, but in my experience, friends don’t require one to knock and it’s best to visit enemies unannounced.”

Liz raised her eyebrows with a wry smile at the thought of Reddington in Sunday school. “And which am I?” she inquired casually.

He looked at her for a moment, his expression softening a little. “How’s work?”

Liz frowned slightly in amused puzzlement. “You’re asking how my day’s been?”

“I am” he responded smoothly.

Liz sighed and looked away for a moment. “Well let’s see. My witness in the Hale case died in the hospital today, and Colfax decided I’d been a bad girl and he wanted to play alpha and omega.”

She caught a flash of a leathery scent, a clue that Reddington was unhappy at her comment. She looked nervously back to him and noted the tension in his jaw and muscles, his lip curled into a brief snarl.

“Are you alright?” he asked tightly.

“I’m fine” she told him quickly, her eyes flicking to the floor.

Reddington’s eyes narrowed in a frown as he scanned her small, tense frame.

“Men like Colfax need to feel powerful” he said, his voice gentle now. “And they do that by taking power from others.”
“From the weak. Like omegas” Liz said distantly.

Reddington’s frown deepened. “You’re not weak, Lizzie. That’s the last thing you are” he said, his eyes flashing.

Liz drew her arms around herself guardedly and nodded at the coffee table in front of him, on which stood a rather rustic looking bottle of wine.

“What’s this?”

“You don’t remember?” Reddington inquired with a soft smile.

“What?”

“The grapevines. The ones you and Sam harvested.”

Liz’s stomach twisted a little as the memory surfaced; the scorching sun, lush leaves and knotted vines meandering over the fence, Sam’s steady hands holding her up to reach the fruit.

Her teeth pulled at her lower lip as her mouth curved into a sad smile. “Of course… I remember. Along the garden fence. Is this…?”

“Yes. A bottle of wine you made with Sam when you were a child. Happy birthday, Lizzie. You’ve become everything he dreamed you would and more” Reddington said quietly, his eyes shining a little.

“I miss him so much” Liz murmured.

Reddington swallowed and nodded. “He adored you. From the moment he first laid eyes on you he was utterly smitten” he continued with a nostalgic smile.

Liz said nothing for a moment, and then walked out of the room without a word. Reddington closed his eyes for a moment, a pained expression on his face, but he soon smiled in surprise when she returned carrying a bottle opener and two glasses.

“Let’s see how it turned out” she said with a hint of a challenge in her voice.

“You don’t think it would be better shared with a friend… or someone special” Reddington asked her gently.

She pursed her lips and busied herself with the task of opening the thick seal on the bottle. “In case you hadn’t noticed, my people are a bit thin on the ground at the moment” she responded curtly.

Reddington winced a little and nodded, watching patiently as she struggled with the old wax seal, until she reluctantly handed the opener to him. Waving it away, he produced a pocket knife and slid the blade into the deep red wax with a smooth thrust, before pealing the seal open with his thumbs in a way that made her shiver a little.

When the wine was poured, he raised his glass to her in a silent toast, his expression one of such open affection that she felt warmth rise in her cheeks before she had even taken a sip of her drink. As her tongue met the liquid her face screwed into a scowl, like the time a cruel grade school teacher had put vinegar on her nose as a punishment.

She watched incredulously as Reddington took a healthy sip and swallowed, his features trained into a polite smile, the only hint of the acrid tang a slight twitch of his upper lip. Liz held his sanguine
gaze for a moment before huffing in exasperation.

“Oh come on – you’re not going to drink that. It’s horrible!”

He rolled his tongue in his mouth and shrugged. “It is rather austere, and the nose is a little sharp. But there are subtler notes. I believe I can taste the Nebraska sunsets still.”

Liz raised an eyebrow, her mouth curved into a dry smile. “It’s vinegar.”

Reddington broke into a hearty laugh and shook his head. “I suspected it would be, so I came prepared.”

He reached into a gift bag on the floor beside him and produced another bottle, placing it on the table between them. “An ’82 Brunello.”

Liz smiled and went to swap their glasses for the superior wine, her heart fluttering in her chest a little in anticipation at the thought of spending the evening with him. He seemed different somehow, more relaxed, although it made her uneasy that it was reminiscing about her childhood that appeared to have brought him pleasure.

Not for the first time she wondered if, given the choice, he would rather see her as an omega baby than a grown woman. But then, perhaps she could use his nostalgia to her advantage.

“You know so much about me” she said slowly while he nodded in approval as he tasted the Brunello. “My childhood. Who I am. Things I don’t know about myself.”

She watched him carefully as he turned to look at her, his gaze soft but alert, as though he could see right through her attempt to get him to talk. She persevered.

“I thought The Ambassador might actually be able to give me some answers today. But he didn’t make it. Everyone who could tell me the truth is gone” she said softly. “Everyone except you”.

Reddington worked his jaw slowly for a moment, as if poring over the all the memories of her early life that were still unknown to her.

“I find it best not to dwell too much on the past” he answered eventually in a low voice. “What’s important is not who you were then, but who you are now. Who you will become” he said with a gentle smile. “And I have no doubt you will only become more extraordinary.”

Liz’s eyes darted away uncomfortably and she took a large sip of her wine.

“That’s a lot of faith to put in someone with a failed marriage and a job hanging in the balance” she said ruefully.

She stiffened then as she felt him shift towards her on the sofa, his rich alpha scent caressing the air around her. Her chest was suddenly tight with anticipation when his hand came up to cup her chin, encouraging her to look at him. She turned her blue eyes up to his, the flecks of gold in his irises glittering intently, giving him an almost leonine look.

When he spoke his voice was so low she struggled to focus on his words over the rushing of blood in her ears as her heart pounded.

“Lizzie. Listen to me. Put away any doubt that you will have the life you want. Because you will have it. Sweet girl” he murmured, and Liz sighed, closing her eyes as he leant in to press a gentle kiss to her cheek.
Her omega body was singing with happiness at his proximity, and a soft whimper escaped her as she felt his nose brush against her cheek and into her hair as he inhaled her scent. He rested his head against hers for the longest time, the scent of their mutual arousal growing around them.

Slowly, Liz tilted her head to expose her neck to him in an almost unconscious gesture of omega submission, and felt his lips brush the velvet skin below her ear with the lightest kisses. She leaned into him, her body tight with need, and moaned when she felt his teeth scrape at her neck.

He was gentle at first, but soon graduated to little nips that emptied her mind of everything except the thought of presenting for him, his teeth fastened to her neck while he penetrated her with his thick alpha cock. She mewled as his hand came up to grip the back of her head, his mouth’s assault on her neck deep enough to bruise and a rough growl vibrating in his throat.

Bucking into him, she felt a rush of slick come between her legs; she was desperate for him to peel her pants down, to spank her, to mate with her, to tell her she was his and force orgasm after orgasm out of her quivering little body.

Suddenly, to her dismay, she felt him pull back and rest his forehead against hers, his eyes screwed shut and his chest heaving.

“Lizzie, I can’t” he panted gruffly. “Someday you will meet someone who deserves you sweetheart. Have a family. Have the life that you want” he told her, his lip curling as though he were forcing the words out.

“I don’t have a choice” she whispered. “It’s you. It’s always going to be you. I’ve tried” she choked. “I’ve tried not to feel this way. I’ve hated you. And I’ve wanted you so much I feel like it might devour me.”

Reddington raised his head, a pained frown on his face. “Elizabeth, if I’ve ever made you feel like you don’t have a choice, then I am truly sorry for that. You do. And you said it yourself” he added tightly “ – I am not your alpha.”

Liz’s chin crumpled in grief as she heard her own words repeated back to her. She raised her fingers to brush away tears and swallowed in anguish when she saw that Reddington had risen to his feet.

“This pain will ease” he told her softly, his concern for her deepening the creases around his eyes.

Liz shook her head, the bitter sting of rejection settling like bile in her stomach. “You know, The Ambassador might not have said much before he died but that doesn’t mean I didn’t get any answers. We ran his prints – he was a missing child. Nicky Walker. Aram’s contact at VCAC thinks he was recruited by an underground agency that trains criminals. A secret organisation run by a guy called The Major.”

Liz turned her watery eyes up to Reddington, whose expression was stiff. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?” she asked him in a hard voice.

“Unfortunately there are many underground organisations that exploit missing children in one way or another. There are many I don’t know of” he responded guardedly.

Liz scoffed. “Really? Because a training academy for criminals sounds exactly like the kind of thing you would know about. But I guess I should know better than to expect you to tell me the truth” she said bitterly.

Reddington looked stricken for a moment, a look of pain passing over the blank expression he had worn a moment ago. “I have never lied to you” he said heavily.
When she didn’t respond he palmed his fedora onto his head and straightened the brim.

“I’m going away on business” he sighed. “I’ll contact you on my return.”

With that, he nodded regretfully and made for the door. After it had closed behind him, Liz sank onto the sofa cushion against which he had leant, buried her nose in his scent, and let the tears come.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

CW: Implied/referenced pedophilia

It was weeks later that Liz got an official call requesting her presence at the black site. Reddington had been gone since the night he had visited her apartment, and Colfax’s status had gone from AWOL to officially missing in the days that followed. The task force had been suspended pending an investigation, and Liz had been more alone than ever.

As she entered the black site she was hit with a multitude of smells; people, guns and musty papers all reminded her she had been away too long. Perhaps it was the sudden onslaught of scents that confused her, but Liz wasn’t aware of Reddington’s presence until she heard his deep, smooth tones drawling out across the operations floor.

He had rejected her – left her – but the treacherous omega inside her practically mewed with joy when she heard his voice. The past few weeks it had been as though her inner omega had curled up in a cold, frightened corner of her stomach, abandoned and trembling. The hope blossoming inside her grew tenfold when she heard another familiar voice, one that filled her with comfort.

She rounded the corner of the operations floor with a smile on her face.

“Cooper!” she exclaimed with a grin.

“That’s Assistant Director Cooper to you, Agent Keen” her mentor responded with mock sternness. “I’ve been formally reinstated.”

Liz’s smile grew and she exchanged happy glances with Ressler, Aram and Samar. Her gaze shifted fleetingly to Reddington, who had stopped speaking and was staring at her enigmatically. He wore a soft, dove gray suit and a crisp white shirt that she longed to cling to.

She looked away again quickly, focussing on Cooper.

“Does this mean Colfax is gone for good?” she asked, unable to hide her pleasure at the thought.

“His disappearance is being handled by the DC bureau. They’re treating it as suspicious. The loss of one of our own is something we take very seriously” Cooper continued gravely. “But that isn’t why I asked you and agents Ressler, Mojtabai and Navabi to join us today. Reddington has brought us a blacklister.”

Liz glanced back at him guardedly, and he returned her gaze for a moment before turning to face his audience.

“Not just one blacklister, Harold. A nest of vipers. A cult of fanatical, polygamous child abusers who systematically strip omegas of their rights and freedoms, and those are just the crimes that main justice is already aware of.”

“You’re talking about The Children of Edon” Ressler said slowly. “Well you can forget it. The FBI have been trying to shut them down for years. It’s not gonna happen.”
“It’s true” Liz said flatly. “They have the best civil rights attorneys there are. Not even the IRS can touch them - their books are impeccable.”

“So are mine” Reddington shot back, looking at the assembled group disapprovingly. “Well, if the ritualised abuse of omega children isn’t enough to whet your appetite for justice then it may interest you to learn that the land and buildings over which they have religious sovereignty are the perfect storage and distribution centers for certain contraband. What better place for the criminal underworld to stash twenty million dollars’ worth of heroin or a few Tomahawk missiles than somewhere the government simply isn’t allowed to enter?”

“Now that’s not fair” Cooper cut in testily. “There are serious political considerations here. If what you’re claiming is true, then they could be sitting on some catastrophically damaging ordnance. We can’t just go barging in.”

“You heard me say that they distribute high grade weaponry among terrorists and cartels?” Reddington said indignantly.

“So do you” Liz pointed out drily.

He turned to look at her intently, and for a moment she saw that flash of gold in his gray-blue eyes and it made her nervous.

“I make no apology for what I do, and, I might add, I pay far more consideration as to who I sell arms to than your government” he said in a hard tone.

The air crackled between them for a moment before Aram broke in nervously.

“Ah, that may be true… I mean it could be true” he said hesitantly, glancing at Cooper. “But it’s beside the point if we can’t get in. There are no blueprints of their temple or any of the buildings named in their papers. There’s no way we can sneak in, and we can’t make any arrests without evidence.”

“I have no intention of sneaking in anywhere” Reddington said smugly. “Agent Keen and I are going to walk right in the front door.”

Liz’s stomach flipped and she raised her eyebrows incredulously. “Excuse me?”

“As you know, The Children of Edon are a hierarchical organisation overseen by a group of so-called elders; alpha males who each have a harem of omegas over whom they have total dominance” Reddington continued. “One of those alphas is a man named Victor Lattimer, a British arms dealer and onetime associate of mine. I have a contact in the organisation who tells me he is preparing to make a new addition to his harem in a ceremony of sorts” he said, his lip twitching in distaste. “If he hears I have newly discovered the merits of taking an omega he won’t be able to resist the opportunity to show me how it’s done.”

“You want to go undercover as alpha and omega” Liz said slowly, tension gnawing at her muscles.

Reddington looked at her, and for a moment she thought she saw a hint of uncertainty in his eyes before he answered her.

“Given our… situation…” he said slowly, “there will be very little subterfuge required on your part. Nothing more untoward than a submissive attitude.”

Ressler snorted and Liz shot him an icy glance.
“Fine. I’ll do it” she said with a casualness she didn’t feel. She gave a fleeting glance at Reddington and thought she saw a flash of surprise on his face that she hadn’t argued. It made her feel triumphant; he may not want to be with her, but she could still catch him off-guard.

“Agent Keen” Cooper said, alarmed. “No one expects you to do this. Not after everything you’ve been through” he added pointedly.

Liz shrugged. “Reddington is right. It would barely even be undercover work. We did bond, our scent wouldn’t give us away. Piece of cake” she finished bitterly.

“What about the sedation?” Samar’s imperious voice chimed in, and they turned to look at her. “If I understand correctly, it’s customary for The Children of Edon to treat their omegas with drugs like Megased. Wouldn’t she need to do that?”

“Megased?” Liz repeated, her scent taking on a tinge of panic. “Like the drug Tom gave me? I’m not doing that” she said quickly, turning to Reddington.

His lips were pursed and he was observing Samar with a look of annoyance. “Thank you for that, Agent Navabi. I’m glad to hear that you were paying attention in secret agent school.”

He turned to Liz, and although she could see the tension etched in his face, he spoke kindly, his tone meant to calm her.

“It’s true that the majority of the omegas there will be sedated but you will not be. As a guest I will be permitted certain liberties. Besides, Victor knows I’ve never been one for following the rules” he finished with a tight smile.

“It’s out of the question regardless” Cooper said authoritatively, puffing his chest in Reddington’s direction. “If you think I’d allow you to drug her – or any agent – before taking them undercover without backup-”

“Well it’s a good thing that won’t be necessary” Reddington cut him off firmly, the annoyance in his scent growing more pungent. “Harold, a word if you will” he said in a firm tone.

Cooper raised his eyebrows, and the assembled group of agents stared as the two alpha males squared off, their hackles rising.

They stared each other down for a moment before Cooper gestured to the stairs. “My office” he responded curtly, and Liz watched curiously as the two men retreated.

“Ok that was weird” Aram said.

“Not really” Ressler observed. “They’re alphas. Cooper is responsible for her as an agent on his team, and she’s Reddington’s omega. I’m with Cooper on this – going undercover in this cult sounds like a bad idea.”

“Liz has made her decision” Samar said curtly. “She’s doing her job and we should respect that.”

They turned to Liz but she had stepped away towards the yellow elevator to wait for Reddington to leave. It was strange; not a word from him for weeks - not since he rejected her - and now he wanted her to pose as his omega? She began to pace in front of the elevator, becoming more and more agitated, until he finally emerged from Cooper’s office and made his way down the stairs and across the floor towards her.

He paused when he reached her, a strange look of regret on his face. When he spoke his voice was
low and unhappy, as though he were almost disappointed that she had accepted the task he had set her.

“That event is this Friday. I’ll come for you at 6.”

Liz nodded resentfully. *That was all he had to say to her?*

“What should I wear?” she asked tightly.

“I’ll have a garment bag sent over with everything you’ll need.” He nodded at her before straightening his fedora and turning to leave.

“I know what you’re doing” Liz said pointedly, and he turned back to face her, his head cocked questioningly.

“This case. The omegas who are completely controlled. You’re trying to show me how bad it can be being an omega. You’re trying to put me off wanting to be yours because you think you don’t deserve it. I’m right, aren’t I?”

His lips parted as she spoke and for a moment his eyes seemed so deep and distant that she wasn’t sure if he had heard her at all. He swallowed and turned, entering the elevator.

“It’s not going to work” she murmured, and although it was barely above a whisper, she knew he had heard her as the elevator door closed.

The garment bag was delivered by an immaculately dressed beta woman in her forties who looked at Liz curiously before hastily departing. When Liz had thanked her and retreated to the privacy of her bedroom, she opened the bag and frowned; it wasn’t what she was expecting. The dress was a heavy, plain, floor-length gown in deep red silk, extremely modest except for the neckline which plunged both front and back; she wouldn’t be able to wear a bra with it.

She noted with a smile that he had included shoes in the delivery, low, elegant heels with delicate jet beading – the only adornments on the whole outfit, apart from a small blue box which was tucked into the pocket of the garment bag. It contained a delicate pair of teardrop diamond earrings that made her breath catch in her throat. She chastised herself for getting caught in the moment; they were not a generous and beautiful gift from her alpha. They were nothing more than part of a costume.

Once dressed, she regarded herself in the mirror disdainfully. To give him credit the dress fit her perfectly, but it was simultaneously too conservative and too revealing, the long, heavy silk off-set by the daring bodice. It occurred to her that at least it would more than adequately conceal the gun strapped to her thigh. She’d just decided to leave her hair loose to soften the look when the doorbell rang.

*That’s a first,* she thought. Perhaps he did have some boundaries after all. She opened the door and saw that he was wearing an immaculate black tuxedo, reminding her of the time they had danced together. Pushing the thought away, she stepped back as he entered so that he could look at her.

His reaction was disappointing. He said nothing at first, only looked her over with an unfathomable expression, before eventually speaking in a clipped tone.

“You’ll need to wear your hair up.”
Liz felt a frisson of anger stir inside her - it wasn’t her fault if he didn’t like how she looked – he chose the dress! And it didn’t matter what he thought anyway.

“Fine” she snapped. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

She went to her room and scurried around searching for hairpins, before hastily shaping her hair into a chignon low on her neck.

“That won’t do.”

She jumped as she heard his voice in the doorway behind her.

“May I?” he asked in a softer tone, and she nodded mutely.

She watched in the mirror as he came up behind her, the luxurious material of his tux brushing against her ear as he gathered her hair in his hands. She closed her eyes involuntarily, basking in his scent as he pulled his fingers through her hair, separating it into sections and quickly working them into a plait. When he was done he twisted it up and pinned it to her head, and she had to admit it was an elegant and grown-up style.

“Your neck needs to be exposed” he offered by way of explanation, and she wondered fleetingly how he had learned to plait hair so well, and whether he used to do it for his daughter. It wasn’t something she could ask about, especially not now. She stood up, nodding with a nonchalance she didn’t feel.

“How about?” she asked with faux brightness.

He looked down at her, working his jaw for a moment. “Take off your underwear.”

Liz’s lips parted in shock and she felt blood rush to her cheeks. “What the hell?” she breathed.

“Omegas don’t wear underwear at these events” he explained quietly. “Nothing must obscure their natural scent” he continued gently. “I decided it would be best to share that particular piece of information in private rather than in front of your colleagues.”

Liz huffed a scornful laugh. “How do you know I’m wearing underwear now?” she asked then, shooting him a challenging look although she knew that he could scent her well enough to know whether she was wearing panties.

To her disappointment, he didn’t take the bait. “Lizzie…” he chided softly.

Liz shook her head in exasperation, her stomach twisting as a glimpse of the powerlessness she would experience tonight washed over her. Holding his gaze as defiantly as she could, she slipped her hands under the deep red silk of the dress and slid her panties down, toeing them off onto the floor in front of him.

To his credit, he never looked away from her face, but his scent deepened in a way that spoke to her of powerful longing.

“Let’s go” she said haughtily, but he caught her arm as she made for the door.

“Lizzie, tonight will be difficult” he said in a low, serious voice. “No matter what you see…what you hear… it’s imperative that you do exactly as I say at all times. However upset you may be with me, you must obey me. These are extremely dangerous people, and they won’t tolerate the threat of exposure.”
Liz was about to protest his demand that she obey him, but bit back her remark as the seriousness of his tone hit her. A feeling of foreboding began to stir in her stomach, and he must have scented her uneasiness because he squeezed her arm reassuringly then.

“You’re going to be just fine” he offered gently, before ushering her out of the safety of her apartment, and into the waiting car.

To Liz’s surprise, the venue for the ceremony turned out not to be a temple or any kind of religious building, but a grand, private house which belonged to Victor Lattimer himself. In the car, Reddington had instructed her gently but firmly as to how she should behave; sweet, submissive, and above all, obedient. By the time she entered the house on Reddington’s arm with her head bowed, she felt numb.

How could being asked to do and say so little feel like such an enormous burden? But it did. In order to impersonate one of these omegas, she didn’t have to act like another person, but like a non-person, someone with no rights, opinions or thoughts other than to please their alphas.

She kept her eyes to the floor while Reddington jovially greeted their fellow guests, and she was keenly aware of her nakedness under her dress, the silk sliding against her bottom as she walked. Her nose twitched at the scent of another omega, and as she glanced up she was surprised to see the young woman wearing a red dress very similar to her own.

Looking around, she realised that all the women wore long, red dresses, their necks clearly on display and a glazed look in their eyes. The crowd was all black tuxes and red dresses, until she saw a flash of white here and there. As they advanced she saw that there were several sweet little omega children present who wore white dresses with old fashioned ribbons in their hair. She smiled at the sight and paused, but Reddington propelled her quickly on past them.

She swallowed as they walked through to a large reception room; it was brightly lit with white flowers arranged at the front, and chairs arranged with an aisle down the middle. Three beautiful omega women stood in their red dresses at the front, their heads bowed. For a moment Liz relaxed a little at what seemed to be a traditional wedding arrangement, but her breathing soon quickened with anxiety when she saw the rest of the décor.

There were strange contraptions displayed on the walls that looked for all the world like medieval torture devices. Leather collars and a silver muzzle made her stomach turn, but the worst things by far were the large wooden table tops displayed at an angle on the side walls.

There were leather straps attached to each of the corners, and a series of metal rings around the edge threaded with thin silver chains that made Liz’s skin scrawl. The tables themselves were intricately carved with entwined alpha and omega figures, reminding her a little of the ornate harp that Reddington had given her.

To her chagrin, the scent of her anxiety began to permeate the air around them and she felt Reddington grasp her hand, his thumb gently stroking the back of her hand to calm her. A refined string quartet began to play, and the crowd turned to look as Lattimer, a handsome man of about forty, entered the room holding the hand of an omega child. She wore a pretty white dress like the other omega children Liz had seen, and had dark blond hair which fell in curls around her shoulders.

“Is that his daughter?” Liz murmured curiously to Reddington.
It was almost imperceptible, but she felt his body tense slightly next to her. He paused a beat before answering her quietly.

“His new omega.”

As his words sunk in, a sickness began to twist in her stomach and her chest tightened. This was the omega - the addition to his harem. A girl who couldn’t be more than ten years old. She began to shake her head slowly.

“I can’t” she groaned under her breath. “I can’t do this.”

She expected Reddington to soothe her, to reassure her that they would fix it somehow, but was surprised when he brought his hand up and gripped the back of her neck.

“Come now sweetheart, you promised me you’d be on your best behavior. You wouldn’t want to disappoint me, now would you” he said pointedly, his tone so full of warning that the omega inside her trembled.

She looked around and saw with alarm that her increasingly distressed scent was drawing curious glances from those standing near them. She licked her lips and shook her head.

“No” she whispered.

“Good girl.” Reddington nodded and gave her a tight, close-lipped smile before returning his eyes to the spectacle in front of them, though his hand remained on the back of her neck for the remainder of the ceremony.

She stood, numb and shaking as words were spoken over the “couple”, passages of verse that referred ambiguously to an alpha’s role as both father and husband. The girl remained silent throughout, and when it was done, Lattimer took a black velvet box from his jacket pocket and knelt down in front of her.

For a moment Liz thought it was a large ring box, but her heart froze when he removed a small, silver key and a collar which he fastened to the girl’s neck before tapping her nose affectionately. Liz drew a sharp breath and felt Reddington’s grip tighten a little on her neck, warning her to stay silent.

Music began to play again and the crowd began to clap and then chatter and mingle among themselves. Her legs felt weak and she was desperate to leave the room, but she saw Lattimer and the child approaching them.

“Victor” Reddington exclaimed animatedly. “Allow me to congratulate you.”

“Wonderful to see you here Raymond” Lattimer responded in a slow, British drawl. “May I present Evie. Isn’t she the most perfect creature?”

Liz felt Reddington nod, though with her head bowed, Liz couldn’t be sure if his reaction was genuine.

“And this must be Elizabeth” Lattimer continued. “May I?”

“By all means” Reddington responded silkily. “On your knees, Elizabeth.” His voice was rich, commanding, and her knees bent, taking her gracefully to the floor before she’d even had a chance to think about what was happening. Although he had warned her she would have to follow his lead, she hated how naturally her body bent to his instruction.
When she was in position she felt his hand come to rest gently on the back of her neck, his palm warming the soft skin. Despite herself, she felt a wave of calm sweep over her; he was there, protecting her. From her position on the floor, Liz turned her eyes upwards just in time for Lattimer to catch her chin in his palm, studying her face before turning it to one side and then another.

“Charming” he murmured. “A rare beauty even among the jewels we have here tonight. But I see you decline to have her treated with sedatives. If you don’t object to the observation, I wonder how you are able to ensure her obedience.”

Liz tensed and immediately felt Reddington’s hand tighten a little on the back of her neck, reassuring her.

An unpleasant smile spread across his face. “I assure you I don’t require sedatives to ensure Elizabeth’s good behavior. She understands that disobedience is not an option.”

Liz felt a sliver of fear slip down her spine in spite of herself, but calmed a little when she felt his thumb gently stroke the sensitive skin on her neck.

Lattimer smiled with cold amusement. “I’m glad to hear it. Though I’d wager in time you may reconsider your opinion on the use of sedatives. They can play a very rewarding role in shaping the relationship between an alpha and his omega. Now if you don’t mind, I need to see that Evie gets some sleep. It’s already past her bedtime.”

It took everything Liz had not laugh at the absurdity of this comment, so instead she focussed her lowered gaze onto the white satin shoes of the girl in question, whose feet were shuffling sleepily.

“So soon?” she heard Reddington respond with a frown in his voice. “Surely she might be permitted to stay up and enjoy the festivities. After all, it is a special occasion.”

Lattimer chuckled softly. “Raymond, I never took you for the sentimental type. I assure you she’s exhausted and would much rather rest than be around us boring grown-ups. Besides, she has a long week ahead of her” he added enigmatically in a way that made Liz’s throat contract with nausea.

“May I congratulate you too” he continued, smiling affectionately down at Liz. “She really is a wonderful little bitch. Stunning” he murmured before moving away from them, steering the silent girl from the room.

Liz was utterly shell shocked. Not so long ago she had felt normal; she had been a woman with a husband and a career. Now she was on her knees, her body and her temperament being discussed over her as though she were Reddington’s pedigree dog.

“Bitch” she whispered, trembling under his hand.

“You can stand up” he said quietly, meeting her eye with a concerned look as she rose in front of him. He moved his hand from her neck to her shoulder, giving it a gentle squeeze.

She pulled back sharply. “I need some air.”

She walked as calmly as she could to a large deserted balcony off the reception room, the lights and sounds of the gathering receding as she stood on the dimly lit stone looking out over the grounds. Reddington appeared beside her momentarily, leaning on the ornate balustrade. He stood close, but didn’t touch her.

“This is horrific” she breathed quietly, without meeting his eye. “That little girl… I wasn’t prepared.”
“It isn’t possible to prepare for something like this” he responded gravely. “But you can do what we set out to do. And perhaps we will succeed in removing one more evil from the world.”

Liz reached up and wiped an angry tear away from her eye. “I don’t understand – he has omega women, I saw them. Why would he…” she trailed off and after a moment Reddington answered her unspoken question softly.

“For the Children of Edon, the alpha male is almost like a god. He must be obeyed, worshipped… loved, by wives, daughters, and concubines. Some believe that an omega child is more likely to bond with an alpha when she reaches maturity if he has already become her caregiver. Her world.” He finished hollowly.

Liz nodded tightly and took a shaky breath of the cool night air. “I know you don’t want any of this for me. But when you touch my neck… when you talk to me the way you did in there…How can I imagine that there is anyone else but you?” she asked quietly, turning to look at him.

He was looking at her with a pained expression, his lower lip slightly curled as he considered his response.

“Elizabeth there is so much that is unknown to you. Things you can’t yet comprehend. But you will. And when you do, you may feel very differently.”

Liz huffed a breath and drew her arms around herself. “How long till we can get out of here?” she asked stiffly.

Reddington nodded briefly. “Not long. My contact should be joining us shortly.”

“In that case, we’re right on schedule” said a clipped, British voice behind them, and Liz’s stomach turned to stone.

They spun round, weapons drawn, as Lattimer and a nervous-looking man with a pinched face joined them on the balcony, flanked by a healthy number of armed guards.

“You’ll forgive the intrusion” Lattimer continued coldly, “but it seems our mutual friend here picked sides and you lost. He’s been telling me some very upsetting things, Raymond.”

Liz’s heart was thundering like a jack-hammer, but Reddington was looking at his contact with an expression of disapproval rather than alarm.

“Daniel, I’m disappointed” he said neutrally. “You’ve been drinking the Kool Aid.”

The man smirked a little, but Lattimer seemed irritated, and although his British politeness never faltered, Liz detected a frisson of anger when he spoke.

“That’s enough pleasantries. Now be a good sport about it, and come quietly.”

Liz’s muscles instantly tensed, her gun aimed at Lattimer’s head and a fierce expression in her eyes, but to her dismay, he laughed.

“That really is quite endearing. But guns aren’t toys my dear, and yours is about to get you both killed. Raymond understands.”

She expected Reddington to deliver a smart remark, to begin fighting, but she felt a cold shiver wash over her as he tossed his own weapon onto the floor, his scent betraying his anxiety as he did so.
“Put down your gun, Elizabeth” he said quietly. "Put down the gun.”
Liz fought to stay calm as they were escorted by armed guards through the back of the house and down to a corridor in the lower level of the building. The noise from the festivities grew more and more faint as they moved, until all she could hear was footsteps on the concrete and the unsteady sound of her own breathing. They stopped in a large underground garage, the walls cold and bare and the space brightly lit with a glaring bulb.

Liz looked nervously at Reddington, whose tux was being crumpled by the grip of three large alpha guards, but his attention was focussed on Lattimer.

“Let her go Victor” he commanded. “Your grievance is with me, and I assume a man of your convictions would have no interest in harming an omega.”

Lattimer strolled casually closer to him and looked thoughtfully for a moment. “Under normal circumstances you’d be quite right. In fact I find the idea of doing any permanent damage to your beautiful girl to be quite abhorrent. But these aren’t normal circumstances are they, Raymond?” he said enigmatically. “Why don’t you have a seat” he finished, nodding to a chair.

“I’d rather not” Reddington responded drily.

“But I insist.” Lattimer gestured at the guards and Liz watched in apprehension as they pushed Reddington into the chair, tying his hands behind him and slapping large hands on his shoulders to keep him seated.

“I assure you it’s the best seat in the house” Lattimer continued ominously. He turned and snapped his fingers. “Bring the table – yes that’ll do nicely” he finished as a mahogany table was placed in the centre of the room.

Liz looked at the table out of the corner of her eye and felt sick as she saw that it was like the ones she had seen displayed on the wall in the reception room; ornate carvings with leather straps attached near each corner. She turned wildly to look at Reddington and his expression terrified her more than the table. He his eyes were sharp, wide and focussed on Lattimer; he didn’t look at her.

Two guards began to drag her backwards towards the table and she was flooded with adrenaline, struggling in their grip.

“Stop! Get your hands off me!”

She elbowed one guard in the stomach and kicked hard at the other one’s shin. They swore and loosened their grip momentarily but it wasn’t enough; soon they had strengthened their hold on her, their fingers biting into her arms.

Observing this, Lattimer chuckled in Reddington’s direction. “She’s extremely spirited for an omega” he laughed softly. Suddenly his smile vanished; he spun round and backhanded her hard across the face as the guards held her. Liz tasted blood on her lip and she knew that Reddington could smell it – she could sense his fear for her and it was appalling.

“Stop this. Now.” Reddington said in a hard voice

Lattimer turned back to Reddington and wagged a finger. “Now now, you know what they say - spare the rod, spoil the omega.”
“It’s child” Reddington said darkly. “Spare the rod, spoil the child – and it’s a disgusting sentiment regardless.”

“Oh yes that’s right” Lattimer mused. “Your oh-so-modern approach to handling your omega - all that guff about not requiring sedatives. Well you’re on my turf now Raymond, and I’m a traditionalist.” He turned back to the guards holding Liz. “Hold her still” he said, removing a syringe from his pocket.

Liz’s heart was thundering horribly as she watched him approach her. “What’s that? No!”

“Lattimer!” Reddington said urgently. “Let her go and you can have anything you want – you know who I am, you know I can make it happen. This is a limited-time offer Victor, you need to act now.”

“That is most generous Raymond, but you will see that I have everything I want, right here” Lattimer murmured, stroking Liz’s face with his finger. She struggled in between the guards as he stepped round behind her holding the syringe.

“I’ve been waiting for the opportunity to try a new sedative” he said, carefully tapping the plastic to remove any air bubbles. “In small amounts it has much the same effect as Megased, but a healthier dose is apparently rather trippy – it induces visions, or more accurately waking nightmares – it’s quite a potent formula.”

Liz cried out when he put his palm firmly on her forehead, forcing her head still against his chest as he emptied the contents of the syringe into her neck.

For a terrible moment she thought she was going into heat again – it was just like that, the shock, the powerlessness – but there was no arousal, no warmth, only weakness as her racing heart pumped the sedative round her body.

“That’s better” Lattimer said contentedly as she sagged limply against him. She felt the guards release their hold on her and a moment later her feet left the floor as Lattimer swept her deftly into his arms. He laid her helplessly on the table, and then, to her dismay, he turned her onto her front, moving her head gently to the side so that her cheek rested against the cool polished wood. Although his movements were relaxed and methodical, his scent carried a pungent odor of rage under his calm exterior, like chemicals or gasoline.

Before she had a chance to think about why he was so angry she felt the leather straps being buckled tightly around her wrists and ankles and was suffused with panic; she could hear Reddington shouting Lattimer’s name in the background over the sound of blood rushing in her ears.

When he had done strapping her down, Lattimer stood back as though she were a piece of art he was admiring.

“She really is extraordinarily beautiful” he murmured. “Perfectly designed to entice me. To make me want to protect her. Such a pity her loveliness will go to waste.”

Liz was sure unconsciousness would come soon, but it didn’t. She was awake, her mind dizzy with fear and adrenaline but her limbs were like lead as she tugged ineffectually at the straps, her knee sliding against the red silk of her dress.

She could hear Reddington’s voice, his hard and commanding tone directed at Lattimer doing little to hide the fear she felt radiating from him. She wanted to look at him, to comfort him, but with the humiliation of being tied down on her front, she couldn’t bear to see his face, or for him to see her cry. She tried closing her eyes but Lattimer delivered a sharp tap to her cheek.
“Eyes open my dear, that’s it. Let him see how afraid you are. You’re going to help me teach him a lesson.”

Reluctantly Liz opened her damp eyes, blinking tears away. Reddington was tense in his chair in the grip of the guards, his chest heaving, but he was still staring at Lattimer. When he spoke again his words chilled her to the core.

“This is beneath you, Victor. The rape of a defenceless young woman isn’t your style. You’re an arms dealer, you’re in it for profit - I’m offering you the biggest payday you’ve ever seen, you’re going to turn that down?”

Liz’s gaze froze in fear. On some level she’d known Lattimer’s intentions the moment she’d seen the table, and certainly when he’d laid her on her back. But to hear Reddington speak the words, to imagine him witnessing her being violated by another man made her inner omega crumple in shame. Despite that, nothing prepared her for Lattimer’s response.

He let out a puzzled laugh. “You can’t *rape* an omega, what a strange notion. Omegas should live, mate and die at the pleasure of alphas. In this case it will be at my pleasure.” Liz watched paralysed as Lattimer addressed Reddington, his body stiff with rage. “You see Raymond, you’re about to find out what it feels like to have someone take your omega from you.”

Liz inhaled sharply, desperately searching Reddington’s face. “What’s he talking about?” she murmured, confusion from the drug beginning to cloud her senses. She hated that he still refused to look at her.

“Yes Raymond” Lattimer said coldly. “Perhaps you’d like to explain to your darling girl what you were up to tonight. That you and your people were trying to take Evie from me. Did you imagine you would rescue her? Did you want her to tell you my secrets? Or did you want to keep her for yourself?”

Reddington didn’t respond, and Liz let out an involuntary sob, the reality of the situation dawning on her. Whatever his motivations, Reddington had not given her the whole truth about why they were there, and she would pay for it dearly.

Lattimer crouched down to her eye level then, stroking her face and gently wiping away the blood on her lip. “Shhh little one” he said softly. “All you need to know is that as I touch you…as you take your last breath… your alpha couldn’t protect you. You’re suffering for his sins. But to die for your alpha – well that’s a noble death indeed, isn’t it.”

She watched numbly as Reddington struggled against the guards in his chair, his chest rising and falling ever more quickly as his panic increased. Lattimer was right. He couldn’t protect her. She twisted weakly as Lattimer stood behind her and put his hand on the back of her neck, his other hand sliding slowly over the silk of her dress and coming to rest on her bottom where he began to rub her gently. She was shamefully aware that under her dress she was naked and growing wet, her body responding to Lattimer’s attentions as it was designed to.

He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent deeply, letting out a small groan of appreciation.

“God Raymond, she’s perfect” he breathed.

Then, as if in a trance, he began to slowly tighten his hand on her neck, murmuring “have you ever threatened an omega just to get at that exquisite tinge of fear in the air? Like bruising lavender between your fingers to release the scent.”
As his grip tightened on her throat, Liz was overwhelmed with the feeling of choking. But it wasn’t his hand, no – it was smoke. She closed her eyes to shut it out but it only made it worse; in her mind’s eye all she saw was smoke, and licks of great orange flames. She let out a strangled cry, desperate to stop the sickening visions, clamouring to breathe. She opened her eyes again in time to see Reddington wrench himself from the grip of the guards with a great roar that would have struck fear into the heart of any alpha.

In that moment the underground garage was filled with footsteps and shouts, followed by the cracking of gun fire.

Through blurred vision and her strange, sideways view from her position on the table she thought she recognised Dembe amongst the intruders, and a gray-haired man she had seen in Reddington’s entourage before. They were quick and effective, freeing Reddington and taking out the guards one by one.

She saw Reddington take a gun from Dembe, spin round and fire multiple times without hesitating at the area behind her where Lattimer had been, his expression hard and cold. Strapped down and helpless to move away from the hail of bullets, she squeezed her eyes shut, and sobbed as visions of flames leapt again behind her closed lids.

It was the fire, the one in her nightmares - she was back there. A long corridor opened up in front of her and she tried to run down it, but her legs were so short and unsteady and her little feet were bare. She could hear a child’s voice calling her, telling her they had to hide, and then a man shouting.

“Daddy no!” she cried, though she wasn’t sure why she’d said it.

She began to struggle in distress, and then felt strong hands on her as Reddington reached her side, quickly unbuckling the cruel straps from around her wrists and ankles. He turned her over gently on the table, cupping her face and stroking her cheek while he scanned her limp body for injuries.

“Lizzie” he said urgently. “Lizzie can you hear me?”

She shook her head, her eyes screwed shut. “There’s so much smoke” she whimpered and he frowned, confused for a moment, before his features sharpened in realisation of where her drug induced state had taken her.

“No sweetheart, you don’t want to see that” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “Don’t look. Come back to me. Open your eyes now sweet girl, do as I say. Come back.”

He moved his hand over her face, smoothing her hair off her clammy forehead before holding her cheeks gently between his fingers and thumb. “Elizabeth!”

The scent of burning in her mind was so real she could almost taste it in her throat, but then there was something else, a scent that carried further than anything. It was Reddington, his abject fear, sharp, terrifying and so familiar; all she could think was soothing it, making it stop, as though she had always been meant to do that.

Her eyes flew open then, blue and wild and round with horror, her breath coming in short gasps.

“You were there” she breathed “the night of the fire.”

He looked at her for a moment, his eyes wide and sharp with anxiety. “Yes.”

“We have met before. When I was a child” she said slowly, staring up at him in consternation, the deepest betrayal pulling at her features. “That’s why we bonded.”
“Lizzie-” he warned, but she didn’t stop.

“I actually thought it was romantic – bonding at first touch. I thought I was special. But it wasn’t that at all, was it?” she said bitterly. “God I felt so sorry for those little girls in The Children of Edon, the ones they literally groom for sex. Was I like them?” she choked. “What did you do to me that made this happen?” she finished in an accusing whisper.

“It isn’t what you think” he said in a low voice, his jaw tight.

“You were in my life when I was a little girl. When we met again we bonded instantly. That’s a hell of a coincidence” she said, biting back a sob.

Reddington was silent, his teeth clenched together, as though forcing himself not to answer her.

She shook her head angrily. “I thought you were different than other alphas, that you believed I could be more than my body. But that’s why you came into my life now. Not to help me. To use me.”

“No” Reddington said forcefully. “Elizabeth I can’t tell you why it happened, but it wasn’t that. I promise you.”

“You can’t? Or you won’t, because you don’t want to admit the truth. At least now I understand why you have so much guilt.” She shook her head and tried to push herself into a sitting position.

He reached out his hand to help her up but she flinched violently away from him.

“Don’t touch me!”

Suddenly the garage was filled with shouts and loud footfall for a second time, and Ressler ran over to them, weapon drawn.

“What are you doing to her? Leave her alone!”

Reddington stood back, a snarl crossing his lips. “Agent Ressler, late again. Although frankly I’m surprised you showed up at all.”

“Yeah, well Cooper didn’t want to take the risk that you wouldn’t be able to protect her and it looks like he was right” he said, holstering his weapon and looking at Liz with concern.

“Over here!” he shouted to paramedics as they arrived on the scene. “Keen, you ok?”

“What about the cult, those children…” Liz responded thickly, deflecting his question as the paramedics attached a blood pressure sleeve to her arm.

“We got our probable cause - it’s been shut down, the omegas are safe” Ressler informed her with a hint of pride in his scent.

Liz nodded in relief, but looked up sharply when Reddington’s deep tones cut across them.

“The girl, Evie. Lattimer’s omega. I need to speak with her.”

Liz huffed a breath incredulously. “Lattimer was right – you want something from her.”

“What’s going on here?” Ressler queried, frowning.

Reddington canted his head, his mouth set in a tight, thin line. “Victor Lattimer was an
extraordinarily cautious man who happened to be guarding information that is extremely valuable to me, and to you, Elizabeth. Now he’s dead. I have reason to believe that little girl is the one person who may have access to that information.”

“Forget it” Liz said vehemently, returning Reddington’s closed stare. “It’s not going to happen.”

“You heard her” Ressler said firmly. “C’mon Keen, I’m getting you out of here.”

He stretched out his hand to her and, swallowing her pride, Liz took it as she slipped shakily off the table. She pulled the paramedic’s blanket around her shoulders, hating that Lattimer’s drug had left her so weak, her knees trembling just at the moment she needed to be stronger than she had ever been.

Ressler held her arm to support her, and though she didn’t look back, she could feel Reddington’s eyes on her, the deep scent of his anxiety tugging at her conscience as she walked away.
Chapter 34

Reddington’s black Mercedes drove slowly through a maze of high rise buildings, the driver looking warily about him as the car wound deeper into the complex.

“Raymond I do not like this” Dembe said in a low voice, glancing in the mirror to observe his employer in the back seat.

Reddington was staring out of the tinted window, as if looking at something very far away.

When he didn’t answer immediately, Dembe continued. “It is too exposed here.”

Reddington looked round then, his features pale and tired, the purplish shadows under his eyes betraying long-term sleep deprivation.

“I agree it’s less than ideal” he answered wearily. “But needs must. Lattimer’s omega Evie was the best chance I had of obtaining a vital piece of information I will need to end this. With that option unavailable, I must seek an alternative means to move forward. You know what’s at stake”

Reddington finished matter-of-factly, palming his fedora onto his head as the car drew to a halt.

Dembe turned around to observe him directly. “You should have told her the truth. Now she is frightened. She does not understand.”

Reddington paused, considering his friend’s statement, his face tensing in pain. “Perhaps she ought to be afraid of me. I don’t know how to tell her truth.”

“You tell her the truth by telling her everything” Dembe told him gently.

Reddington swallowed and looked away. “I can’t do that.”

He exited the car abruptly and Dembe followed. As he stepped out, he put his hand on his weapon, immediately on alert.

“There is blood in the air” Dembe said, his voice low and urgent, and both men drew their weapons, looking about them sharply at the tall surrounding buildings.

“Can you see anything?” Reddington asked in a low growl, his eyes carefully scanning the area.

“Negative.”

“From the scent I’d say there’s a fresh body concealed in the alley behind the next block” Reddington murmured, the lines around his eyes deepening as he concentrated. “It’s most likely my contact.”

“We need to leave” Dembe said urgently. “Raymond!”

Reddington turned, and it was then that a single gunshot rang out, the scent of gunpowder, oil and blood drifting on the breeze.

In the weeks since she had gone undercover at the cult of the Children of Edon, Liz had become withdrawn and hard, more determined than ever to find the truth she was looking for. It was a truth
that was hinted at in her visions of the fire, and she felt a deep anger that she had no waking knowledge of that night, as though her own memories had been stolen from her.

Lattimer and his drug had changed everything she thought she knew about herself; he had left her deeply afraid of the man she had come to think of as her protector, and ashamed of the feelings she had felt for him. After she had gathered her scattered, wretched thoughts, she had gone back to Radford bank, and left a simple message in the safety deposit box once used by her former husband. It read:

*I know about Reddington. We need to talk. L.*

She had no idea if Tom was still checking the box, or even if he would tell her anything useful, but she’d left it there anyway on the understanding that sometimes you need to use a devil to catch a devil. Then, she waited, the weeks passing with her sleep plagued with a recurring nightmare that left her drained and confused.

She was back in Victor Lattimer’s house, strapped to the sleek mahogany table. At the beginning she could never tell whether she was lying on her front or back until a face appeared above her. She always expected it to be Lattimer, but, unfailingly, it was Tom’s pinched face that she saw standing over her, his expression cold and flat.

As she tried to sit up, she realised that he was standing behind her, holding her down, his hands pushing hard on her shoulders and pinning her to the table.

“Tom, please” she choked but he just shook his head.

“I’m sorry Liz – this is what you were meant for” he told her, his tone hollow.

He looked up expectantly towards a dark door that had opened up in front of her, as if he was waiting for someone. It was then that she heard it; the faint sound of footsteps growing closer and closer.

Her heart began to pound as she listened, the creak of the finest Italian shoe leather and the steady stride of the sole on the corridor betraying the identity of the man who was coming for her.

Reddington.

Liz began to struggle, panic rising in her chest. “You have to let me go” she said hoarsely. “Tom, he’s coming for me, please!”

But her former husband only pushed down harder on her arms, bracing himself on his back foot.

“You belong to him, Liz. You were always his” he said distantly as the footsteps came closer and closer.

She was so frightened she could barely breathe, and craned her neck to see the doorway in front of her where Reddington would appear any moment, her body writhing in a futile attempt to break free. As she kicked out, her heels slid uselessly along the polished wood of the table again and again until her legs grew strangely tired.

It was then that she realised that she was no longer a woman, but a child, her small feet kicking feebly. She whimpered in utter terror as the footsteps became deafening, before he appeared in the doorway in a grey silk vest and fedora.

Her scream caught in her throat every time as she woke, but it wasn’t just the sheer horror of being trapped at Reddington’s mercy - it was his face. It wasn’t *him. It wasn’t his face.*
Weeks after sending her message to her former husband, Liz drew her hoodie about her as she stalked through empty, littered streets near the docks. It wasn’t a route she would have taken even two months ago; as an omega it wasn’t a good idea to walk through bad neighborhoods alone. Now it no longer seemed to matter.

Just as she was beginning to doubt whether her message would ever be read, her honed omega intuition began to prickle as she sensed someone approaching her stealthily from behind. She kept walking, until she felt a man’s arm come tightly about her neck in an attempt to bring her to the floor. This time, she was ready.

She reacted in a fraction of a second, pivoting round and bringing her knee up to his groin whilst simultaneously smashing her fist into her assailant’s nose. He fell back on the ground, choking in pain and surprise, and Liz stood over him triumphantly, adrenaline pumping through her.

“Hey Tom” she sneered. “You should know you can’t sneak up on an omega.”

He spat blood onto the ground and glared up at her angrily. Liz was taken aback as she took in his appearance; he looked different, his head shaved and his body molded into aggressive muscle over which he wore a dirty white vest and a worn jacket that had seen better days.

“The last time we met I got shot at so I figured I can’t be too careful” he panted, wiping his nose with the back of his hand and inspecting the blood smear it left behind. “Bitch” he swore under his breath.

“Oh, I don’t know Tom, from where I’m standing you look like the bitch to me” Liz shot back drily. She jumped back suddenly, just in time to avoid the swipe of his leg as he attempted to bring her feet out from under her. Recovering quickly, she lunged forward, but Tom’s move had bought him enough time to get back on his feet. Using her momentum against her, he pulled her towards him and locked her arms behind her back, leaving her seething and struggling ineffectively.

“What, you haven’t had enough of beating up omegas? You’re pathetic” she hissed, her anger at him, at Reddington, and the life she now lived bubbling over, the omega inside her spitting and scratching like an angry cat.

“Hey” Tom said firmly, tightening his grip on her in an attempt to hold her still. “You asked for me, remember? I got your note. If you’re not interested, then I’ll be on my way right now.”

Hearing his threat to leave, Liz forced herself to calm, aware that, whether she liked it or not, she needed him. Sensing her acceptance, he loosened his grip on her and she yanked her arms free, stepping back and folding them across her chest in a belligerent truce.

“Jesus Liz” Tom said then, sounding like his old self for a moment. “What’s gotten into you?”

She looked at him, her eyes cold and lip flattened under her teeth. “Reddington.”

“Sugar daddy not as warm and fuzzy as you thought, huh?” Tom quipped sardonically.

Liz paled at his words, nausea rising inside her as she swayed on her feet.

“Hey” Tom said, frowning. “You ok?”

“As if you care” she snapped, swallowing and raking her hand through her hair.
“Liz” Tom said quietly. “What did Reddington do to you?”

“You can drop the concerned husband act” she said, looking away.

“It’s not an act” he said flatly. “I do care about you. It’s why I ended up in this mess. It’s why Reddington will kill me if he ever finds me.”

Liz looked at him, confused. “What are you talking about? I need to know about Reddington, Tom. I need to know everything. If you really do care about me, you’ll tell me.”

Tom sighed and looked about warily for a moment. Seemingly satisfied that they were alone he shook his head, agitated.

“Reddington is the reason I met you. He hired me.”

The nausea Liz had felt returned and she took a step back, her stomach feeling like a stone inside her.

“He hired you to marry me” she whispered.

“No” Tom scoffed with a humorless laugh. “He hired me to watch you, to pose as a friend of a friend. Keep you safe, report to him. That was the deal. Until I fell for you. I thought he was going to kill me then – I can honestly say I’ve never been as afraid as I was when Reddington found out I’d touched his girl.”

“I’m not Reddington’s girl” Liz spat vehemently. “You said you were afraid but you didn’t leave. You married me. Why, Tom? Why did you do that to me?”

“I could tell you why but you wouldn’t believe me” he answered her enigmatically.

Liz shook her head exasperatedly. “Who were you working for last year? Who were you working for when you drugged me and left me alone in a hotel room while you assassinated someone? Who were you working for when you beat me unconscious in our house?” she hissed.

“I don’t know who they are” Tom said quickly, clearly chastened. “All I know is they’re a powerful organisation, more powerful than Reddington. It was the only way I could protect myself from him and still be with you.”

“The cabal” Liz whispered numbly. “You’ve been working for them all this time. The people who want to eradicate betas like you!”

Tom shrugged uncomfortably. “It’s just a job. I’ve posed as a Neo-Nazi too – it doesn’t mean that’s who I am.”

Liz was shaking now, the hairs on her neck twitching uncomfortably. “Did you kill Meera? In the club on New Year’s. I saw you there. Did you kill Meera Malik?” she asked, her voice rising to a shout.

“No” he said, shaking his head earnestly. “I knew they were targeting all of you that night. I went there to save you Liz, but Reddington showed up and there was nothing I could do. I watched him take you away from me. Again” he added bitterly.

Suddenly his face lit up, his expression strangely boyish for someone with a shaved head and bloody nose. “Leave with me, Liz. Right now. We can get away from Reddington, I can protect you from him. I’m the only one who really gets how far his obsession with you goes, I’ve seen it first hand for years. I know how to beat him.”
Liz let out a hollow laugh, the absurdity of the situation making her feel giddy. “You want me to run away with you just like that? That’s insane, Tom. You’re a sociopath - I don’t know whether to be more afraid of you or Reddington.”

Tom’s expression hardened and he shook his head. “Stop lying to yourself Liz. You’re terrified of Reddington, I can see it in your eyes. You’re a mess – he’s gotten into your head. I’m the only one who can protect you. You need me.”

Liz shook her head slowly and began to step backwards away from him.

“I don’t need you” she said defiantly. “Or Reddington. God. Everyone thinks omegas can’t be alone, that they can’t look after themselves – watch me” she finished in a hard tone and began to walk away.

“You asked me why I married you” Tom called after her. “It’s simple, Liz. I married you because I fell in love with you.”

Liz turned around, and suddenly the man who had abused and manipulated her seemed strangely small. She was reminded then of Ethan Maly, the beta boy who had fallen for his omega classmate, a dangerous infatuation that had ultimately cost the poor girl her life.

“I believe you think you love me” Liz said slowly “but you don’t. You don’t understand what love is.”

She spun and walked quickly away, slowing her pace only when she was sure that her former husband wasn’t following her.

After a while she became aware of a black Mercedes crawling along the edge of the water beside her and her heart rate increased. She picked up her pace and began to weave in and out of the dilapidated boat houses and rope piles until she heard a car door slam and heavy footsteps coming after her. She was about to break into a run when she heard Dembe’s voice behind her.

“Elizabeth!”

She whipped round in a panic, her body tense and ready to flee.

“I don’t want to see him, Dembe. Tell him to leave me alone or God help me-”

“He does not know I am here” Reddington’s body guard said then, and he looked so uncomfortable that Liz’s curiosity got the better of her urge to run.

“What do you want?” she asked warily.

Dembe was silent for a moment and then looked back at the path Liz had taken along the docks. “You should not meet with Tom Keen. Especially not in this place.”

His tone was low and even, but despite that, his words sparked a frisson of raw anger inside her.

“You followed me – he’s still having you spy on me!”

Dembe shook his head solemnly. “I told you he does not know that I am here. He may never know.”

Liz frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Raymond was shot in the chest an hour ago. He is in surgery now. I do not know if he will live.”
He spoke quietly, and it took Liz a few moments to process what he had said. Her chest began to tighten as if it were she who had been shot, and a deep horror grew inside her as her inner omega began to panic. *It’s not like losing your alpha, it’s not* she thought desperately, but she couldn’t calm the part of her that felt viscerally that she would fade and die without him, the man who had turned her life upside down.

She let out a piteous, involuntary whine and Dembe responded with a low, sympathetic growl, alpha and omega sharing their grief together.

Dembe lowered his head. “I am here because if I cannot be with him now… I would like to be with the person he loves.”

At his words, a sob rose in Liz’s throat and she covered her face with her hands, tears squeezing out from behind her lashes, her breathing uneven.

“How could this happen” she whispered shakily. “Was it them? The cabal?”

“I believe it was” Dembe answered her gently. “Raymond is a threat to them, now more than ever.”

“Because of me?” Liz asked slowly “Because of who I am to him?”

Dembe did not answer, and Liz shook her head, her lower lip trembling. “I don’t know what to do. How to feel… I should hate him. After everything he’s done. I don’t know…”

Dembe nodded sagely; Liz was surprised by his calmness and even more so when he began to talk again, saying more than she had ever heard him speak previously.

“Elizabeth, he is not the man you think he is. I was born in Sierra Leone. When I was six years old my family were massacred by a cartel. I thought then that I would die too, but for me… it was worse.” He paused here for a moment and Liz stared at him, a feeling of foreboding in her stomach.

“I was fourteen when Raymond found me in a brothel in Nairobi. I had been left to die. He saved me and gave me an education. University. Friendship. I owe him everything and love him as a brother. You must understand - the suffering of children is unbearable to him.”

Liz swallowed and ran her hands agitatedly over her damp eyes in an attempt to remove the evidence of her grief.

“I’m so sorry that happened to you. And I’m glad he helped you. But there’s just too much he’s keeping from me. His role in my past, the fire, Tom… You know what he told me when I saw him? He told me that Reddington hired him. That he’s the reason Tom was in my life.”

Dembe bowed his head. “You deserve the truth. I cannot give it to you. But there is something I can do.”

He held out a key as he spoke. “In Bethesda there is a small, second story flat which may be interesting for you. But please, Elizabeth… if he lives, Raymond must never know you were there. He must never know.”
As Liz entered Reddington’s apartment in Bethesda she closed the door behind her and inhaled deeply, her eyes closed in pleasure and relief. Whatever happened as surgeons fought to save him, here in this apartment he was so alive, his unique scent comforting her frazzled senses. Moving inside, she smiled in spite of herself. The walls were deep, exposed brick balanced with a heavy fireplace and built-in bookshelves laden with well-thumbed volumes. The furniture was lovingly worn leather, imbued with the scent of his relaxation; scotch, the faintest woody tinge of cigars and the perspiration of hard days done.

It wasn’t like the other safe houses she had seen him use, not opulent or derelict… It was just him, and it occurred to her then that this wasn’t a safe house at all. Right now at least, this was the nearest thing Raymond Reddington had to a home. As her eyes roamed about the sitting room she began to take in the photographs displayed on the shelves and mantle, her interest piqued by what looked like family photos spanning generations. She paused with curiosity when she reached a blurry photograph of a woman holding a child on a swing, curiosity which turned to lead in her stomach as she recognised herself as the little girl in the picture. Seizing the photograph, she squinted at it, trying in vain to make out the woman’s face, before running her nose over the frame. Nothing – the only scents in the whole place belonged to him, and, if her nose was correct, a male house cat that had yet to show itself.

After the shock had dissipated she began to study the photograph more fully. Although her face was obscured, the woman clearly had hair much lighter than Liz’s own, and was taller – perhaps too tall for her to be an omega, Liz thought, though she was clearly a beautiful woman. If this was her mother, was it possible that Reddington had been intimate with her? The omega part of Liz that was prone to jealously arched at the thought; she was by no means vain, but she could not help but wonder whether Reddington considered her to be as beautiful as her mother, if that’s who this woman was.

Desperate for more clues about her past, she scanned the rest of the apartment, her gaze settling on an old-fashioned, locked bureau which looked like it was first used when Lincoln was president. Pulling a small lock pick Sam had given her from her pants pocket, she set to work and soon had it open. She was disappointed to find nothing but mundane household bills inside, though she took note of his alias – Bill Kershaw.

She was about to give up when she noticed that the drawers at the back of the bureau seemed a little too high for the frame. She felt around underneath, and sure enough there was a large, concealed drawer which contained a stack of papers and photographs. The pictures on top of the pile caught her attention immediately – they were of her. Her, and Sam too. She smiled at the memories represented there - birthdays, gap-toothed school photographs, dance recitals – and felt a degree of comfort that Sam must have given him these pictures. Then, as she flicked through the pile, she found something that made cold creep into her bones.

It was another photograph, though this one was a grainy, black and white image and it took her a moment to process what she was seeing. It looked like another school class photograph, though this one was very different to the last. The children were little girls wearing drab pinafores and arranged in somber lines, standing in front of an austere concrete block with large writing on the front that
looked liked Cyrillic.

The first thing that struck her after the bleakness of the image, was the fact that all the girls were omegas, small in stature, with their enormous eyes staring joylessly into the camera. Then, it was with a slow horror that she realised that her own face was staring back at her from the top right of the assembled group. The picture quality was terrible, but she knew it was her, aged no more than about three or four.

Liz’s throat began to contract with nausea and she threw the photo aside, desperate to see the next one in the pile. It was her again, also in black and white, alone this time and standing beside a meter rule on a wall in what looked like a stark doctor’s office. The next and last one on the pile was similar, but this time the doctor was in the picture, an older man in a white coat with a lined, bland face and a flat expression, a clipboard in his hand.

She rummaged desperately in the drawer for more, for more clues that would tell her why she had apparently started her life in such misery, and what it meant, but found none. Had she been sick? Where was she? Who were all the other omegas? Only 12% of the population were omegas, so omega-only schools weren’t all that common except in very religious parts of the world. It occurred to her that she looked so waif-like that she almost had the appearance of a refugee child from the time.

The thought disturbed her almost as much as thinking about Reddington being with her mother. What if it wasn’t that he had coveted her as child - what if he had pitied her? She remembered Dembe’s words – the suffering of children is unbearable to him – and suddenly felt irrationally ashamed at the thought that Reddington had seen her like this - drab, thin, alone, and unloved. Then, of course, there was the most profoundly unsettling thing of all. If this had been her life, why couldn’t she remember?

Slamming the bureau shut, she stumbled through the rest of the apartment such as it was, vaguely aware of old recipe books in the kitchen and a well-used oven. Without really thinking about what she was doing she ended up in his bedroom, the bed small but comfortable and inviting. She hopped onto it instinctively and curled up, burying her nose in his pillow and inhaling his comforting scent.

After a few minutes she felt a small weight on the covers and realised that the cat she had scented earlier had finally emerged. She sat up and looked at the animal; he was a large, dark tabby with curious green eyes and a pink nose that sniffed at her cautiously.

“Hey kitty” she said softly, scratching the creature behind its ears.

As she petted it, she wondered about the fact that Reddington had a cat; many alphas and omegas did not keep animals because of the pressure of having their senses so attuned to the needs and emotions of a creature that was completely dependent on them. Though well-fed, this cat was extremely pleased to see her, and puffed its chest in a masculine display as it head-butted her hand in encouragement of her affection.

Suddenly it began to emit an extremely pungent, musky scent announcing its sexual interest in her,
and she drew back her hand in embarrassment.

“As territorial as your owner, huh” Liz muttered darkly, and went to the bathroom to scrub her hand clean.

As she emerged, her phone buzzed and she gasped quietly as she read the text from Dembe. Reddington was awake.

Liz entered the warehouse Dembe had instructed her to go to, her eyes darting warily about her. There were medical personnel dotted around the place, and the sound of machines humming in the makeshift hospital, as well as numerous scents that put her inner omega on edge; blood, antiseptic, and the residual hue of fear.

Dembe approached her then, his voice respectfully low in the cavernous space. “I am glad that you are here. He is refusing medication for the pain...I believe he is suffering” he finished in a somber tone.

Liz nodded at him wordlessly and then made her way to the curtained area in the middle of the room. The medical staff looked at her curiously but made no move to stop her as she pulled back the plastic sheeting slowly and stepped inside.

Reddington lay covered on a gurney, his eyes closed and his skin deathly pale, looking smaller than she remembered him. His refined suit had been replaced with a dark hoodie, a reminder that his defences had been viciously stripped away. If it weren’t for the steady beep of the monitor in time with the rise and fall of his broad chest she would think that he was gone, and the thought terrified her.

Despite her concerns, she approached him gingerly as one might a sleeping wolf; alphas were at their most dangerous when they were injured, their primordial, most defensive instincts often taking over. She could only imagine how an alpha as deadly as Reddington might react to vulnerability, especially if she were to take him by surprise.

“Lizzie” he murmured in a rough voice, his eyes still closed, and she froze, rooted to the spot. He had scented her.

He opened his eyes, wincing with the effort, but his blue-gray gaze was clear and fixed on her. They stared at one another in silence, and then he opened his palm where it lay on the blanket.

Overcome with a surge of emotion too primal for her to properly understand, she rushed forward to take his hand, their fingers interlacing, her palm pressing against his much larger one. She collapsed onto a stark plastic chair beside the bed, letting out a small sob. After a moment she covered their entwined fingers with her other hand and bent down to rest her head there, focusing on his warmth, his life.
He gripped her hand tightly, and allowed her to delicately scent his hand and wrist with her little turned up nose, and she was grateful that he understood her need. She shuddered involuntarily at the scent of blood that had dried on his hand, the way it permeated his comforting scent. She felt him swallow, and then he spoke again, his tone throaty and fatigued.

“Lizzie, there’s something I need to tell you. Something I should have told you some time ago.”

She turned her large blue eyes up to meet his, curling her lip in an attempt to control her emotions.

“You hired Tom.”

She said it simply - not accusing, not forgiving, just fact.

Reddington nodded fractionally, his brow creased with regret. “You were so innocent” he breathed. “Beautiful. A young omega, growing up with untold threats – utterly vulnerable and defenceless. Prey to some of the most despicable forces humanity has to offer and oblivious to the danger you were in. Sam had guarded you fiercely but you’d outgrown him, and I knew I had to find a way to protect you.”

“Tom” Liz whispered.

“Lizzie, I never intended him to become involved in your life in any way. I didn’t consider the very real possibility that a young beta would become infatuated with you to the extent that he would betray me and risk everything. I should have removed him. But by the time I realised what had happened, he’d already used his considerable skill to make you fall in love with him.”

“You let him live” she said slowly. “For me.”

Reddington’s lip twitched, as though he were still at war with himself over the decision to preserve her former husband’s life. “A confluence of peril had entered your life and I couldn’t stay away any longer. I turned myself into the FBI so that I could protect you myself.”

He paused and looked away from her, jaw tense and tongue running pensively inside his bottom lip. “Perhaps I should have done it from the beginning. Been your guardian.”

Liz shook her head emphatically, the suggestion tugging nastily at her insides. “And raise me like one of those omega girls in the cult?” she asked bitterly.

“No” Reddington answered heavily. “No, Lizzie. Not like that. But I knew that eventually I would need to guide you towards a truth that you would have to discover on your own.”
“What truth?” she asked him in a low, impatient voice. “That I’m Russian? Am I connected to your mission there?”

His lips pursed disapprovingly. “Yes, it’s time we discussed the fact that you’ve been to my apartment.”

Liz colored, remembering Dembe’s warning. “You mustn’t be angry with Dembe” she said hurriedly. “He wanted to help.”

Reddington grunted softly. “Remarkably, he’s still blessed with the ability to see the best in people. He wanted to convince you that I’m a good man. But I’m not, Elizabeth. I’m not a good man.”

There was something so bleak in his tone that Liz had to look away uncomfortably. “How did you know that I went there? Because I found out about Russia?”

Reddington’s nostrils flared and he shook his head in a resigned way. “That, and you’re carrying the distinctive odor of a beautiful woman who has met my cat. He’s a little rascal.”

The color in Liz’s cheeks deepened furiously, and Reddington huffed a shallow laugh, wincing at the pain in his chest that the action prompted. “Come now, you can’t blame him” he said gently. “Your scent is utterly intoxicating.”

Liz was taken aback at his frank statement, and it did nothing to quell her embarrassment.

She drew back, and, sensing her profound discomfort, he shook his head softly.

“Shame is a vicious emotion. You should never feel it for who you are, Lizzie.”

“That’s just it” she whispered. “I don’t know who I am. What I saw in your apartment…There’s a lot more to this than what you’ve told me, isn’t there?”

“Yes” he answered quietly, his tired eyes resting on her stricken features.

A single tear spilled over between her lashes and dropped on the blanket beside his hand. “Tell me” she breathed. “I need to know.”

“You want to know” he murmured, his tone fatigued. “There’s a difference.”

“Then just tell me this” Liz asked shakily. “Why can’t I remember? I’ve seen enough to know that some terrible things happened when I was a little girl. I know about the fire, I know I was in Russia,
that maybe I was sick, I don’t know. These aren’t things that a person would forget. What’s wrong with me? Did you... do something? Are you the reason I can’t remember?”

He stared at her in silence for a moment, and she was heart-stricken by the pain she saw in his stormy eyes, pain that went far beyond the considerable physical discomfort that he must be in.

“Yeah” he breathed, and her limbs went cold and heavy with shock.

“Why?” she choked.

“I’m not going to tell you” he responded, and although his voice was barely above a whisper, she still felt the full power of his denial.

Suddenly the curtain around the gurney was gently pulled back, and an alpha doctor came in, his expression firm. “Far be it from me to come between an omega and her alpha, but he needs to rest.”

Liz’s stomach knotted painfully at the thought of leaving him alone in the dark warehouse. Rationally she knew that she should run, that this was her chance to escape him; he’d kept more from her than she had ever imagined - he’d even manipulated her memories to do it - and even now in his weakened state he was seducing her back into his world.

“I’m staying” she said firmly.

Amused, the doctor’s eyes flicked to Reddington who simply nodded.

“Alright then” the doctor told Liz before throwing an exasperated look around him. “It’s not like this place has visiting hours. But he needs sleep, young lady. He’s been through hell. And if you can persuade him to let us medicate him properly then so much the better” he added darkly.

Reddington instantly began to shake his head, and Liz found herself squeezing his hand. “I know you don’t want to be vulnerable” she murmured. “But sometimes you just have to let someone help you. Dembe is here… And so am I” she finished, drawing her weapon from her waistband and resting it on her knee.

Reddington stared at her, working his jaw, before nodding fractionally. The doctor’s shoulders sagged with relief and he began to adjust the IV attached to Reddington’s arm. Before long, the alpha criminal’s eyes drooped shut, and the grip of his hand in hers relaxed as his mind began to wander.

He remembered being in a small hallway, the 80s decor of Sam’s old house instantly recognisable to
him, as was the man himself, looking young and healthy. Reddington walked towards him and caught sight of himself in the hallway mirror, also a much younger man, though his face was lined with pain even then. He continued past his friend and into the kitchen.

“It’s late. She’s asleep, Ray” Sam said, the agitation in his voice evident.

Reddington opened the fridge and took out a carton of milk, pouring some into a pan on the stove. Sam watched in confusion as he began to heat the milk, his face darkening as he watched Reddington remove a prescription bottle from his leather jacket and add two pills to the milk, grinding them in with a spoon.

“For Christ’s sake Ray, you’re not giving that to her!”

“It’s safe” Reddington responded, his voice low and tight.

“I can’t let you do it” Sam said, his voice stricken.

There was a metallic sound as the spoon clattered on the sideboard. “You think this is what I want?” Reddington hissed. “To drug a child?”

He shook his head, turned off the heat and poured the milk into a red beaker, carefully adding some cold water to the mixture. “I can’t risk her coming round in the car and panicking when she wakes up with…” he paused and swallowed before finishing his sentence “…with a stranger.”

Sam started forward. “Now see here, Raymond. You wanted me to care for her and I’ve been doing exactly that. I won’t say it’s been easy, especially not at night, but we’re getting on just fine. She’s got her own room - we decorated it together, her and me” he said with awkward pride in his voice. “All pink, ballerinas, you know. That’s what she likes. And you expect me to just let you take her away from me now” he finished fiercely.

Reddington looked at his friend for a moment before nodding, his expression softening. “You care about her. That’s good.”

He reached into his jacket pocket again and withdrew an envelope, handing it to Sam.

“What’s this?”

“Your insurance policy” Reddington said neutrally. “If you want it.”

Sam opened the envelope and exhaled loudly. “Adoption papers?”
“They’ll pass any level of scrutiny. After tonight, she’s yours.”

“The space where the name should be is blank” Sam observed quietly. “Masha-”

“As far as anyone knows, Masha Rostova disappeared that night, never to be seen again.” Reddington looked his friend in the eye, his expression serious. “She needs a new name.”

Sam drew his hand over his mouth, conflicted. “It doesn’t feel right.”

“Elizabeth” Reddington breathed, his voice low and distant.

Sam chuckled quietly in spite of himself. “Like the queen of England.”

“You treat her like a queen” Reddington responded, his eyes dancing for a moment before his expression turned serious again as he picked up the beaker. “Please understand that this has to be done, Sam. For her own protection. For all of us.”

“Sam?” said a little voice from the doorway.

The men turned to see the little girl standing sleepily in pink and white pajamas, clutching a limp toy rabbit in her hand.

“Hey there, Butterball” Sam said softly, holding his arms open and scooping her up. “Were we being too noisy? I’m sorry. You remember Raymond, don’t you?”

Reddington closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them to look at the beautiful little girl he was met with a pair of enormous blue eyes, staring back at him appraisingly. The girl nodded silently, her eyes fixed on him.

He swallowed, holding out his hands. “Give her to me.”

Sam hesitated, but the girl reached for him instinctively, and climbed easily into his arms where she lay quietly looking up at him.

“Hello sweetheart” Reddington said softly, holding the beaker to her lips. “Be a good girl and drink this for me, hmm?”

He exhaled in relief as she obeyed him without question, and rocked her gently as her eyes began to close and she tuck her head sleepily into his chest.
Sam ran his hand agitatedly down his face. “You bring her back to me, or so help me-”

“I'll bring her back” Reddington said heavily. “By morning she'll have forgotten that anyone ever tried to hurt her.”
As Liz made her way down the winding walkway, the scent of fruit trees and garden flowers tickled her nose pleasingly. This secluded cottage with its acres of beautiful land should have been a relaxing environment, yet her heart trembled uncomfortably in her chest as she approached Reddington’s suave silhouette, outlined against the afternoon sun.

“Lizzie” he greeted her warmly, reaching up to pluck a ripened peach from a laden bough above him. “Do I dare to eat a peach?” he murmured, observing the golden velvet fruit with admiration for a moment before holding it out to her.

Liz shook her head fractionally and he shrugged, taking a deep bite of the peach himself. Her lips parted slightly as she watched his teeth sink into the succulent flesh, the juice sliding down his chin where he caught it deftly with his tongue. To her embarrassment, her body began to respond to the obvious sexual display from the alpha; her sensitive nipples tightened against the lace of her bra, and she shuffled uncomfortably in an attempt to halt the dull throb growing between her legs.

He smiled at her softly, and to her surprise, held out his other hand, his eyes twinkling with life.

“Dance with me Lizzie.”

It was barely a question, his tone a low, seductive command that made the omega inside her desperate to take his hand.

“Why would I do that?” she asked warily, attempting to keep her composure.

“Because I’m alive” he answered simply.

His honesty was disarming, and when she thought of how close to death he had come, she found herself reaching out to him. A moment later he had drawn her to him, moving her softly and rhythmically round the garden to some unknown tune in his head.

Liz laughed in spite of herself, and he twirled her in response, his smile beaming.

“You were shot in the chest two weeks ago” she warned pulling them to a stop, unable to believe his energy.

“Well, as Dembe is fond of reminding me, keeping active is an important part of my recovery. Truth be told, all the aimless walking he has me doing doesn’t compare to the gift of dancing with you.”

Liz colored, aware of the scent of her pleasure mixing with the heady smell of the peach trees. Reddington sighed in satisfaction and took another nip of the peach he held before nodding at her.

“Are you sure you won’t taste it – just one bite…”

She swallowed, determined not to allow herself to be swept away by his charm.

“Shouldn’t you be tempting me with an apple instead?” she commented drily.

Reddington laughed softly, his eyes sparking with mischief. “Sweetheart, Satan comes in many forms but I assure you I am not he.”

“Oh I don’t know” Liz said, arching an eyebrow. “You kind of look like the devil to me.”
He nodded with resigned humor. “I take it now that I am back on my feet our truce is at an end.”

Liz pursed her lips. “You admitted to tampering with my memory - I can’t let that go. How is that even possible?” she added in a low voice, as though willing him to make her his co-conspirator. “What did you do to me?”

He stared at her in silence, his brow a little creased, as though he were turning over a painful memory.

“Was it hypnosis?” She pressed in a whisper. “Did you drug me? What was so terrible that you’d go that far to make sure I didn’t remember?”

“I’m not going to tell you, Lizzie” he said with quiet conviction.

His expression was so strained that the omega keened inside her wanting to comfort him, to tell him that whatever he had done, it was ok, she was his. But it wasn’t ok at all. He didn’t have the right to her body and he certainly didn’t have the right to her mind, to control her memories. A little growl of frustration rose in her throat.

“The picture of me in your apartment, with the alpha woman. Was she my mother?”

His jaw tightened, his lip stretching over his bottom teeth, but still he said nothing.

“I will find out” she told him determinedly.

“I’m sure you will” he responded tightly.

He turned and sat on a nearby garden bench, patting the space beside him. She moved reluctantly to sit next to him, and watched him warily. His bout of joie de vivre had dissipated, and for the first time she noticed the pallor of his skin and the scent of antiseptic from the bullet wound under his neatly pressed shirt.

He gazed out over the orchard before turning to her, his mouth set in a thin line. “The cabal has declared war on us, Elizabeth.”

“Who are these people” she asked slowly. “They’ve proven they can get to you anytime they like. The FBI have been hunting you for years and they’ve never even come close.”

Reddington nodded. “That’s a question I’ve been attempting to answer since before you were born. For some time now I’ve had an arrangement of sorts with a man I believed to be one of their key operatives in the United States, a man known as Alan Fitch who protected my interests in exchange for my maintaining certain secrets of theirs. It’s an agreement that has kept me alive, and one which has unfortunately come to an end.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “Fitch? As in the Assistant Director of National Intelligence?”

“The same.”

“I’d need congressional permission to question him-”

“Well that wouldn’t do any good” Reddington responded glibly. “He’s dead.”

Liz’s eyes widened and Reddington paused before continuing. “The day I was shot I went to meet an important contact in an attempt to elicit a name, someone in the highest halls of government who is doing the cabal’s bidding. That contact was Alan Fitch. Unfortunately I received a bullet in the
chest for my trouble.”

“That’s what happened?” Liz breathed. “He shot you and you had him killed?”

Reddington huffed a laugh. “Goodness no, he was dead when I arrived. His colleagues higher up the food chain had clearly decided that we were both a liability. And I suppose they were right” he said with a wry smile.

Liz turned her eyes up to him questioningly. “So how do we find this person with Fitch gone?”

Reddington rose to his feet, turning his face towards the afternoon sun to breathe in the powerful scent of the peach trees, a small smile on his lips. “The old-fashioned way, Lizzie - we’re going to sniff him out.”

“You’re telling me that the Assistant Director of National intelligence is dead?” Cooper asked incredulously. “Don’t you think we would have heard about that?”

Liz observed her colleagues at the black site, all gathered round the hub on the operations floor. Although she had been detached and distant since Reddington’s revelations had thrown her past into question, they had rallied at the prospect of a new blacklist and she was grateful. She shook her head at Cooper’s query.

“There’s no way they could let his body be discovered in an alley, it would raise too many questions.”

“I’ll say” Ressler cut in. “It’ll come out in the weekend paper - Assistant Director died at his home after a short illness or some bull.”

“Exactly” Liz nodded. “According to Reddington, the attempt on his life, Fitch’s murder, and the bioterrorist plot were all carried out by a clandestine global organisation known as the Cabal. He believes that they have someone smoothing the way for them, helping them stay two steps ahead. Someone powerful. It could even be someone we’ve worked with, someone who knows about the task force.”

The assembled team looked at one another uncomfortably and Cooper stepped forward, his scent growing dusky and gruff with indignation.

“That’s a big accusation from a criminal who’s been leading us on for months!”

Liz huffed belligerently. “Leading us on is exactly what he’s being doing, it’s what he does – he seduces, gives a little piece of the puzzle. It’s infuriating. But it is going somewhere – The Ford family, Madeline Pratt, the biological threat, The Ambassador, The Children of Edon, Tom-

“Meera” Aram cut in quietly and a solemn silence sat in the air among the team.

“And Meera” Liz agreed quietly. “These cases aren’t random. They’re all related in some way to the activities of an organisation way more powerful than Reddington.”

Samar shook her head, unconvinced. “You’ve got to admit, we’ve made some arrests but nothing concrete. How do we know this cabal actually exists?”

“It exists” Liz said emphatically through clenched teeth. “Reddington didn’t just decide to betray his
country, he did it because of them, some shared history. Something that involves me too. I… I think he was there the night my parents died” she finished, looking away.

“That’s quite a coincidence” Samar said with a frown. “He’s been connected to you since you were a child, and then he becomes your alpha.”

Liz could feel the tension rise in the room, an uncomfortable silence hanging in the air.

“That’s a horrible insinuation” Aram said reproachfully, his voice low.

Liz swallowed the shame brewing inside her and shook her head dismissively. “There are a lot of things that don’t make sense yet, and I will find answers. But right now we need to stop the person who is allowing them to stay ahead of us. We need to get the people responsible for Meera’s death.”

Aram nodded respectfully. “Where do we start?”

“There aren’t many leads, but Reddington says that he believes this person has used the services of a scientist known as The Scent-maker, a geneticist who can literally change a person’s physical smell. We start there.”

“That’s not possible” Ressler said incredulously.

“I don’t know” Aram said mysteriously, his hands flying over the console keyboard. “There was a case in Virginia a year ago where an insurance broker, Andrew Weinberg, was put on trial for the murder of a male escort. By all accounts he was a conservative family man, it rocked the community. The strongest evidence against him was his scent profile which was all over the victim. It was a sensational story, but the thing that was really weird about it was that Weinberg always protested his innocence, and claimed that his scent had somehow been planted on the body.”

Samar shrugged. “You can’t fake a scent profile at a crime scene, it isn’t like spraying a perfume. It comes through a person’s skin, it has DNA and it degrades. Everyone knows that. If his scent profile was on the body, he was there when the victim died.”

“The jury agreed with you” Aram answered. “But why would he concoct a story that no one would believe?”


“You can’t” Aram said slowly. “He killed himself in prison eight months after he was convicted.”

“We can’t do much with a dead witness” Cooper said pinching the bridge of his nose. “Do you have anything else?”

“Ah, yeah, actually I do” Aram responded with a frown. “Before Weinberg worked for HomeAce insurance, he was employed by The Cleveland Laboratory and Industries for fifteen years. It’s a biogenetics innovation center.

Samar raised an eyebrow. “From high level biogenetic research to home insurance – strange career move.”

“Too strange” Ressler said firmly. “Come on Keen, let’s check it out.”

“Sounds like an excellent idea” a voice said behind them, and the agents turned to see the Assistant Attorney General Tom Connolly approaching them with a smile.
“Harold” the alpha man greeted jovially, and Cooper shook his hand warmly before turning to the team to make introductions. “This is AAG Tom Connolly.”

“Please” Connolly said warmly, “call me Tommy. Harold and I are old partners in crime.”

“How ironic for an AAG” Samar quipped drily.

Connolly laughed with a smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “Much as I’d love this to be a social call I’m afraid I’m here on some rather sticky business. This disappearance of Assistant Director Lukas Allan Colfax. The case has come across my desk and, well, we’re determined to find out the fate of your esteemed colleague.”

Liz looked up, her stomach tensing, but before she could say anything Ressler stepped in.

“I thought there were no leads – do you even know he’s dead?” he asked incredulously.

“Well no, Agent Ressler” Connolly said evenly. “We haven’t found a body or one damned trace of him. But his car, cell-phone, credit cards, nothing has been used since the night he disappeared. Somehow I don’t think he’s going to turn up alive and well.’’

“I assure you we take the disappearance of one of our own extremely seriously” Cooper said, frowning at Ressler. “We’ll cooperate in any way we can.”

“It’s alright Harold, I understand if Colfax wasn’t too popular with your agents - they’re loyal to you, and I admire that. And while I don’t wish to speak ill of the man, I’m afraid to say that he had a bit of a reputation for being a ladies man. That kind of thing can get a man into trouble. Isn’t that right, Agent Keen?” he finished suddenly, turning to Liz.

Liz’s shoulders tensed as she met Connolly’s scrutinising gaze. “I guess” she answered guardedly, keeping her face placid as Connolly stared at her.

His expression seemed to convey everything his words hadn’t; she was an omega, soft and sexual and bound to arouse unwanted attention from a man like Colfax. She tried not to shudder at the memory of him trapping her in her office, of how close he had come to forcing himself on her. She glanced at Samar, at the alpha woman who had come to her aid, but her expression was stoic.

“Look” Ressler said heatedly. “I don’t mind being the one to say it - the guy was an ass. But just because we didn’t like him, doesn’t mean we won’t cooperate.”

Connolly looked at him with small, cold eyes, before chuckling at the assembled group. “I appreciate your candor, I’ll say that much” he said, shaking his head at them in mock resignation. “Well I’d best be on my way. I’m sure I’ll have questions for all of you – in the meantime good luck with your case, agents” he said smiling cheerfully as he made his way towards the elevator, whistling lightly into the darkness of the black site.

When Liz and Ressler arrived at the Cleveland Laboratory, an immaculate, futuristic building tucked away in the suburbs, they were greeted at the reception desk by a smartly dressed beta man who looked down his nose at them.

“You really should have called” he said, irritated. “Professor Angela Strom is the Director of Research here but she won’t be able to see you today.”
Ressler sighed and shook his head in a show of exasperation, before leaning on the counter and speaking a low voice. “Look friend, you gotta help me out here - I’m stuck on the job with a rookie omega. We need to see Professor Strom or this one will get upset. You know what happens when omegas get upset, right?”

The man shot a nervous glance at Liz and, on cue, she widened her large eyes sadly, her lower lip trembling.

“Ok, fine” he said hastily. “I’ll see what I can do. But the professor won’t like this.”

He walked off hastily down the corridor muttering under his breath, and Ressler turned to Liz with a smug smile. “Worked like a charm.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “You’re an ass” she told him drily.

Ressler shrugged in response. “It worked, didn’t it?” he said, nodding to the alpha woman approaching them in the foyer. “Professor Strom?”

The woman cast a quick eye over them, her expression unreadable. “Agents, what can I do for you?”

“Did you employ a researcher named Andrew Weinberg?” Liz asked.

“I did” the woman responded tightly. “I heard what happened to him – it saddened all of us.”

Ressler looked at her incredulously. “You don’t seem all that upset.”

Professor Strom sighed, shaking her head. “His last year here he became like a different person – anxious, withdrawn. Even secretive. I tried to talk to him but he shut me out. In the end his work suffered and I had to let him go.”

Liz nodded. “What was he working on?”

“Nothing controversial, if that’s what you’re asking” the woman told her. “He was working for one of our clients on refining a compound that would help preserve food for longer, but it wasn’t proprietary material. Nothing our competitors would be particularly interested in.”

“We’d like to see your client list” Ressler said, eyeing her authoritatively.

“I can’t help you there, agents” she said brusquely. “Come back with a warrant and it’s all yours. But I doubt you’ll get a judge to agree to it.”

“Can we look around?” Liz asked innocently, her large eyes widening curiously.

Professor Strom looked unmoved by Liz’s display, but she waved impatiently over her shoulder. Liz turned and saw a beta man with red hair in a white coat approaching them.

“Dr Mason, could you give these agents a tour of the lab please. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

The woman began to walk off down the corridor, and Liz caught up with her, putting her hand on her arm to stop her.

“Um, Professor Strom. There’s something else…”

The woman turned and looked at her exasperatedly. “Yes?”

Liz glanced around her awkwardly. “It’s actually a question about genetics. Is it possible for an alpha
woman to have an omega daughter?” she asked in a low voice.

Professor Strom raised her eyebrows. “A biological daughter? It’s uncommon, but it’s certainly possible. And the scarcity of those cases is in part due to social factors – it’s far more common for alpha males to mate with omegas than it is for alpha women to mate with beta males.”

Liz frowned. “So if an omega had an alpha mother, that means her father was a beta?”

The woman looked at her watch distractedly. “Most likely, yes. Alpha genes are dominant, so if two alphas have a child, the chances of that child being an omega are very slim.”

“Slim but not impossible?” Liz persisted.

“No, not impossible” the woman confirmed. “I really must go” she finished, walking away.

Liz turned and smiled as she observed the woman’s cell phone that she had successfully palmed. “So, if the alpha woman in the picture is my mother, there’s a good chance my father was a beta” she murmured. “Let’s see if you’ve got any other secrets to tell me.”

Liz looked at the lock screen and tapped through a few combinations, rolling her eyes when the screen brightened as she entered ‘1234’. She swiped quickly through Strom’s emails and then scrolled down her contacts, pausing when a familiar name caught her eye. Bill Kershaw. Her stomach knotted painfully; what did Reddington have to do with that woman? With this organisation? More importantly, why had he hidden it from her?

She tucked the phone up her sleeve and went to join Ressler and Dr Mason in the foyer. As she reached them she bent down and then handed the phone to Mason.

“Looks like your boss dropped her phone” she said innocently as the man took it from her, a puzzled look on his face.

“Would you like the tour now?” he asked uncertainly.

Ressler shook his head. “Another time. I’m guessing you have work to do. More since Andrew Weinberg was fired, huh.”

Mason shrugged guardedly. “Like professor Strom said. We were sad to lose Andrew, but he wasn’t pulling his weight.”

“Seems like the Professor has you all working pretty hard” Ressler commented.

“Biotech is a competitive industry. Every innovation, every development you can think of, someone is already working on it, someone has already promised it to a client. We need to stay ahead of the game. Now if you don’t want to look round I really should get back to the lab.”

He walked quickly away and Liz and Ressler exited the sterile looking building.

“Strom’s certainly guilty of being a hard-ass boss” Ressler said sardonically. “I can see that environment contributing to Andrew Weinberg’s breakdown. But I didn’t get a whiff of any deception there. I don’t know that this is where we should be looking.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure” Liz said slowly. “When I palmed Professor Strom’s phone I got a look at her contacts and I saw a name I recognised. Bill Kershaw.”

“Who’s Bill Kershaw?” Ressler asked with a frown.
Liz paused and looked at him darkly. “Someone we both know very well.”
Chapter 37

Reddington sat deep in thought on the couch in the secluded cottage, the dappled sunlight through the trees outside making interlocking patterns on the sitting room wall. A television set was on silently in the background, the news channel banner reading “civil rights attorney Martin Hannover to take beta employment rights fight to Supreme Court.”

“Raymond” said Dembe as he entered the room holding a cell phone. “Velov has made contact. I’m afraid it has happened.”

Reddington’s mouth twitched unhappily. “They’ve found him” he said quietly. “How much do they know?”

“Enough” Dembe said heavily. “They asked about Katerina. About what happened to her child. Raymond…they know she had a daughter.”

Reddington closed his eyes. “Thank you, Dembe. Give us a moment please.”

Dembe nodded regretfully and left the room, and a moment later Kaplan emerged from the shadows by the bookcase where she had been standing observing the television.

“This isn’t what we agreed, Raymond” she said in a hard tone, her beady black eyes staring him down. “You promised to protect her from this world.”

“And that is precisely what I have done” Reddington answered firmly, his gaze still fixed on the light dancing through the window.

“Is it?” Kaplan said in a clipped tone. “It seems to me that you’ve been drawing her further and further in. Do you really expect her to resist this hold you have over her?”

Reddington twisted towards her sharply in his seat and hissed in pain as the movement irritated the wound in his chest.

“Here” Kaplan said in a matronly way, grabbing her black doctor’s bag and striding over to him. “Let me see to that before you die of sepsis. Come on” she commanded irritably, indicating his shirt.

Reddington pursed his lips unhappily but obeyed, unbuttoning his shirt to reveal the gauze and tape protecting the bullet wound which Kaplan pulled back unceremoniously. Reddington grunted as she began to apply liberal amounts of pungent antiseptic.

“You should see someone with a medical license” the angular woman muttered under her breath.

“It would certainly be less painful, but ultimately less effective. You’re still the best” he said in a low voice, looking up at her apprehensively. “Elizabeth is who she is, Kate. The choices she’s made have been her own. She’s drawn to the study of criminals. Their inclinations. Their proclivities… I know you were shocked at the way things developed - how could you not be. But my goal is and has always been this: to protect her.”

Kaplan patted down a fresh gauze pad onto his chest and stood back, eyeing him directly. “I know dearie. I know that you love her, and how painful that must be for you. But Raymond she’s not yours. She never was. And it’s wrong to let her believe that you could be her alpha, to continue this charade. Do you really think that she isn’t influenced by you? That your feelings for her won’t put her life and everything we’ve worked for in jeopardy?”
She turned to look out of the window and caught sight of Liz’s graceful omega figure making her way down the path to the house. The two alphas watched her from the shadowy room in silence before Kaplan turned, her jaw firm.

“Like a moth to a flame” she said disapprovingly. “Be careful, Raymond”.

With that she stalked out of the room, passing Liz in the hallway.

“Good afternoon, Elizabeth” she greeted her stiffly, nodding before making her way from the house.

Liz frowned a little at the strange woman’s formal tone, wondering with a slight shudder why Reddington’s ‘cleaner’ was here in his chosen place of recuperation. She opened the door of the sitting room cautiously, her nose wrinkling a little at the scent of antiseptic.

“Hello, Lizzie” she heard Reddington’s low rumble from the soft leather couch.

“Hello Mr Reddington” she responded icily, staring him down. “Or should I say Mr Kershaw?”

Reddington’s eye twitched fractionally but he remained silent, staring at her expectantly.

Liz shook her head exasperatedly, her eyes flashing with anger. “We went to the Cleveland Laboratory today to track down this shadowy government figure you say is working for the cabal, and guess what - the only name I recognised led me straight back to you. Why didn’t you tell me you were a client of a lab linked to the scent manipulation you told me about? What are you hiding?”

She paused to catch her breath, looking at him with an expression of betrayal. “Is this even your scent? The way I react to you, when you’re near… is that really you? Or do you fake it like this blacklister you want us to catch? It’s a simple question!”

Reddington stared at her, his teeth worrying the inside of his cheek. “Perhaps. But there isn’t a simple answer.”

Liz’s teeth sank into her lower lip in frustration. “You know, I learned something else at the lab. If the woman in the picture is my mother - if she was an alpha - then my father was most likely a beta. I deserve the dignity of knowing who they were” she said heavily.

He looked at her and then surprised her by nodding, patting the space on the couch beside him. After a beat she moved reluctantly to sit next to him, keeping a wary distance between them.

“You’re right” he said softly. “It’s time we discussed the photograph. The woman in the picture is your mother.”

“What was her name?” Liz breathed, as though afraid that if she spoke loudly she would jolt him out of whatever humor had encouraged him to share this truth with her.

“I knew her as Katarina Rostova” he said tightly, “though she had many names. She was a KGB agent. Your parents were both in foreign intelligence.”

“And she was an alpha” Liz prompted, a dizzy feeling rising in her chest as her heart fluttered.

Reddington observed her for a moment before speaking in a clear, clipped tone. “Yes.”

“Were you in love with her?” Liz asked bluntly. “Is that why you have her picture? My father died the night of the fire - did you kill him because you wanted to be with her? Maybe you couldn’t stand that an alpha woman would choose a beta over you.”
His eyes sharpened but he remained silent.

“At least tell me who I am!” she choked.

Reddington’s expression softened, his eyes pained. “You are Elizabeth Keen” he told her gently. “That’s what matters.”

“This is my life” she said slowly, shaking her head. “I had a name.”

“Masha” he said quietly. “You were born in Moscow as Masha Rostova.”

Liz let out a shaky breath. “That photograph of me as little girl in the doctor’s office – was I sick? Is there something wrong with me?”

Reddington raised his eyebrows in pained surprised. “No no no, you weren’t sick, sweetheart” he assured her. “You were perfect.”

Liz frowned, her dark eyebrows creasing sorrowfully above her enormous blue eyes. “Then why was I in that place? You said that I would discover the truth.”

She stared at him beseechingly and he returned her gaze, his eyes deep and sincere. “There are pieces of the puzzle that I’m sure will come to you in time” he said softly, working the tension in his jaw. “But some truths belong in the past, Lizzie. Revealing them now would bring nothing but suffering.”

The sick feeling in Liz’s stomach that she had felt on seeing the photographs in Reddington’s apartment returned, and she fought the urge to tremble at the thought of what horrors he was concealing.

“You don’t get to decide” she whispered emphatically.

She started suddenly when her cell vibrated in her pocket, and her lips parted in surprise as she looked at the screen.

“It’s Cooper - I have to go. Tom Connolly has given us intelligence that there will be a series of attacks in the city, starting with a subway station.”

Reddington frowned. “The AGG is bringing intelligence to you?”

Liz nodded as she stood to leave. “You’re not the only source of information we have, you know.”

He pursed his lips unhappily. “Perhaps not, but I’m still the best connected. If a series of major terrorist attacks were about to happen I would likely know about it.”

“Feeling threatened?” Liz quipped, raising her eyebrow.

Reddington ignored the jibe. “Be safe” he told her sternly.

Liz nodded and made for the door, before turning to look back at him pointedly. “Connolly is investigating Colfax’s disappearance. In case you’re interested.”

She turned and left without waiting for an answer.
Liz met Ressler at Dupont Circle metro station to find the chaos of afternoon rush hour in full swing. The sounds and scents of the station crowded her senses, the black dust of traffic pollution and the scent of sweat, polyester and urine irritating her nose.

“What do we know?” she asked Ressler as they walked quickly past throngs of people towards the platforms.

“An informant for the Justice Department was offered immunity in exchange for critical information about a series of attacks” Ressler said grimly. “The first one is supposed to be this afternoon at six, right when people leave work.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “That’s in less than fifteen minutes – we need to evacuate the station now!”

Ressler shook his head. “There’s no time. We try to evacuate, people panic, there’ll be a crush and we’ll have no chance of finding the bomb. Our best shot is to find it and disarm it. Aram is going through the station footage for the last 24 hours. In the meantime we split up and search the platforms – unattended suitcases, signal boxes, anything.”

Liz nodded determinedly. “Got you – I’ll take Eastbound, you take West” she said, running for the escalator.

She pushed past the crowds of people on the platform, her eyes scanning the area and her nose primed for anything out of the ordinary. As she moved she drew glances from people in the crowd; although she was in plain clothes she still attracted attention from people who were interested in seeing an omega up close, their eyes filled with lust, jealousy or plain curiosity. She searched their faces with equal interest, looking for signs of guilt or anxiety that could lead her to the bomber.

She turned to survey the area behind her, and was suddenly knocked to the ground by a guy in a hoodie running along the platform. She went down hard, smashing her head against a concrete pillar, and her vision went fuzzy and dark.

When she became aware again, there was a crowd of passengers milling round her all talking at once.

“She’s an omega-”

“Are you alright, little darlin’?”

“Is she alone? It’s a busy place for a girl like her to be out by herself.”

“She’s a grown woman! You ok ma’am?”

Liz looked around in confusion until she heard a familiar voice.

“Excuse me, FBI! Move out of the way please” Ressler said in a commanding tone, dispersing the crowd.

He held out his hand to her and hauled her to her feet. “You ok?”

“No I am not ok” she said forcefully under her breath. “He’s placed the bomb somewhere on the platform and we have minutes to find it. He ran onto a train-”

“What are you talking about?” Ressler said with a frown. “Keen, it’s ok – we found the device. Aram pulled security footage from yesterday of the bomb being placed in a locker outside the control room. It’s been disarmed.”
Liz breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank God. That guy who ran into me-”

“Just some jerk” Ressler supplied gently. “The city’s full of them.”

“What about the next attack?” Liz asked urgently. “The informant said there would be another one. It could be immanent.”

Ressler grimaced. “According to the source the next one isn’t a terrorist attack – it’s a murder.”

“A murder? Who’s the target?”

Ressler shook his head. “That’s the thing - we don’t know exactly. But he did say that he heard it would involve an attorney.”

“An attorney” Liz repeated thoughtfully. “You know that tomorrow Martin Hannover is due to take the case over beta employment rights to the supreme court, right? If he succeeds it could put an end to preferential hiring of alphas.”

“What are you saying?” Ressler frowned.

“I’m saying it’s a hell of a coincidence that the biggest civil rights case since omega freedom in the 70s is up in front of the supreme court this week, and we get word that an attorney is going to be linked to a murder somehow” Liz said meaningfully. “Who do we know that doesn’t want to see betas get the same rights as alphas?”

“The cabal” Ressler answered grimly. “It’s all connected.”

Liz nodded and put her phone to her ear. “Aram – looks like we’ve got two cases for the price of one. “What have you got for us on Cleveland Laboratories?”

“Agent Keen, hi - I’ve been going through their financials and there are some irregularities. Some of the lab’s commercial payments have been rerouted through a dummy account that I traced back to a perfume store on Columbia Road, and I’m talking about thousands of dollars” Aram told her. “I know it’s, er, been a while since I had a girlfriend, but as far as I know perfume doesn’t usually cost over 500,000 dollars, especially from a store like that.”

“It doesn’t” Liz said, looking at Ressler. “Let’s check it out.”

Liz coughed involuntarily when she and Ressler entered the perfume store. It was dimly lit with rows and rows of perfume boxes and bottles lining the walls, the heady cacophony of scents instantly crowding their senses. A man stepped towards them and sprayed some perfume in the air in front of them with a flourish.

“What do you think?” he asked enthusiastically.

“What is that, jasmine?” Ressler coughed, covering his nose with his sleeve.

“Good nose! But then I guess I should expect that from an alpha” the store manager smiled. “This is our new blend. Perhaps your omega would like to try it?” he asked, eyeing Liz appreciatively.

“I don’t think so” Liz murmured, her eye attracted by the movement of a person at the back of the store. “Hey, stop!”
Suddenly she sprinted forward after a man running out the back, with Ressler following close behind. She caught up to the man just as he reached the back door, springing at him and bringing him to the ground with a crash.

“It’s the guy from Cleaveland Laboratories” she panted as she handcuffed his wrists behind his back on the floor.

“What, Dr Mason?” Ressler asked.

“You’re not gonna believe this, but no” said Liz, moving aside so that Ressler could see. “It’s the beta guy from the reception desk. The one we played.”

“Looks like he played us right back” Ressler quipped staring down at the sour-faced man grimacing on the floor. “Hey buddy – doing a little moonlighting?”

“What’s it to you?” the man snarled.

“Let’s see” Ressler said sarcastically. “You’re using your day job to run some kind of fringe scent science racket which helps frame people for murder.”

“Hey, I don’t know what people do with the product - that’s their business.”

“So you and Professor Strom wouldn’t know anything about a plot to frame an attorney?” Liz asked, her eyebrow raised.

The man paled a little. “Look, I just run the money. I don’t know what the Prof. and her team of wackos are up to. I almost got out after I heard about that guy Andrew that used to work there but-”

“But the money was too good?” Liz finished scathingly.

“Look, it isn’t easy being a beta in this city” he snapped. “I graduated 2nd in my class in biochemistry, but the nearest I get to that lab is running the reception desk.”

“So it probably bothers you to find out that your little scam could be linked to Martin Hannover – you know, the civil rights attorney who’s fighting for beta rights?” Ressler said exasperatedly.

The man closed his eyes, his shoulders slumped defeatedly. “I’d tell you if I knew. The only thing I can say is that if they’re going to set him up like they did with Andrew, then whatever plan they’ve got is already set in motion. This morning I processed one the biggest payments we’ve ever had. And once they have a scent profile it takes less than an hour to work up the formula that will be used to give a killer someone else’s scent. It’s scary easy to do.”

“Good to know” Ressler said grimly. “How about we take you back to our office and you can tell us exactly how it works.”

As Liz and Ressler walked their prisoner to the car, Liz’s phone began to vibrate and she waved them on.

“Reddington” she said coolly. "Calling to check on me?"

“As a matter of fact, I am” he growled, and Liz couldn’t help but feel a shiver of pleasure at his concern for her.

“I’m fine” she relented, reassuring him. “In fact apart from a bump on the head, I’m making a lot of progress – we found the bomb in time to prevent a disaster, and I’m pretty sure your Professor Strom
has been hired to set up Martin Hannover ahead of his Supreme Court date over beta rights. She’s
done it before – an employee of the Cleaveland Laboratory Andrew Weinberg was convicted for
murder but it looks like his scent was planted.”

“A bump on the head?” Reddington asked, the concern in his voice still apparent.

Liz rolled her eyes. “Is that all you heard? Some guy ran into me at the station, it was nothing.”

“Perhaps” he responded in a low voice. “Do you know who the intended victim is?”

“Victim?” Liz frowned.

She heard Reddington tut on the other end of the line. “If Martin Hannover is going to be set up for
murder, then who is he supposed to kill?”
Chapter 38

Liz arrived back at her apartment exhausted. They had contacted Martin Hannover to alert him that there may be a plot to set him up for murder, and eventually he had agreed to accept a protective detail to act as an alibi ahead of his court date. Liz had babysat the attorney for hours until she gratefully handed over her charge to two agents who would take the night shift.

Returning home she smiled as she noticed the black SUVs parked down the street from her apartment, realising that she had a protective detail of her own – Reddington had stepped up her security, and for once she found that she didn’t mind. She gave a knowing wave to one of the cars, and after a moment she saw Reddington’s silver haired bodyguard lean out and make a thumbs-up sign at her. Her smile broadened and she stepped inside her apartment, feeling safe despite the threat of the Cabal. Alone in her room she undressed for bed, pulling off her shirt and tossing it on the floor, before shimmying out of her black jeans.

As she undressed she caught sight of herself in the mirror, and paused to look. She had never been comfortable with her hyper-sexual omega body, choosing for the most part to hide it with dark, heavy clothes, but now she stopped to really study herself. Biting her lip, she unclasped her bra, freeing her breasts. She hooked her thumbs into her panties and pushed them down too, until she stood naked in front of the mirror.

Her limbs were long and slim, the outline of her muscles much clearer than they had been a year ago. Her breasts were pert and girlish, if a little small, but her ass was round and, she hoped, inviting. Suddenly she imagined Reddington standing behind her in the darkness of her bedroom, his charcoal suit brushing against her spine as he bent her gently forward over her vanity table.

She needed him. She knew it now; though there were so many questions still hanging over him, he was in her blood, an electric current that had not left her since he had put her in heat. Her clit throbbed at the memory and, blushing slightly, she slipped a finger slowly between her legs and imagined him watching her pleasure herself while he sipped his signature single malt.

He had been right about omega sexuality; danger combined with the slightest sexual stimulus – the naughty thought of masturbating while the men he sent to protect her were just outside – and she grew so slick she knew she would have to finish what she had started. She lay back naked on the bed with her knees slightly bent, and proceeded to slide two fingers between her legs while she cupped and squeezed her breast with her other hand, as he had once done for her.

In her mind she saw him slug back the last of his scotch and rise from his chair, approaching the bed. He stood and watched her finger herself, his eyes sharp and a large bulge in his suit pants making her mouth water. She wanted him to penetrate her. She knew that along with the pleasure it would hurt terribly, but she didn’t care – it was what she needed. She had needed it, she thought, since that moment in her hotel room where he had knotted her the last time with such gentle force, determined to save her life. They hadn’t been finished then. They had only just begun.

The thought of him running a long, callused finger slowly up her smooth thigh had her whimpering into the darkness of her bedroom while she slid her fingers erratically over her aching sex. Imagining him kneeling up over her, preparing to take her, brought her to a luxurious orgasm as she moaned his name. Writhing on the sheets, she remembered the last orgasm he had given her, his warm tongue lapping at her pink omega slit and her heart ached for him.

Before long, she fell into a hazy sleep, overwhelmed by the memory of being cradled in his arms. In her dreams she felt him kiss her forehead and whisper that he would always protect her, while a faint
scent of burning tinged the air.

She was woken early in the morning by a sharp banging on her door. Squinting at the clock she pulled on her robe and went downstairs. She frowned as she peered through the peephole to see Ressler and Samar outside, and opened the door to them huffily.

“Hey, why so early?”

As soon as she saw Ressler’s face properly she knew something was wrong.

“Elizabeth Keen, I’m arresting you in connection with the death of Martin Hannover. You do not have to say anything but anything you do say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand?”

Liz’s mouth dropped open. “Hannover’s dead? How?”

Ressler shook his head. “I’m sorry, Liz. You need to come with us.”

Samar stepped forward. “I’ll come upstairs with you so you can dress. As an omega I’m sure you don’t want to go to interrogation in your bath robe.”

Liz looked at her incredulously. “Are you serious?”

“Completely” Samar told her looking at her passively. “Let’s go.”

When Liz entered the black site this time, it was in handcuffs. Ressler walked stiffly behind her and she stared numbly ahead as she was met by her colleagues.

“Liz” Aram said anxiously. “You didn’t do this. Tell us you didn’t do this!”

She tilted her head stonily. “You have to ask?”

“Yes” Cooper cut in testily. “As a matter of fact, we do have to ask, Agent Keen. Is it true that your mother was a KGB agent? An alpha, Russian spy stealing secrets from the federal government?”

Liz froze, feeling as though the wind had been knocked out of her. “Yes” she faltered. “But-”

“And you didn’t think to tell me this?” Cooper interrupted angrily.

Liz’s heart began to beat faster as the seriousness of her situation was becoming clear. “I only found out recently myself” she whispered. “You can’t think that I had anything to do with Hannover’s death!”

Cooper removed his glasses and pinched his nose. “Keen, Hannover was found in the back of his car with his throat cut. He’d clearly been engaging in sexual intercourse before he died – with you.”

Liz’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed involuntarily. “That’s not possible – I was at home.”

Ressler shook his head. “Your scent profile is all over him, Keen. Your saliva, your…fluids” Ressler
finished, his ears turning a little pink.

Samar raised her eyebrow. “Whoever killed Hannover straddled him and slit his throat during sex. It’s a classic Russian honey trap.”

“Hey” Liz said angrily. “We assumed Martin Hanover was going to be set up for murder but he wasn’t – it was me. I’m being set up. He was alive when I left him, I went straight home and stayed there.”

“Can anyone vouch for that?” Ressler asked.

“Yes” Liz responded. “Reddington has a protective detail on me, they were outside my apartment all night.”

“Reddington’s men” Ressler scoffed. “Some alibi. You don’t think the master criminal would have his people lie to protect his omega?”

“I don’t care what you think” Liz said, becoming more and more agitated. “It’s the truth.”

“There’s more” Cooper told her slowly. “The AG’s investigation into Assistant Director Colfax’s disappearance has taken an alarming turn. You’re a suspect, Agent Keen.”

Liz’s mouth fell open and she looked at her colleagues’ faces pleadingly. “You can’t possibly think I had anything to do with that!”

“Look Keen” Cooper sighed. “You’ve kept some crucial information from me, and frankly it worries me a lot. Now, if you say you’re innocent then I’m still willing to give you the benefit of the doubt. But we need a way to prove it.”

“How can I do that if my scent profile was stolen?” she asked miserably.

“The first thing we do is get a sample from you ourselves, right now. The infirmary will do” Aram said determinedly. “I’ll compare every detail to the crime scene samples, see if they made a mistake. “Try not to worry” he said encouragingly as he gestured to her to follow him. “We’re going to prove you’re innocent.”

Liz smiled wanly as she walked with him down the corridor. “Thank you Aram.”

When they reached the cold infirmary she was briefly reminded of the last time she had been in there, when she had been in heat, and wretchedly terrified of Reddington, the alpha criminal who had done it to her. Now she wished more than anything for him to take her out of this place, out of the nightmare she had woken to.

“How does this work?” she asked Aram nervously.

“Ah, I just need to get a sample from the scent gland behind your ear. It would be easier if you could lie down here” he said pointing to the examination bed. “If you don’t mind” he said hurriedly.

Liz nodded, her cheeks coloring a little, but when she tried to get up on the bed she found she couldn’t while her hands were cuffed behind her back. Her face flushed in humiliation at the ignominy of the situation.

“Ah, Aram? I’m gonna need you to help me up.”

Aram’s own face turned a little pink as he approached her, but instead of helping her up, he turned
her round and undid the cuffs.

She looked back at him in surprise. “You don’t have to do that” she said quietly.

He gave her an honest, gentle smile. “I know. But I trust you, Agent Keen. You didn’t do this. And we are going to prove it.”

Liz smiled bravely and got up on the examination bed, lying down awkwardly on her back while Aram gathered a tray of instruments. He pulled on a pair of latex gloves and cleared his throat.

“Um, if you could roll onto your side?” he said a little hoarsely.

She did as he asked, sweeping her hair out of the way, and trying not to admit to herself how vulnerable she felt. She squeezed her eyes shut as he approached with the needle, his hand pressing gently on her head to hold her still.

To her surprise, he stayed there for a minute without proceeding, his fingers probing the gland behind her ear in a way that was both intimate and embarrassing.

She swallowed, grateful that as a beta he would be less aware of her involuntary response to his ministrations. “Aram?” she asked awkwardly. “What are you doing?”

He stepped back quickly. “I’m really sorry Liz, I just had to be sure. You can sit up.”

Liz sat up slowly, frowning. “But you haven’t taken the sample.”

Aram shook his head. “I don’t need to. You have a puncture wound behind your ear from a small gauge needle. It’s tiny, but it’s definitely there. They stole your scent profile and used it to set you up. The evidence from the scene will match you perfectly, but this is proof that someone stole your profile.”

Liz frowned. “But I would have known if someone had stuck me-” she broke off, realisation dawning. “The station, that guy who ran into me… I was unconscious for less than a minute!”

“That’s all it takes” Aram said sympathetically. “And they can use it to give another woman exactly your profile. It’s ingenious really” he said animatedly, and then broke off, seeing her expression. “If you’re not the one being set up for murder, that is” he finished sheepishly.

Liz rolled her eyes and reached for her phone as it began to vibrate in her pocket. She exhaled in relief when she saw the screen.

“Reddington” she breathed.

“Lizzie you need to get out of there now” he said urgently. “You’ve been set up.”

“I know” she responded hurriedly, “but I can prove it – Aram found a puncture wound behind my ear, that’s how they got my scent profile-”

“It’s not enough, Lizzie” Reddington urged, cutting her off. “Connolly is coming for you. He’ll claim you killed Hannover and Colfax. He knows that your mother was a Russian spy, they’ll make it look like you are too. If Connolly finds you he will be merciless - it doesn’t matter what evidence you have, he will destroy you.”

“Connolly” Liz said slowly. “He was the one who sent us to the station when my scent profile was stolen. It’s him – he’s part of the cabal!”
“Yes” Reddington said emphatically. “You need to get out. I’ll be there in 3 minutes.”

“If I run, I’ll look guilty” Liz said, panicked. “I’ll be playing into their hands!”

“You’re already in their hands” Reddington barked. “The only thing they haven’t done is close their fist. Go, Elizabeth. Now.”

“Yes” she whispered numbly. “Yes, ok.”

Liz hung up and looked around, her heart thundering. Aram was looking at her apprehensively.

“So you’re going to run, huh?” he said, his voice full of disappointment. “You don’t even want to try to prove you’re innocent?”

Liz looked at him regretfully, steeling herself. “I’m sorry Aram. I really am. But I have to do this.”

In a flash she had rolled onto the floor, and taken his feet out from under him, bringing him down with a crash. He stared at her in limp shock as she grabbed the cuffs he had removed from her and clipped one around his wrist, the other around the examination bed. When he was secure she sprang up and paused, looking down at him regretfully. “I can’t have them think that you helped me. I am sorry” she said again.

He stared up at her reproachfully. “Yeah. But not sorry enough not to do it. I guess I’m just too trusting, right?” he said bitterly. “I hope you know what you’re doing.”

When she was a safe distance away Liz stopped to think, her mind racing. She could almost feel Reddington’s anxiety as he waited for her to meet him, but she couldn’t, not yet. There was one last thing she had to try. She palmed a phone from a woman on the street, and dialled the number of the only person other than Reddington who could help her.

“Agent Keen!” Cooper’s voice exclaimed on the other end of the line. “You need to turn yourself in right now. I can’t help you while you’re a fugitive.”

“You can” Liz breathed. “It’s Connolly. All of it – Meera’s death, the virus - he’s been working for the Cabal this entire time. He was the one who gave us the intel to go to Dupont Circle where my scent profile was stolen. He inserted himself into our investigation.”

Cooper paused on the end of the line before speaking under his breath. “Let’s say I believe you. What do you expect me to do?”

“Get me in a room with him. And you need to be there – I need you to be a witness when I get him to admit what he did.”

Cooper laughed sceptically. “If he is what you say he is, how could you possibly think that he would admit to it?”

“Because he’s arrogant” Liz said in a hard tone. “Members of the Cabal think they’re above the law, that they’re above everything and everyone. We’re going to show them that they’re not. You know I’m right” she finished, hanging up.

A minute later she received a text message with an address, and her lips curled into a grateful smile.
He still believed in her, and she would make it right.

The meeting place was an old church, with stretched stained glass windows depicting somber saints and their alpha wolf counterparts. Connolly was standing near the alter, with Cooper standing a few feet away, his shoulders tense. As Liz approached she could smell the raised hackles between the alpha men, and she had to concentrate hard to stop her hands from trembling.

“You were right” Cooper told her with a note of disgust in his voice. “He’s working for the Cabal.”

Connolly shook his head. “A quaint term that no one actually involved would ever use.”

“I can think of some other terms for the people involved” Liz said heatedly.

The AG laughed at that, his cold eyes glinting with amusement. “Feeling hard done by, Agent Keen? It’s not all bad – you’ll go down in history like Marta Hari, the sexy omega spy who slit a man’s throat while you rode him senseless.”

“Now see here!” Cooper exclaimed angrily.

“You sick son of a bitch” Liz breathed.

Connolly laughed unpleasantly. “Oh God it makes me hard” he drawled. “Thinking about what they’re going to do to you in prison - it’ll be like one of those pornos my wife won’t let me watch. The sweet taste of an omega” he said inhaling in exaggerated enjoyment. “There’s nothing like it. Those alpha women prisoners will eat you alive - literally!”

Cooper turned to her then. “Keen, stay focussed. Don’t let him rile you.”

But Liz was fixated on Connolly. “You’re disgusting” Liz whispered, her voice shaking with rage.

“That’s what my wife tells me” Connolly responded jovially. “Do you know how many omegas are currently incarcerated in D.C prisons?” he continued conversationally. “Less than 300. And do you know why it’s so few?” he taunted. “Most omegas have someone who care for them. Someone who’ll keep them out of prison. And the ones who end up there? If they’re not killed by another prisoner, they kill themselves. Would you like me to tell you the rate of violent sexual assaults committed against omegas in prison? It’s my best one yet!” he chuckled nastily.

Before Liz really knew what was happening she had drawn her weapon, and pointed it directly at Connolly’s chest.

“Keen, no!” Cooper said sharply, his anxiety clear in the air. “Do this and you become everything they say you are.”

Liz tried to listen to him, to connect with her mentor’s voice, but her focus was broken by the sound of Connolly’s cruel laughter.

“What, is the omega whore going to shoot me? It won’t solve anything. We are everywhere! You will still go to prison. Your pathetic task force will go to prison too – even Agent Mojtabai. I don’t suppose he’ll last long in jail either. We’ve got something cooked up for everyone. As for Reddington… your alpha... It’s the death penalty for him. I’m looking forward to putting him down like the dog he is. Hell, I’ll be the hero of the people – taking down Raymond Reddington and his filthy little omega bitch” he finished coldly, carefully annunciating each word.
She wasn’t sure what it was that made her squeeze the trigger. It was almost like being in heat again, a chemical reaction burning like fire that had ripped through her body before she could stop it. Connolly fell with a look of utter surprise on his face but in that moment, she didn’t see it, not really. She saw something else. Someone else.

The scent of gunpowder was utterly overpowering; the only other thing she could scent was her own fear and rage and the two blended together was heartbreakingly familiar as her memories flooded back to her. Finally she knew the truth, and it was too late, too late to take it back, to un-remember it, to trust Reddington who had only ever tried to protect her.

“Run, Keen” Cooper whispered brokenly. “Run.”

She let out a desperate whimper, turned and fled.

When Reddington met her he was dressed in a hat and coat for travelling, a briefcase in his hand. His eyes scanned her, sharp and appraising, his nose scenting her hair and the air around her without pretence.

“Did he hurt you?” he asked urgently. “Are you hurt?”

“I shot him” she breathed, her eyes wild and lungs still ragged.

“I know” Reddington said quietly. “I’m going to get you out.” He placed his large hand on her shoulder and gestured to a van waiting on the kerb, but she stood frozen in place.

“There’s something else you need to know” she faltered.

He looked at her and raised his chin questioningly, his hand firmly on her shoulder.

“I know what happened the night of the fire. I remember everything” she told him, her tone defeated.

“Remember what?” Reddington asked softly, suddenly very still.

“When I pulled the trigger it was like I was there again. He was hurting her. I was scared. There were so many sounds and scents. Anger and fear – so much fear. I shot my father. I killed him. That’s why you took my memory away. Not to protect yourself. To protect me.” Liz finished brokenly.

Reddington’s lips parted slowly, the lines around his eyes deepening with regret.

“Yeah” he sighed.

“Why?” Liz whispered looking up at him. “Why would you do that for me?”

He ran his tongue across his bottom teeth, considering her question before responding. “I’m a sinner. I absorb the misdeeds of others, darkening my soul to keep theirs pure. And you were the purest little soul. Innocent in every conceivable way. No child should have endured what you did” he said, swallowing hard.

Liz shook her head, biting her lip hard against the sob rising in her throat. “I’m not innocent anymore.”

Reddington drew her slowly to him, cradling her head gently against his chest. “I never wanted you
“to be like me” he murmured regretfully, and she could feel his deep rumble vibrate through her as he held her.

She looked up at him then, her face inches from his. “I’m not going to be. I can’t go with you” she said quietly, shaking her head. “I’m sorry.”

Reddington’s eyes narrowed in a frown. “What are you saying?” he asked in a low voice.

“I may not have killed Hannover, but I did kill Connolly. He was unarmed and I shot him. I’ve betrayed my friends” she explained, her words catching in her throat. “I need to turn myself in.”

His expression sharpened and she could suddenly feel the tension in his powerful muscles, with a hint of anxiety in his scent. “I can’t let you do that” he said heavily.

She gave him a wan smile. “I know you want to protect me. It’s all you’ve ever tried to do. I know that now. But I need to do the right thing.”

He shook his head sharply. “You won’t find justice that way, Lizzie. They’ll drop you in a hole so deep you’ll have no chance of mounting a defence. The only option you have is to come with me and work towards exposing the truth” he told her firmly.

Liz let out a shaky breath, the omega inside her gnawing at the thought of disobeying him. “I’m sorry. But I can’t.”

Reddington’s lip twitched, and he pulled her to him again, his hand on the back of her neck. For a moment she thought he was hugging her goodbye, but his grip on her was strangely tight, his fingers and thumb pressing into her neck.

After a moment she felt herself grow dizzy and began to struggle weakly, panic rising inside her as she realised what he was doing.

“No!” she said urgently, pushing against his chest in vain. “Let me go-”

“I’m sorry sweetheart” he murmured, his face dark and pained as he squeezed with precision force, until she quickly lost consciousness.

His lip trembling slightly, he lifted her gently into his arms and carried her to the van waiting to speed them away.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

Time for 'season' 2! Starting it with a bang... NSFW (you have been warned).

When Liz came round she was lying on a bed in a strange room. The walls were deep red and the furniture dark and strangely cramped in the small space. Reddington stood near the foot of the bed, a glass of scotch in his hand, and turned to face her as she stirred. Although he had removed his suit jacket and tie he did not look comfortable; his face was heavy with regret and apprehension as he looked at her.

“What have you done?” she whispered as she sat up, her eyes round and fixed on him.

“I did what I had to do to protect you” he answered in a low voice.

“You kidnapped me” she said, a note of disbelief in her voice.

He nodded heavily. “Yes. Sometimes the people we need saving from the most are ourselves.”

She stared at him in silence for a moment, and he held her gaze, his expression almost haunted.

Liz closed her eyes, shaking her head. “I’m a coward” she said bitterly.

Reddington’s brow knitted into a frown. “It wasn’t your decision to run. You are here as a consequence of my actions.”

“Yes” she whispered. “And I ought to be terrified of you. I’m trapped here. You’re not just an alpha - you’re one of the most dangerous men in America.”

Reddington did not contradict her, but swallowed painfully as though it hurt to be reminded.

She looked up at him, her blue eyes shimmering. “I’m not terrified. I’m relieved” she gulped, as though disgusted at herself. “I was so afraid…I’m glad you took me away. What kind of person does that make me?” she asked brokenly.

“It makes you human” he answered her gently. “And for our kind more than most, fear is a powerful tool. It keeps us safe.”

Liz’s eyes moved to the scotch glass in his hand. “May I have one of those?”

Reddington paused as though he might refuse, but then nodded silently and poured another.

As she climbed off the bed to her feet, Liz stopped short, frowning. “Is the floor moving?”

He approached her slowly, handing her the glass of scotch. “Let me show you something.”

He took her arm gently and walked her to the end of the room, where he proceeded to punch in a code to a keypad on the wall.

Suddenly the wall came apart in the middle, and began to shunt open to reveal a dark, yawning sea,
and a sky strewn with stars, the light of a great moon glimmering dazzlingly on the water. Liz gasped and her legs wobbled as she fully appreciated the reason that the floor had appeared to sway gently. The room in which she had woken was in fact a shipping container, albeit the most decedent one that had likely ever been on the ocean.

Reddington gripped her arm firmly to help her keep her balance. “Watch your step” he murmured.

Liz’s lips were parted in wonder she looked ahead. “The moon – it’s enormous. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“It’s a supermoon” Reddington said, awe apparent in his voice. “Perigee-syzygy of the Earth-moon-sun system. The full moon coinciding with the closest distance that the moon reaches Earth in its elliptic orbit. This is the largest seen in years. People like to think that we’ve evolved past our ancestors - that we’re no longer affected by the pull of the moon. I don’t think so.”

“I can’t blame what I’ve done on the full moon” Liz said bleakly. “I shot a man. I betrayed my friends. Aram, he had faith in me. He undid my cuffs, and I betrayed his trust. You didn’t see his face, the hurt… No one has ever looked at me like that before.”

Reddington nodded, a regretful smile on his lips. “Aram is a good man. He wanted to help you, which means he will forgive you in time. I’m not saying it’s easy to ignore the way people look at you. But I hope you can find some solace in the fact that when I look at you…”

Reddington paused and moved his hand from her arm down to close his fingers around hers. “I feel a yen as powerful as the grip of the moon on the tides. It aches in my veins. The most serene light in the darkest reaches of my soul. That’s what I feel when I look at you.”

Liz looked at him, frowning a little in puzzlement and wonder. “How can you still think of me that way? After what I’ve done?” she whispered. “I don’t deserve it.”

Reddington observed her, working his jaw slowly as he considered what she had said. “What do you think you deserve, Lizzie. What would you do to someone else in your position?” he asked softly.

Liz shook her head tightly, looking away from him as an angry sob threatened in her throat. “I should be punished for what I’ve done. You should have let me turn myself in.”

She turned and walked briskly back inside the shipping container, her hair whipping round her face in the wind. Before long he followed her inside, closing the doors behind him.

She stood with her back to him, her arms drawn defensively around herself. She tensed as she felt him come up slowly behind her, his scent gentle but provocative. The knot in her stomach tightened while she waited to see what he would do.

“Take off your pants” he said quietly, and she took a sharp breath, pausing uncertainly.

“You wanted to be punished, Elizabeth” he growled behind her. “Take them off.”

Swallowing shakily, she popped her jeans open and pushed them over her hips to the floor, leaving her in her shirt and plain cotton panties. She felt the dull warmth of shame rise up her neck, into her cheeks and the glands behind her ears at the thought of what was going to happen. He was going to smack her bottom as though she were a little girl, a naughty little omega, as though that would in any way make up for what she had done.

“This won’t take away the guilt you feel” he told her in a low voice, knowing her thoughts as well as she did. “Only time can do that.”
“Then why do it at all?” she asked, defeated.

She felt his hands on her shoulders then, turning her gently to face him.

“Because you need to feel that your actions have consequences. To accept what’s happened. And to know that you are cared for” he said gently, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead.

She nodded wordlessly and trembled in anticipation of what was to come, the omega inside her longing to be taken in hand.

“Against the bed?” he murmured in her ear. “Or over my knee.”

She gasped quietly at his words and her mouth went dry. “Your knee” she whispered.

She closed her eyes in surrender as she felt his hand come up to grip the back of her neck. She was his, body and soul, and no amount of shame or protest would change that.

He shepherded her slowly to the large couch and she walked numbly in her shirt and panties, willing to submit herself to him as far as he would allow. He sat down carefully with his knees a comfortable distance apart, and drew her to him, his thumb brushing the scar on her wrist as it had when he’d put her in heat. He looked up at her, and when she met his gaze his stormy eyes were hooded and intense.

“Up you get” he commanded, helping her up as she climbed onto the couch and settled herself hesitantly across his lap.

He gave her rump a quick tap of admonishment and her thighs tensed, raising her bottom a little higher.

“That’s better” he growled, and for a moment she caught a hint of his musky scent in the air and it coiled in her belly. Her body felt fully charged, every muscle tightened and primed for what would come. He was her alpha, and this felt right.

Her abdomen clenched as she felt his large hand come to rest on her bottom, and for what seemed like minutes he merely cupped her ass, the warmth from his palm heating her skin through her panties. Then it was gone, and a second later returned in a hard slap that made her cry out, despite thinking she was prepared for it. She managed to bite her lip for the next one, and the next, although he altered the angle slightly and caught the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs.

He was firmer than he had been last time, each slap stinging her warm skin to redness until her thoughts narrowed, the pain somehow calming her mind to clarity.

Slap.

She had killed Connolly, not out of fear, but rage. The world would be better without that particular evil in it, but she would have to bear it, just as she bore the strike of her alpha’s hand.

Slap.

The way her colleagues had looked at her, as though her omega sexuality was something disgusting and dangerous. The hurt in Aram’s eyes - that was somehow harder, as though he had shown her kindness when she was lost and lonely, and she’d bitten his hand like a feral cat.

Slap.
She’d killed her own father, a memory that was now all too real. How could her mother want her after that? She’d been sent away - she hadn’t been wanted. She still wasn’t wanted.

_Slap._

She choked on a sob as she realised the full depth of the pain she had been feeling; Reddington, for all his attentions to her, hadn’t claimed her since that desperate first moment in the hotel that would have been her dying place. He hadn’t allowed her to touch him since. He had even told her she should be with someone else, as though there could be anyone else whose scent ignited her again.

Even now the affection he was showing her was ambiguous. She could feel his rigid cock inside his pants, the natural excitement it provoked in her scenting the air and soaking through her underwear, and yet she knew he wouldn’t let her touch him. He hadn’t abducted her because he wanted to knot her; he’d done it to help her save her own skin.

She became aware that her thoughts were beginning to reflect in her scent, much as though she was desperately hurt, and her body was attempting to entice him to protect her. He stilled his hand immediately that he detected it, and gently gathered her small body in his arms while she trembled against his chest.

“Shhhh, you’re safe with me” he murmured. “I’m not going to harm you. You’re ok, Lizzie.”

She turned her reddened face up to him then, meeting his concerned frown. “I’m not afraid of you” she whispered. “That’s not it.”

He ran his large forefinger affectionately down the line of her jaw to her chin.

“Then what? Tell me, sweetheart.”

She swallowed hard. “When I was a little girl, I used to lie awake at night, worrying that Sam wouldn’t want to keep me. That he might send me away if I was bad. But he was a perfect father. He always loved me, even when I was a messed up teenager. Then there was Tom and I thought he wanted me but he was hired to marry me. I guess it’s an omega thing, but…”

Liz paused and took a shaky breath, while Reddington waited patiently for her to continue.

“You… You’ve never asked for anything from me. After my heat was resolved, you never wanted to knot me again” she said, looking down.

“You think that I don’t want you” he said quietly, the sadness palpable in his scent.

She didn’t respond and he sighed, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head.

“It’s true that my feelings for you are… complicated” he said slowly. “But please don’t think that I don’t utterly treasure the time I spend with you.”

“But you don’t want to be my alpha” she whispered, a hollow pang of grief tugging at her insides.

“I want what’s best for you” he said tightly. “And when I think about the years I’ve spent… the devastation in my wake… that certainly isn’t me. However much I desire to take you for myself, it would be selfish. And that’s something I’ve tried not to be.”

He gave her a pained smile and she looked up at him, her forehead creased in emotional turmoil.

“You’ve been hurt so much you can’t imagine that you are what’s best for me” she whispered. “Do
you know how hard it is to fight the cabal - to fight this war - when you’re withholding the one thing I need?”

She shifted slowly on his lap to straddle him, no longer caring about the dampness of her arousal on his pants, and his gripped her hips to still her, the tension of prolonged self-control palpable in his face.

“A dear friend told me recently that I’d strayed from the path I’d set” he said quietly, shadows gathering around his eyes. “It made me wonder that perhaps… in striving to protect you, I’d become the man I’d hoped to shield you from” he said, swallowing.

“You did protect me” Liz said, smiling softly. “That night and so many times since. Probably more than I know.”

She leant towards him slowly and a lock of her hair fell forwards, tickling his chin. He raised his hand reflexively to tuck it behind her ear, just as her mouth met his. He closed his eyes and allowed her plump bottom lip to brush against his, before wrapping a strong arm around her waist with a growl, holding her firmly against him.

Liz whimpered in delight as she felt Reddington’s tongue enter her mouth, and the slide of his soft lips over hers that she had been craving desperately. He groaned throatily as she squirmed in his lap with youthful abandon, rubbing herself tantalisingly against the thick bulge in his pants. He pulled back from her breathlessly, his eyes almost wide with surprise, his tongue resting erotically inside his lower lip.

“You’re on heat suppressants?” he asked, his voice deep and strained. “This is important, Lizzie.”

“Yes” she breathed. “My shot is good for another month.”

She began to fervently unbutton his shirt, working quickly and willing him into the moment in case he changed his mind, but his hands came up to stop her. She mewled in frustration, but paused when she saw the concern on his face.

“Sweetheart, this will hurt” he said gravely. “Are you sure you want it?”

Liz’s lips parted for a moment, her heart clenching at his tenderness, his concern for her.

“It doesn’t hurt more than the ache I feel without it. It’s like I’ve been empty ever since you left me in that hotel room. Please understand – I need this.” She smiled wickedly then. “And if I recall, it also feels incredible.”

Holding his enraptured gaze, she continued to unbutton his shirt and vest, and he allowed her, his thumbs pressing into her hips as he held her steady on his lap. She paused as she pushed the shirt off his broad, muscular shoulders, her fingertips ghosting over pale, ridged scarring traversing his back.

“Does it hurt?” she asked quietly, her grief for what he would have gone through tinging the heady scent in the air with sadness.

He smiled gently at her, the lines around his eyes creasing pleasantly as he shook his head. “No, sweetheart. Shhh” he whispered as he saw her eyes grow moist, kissing her forehead. “We survived, Lizzie. We got out. Together.”

Liz nodded, a small, sad smile of understanding on her face. She slowly pulled her own shirt over her head, dispensing with her bra and finally her panties, until she sat naked and needy on his lap. His eyes drank her in hungrily, raking unashamedly over her breasts, the curve of her hips and the
warmth between her legs. Suddenly he lifted her up with one arm, quickly divesting himself of what remained of his clothing and leaving them bare, alpha and omega together.

The omega inside Liz grew frantic at the sight of him naked; she needed to rub against his skin, to scent him, to rub the aching slick between her legs down his heavy shaft. She began to buck against him, her teeth nipping at his neck and rubbing the gland behind her ear against his jaw. It was childish and unsophisticated but he didn’t seem to care. His breathing was ragged and the purple head of his alpha cock was weeping pre-cum freely against the dark fuzz on his stomach as he allowed her to enjoy playing naked in his lap, his hands tickling her breasts affectionately.

When he held the back of her neck tightly she pushed back into his grip, fully displaying her lean body and pert breasts to him. “Mmmm sweet girl, my sweet… beautiful… girl” he groaned in delight as he took the tip of one breast in his mouth before moving to the other, lavishing attention on her.

“The things I want to do to you Lizzie” he growled, running his nose across her glowing skin while he kissed and nipped at her, his fingers sliding with gentle pressure between her legs. “The scent of you when you’re close to orgasm” he murmured, flicking his tongue expertly over a tight little nipple as he stroked her clit.

She felt his cock twitch between them and licked her lips in anticipation. “I need to taste you” she gasped hopefully. “Please let me have this - you know I need it.”

She was terrified he would refuse her like last time, but he swallowed silently and nodded, his tongue pushing against the inside of his cheek unconsciously. Delighted, she slipped eagerly off the couch and knelt neatly between his thick, muscular thighs, her nose brushing along his skin as she enjoyed his scent. She was in heaven, rubbing the gland behind her ear against his inner thigh while she nuzzled his heavy sac.

He made a very gratifying noise as her tongue slipped out to taste him, like a kitten lapping at the moisture beading on his crown. “Lizzie-” he groaned through clenched teeth, his large hand coming rest on her head as she began to tease and suck the tip of his penis.

His thighs were taught with the strain of holding himself back; she could feel the sheer alpha power coiling in his muscles, that and the deepening of his rich, musky scent telling her that he was exercising an extraordinary amount of self-control in order to let her explore him the way she wanted to.

It made a wicked part of her dare to go further, to want to see how far he would restrain himself for her. She began to take him in her mouth, stretching her lips bravely around him, her teeth scraping lightly down his shaft. She felt a jolt of adrenaline as he gripped her neck harder, and saw a dusky, purplish ring form at the base of his cock where his knot would come. She knew he was a powerful, violent man – there was no escaping that. She knew what he could do to her, and yet when it came to her, he had always been gentle.

“Elizabeth.”

It was a dark, guttural growl that made her tremble. He reached down and slid his cock slowly from her mouth, the tip sliding over her lips and leaving a salty, soapy taste that she caught eagerly with her tongue.

“It’s time” he said quietly. “If you want this, sweetheart.”

She looked up at him and nodded, her large eyes round and shining with excitement. He pulled her gently back onto his lap, and positioned his engorged penis between her legs. Her inner omega was
desperate to feel him inside her, for him to take away the ache in the way that only he could; she began to bear down on him immediately and regretted it, a sharp pain spiralling outwards as she tried to take him.

He hissed and gripped her waist hard, stilling her as she whimpered in pain. “Easy, sweetheart” he chastised. “Don’t hurt yourself. We need to take this slowly.”

“I don’t know if I can” she whined, “I need it, please, Raymond” she gasped.

He swallowed hard but said nothing, his musky scent growing complicated in a way that she didn’t understand, but that aroused her anyway. With his arm wrapped firmly around her waist he began to move, pushing just the tip of his enormous alpha cock slowly in and out of her, limiting her determined efforts to take more of him than she could handle.

She whimpered in pleasure and frustration as he rubbed the glistening head of his cock between her vaginal lips and up to her clit before pushing back inside her, a little more this time, just enough for her omega body to adjust to him. She gasped as he penetrated her again and he held her tightly to him, murmuring encouragement and endearments in her ear. “That’s it sweetheart, that’s my girl-”

He broke off with a groan when he felt her clench around him, a sweet, mischievous smile crossing her lips that somehow only enhanced her innocence as she took him deeper inside. He responded in kind by thrusting gently, pushing more firmly inside her now and stealing her breath as she sighed with the ecstasy of being completely loved by him.

Her eyes slipped shut as he stretched her luxuriously, and her arms crept around his shoulders, clutching at him with an involuntary sob as he finally pushed the thick bottom of his shaft inside her where his knot would expend.

“She can stop” he said tightly. “If this is too much-”

She opened her eyes and lifted her head to look at him. “This is everything” she whispered. “Just hold me. Please.”

He nodded, his eyes heavy with emotion, and began to move gently inside her while his arms were wrapped tightly around her small body. As he penetrated her he tilted her head to the side and fastened his mouth to her neck, his tongue lathing her pulse point before latching on with his teeth; he didn’t break skin, but it was hard enough to send an almost primeval message to the omega inside her that she was his alone.

She cried out as he stimulated the sensitive spot in her neck, rubbing herself against him until she was almost weeping with the need to come, to release everything she had been carrying since he turned her life upside down.

“She can stop” she whispered brokenly, “please let me come, please-”

He groaned in pleasure as he heard her plead with him. “Shhhh sweet girl, my sweet little Lizzie – are you ready? Show me - let me see you come, sweetheart.”

As he crooned in her ear he slipped his hand down, grazing her slick clit lightly with two fingers while he continued to thrust until she began to spasm around him. Intense pleasure wound slowly through her tummy and up from the base of her spine, caressing her everywhere like the sweetest current running through her veins.

Reddington stared, mesmerised as she came with her legs spread wide around him, his eyes stormy and lower lip curling up to cover his bared teeth. The scent and feel of her creaming herself around
him coupled with her delightful little whines were too much, and he felt a powerful, transcendent tug in his groin all too soon.

“I can’t hold it” he breathed “I’m sorry-God”

He began to pulse thickly inside her, securing his grip around her waist as his knot started to stretch her. Holding her close against his muscular chest he felt her heart thundering, fighting against panic as the pain intensified. She began to whimper and he held her tightly, breathing hard through his nose.

“Look at me” he commanded huskily.

She looked up at him bravely, and he caught her lips with a passionate kiss, pushing his tongue inside her mouth as he ejaculated inside her.

“I’ve got you sweetheart, it’s going to be ok. You’re ok” he panted against her mouth, shuddering gently through the final throes his orgasm. His knot came fully into place, and with it an overwhelming urge to keep her close, to make her a part of him and him a part of her.

She let out a stuttering breath, clinging to him and he began to nuzzle her neck, licking and scraping his teeth proprietorially over her carotid to calm her.

“There you go” he said softly against her neck. “That’s not so bad, is it? You’re a brave girl. Try to relax, Lizzie.”

“I’m ok” she murmured, enjoying the warmth of his lips on her neck. “I want this. I needed this. I need it to hurt to know it’s real.”

He sighed and pressed a long, gentle kiss to her temple. It was perverse, this process, and he couldn’t shake the gnawing guilt that accompanied it. He was hurting her; she needed to be hurt in order to cement their bond, a bond he should have protected her from. Swallowing, he began to gently stroke the small of her back to soothe her and ease the pain.

“Sweetheart I’m going to move us to the bed to make you more comfortable. You need to hold on to me, do you think you can manage that?”

She nodded silently against his chest, and tightened her arms around his neck. He stood slowly, cupping her bottom, and she clung to him, her legs wrapped around his waist. She choked back a sob as he moved them to the bed, the motion tugging at her and sending frissons of sharp pain through her center.

It was over in a moment though, and he settled them softly on the bed, where she relaxed gratefully in his arms, concentrating on the intense, throbbing pain of his knot and the warmth of his embrace around her. She settled her head on his chest, his luxurious scent and thick, surprisingly soft hair tickling her nose pleasantly.

“There now” he soothed. “It feels better already, doesn’t it sweetheart.”

She nodded against his chest and he cradled her against him, placing soft kisses on her forehead and nose, stroking and comforting her until she fell in to a haze of warmth and pleasure.

After a while she heard him murmur in her ear, rousing her from a state of semi-consciousness. “I think I can release you now. If you want to try?”

She let out a little whine of dissent and clung harder to him, the thought of giving up this sense of
phenomenal closeness with her alpha unbearable.

He chuckled softly and held her close, tucking her hair gently behind her ear.

“Alright sweetheart, we can stay like this for now. I’m not going anywhere. Although too much longer and you risk my becoming hard again – then you’d be in trouble, wouldn’t you?” he said, teasing her gently.

“I could handle it” she mumbled sleepily, and he laughed again, the sound caressing her as much as the wonderful scent of his love for her.

“Sleep, Lizzie” he told her, softly kissing her temple. “Sleep now.”

Her dark lashes drooped shut, and her last thought before she fell into a dreamless sleep was that now, even though she was on the run, hunted and betrayed, she had never felt so safe and loved in all her life.
Chapter 40

Liz woke, bathed in warmth and the luxurious, complex scent that she and her alpha had created in bed together – scent that she and Reddington had created. She shifted sleepily in his arms and looked up to see his blue-gray eyes staring reverently down at her, his nostrils slightly flared as though he too were taking in the incredible scent they had awakened with their love-making in the shipping container.

“Hello, Lizzie” he said softly. “How are you feeling?”

She smiled, the omega inside her embracing the sheer joy of being in his arms still. “I feel amazing” she murmured, stretching her long, lean limbs on the bed like a cat.

“You’re not injured” he pressed. “I didn’t tear you?”

She shook her head against his chest, and felt his arms tighten a little around her, his relief palpable in the air. She curled herself into him, enjoying the friction of her thigh sliding over his while she nuzzled her chest with her nose.

She hummed in pleasure as she felt him begin to grow hard, his length stiffening between them, growing hot against her hip. She began to squirm against him, her inner omega delighted at his excitement, and eager to take him inside again.

His large hand gripped her thigh to still her movement, his scent low and hesitant. “Shhhh sweetheart” he soothed. “Be patient.”

Liz frowned up at him, her dark eyebrows folding adorably. “Why?” she asked plaintively. “I know you want it” she told him, rubbing the soft dark curls between her legs against his hard length.

He groaned, placing his hand on the back of her neck authoritatively, warning her to cease her movement. “It hurts, sweetheart” he said tightly.

“I’m fine” she said hurriedly. “It doesn’t-”

“It hurts me” he said heavily.

She looked up at him in confusion and he sighed, placing a lingering kiss on her creased brow.

“It’s hurts me to cause you pain, Elizabeth. However much you think you want it.”

“I do want it” she said resolutely.

“I understand” he told her gently.

“Is that the only reason?” she demanded. “That you don’t like hurting me?”

Reddington paused hesitantly. “It’s one of the reasons.”

Liz’s expression darkened as he deflected and after a moment he conceded, his thumb rubbing the warm skin of her arm reflexively.

“I can’t think of any drug more euphoric - more powerful - than the feelings stirred when alphas and omegas mate” he said slowly. “And, like a drug, it can be utterly consuming. Dangerous - especially if you’re inexperienced. I want you to be strengthened by our bond Elizabeth, not lost in it. Which is
why you need to trust me when I say you should rest and recover before I knot you again. Not too long, sweetheart” he said reassuringly as her face fell. “But much as it pains me to say it, you are part of my world now. And that means you need to stay healthy, and keep a clear head.”

She looked up at him, her large eyes heavy with the knowledge of all she had lost in the last 24 hours. “I understand what’s happened. I killed the Assistant Attorney General – I can’t go back to the life I had. I know your world is dangerous and you want to protect me from that… But being with you makes me feel safe.”

She went to move from the bed and he caught her hand. “Lizzie” he said gently, his eyebrows raised slightly.

“I’m going to shower” she responded firmly.

Reddington canted his head at her thoughtfully, a soft smile on his lips. “You know, I’ve never savored being an alpha the way that so many do. Physical strength is rarely the quality that bestows the greatest advantage in life, and the sex…Good lord it can be complicated, especially when you’re young” he continued, smiling nostalgically. “But the scent… Now that I couldn’t live without. I can honestly say that sublime pleasure is one of the greatest joys in my life. Which is why I simply cannot allow you to shower just yet” he finished, shaking his head with the hint of a mischievous smile.

Liz reddened at the reminder that the scent of their mixed fluids on her body was very apparent, but didn’t resist when he pulled her gently back down on the bed. He growled appreciatively and rose up on his forearms, pinning her beneath him with a leonine stare. She lay there breathlessly as he began to scent the air around her, his nostrils flaring, before closing his eyes in appreciation and running his nose and lips over her neck. She moaned under him, arching to give him greater access and enjoying the feel of the soft, cool sheets on her naked skin.

“But you said no” she breathed in confusion as he began to slide his tongue very gently over the bruising forming on her neck where he had marked her with his teeth.

He chuckled softly into her neck, tickling her skin with his warm breath. “I said I wouldn’t knot you again so soon, Lizzie. There are many other delightful ways to make you feel…safe” he murmured against her neck. “The warmth of my hands on you” he continued, gripping her slim waist as she twisted beneath him. “My tongue exploring those secret omega erogenous zones of yours…” he finished with a purr, bending his head to capture a pebbled nipple in his mouth when she arched into him.

Liz had never felt about her omega body the way she did now. She’d felt awkward, even resentful of her tendency to blush, the softness of her skin, the difficulty she had putting on extra muscle and especially her embarrassing levels of sexual arousal. But now… God, now it was like he was bringing her body to life, repairing her connection to it, the soft, luxurious ache of pleasure suffusing her senses until there was nothing but him.

She bucked into him, desperate for more contact with her alpha, and was rewarded when he slid his long forefinger between her legs, slipping it inside her. She mewled in pleasure as he fingered her gently and he growled softly.

“So wet, sweetheart. So ready. You’re a needy little omega, aren’t you. So eager” he murmured with pride, and slipped a second finger inside her.

She inhaled sharply, her breath catching in her throat as a frisson of pain shot through her, her muscles tensing. Reddington frowned and gently slipped his fingers from her.
“You told me you weren’t injured” he said, his tone serious.

Liz felt warmth creep into her cheeks and rolled her eyes. “I said I was fine, and I am.”

“You’re hurt” he responded, his forehead creased in concern for her.

He began to move down the bed to inspect her and she closed her legs, curling up in embarrassment.

“Lizzie” he said patiently. “I’d like to check you over. Is that something you think you can let me do?”

Liz bit her lip. She knew that he was being both considerate and patient; it was entirely normal for proprietary alphas to examine every inch of their omegas, but this was new to her, and somehow even more intimate than sex.

Finally she nodded, swallowing, and he smiled gently at her, coaxing her legs apart and placing soft, reassuring kisses on the inside of her knee and thigh. She tensed as he approached her damaged sex and he nuzzled the soft skin of her thigh.

“Try to relax, sweetheart. You’re ok.”

She felt his fingers part her inner lips ever so gently and begin to probe around the entrance to her vagina, growling low in his throat when she whimpered involuntarily in pain.

“Shhh sweet girl. You’re going to be fine. You’re a little bruised, nothing more. You did wonderfully, sweetheart” he reassured her gently. “Sex with an alpha can be… challenging. Especially when you’re an omega, and inexperienced.”

Liz raised her eyebrows haughtily. “You say that as though I’m a complete rookie. I know what I’m doing.”

“Oh I’ve no doubt of that, Lizzie” he responded softly. “But that hotel room, after I turned myself in… that was your first knot.”

Liz reddened furiously. “How did you know that?”

“Your reaction to me” he said quietly. “I expected you to be terrified” he continued, swallowing. “But this was… different. I knew then that you’d never been with an alpha before.”

Liz looked at the ceiling to hide her embarrassment. “I thought I might” she said hesitantly. “In college. But they were all so arrogant. Came on so strong, like they couldn’t wait for me to belong to them. I didn’t want to lose myself.”

“And you won’t” Reddington murmured earnestly, placing a long, gentle kiss on her thigh. “I want you to own your sexuality, sweetheart.”

He kissed her thigh again, a little higher up this time, moaning in pleasure as his tongue caressed the salty musk of their mixed fluids on her soft skin.

Liz gasped, the sound catching in her throat as his hot mouth found her clit, lapping ever so softly at her bruised folds. She began to squirm against the soft sheets and he brought his hands up, his palms pressing firmly against her thighs and holding her in place.

“You do find it difficult to hold still, don’t you” he murmured against her, holding her legs firmly apart as he suckled her clit.
“Mmmm” she breathed raggedly. “God, I’ll be good, I promise – just don’t stop-”

“I have no intention of stopping” he growled, his words punctuated by tantalising sweeps of his tongue. “I swear there is no taste more divine… no scent more intoxicating on God’s green earth than my sweet… little… Lizzie”.

She whimpered in pleasure, trying her best to hold still for him while he soothed her aching flesh with his tongue, his strokes gentle and determined. Soon she felt sweet warmth begin to build inside her, creeping luxuriously over her stomach and thighs, and tightening her nipples. She began to buck softly against him, but to her dismay he moved from her clit, lathing his tongue against her inner lips and dipping teasingly into her entrance.

“Please” she mewed piteously. “I’ve been good!”

She bit her lip as soon as the words slipped out, and even in her haze of pleasure it occurred to her how easily she had fallen into her omega role. It seemed to please him greatly though; his scent warmed in pleasure and she felt him smile against her, rumbling his agreement.

“Oh sweet girl you’ve been so good” he told her, his voice like silken honey in between strokes of his tongue. “The loveliest… sweetest… incandescently beautiful girl. How can I deny you anything… You can come when you’re ready, sweet baby” he breathed. “Come for me Lizzie.”

With that, he returned to her clit, applying just the lightest pressure with the flat of his tongue, but it was enough; the delicious feeling tightening in her breasts and belly began to unwind as the unbearably sweet warmth of orgasm spiralled over her. He placed impossibly soft kisses on her swollen omega sex while she pulsed uncontrollably, her breasts tingling and lip trembling with soft cries while she lay at his mercy.

She whimpered feebly as her orgasm subsided and Reddington moved to lie at her side, drawing her to him and encouraging her to rest her head near his armpit so that the unique scent of her alpha would comfort her in this unique moment of vulnerability. She smiled contentedly and he gently brushed errant strands of tousled hair from her face, looking down to admire her sleepy, graceful features.

“Do you think we can stay here” she murmured. “Defeat the Cabal from this bed?”

Reddington laughed softly. “As enticing as that sounds I’m afraid we’ll be docking soon. And the moment this ship hits land we need to keep moving. We’ve got a long drive ahead.”

Liz turned her large eyes up to him. “I never asked you where we were going” she said in disbelief at herself. “Tell me it’s somewhere warm? Spain? Or an island bolthole in the Caribbean?”

“Kentucky” Reddington said glibly, and Liz’s features fell in disappointment and confusion.

“We never left the States?” she asked, alarm beginning to manifest in her scent. “I thought we were on the run!”

“I prefer to think of it as a strategic retreat” he said conversationally. “Lizzie, while it was imperative that we get you out of Washington, we can’t fight the Cabal from thousands of miles away. They’re expecting you to run, which is why we’re going to pay them a visit right in their back yard.”

“In Kentucky…” Liz said, confused.

Reddington smiled knowingly. “The Cabal may have people pulling strings in Washington but the heart of their operation in the United States is based somewhere far less conspicuous - our very own
Bluegrass state.”

“What, so they’re planning the alpha world domination from city hall?” Liz responded sceptically.

“Good Lord, no – they’re not plotting in board rooms, in fact I doubt that the governor has any idea what’s going on right under his nose. No, the cabal’s preferred place of business is the town of Pity outside of Lexington, a quaint little place with five gas stations, sixteen bars, and a chain of laundromats that’s doing much better than one might expect in this economy.”

Liz pursed her lips. “Pity?”

“Yes, it’s a strange name for a prosperous town; it dates back to the depression era when the people who settled here weren’t quite so fortunate as they are now that the Cabal has got their hooks into the place. Contrary to the popular saying, crime does pay, and often rather well” he finished, flashing her a smug smile.

She raised her eyebrows in admonishment, before realising how crazy that was given that she was currently a fugitive.

“So the Cabal use the laundromats to launder money? That’s original” she said sarcastically.

Reddington shrugged. “The laundromats, the gas stations, the bars, the department store, the pet store, not to mention the schools, public library and the dentist – the whole town runs money and goods for the cabal and operates like a valve pumping cash and various assets throughout the country keeping their operations going in every state.”

“If the Cabal owns every single business then where’s our in?” Liz asked.

Reddington smiled knowingly. “Not quite every business, Lizzie. I think we’re in need of some new clothes...”

When their car pulled into the parking lot, Liz got out and folded her arms. “A Walmart? Seriously?”

Reddington exited the car nonchalantly and stood proudly, looking at the building from behind his sunglasses.

“The cornerstone of everyday America. When one achieves a certain level of notoriety and excitement in one’s life, there’s something surprisingly seductive about the mundane. The simple lives that ordinary people lead…” he murmured distantly.

Liz looked at him, her expression softening a little. She had been an ordinary person until yesterday; for Reddington it had been years.

“So this is the store that the Cabal doesn’t own – who manages it? They’d have to be pretty special to stay out of the Cabal’s net.”

Reddington smiled. “That he is. Come and meet him, Lizzie.”

They walked in companionable silence across the parking lot and into the store. It looked just like any other Walmart; cheap, bright colors and innocuous muzak playing quietly over the speakers. Reddington made for the clothing section and Liz followed grudgingly. As she moved down the aisles she caught the eye of a middle-aged, overweight woman who looked at her and frowned. Liz
turned her face down and walked on – had the woman recognised her? Was her face on TV by now? Or was the woman just unused to seeing omegas?

When she caught up with Reddington she saw he had swapped his fedora for a baseball cap and was grinning broadly.

“Raymond” came a jovial voice behind them. “That’s a good look for you. Less stuffy.”

They turned to see an older beta man in a company T-shirt approaching them with a smile.

Reddington embraced him, laughing, and Liz felt strangely awkward and conspicuous. The man turned to her and gave her a warm smile.

“And this must be Elizabeth.”

Reddington nodded proudly. “Elizabeth, meet Anil. He manages this fine establishment.”

Liz put out her hand but he bowed respectfully instead of taking it. “It is an honor to meet you, Elizabeth.”

Liz retracted her hand, her face flushing. She knew there were men who didn’t like to touch omegas for religious reasons but it hadn’t occurred to her that she should worry about that here. Before she could make a phatic comment in response she heard her name on the store TV and turned round sharply.

“Today the FBI are hunting one of their own – Special Agent Elizabeth Keen is wanted in connection with the murders of civil rights attorney Martin Hannover and Assistant Attorney General Tom Connolly. Keen is suspected to have ties with Russia, and may be working with notorious criminal fugitive Raymond Reddington. Reddington is currently number four on the FBI’s most wanted list, a position he has occupied for over a decade despite multiple efforts to apprehend him. Both fugitives should be considered armed and dangerous, and members of the public are advised not to approach them under any circumstances.”

Liz turned back to the men, her features and scent betraying her terror.

“Anil is a friend” Reddington told her gently.

Liz turned to the store manager sceptically. “So you’ll harbor dangerous fugitives but you won’t shake hands with an omega?” she observed bitterly.

She’d expected an equally abrasive response, but the man observed her sympathetically. “Only God knows what is in your heart. Just as he does mine.” Then manager’s features spread into a grin. “And only I know what treasures you can find in this store. I think now is the time to change your look, huh? Something a little less…fugitive.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “There aren’t exactly a lot of omegas around here, it’s going to be hard to blend in.”

Reddington nodded. “Omegas don’t blend in, so I suggest we use that to our advantage. Among his many talents, Anil is a master of disguise” he said confidently. “Let him help you. Then you can change in the bathroom while he and I have a little chat.”

Anil grinned at her. “How do you feel about going blonde?”
When Liz emerged from the store bathroom she began to walk nervously down the aisles in search of Reddington. She wore plain skinny jeans and a floral shirt that was brighter than her usual palette but nothing out of the ordinary. The real change was her hair, the super-strength beach-blond mixture supplied to her by Anil having successfully bleached her dark hair to golden waves. She looked anxiously about her as she walked; far from helping her conceal her omega looks, the makeover had accentuated them, her large blue eyes and golden hair softened even further by the delicate florals of her shirt.

She noticed a man pause in the aisle, openly staring at her agape as she walked past, and put her head down until she eventually found Reddington at the gun counter. He was still wearing the baseball cap, but had changed into a polo shirt and jeans which accentuated the muscular curve of his ass. He turned as she approached and his lips parted in surprise. He stared at her in silence for a moment, which did nothing to ease Liz’s discomfort at having her omega features exaggerated.

“What do you think?” she breathed, unable to hide the anxiety in her voice or her scent.

Reddington remained silent, his tongue running unconsciously across his lower lip and his expression unfathomable. It was only his scent that betrayed the complexity of his feelings in that moment; he was certainly aroused, but something much more that she couldn’t quite decipher. He swallowed, leaving his scent to speak for itself, and turned back to the counter, indicating the rifles fixed to the wall.

“Only in the United States can a person buy a gun with their groceries. Utterly bizarre, but it may come in handy for us.”

Liz raised her eyebrows. “You’re in favor of gun control? You’re an illegal arms dealer!”

Reddington shrugged. “I’m perfectly comfortable with what I do. But of all the sins I’ve encountered in my life, hypocrisy is still one of the worst. Your government funds initiatives designed to prevent gun violence while simultaneously awarding licences to individuals with a history of violence and mental health problems.”

“God bless America” came a drawling voice beside them, and they turned to see two beta men dressed casually in jeans and Ts leaning on the counter, their faces unshaven.

One of the men whistled in surprise when Liz turned around, and the other one laughed.

“Would you look at that. You’re about the prettiest little omega I ever saw.”

“ Prettiest pussy I ever sniffed” his friend said crudely, sniffing the air in an exaggerated way.

Liz rolled her eyes and was about to tell them where to go, when Reddington stepped towards them, his casual gait undermined by the unmistakable menace in his scent.

“Oh here we go” the man jeered. “We made her daddy mad.”

Reddington smiled tightly and in a flash he had the man pinned down on the counter, a gun pressed into his stomach while the other man stood back in alarm.

“You haven’t the slightest clue how to speak to a woman, have you?” Reddington growled quietly. “I ought to wash your mouth out with soap. And by God if I hear you speak that way to her or any woman again I’ll cut out your filthy tongue with a butter knife.”
“No need for that” said a voice behind them as a third man joined them. “I’m sure my boys didn’t mean any harm.”

Reddington gave the man in his grip a hard stare before releasing him and turning around to view the newcomer. Unlike the other two, this man was an alpha, tall with thick muscles rippling under his unshaven neck.

“We don’t see many of your sort round here” the man continued, staring intently at Liz. “You can’t blame them for a little excitement. Now if you don’t mind, we’re here to exercise our constitutional right to purchase arms.”

“And I’m exercising my constitutional right to refuse sale” Anil said as he appeared behind the counter. “I think it would be best if you left now, gentlemen.”

Tension began to crackle in the air, and Liz could smell the alpha man’s frustration clearly.

He turned and gripped the counter, his knuckles whitening. “No call for that. We ain’t doing no harm. We came here calm, we’ll leave calm – once we have the piece we came for.”

Reddington cocked his head disapprovingly. “I believe the manager has already asked you to leave.”

The alpha man’s head whipped round, his temper flaring. “What business is it of yours, old man? You think I’m gonna leave without what I came for just ‘cause of some tussle over a bit of pussy?” he spat, flecks of spittle gathering at the corner of his mouth.

Reddington’s expression darkened and he rested his hand on the counter, his gun lying with the barrel pointed in the direction of the alpha and his men.

“As it happens that’s exactly what you’re going to do” he growled. “You see, unlike you, I have a weapon - several, in fact – and this conversation is growing rather tiresome.”

One of the beta men stepped forward in anger, but the disgruntled alpha shot out his arm to hold him back. “Fine” he said with faux sweetness. “If that’s how it’s gonna be. Come on boys – we can come back once the guard dog’s left.”

Reddington’s lip twitched in distaste as the men left the store, and he returned his gun to the holster behind his back.

“I’m afraid you haven’t heard the last of them” Anil said warily. “They’re a scourge in this town - Garret Lee and his band of redneck wannabes.”

Liz pursed her lips. “It’s nothing we can’t handle. Besides, we’ll be getting out of here soon, right?” she asked Reddington. “You’ve done what you needed to do?”

Reddington turned to her with a soft smile. “Sweetheart I think we’ll be staying, just for a few days.”

Liz rolled her eyes, and Reddington straightened his baseball cap with a flourish, turning back to Anil.

“Now my friend – where’s good to eat around here these days? Tell me that charming little bistro on main street is still there…”
Chapter 41

The bistro was as charming as he’d promised, a single, cosy, candlelit room with wood panelling and old leather seats that reminded Liz faintly of Reddington’s apartment. The man himself seemed relaxed and jovial, in stark contrast to her discomfort about being out in public with her face all over the TV. The only outward sign of something disturbing him was the occasional brooding glance he would give her, a dark, almost haunted look that was so fleeting that, were it not for his scent, she’d have thought she might have imagined it. But she hadn’t. Since she’d appeared from the store bathroom with her omega looks heightened beyond measure, his scent had betrayed to her a mind that was almost as much in turmoil as hers.

She poked absently at her food with her fork, before looking up to find him staring at her again. His expression softened as she held his gaze, and he canted his head slightly.

“You’ve barely touched your dinner” he observed gently.

Liz sat back in her seat with a sigh. “I’m not hungry.”

Reddington nodded sympathetically. “I’d like you to try, Lizzie. It’s imperative that you keep your strength up for what lies ahead.”

“And if I don’t feel like it?” she asked sulkily.

His lip twitched. “Elizabeth, like it or not you are in my care” he said meaningfully.

Liz stared at him in silence for a moment, before yielding to his stern gaze and taking a small mouthful. She swallowed quickly, and decided to ask him a question she wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer to.

“The way you’ve looked at me, since I changed my hair… I look like her, don’t I? Like my mother?”

Reddington worked his jaw for a moment. “Your mother was an alpha” he said guardedly. “You… Are every bit an omega.”

“So we don’t look the same?”

Reddington didn’t respond, and Liz dropped her eyes back to her plate. “Sometimes I wonder if she hated me. She must have been so strong. An alpha woman spy – she wouldn’t have wanted a helpless omega child.”

Liz continued to push her food distantly but stopped when she felt Reddington’s large hand cover hers, stilling her movement. She looked up to see his stormy eyes looking intently at her, his forehead creased in a deep frown.

“Katarina had a difficult life. The cold war changed her, and your father. He took you from her and she followed you here, to the United States. You need to understand that, Lizzie. She adored you. She left her entire life behind to be with you. To protect you.”

Liz’s eyes widened as she listened. “Protect me from what? From those men in the photographs at your apartment? The doctors?”

Reddington sighed unhappily. “You know that the Soviet Union carried out some of the earliest
experiments with human genetics. Biological and non-biological enhancements. They groomed their alphas for combat, introduced a national programme to develop a race of alpha super-soldiers. Officially the programme was shut down after the Second World War, the human experiments condemned as barbaric and superseded by the development of chemical weapons.”

“And unofficially?” Liz asked, her stomach swirling unpleasantly.

“Unofficially, the programme continued. Government after government unable to shake off the promise of power that came with enhanced humans. The temptation to breed the strongest, most intelligent alphas. Even now, alphas are venerated in Russian society more than most other places on Earth. Omegas too – for their beauty. Their fertility.”

“What are you saying?” Liz whispered, nausea clawing at her. “That I’m the result of some kind of experiment?”

“No, sweetheart” Reddington said, shaking his head emphatically. “Katerina wasn’t just an agent – she was a rising alpha star in the KGB. Her husband too. When the authorities learned that she had given birth to an omega child, they were excited. The possibility of two alphas producing an omega was so remote… Like winning a genetic lottery. A child who could have the strength and intelligence of an alpha and the beauty of an omega… And, in time, the ability to bear many children like her.”

Liz stared at him, her lips parted as her mind raced. “The doctors in the pictures… the other little girls… they were studying us. Testing us.”

Reddington nodded, swallowing hard. “It was too much for your father. To see his little girl in the hands of the KGB and their brutal regime.”

Liz was trembling now, gripping at her hands in an attempt to stop shaking. “I don’t know what they did to us but I can guess” she whispered, her throat swelling with tears and shame. “He saved me, and I shot him” she murmured brokenly.

“It was an accident” Reddington said gently.

“My mother… tell me. I need to know.”

Reddington looked at her sadly. “She was never the same. The man she loved, killed by the child she adored. It was too much. Two months later, she went to Cape May and left her clothes on the beach, walked into the ocean, and was never seen again.”

Tears fell silently down Liz’s cheeks as she listened. “I killed both my parents” she said hollowly.

“You were a child” Reddington said vehemently. “There should never have been a gun for you to grab.”

Liz sat there in silence, processing the terrible truth of it, the coldness she felt tempered a little by his presence. He was there, silent and steadfast, his scent a powerful reminder of his love for her. He’d never judged her. He’d always been there. He’d rescued her, he’d sat and guarded her bedside…

Suddenly Liz frowned and looked up sharply. “That virus – the one the Cabal created to wipe out betas. Why did I get so sick if both my parents were alphas? I should have been immune.”

Reddington’s jaw tightened then, and she saw the familiar shuttered expression she’d become so used to, the one that signalled she wouldn’t get what she wanted. He smiled tightly and then looked towards the restaurant window, a nostalgic look on his face.
“You know, I once contracted malaria when I was sailing round Cape Verde. African flu, they called it – no one took it very seriously, least of all myself. An alpha in his prime has little to fear from a common tropical disease. A week later I’d become deathly ill; I was in a makeshift intensive care unit in Praia, preparing myself to die. I’d lost all sense of who I was… who I was supposed to be. But even in my darkest hours I was never more clear on one thing. The thing that matters most. The people who become the foundational elements of our lives. The people who remain part of us, even when we no longer recognise ourselves. I believe that carried me through.”

He turned back to her then, his eyes observing her softly. “We all have our vulnerabilities. But the very things that make us weak can also be our greatest strengths.”

Liz gave him a wry smile. “Being an omega hunted by every law enforcement agency in the country. I’d say that’s a pretty big vulnerability.”

Reddington laughed softly, his eyes glittering with humor. “I wouldn’t worry. I have it on good authority that right about now Agent Ressler and his brethren in local law enforcement are chasing their tails hunting one of several very credible yet utterly false leads along the Mexican border.”

“It’s not right” Liz sighed distantly.

“You know, I think we need to unwind a little. How about we stay out on the town. See what scents we can pick up” Reddington smiled enigmatically.

Liz raised an eyebrow. “What did you have in mind?”

“First Walmart, now a dive bar – you really know how to show a girl a good time” Liz commented dryly as they made their way through the dimly lit, stale-smelling establishment to the counter.

Reddington grinned as he leant on the bar, the sleeves of his casual shirt rolled up.

“You’re enjoying this!” Liz accused.

“Perhaps I am” he responded happily. “This is the stuff of great American novels - Keruac, Salinger, Hunter S. Thompson-”

“What do you want?” a surly barman interrupted, staring openly at Liz as he spoke.

“I’ll take a beer” Reddington smiled genially.

“Reddington” Liz said impatiently.

“Make that two” he continued nonchalantly.

While the barman shuffled off to complete their order, Liz turned and lent on the bar next to Reddington, spreading her arms on the counter. The gesture had the effect of stretching her shirt over her round breasts, and she couldn’t help but smirk as he took the bait, his eyes drawn helplessly to her chest. He might be one of the most powerful alphas in the world, but she had managed to distract him in a heartbeat. It felt good.

Reddington swallowed hard. His scent was growing distinctly territorial and Liz wondered fleetingly what she would do if he pushed her against the counter, stripped down her jeans and took her right there. Would she even care about being in public? She’d thought that once he’d knotted her she
would feel better, that the craving she felt for him would lessen, but it’d had the opposite effect; she was a fugitive grappling with a dark, dysfunctional past and she needed him like a drug, more than freedom, more than justice.

“That’ll be $12.50” the barman grunted, placing the beer bottles on the counter.

It broke the spell and Reddington turned to the man, chuckling quietly. “Dear me, that does seem a bit steep. But then, running a largescale money laundering operation for an organisation like the Cabal it must be hard to meet your overheads. I should know” he said, shaking his head sympathetically.

The barman’s hand darted quickly under the counter, but Reddington was quicker, his gun resting on the bar in the blink of an eye.

“How about we go have a little chat in the back” he continued brightly.

“What are you going to do?” the barman asked warily, glancing again at Liz.

Reddington smiled. “We’re going to give you a little financial advice.”

Liz rolled her eyes as they walked quietly behind the counter and into a dingy back room, the few patrons in the bar either not seeing or not wanting to see what had transpired.

The barman turned to face them slowly, his hands raised. “Look man, I don’t care what you and your omega do, just leave me out of it. I just run the books, I don’t ask questions.”

Reddington nodded. “It’s a useful skill to have, being professionally uninquisitive. I’m really no good at it myself” he chuckled. “No, I can’t help but ask questions and once I’m on to something, well I just can’t let it go. I dig and dig until I find what it is I’m looking for, and so far, I’ve found you” he finished in a hard tone.

“Believe me, I’d tell you everything if I could” the barman said earnestly “but I don’t know anything - they design it that way. They don’t even keep any electronic records. They make me write everything down in this book, which sucks because I’m dyslexic-”

Reddington was grinning broadly now, and even Liz couldn’t help but crack a smile.

“We’re going to need to see that book” Reddington said pleasantly.

Once they’d gotten what they came for, Liz was keen to get out of the bar but just as she strode back out into the gloomy mass of tables she smelt an unpleasantly familiar scent.

“Well hey darlin’. Ain’t I the lucky one catching sight of you twice in one day.”

Before she knew it, Liz was surrounded by Garret Lee and the lackeys she’d encountered in Walmart. She rolled her eyes and tried to step round them, but they closed in, pinning her against the pool table.

Garret wagged his finger in her face. “Well that ain’t very polite is it? Tryin’ to leave without so much as a ‘good evenin’ sir’. Maybe I oughtta teach you some manners, sweet thing.”

“Let her go” Reddington snarled, stepping out from behind the counter, his expression stony and his gun pointed squarely at Garret’s head.
At this point, what few patrons there were upped and left stealthily, and Liz guessed that they were used to looking the other way when unpleasant things happened in this town.

When Reddington pulled the gun, Garret merely laughed, and something in his nonchalance gave Liz a cold feeling. Something wasn’t right. In a flash Garret had pulled a revolver from his jeans and had the barrel under Liz’s chin, pushing her hard into the pool table until it hurt.

Keeping the gun on Liz, he turned to Reddington with a sour smile. “How about it, pops? I got myself a piece of my own now. Evened the score a little bit. So y’know what I think? I’m gonna have a real good time with your little girl here, and there ain’t a damned thing you can do about it, unless you want me to blow her pretty head open.”

Garett’s lackeys sprang into action then, grabbing her arms and holding her down as she struggled on the smudged green felt of the pool table. Garret leered over her, pressing the cold metal of the gun under her chin while he ground his pelvis suggestively into hers. She could feel his erection clearly through his jeans, but it wasn’t fear that coursed through her - it was white hot anger.

She could scent Reddington’s rage too; it was murderous and it roused her beyond anything. She was a criminal now. She could do what she wanted. She was going to take care of this herself.

She heard Reddington cock his gun and her head whipped round. “No” she breathed sharply. “I don’t need your help.”

Reddington stopped in his tracks and remained where he stood, his eyes sharp. She could scent his anxiety, his uncertainty, his deep unhappiness at being asked to hold back when she was in need, but he was holding back, and it made her feel even more powerful. He respected her. He trusted that she was capable of defending herself. She was free.

She turned back to Garett, with a glint in her eye. He was salivating revoltingly, his hand groping between her legs, going for her zipper. She felt adrenaline surge through her like an electric current; she was alive, alert, and angry.

She brought the heel of her boot up and kicked him viciously hard in the shin, sending him howling backwards, his gun skidding away across the floor. His beta sidekicks loosened their grip in surprise, enough for her to twist her body round on the table, elbowing one sharply enough to break his nose, and kicking the other in the crotch.

Garret swore loudly and launched himself at her with a howl of rage, but this time she was ready. She kicked and punched with violent accuracy, hissing like a wild cat, a slim little omega taking on three grown men with ease.

Before long, Garret’s lackeys seemed to decide to cut their losses and fled the bar, limping and bleeding, but she didn’t care – it was Garret she wanted. In that moment he was everything she hated; he was Tom who had beaten and betrayed her, he was Davenport with his sadistic tendencies, he was Victor Lattimer, the evil alpha who had taken away her power, he was Colfax, with the same shameless arrogance, he was Connolly, the corrupt assistant DA who was the reason she was in this mess. He was all the disgusting men who had made comments, demeaned her, experimented on her, abused her and underestimated her.

She was vaguely aware of Reddington still watching her intently, standing ready to step in if she needed, but letting her have her moment. She delivered one final, bloody punch and Garret went down hard, coughing and spluttering, his face an oozing mess of dark blood. Liz stood over him triumphantly, her breathing ragged.
“Feel better?” Reddington asked softly.

She looked up at him, her expression hard and determined. “I do.”

Reddington nodded and Liz turned to leave with her head held high, walking towards the door of the deserted bar. She paused when she realised he wasn’t following her, and turned back just in time to see him raise his gun and deliver a neat shot to Garret’s head, killing him instantly.

Liz’s lips parted in shock and she looked at Reddington in dismay. “He already got what he deserved! You shouldn’t have done that for me” she chastised bitterly.

Reddington tucked the gun away and fixed her with a hard stare. “I didn’t do it for you” he said quietly. “I did it for the next omega he meets who isn’t able to defend herself.”

Liz swallowed and nodded, and Reddington walked towards her, gesturing to the exit. “Let’s get that hand cleaned up” he said tightly.

She look down in confusion and saw that the knuckles of her right hand were swollen and bloody, with purple bruises beginning to form. The adrenaline had prevented her from feeling it, but she knew that she soon would. She nodded numbly, and allowed him to escort her from the bar.

They arrived at a hotel, and Liz was pleasantly surprised to find that the room was comfortable but not ostentatious; not the glittering wealth of Reddington’s previous hotel rooms, but not a sleazy motel either. It was the kind of normal that she craved, and she took comfort in that, however distant ‘normal’ seemed in that moment. Reddington had been silent as he’d driven them there, his scent telling her that his mind was not at peace.

“Go and sit down in the bathroom” he told her firmly as he rummaged in his carryall.

He entered shortly after with a first aid kit and began to remove items methodically while Liz watched him silently from her position sitting on the toilet lid. When he turned to her she held out her hand obediently, and he carefully began to sponge warm water over her bruised and bloody knuckles. She hissed in pain and saw his lip twitch unhappily as he continued to clean the abrasions.

After he’d cleansed her hand, he gently applied antiseptic cream, his long fingers delicately dapping with a gentleness that she knew he was steadfastly maintaining despite his fraught mind.

“You’re angry with me” she said quietly, looking up at him with her large blue eyes.

Reddington placed the antiseptic on the side and proceeded to tape gauze over her knuckles, maintaining his focus on her hand.

“No” he responded grimly as he applied the last piece of tape. “If I’m angry then it’s only with myself.”

Liz frowned. “Why? You’ve done everything you can to help me.”

Reddington passed her a cool pack and nodded to her hand. “Here. This will keep the swelling down.”

He sighed and left the bathroom, with Liz following close behind, clutching the cool pack to her damaged knuckles. “Tell me why” she asked again, her tone apprehensive.
Reddington sat heavily on the end of the hotel room bed, his hands clasped loosely between his knees. Finally he looked up at her, his expression taught.

“I swore to protect you from this. From my world and everything that comes with it. I failed.”

Liz shook her head. “It’s not just that. This is about Garret Lee, and all the men out there like him. You hated that I asked you not to step in but you let me do what I needed to do. I want to thank you for that.”

Reddington’s expression darkened and Liz could sense his breathing increase, his lips tightening in an attempt to keep a snarl at bay.

“What he planned to do…” Reddington began tightly, his lips pursed.

“Yes” Liz said quietly. “That’s why I needed to take care of it myself. To know that I can.”

“I know” he said, biting the inside of his cheek. “That doesn’t make it any easier to watch. To watch my omega…” he cut himself off sharply, and shook his head.

“It’s ok” Liz said quietly. “I am your omega. You can say it.” She moistened her lips hesitantly and went to kneel at the foot of the bed in front of him.

He looked down at her in silence, his brow creased and his expression pained, while his scent betrayed his most primal, possessive instincts no matter how hard he attempted to hide it.

Liz held his gaze, her large blue eyes looking softly at him. “You want to knot me, don’t you” she said, her voice almost a whisper. “Because you need to prove that everything is ok. That you’re the one who gets to have me. That I’m yours.”

Reddington stared at her, his eyes dark and haunted. “Yes” he ground out finally, his lip curling over his clenched teeth. “I admit that. But I’m not going to, Elizabeth. Not yet. It’s too soon.”

“I’ll be ok” Liz protested.

“I said no” Reddington told her, his tone heavy and final.

His expression softened as he saw her chin crumple a little in disappointment, her unrest at having displeased him heavy in her scent along with the richness of her natural arousal.

He worked his jaw for a moment, his breathing still coming fast. “Take off your pants” he said then, his voice low and rough.

Liz stood immediately and obediently pushed her jeans down over her creamy thighs, toeing them off delicately.

“Your panties too” he said hoarsely, moistening his lips, his eyes roaming over her.

A small smile hinted at the corner of Liz’s mouth as she pushed her panties down, giving him a view of the soft hair and swollen lips between her legs. She knew how much he wanted her; she could smell his desire to own her clearly and it coiled sweetly inside.

“Good” he breathed. “Come down in front of me now, your back to me.”

Liz frowned a little but did as he asked, her aching omega sex moist and throbbing at the thought of what might happen. Was he going to take her from behind, like a traditional alpha? Was he going to knot her after all? If he was going to do it like this, would it hurt more?
She positioned herself hesitantly in front of him, facing away and relying on his scent to tell her what was happening. Arousal, fear, almost feral possessiveness and, as always, another emotion she couldn’t place - something *complicated*.

Acting on pure instinct, she lent her front half down slowly towards the floor and raised her bottom, adopting the lordosis presenting position. She sensed his breathing become shallower and tensed as she heard the clink of his belt buckle as he undid his pants. She went to look over her shoulder but felt his large palm come gently between her shoulder blades, pushing her gently down and opening her further until she felt the conditioned air of the room cooling her exposed sex.

“That’s it sweetheart, good girl” he murmured roughly.

Liz closed her eyes and waited in trepidation; she could sense that the encounter in the bar had almost driven him to breaking point, and bit her lip, trying desperately to prepare herself for the pain of him taking her like he clearly wanted to although she was still bruised and sore from the last time.

When it finally came, his touch was not what she’d expected at all. It was his long middle finger sliding ever so gently between her legs, back and forth along her slit, his palm cupping her while he pleased her. Even now he was still perfectly in control, though she could feel his hand shaking slightly with the effort of containing himself. It excited her even more and she began to buck gently on his finger.

He groaned brokenly when she did that, and she heard a rustle of material behind her followed by the distinct sound of skin on skin, and that clean, musky scent that made her mouth water. Her lips parted in a gasp – he was *touching himself*. He was fingering her while he rolled his palm over the velvety skin of his impressive cock, his breathing shallow and labored.

“*Oh God*” she whispered emphatically, rocking on his hand. She understood then. He was going to keep his word, he wasn’t going to knot her; he was going to release on her - to mark her as his own. She trembled with excitement at the thought, and rubbed herself against his palm, earning her a strangled growl from him.

“Such a needy girl” he panted behind her as he tugged at himself in firm, even strokes. “So aroused. So innocent. Promise me, sweetheart. Promise me you’ll let me protect you. Even if you don’t always understand why I do the things I do” he breathed, his voice strained.

Liz could feel the sweet pressure of climax building inside her as he worked her sex with his hand, the scent of his own pleasure growing in the air around her. “*Yes*” she moaned distractedly. “*Yes I will.*”

“Elizabeth” he growled heatedly. The warning was clear in his tone and she knew he was deadly serious.

“I promise” she whispered, swallowing. “I’ll let you look after me. I need it. I need *you*.”

She heard him exhale loudly, as though he had been holding his breath waiting to hear her response. She could feel his movements growing more rapid, his breathing becoming shallower until finally he knelt down behind her with a soft thud, preparing for his knot to come.

Tingling in anticipation, she obediently rolled her head to the side, exposing her neck. She felt his breath hot against her ear before he bit down tightly onto her nape, in the same spot where she was still bruised from before.

Suddenly she was overcome with emotion, a flood of hormones screaming for her to give herself to
him fully, to accept him, his guidance and his power. He bit so deeply while his fingers slid erratically between her legs and she cried out, mewling and whimpering helplessly as she came, pulsing in his hand.

A raw, primal sound ripped from his throat then, vibrating against her neck, and she felt searing hot spurts hit her lower back as he followed her moments later.

“You’re mine” he hissed through clenched teeth against her neck. “I don’t deserve you but God you’re mine.”

Liz closed her eyes but it didn’t stop the onslaught of overwhelming feeling; pain, ecstasy, loss, and the absolute knowledge that she belonged to him, that his touch, his scent, would be the only thing that would bring her pleasure or peace for the rest of her life.

“Shhh, shhh sweetheart. You’re ok” he panted, softly kissing her bruised neck.

It was only then that she realised she was crying, great fat tears sliding down her flushed cheeks, her chest shaking with sobs. She turned and buried her head in his chest and he held her tightly, his heart beating fast and steady and his hand cradling her head.

“I don’t know why I’m crying” she hiccuped.

“You’re going to be fine” he said gently. “Right about now you have a multitude of hormones coursing through you telling you that my approval is the only thing that matters - I’d try not to listen. Defying me should come naturally enough, goodness knows you’ve had enough practice” he chuckled softly.

Liz laughed in spite of herself and nuzzled his neck. She smiled contentedly as he took his shirt off, enjoying his attentions as he used it to carefully wipe his semen from her skin.

When he was done he smiled affectionately down at her, cupping her face and planting a deep kiss on her forehead.

“What now?” she asked hesitantly, looking up at him.

“Well, first we get off the floor and onto the bed where I’m sure we’ll be considerably more comfortable” he said lightly.

Liz uncurled reluctantly from his lap, her heart squeezing a little as she watched him rise stiffly to his feet. He radiated so much power that it was difficult to remember that he wasn’t as young as she, that he had been shot not so long ago.

He groaned in relief as he lay back on the soft sheets and she curled gratefully into his side, enjoying his warmth and scent in the comfort of the hotel bed. He seemed calmer, and for tonight that was enough.

“I still need you to knot me” she said quietly, her fingers absently making patterns in his chest hair around the scar where the bullet had entered. “I need it more than ever. Not tonight, but…”

“Soon, sweetheart” he murmured, gently stroking her bandaged hand. “When the time is right… I’ll give you everything.”
Chapter 42

When Liz woke, the space in the bed next to her was empty and cold. For a moment the omega inside her was gripped with a jolt of panic; where was her alpha? Had he left her alone? But she was soon reassured by the presence of his heavy scent in the air, and the tang of fresh coffee. She grabbed some panties and one of his shirts, pulling it on without bothering to do up the buttons, before stepping round the corner into the lounge area of their room.

Reddington was dressed and sitting elegantly on the couch with a cup of coffee, examining the ledger they had taken from the bar. He looked up when she appeared, smiling appreciatively and setting the book down.

“I couldn’t bear to wake you” he said softly.

She walked towards him, nodding at the cafetiere on the table. “I think my omega senses detected the smell of coffee in my sleep.”

Reddington nodded, his eyes roaming her body and coming to rest on the sweet little mound between her legs. He shifted awkwardly in his seat as he decanted the aromatic coffee into a cup and handed it to her. She accepted it and smiled in wry amusement at his attempt to conceal his growing erection.

“The ledger” she said, nodding to the book. “Did you find anything?”

“I’m doing my best” he responded conversationally. “But I must say you seem utterly determined to distract me with your attire, or should I say lack thereof. My shirt is really quite becoming on you, however-”

“Don’t get any ideas” she said sternly. “We need to get what we can from that ledger and move on quickly. What have you got so far?”

Reddington groaned. “Oh dear. I can see I’m going to be in considerable discomfort for the rest of the morning… In truth I’ve learned very little, but what little I did learn is close to being everything.”

Liz looked at him incredulously. “Why do you always do that?”

“Do what?” he responded innocently.

“Talk in riddles” Liz pressed. “You’re like the Mad Hatter from Alice in Wonderland.”

Reddington smiled. “Well then Alice, it’s time we went down the rabbit hole. Because to make sense of this particular riddle, we need to pay a visit to The Gatekeeper.”

Liz looked about her uncertainly as they pulled up to a grand country house, the sleek white timber surrounded by trees and neatly arranged shrubs.

“Who exactly is The Gatekeeper?” she asked.

Reddington looked up at the house, squinting behind his sunglasses in the cool glare of the day.

“As you know, I tend to eschew the use of cellular telephones and laptops where possible and one of
the many reasons is that for the life of me I can’t remember all those passwords - random letters and numbers, special characters” he said, disdainfully. “Criminal syndicates produce a large amount of sensitive data that needs to be protected somehow, and encryption software available on the general market won’t cut it. The Gatekeeper holds a library of digital cyphers – keys if you will – that translate data stored by criminals across the world.”

Liz’s lips parted in surprise. “We’re going after a Blacklister? We’re on the run…”

Reddington smiled. “Our goal hasn’t changed, Lizzie. We’re just playing slightly left of the field.”

With that he began to saunter round the back of the house and Liz followed him, looking around her for clues that a cyber-criminal mastermind lived there, and finding none. The garden looked like something from Stepford Wives, as did the woman who greeted them on the patio.

She was an attractive alpha brunette in a light blue, figure hugging dress, her athletic physique making her look a little younger than the forty-eight years Liz suspected she was. She gave them a tremulous wave as though they were old friends, her delicate, bejewelled bracelets sparkling in the sun.

Reddington smiled genteelly, but Liz could sense that there was an edge that hadn’t been there a moment ago. “It’s Rosalind, isn’t it” he said pleasantly. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Likewise, Mr Reddington” she responded daintily.

“Ah… I see my reputation precedes me. This is my associate, Elizabeth.”

The woman’s appraising eyes moved to Liz. “‘Associate’, is it?” the woman said with a hint of amusement. “I suspect you’re a little more than that, aren’t you my dear.”

Liz folded her arms defensively, the woman’s intense stare making her uncomfortable.

Reddington smiled politely. “I hope you’ll forgive our intrusion, but Elizabeth and I have come by a document that we really can’t make heads or tails of, and we were wondering if you’d be so kind as to supply us with the cypher.”

The woman smiled icily, though her attention was still drawn to Liz.

“I fear my clients would take a rather dim view of my divulging their information, so it seems you’ve had a wasted trip. Perhaps you’d like to stay for some tea?” she said brightly, gesturing to the pot on the garden table.

Liz raised an eyebrow. “I have to say you don’t seem like a cyber-criminal mastermind” she commented drily.

The woman laughed sweetly, and for the first time she seemed genuine. “Oh dear girl, that’s because I’m not. It’s probably best to think of me as more of an administrator.”

Reddington cocked his head. “Ohhh, something tells me you’re far more than that.”

Liz looked around the garden again, and saw what looked like a boy’s bike tucked against one of the walls.

“It’s a big place you have here” she observed neutrally. “You live here alone?”

“No, with my son Jake” the woman answered crisply. “He’s fifteen.”
Liz shrugged. “In that case, I would have thought you’d want to give us what we came for so you can get us out of here as soon as possible.”

At that moment a security team appeared on the patio surrounding Liz and Reddington, their weapons drawn.

The woman smiled again, though this time it wasn’t sweet. It was predatory. “On the contrary. I’m really hoping you’re going to stay.”

Reddington walked accompanied by the alpha woman down a corridor in the lower part of the house, missing the reassuring feeling of his revolver in the holster at his back. They soon reached a large room set up with surveillance screens which Rosalind accessed with a key card.

Reddington saw immediately that Liz was visible on one of the large screens, trapped in a bright, mirrored room. She was stalking back and forth, looking up and around, appraising her situation. Suddenly she appeared to look straight at him and he realised that she must have located the camera. They watched as she bent down, calmly removed one of her boots, and hurled it at the camera with deadly accuracy.

Her image vanished from the screen as she took the camera out, and the alpha woman hummed in admiration next to him.

“There’s only been one other who managed to do that, and it took her much longer” she observed, impressed.

“How many have there been?” Reddington enquired heavily.

“Enough” she quipped, tapping quickly on a console keyboard.

Liz appeared on screen again, this time from a different angle, betraying the location of a second camera. This time she was kneeling with her back to them, studying the lock on the door.

“Your Cabal associates acted fast” Reddington observed. “I assume they let you know to expect us.”

The woman smiled. “They contacted me the moment they became aware that you had taken their records from that ghastly bar. To most people it would just be a book of poorly managed accounts, but if you know what to look for, it was only a matter of time before you sought me out. Luckily they got to me first.”

“Is that lucky?” Reddington asked quietly, his gazed still fixed on the screen in front of them. “I’m unusually generous to those who help me. Your associates on the other hand… In finding you we’ve made you a liability they won’t tolerate.”

The woman pursed her lips. “We’ll see. In the meantime I’m curious to learn more about your girl. I can already tell she’s not your average omega. Not that any omega is average, by definition” she added.

“No” Reddington agreed darkly.

Rosalind tapped on the keyboard again and Reddington watched in consternation as Liz was suddenly thrown by an invisible force back onto the floor from her position in front of the door. She lay motionless on the floor, her limp hand outstretched and her hair falling over her face.
A growl rose involuntarily in Reddington’s throat, escaping through his clenched teeth as his body tensed.

“Try anything and she’ll pay for it” the alpha woman warned. Seeing his expression she laughed dismissively. “Relax Mr Reddington, she’ll come round shortly. I’ve just activated the electric barrier in the room. I’ve never had an omega escape before but something tells me if one were to get out, it would be her. She’s a special girl, isn’t she.”

“She is” he said tightly.

This elicited a genuine smile from the alpha woman. “You’re proud of her. That’s sweet. Perhaps you could show her off to me… We could have some fun, you know” she said softly. “The three of us.”

Reddington’s lip twitched in distaste. “As titillating as that sounds, I don’t share. Besides, I get the impression that you’re far more interested in her than you are in me. This is how The Cabal compensates you for your services – you store their cyphers, they have local law enforcement turn a blind eye to your little habit.”

The woman smiled wistfully. “Something like that. Truthfully I find them fascinating. Omegas… their beauty, their scent… their taste.”

“You have a fetish that kills young women” Reddington said in a hard tone.

“No” she said defensively. “I don’t want to kill them, not unless I have to… I want to feel what it’s like to be them. So innocent and healthy and beautiful. An omega at the peak of sexual maturity like your girl here… There’s nothing quite like it.”

Reddington smiled in relief as he observed the screen; Liz had regained consciousness, pulling herself to a sitting position and observing the electric barrier.

“Elizabeth Báthory was one of the earliest and most infamous serial killers” he began quietly. “She was a Hungarian noblewoman who was said to have abducted and killed over six-hundred virgin girls between 1585 and 1609. She tortured them and bathed in their blood in a twisted attempt to preserve her youth. But she never found immortality. She died in prison of a wasting disease.”

“Well in that case I should consider myself lucky” Rosalind said hollowly. “This is hardly a prison.”

“You have Parkinson’s” Reddington stated neutrally. “I noticed the tremor in your hand when we first arrived.”

“Close” she responded. “It’s Huntington’s. And make no mistake – I’m under no illusions that your sweet girl’s blood can save me. I’m dying. But I intend to make the most of the time that I have” she finished ominously, watching Liz on the camera with an almost hungry expression.

Reddington nodded. “I’m no expert, but I seem to recall that Huntington’s disease is very often passed on by parents to children.”

“There was a fifty percent chance that my son would inherit the gene” she said bitterly. “That we would suffer the same fate. But he’s fine. Genetically perfect” she said scathingly.

“And you make him pay for that by exploiting his gift” Reddington surmised coldly. “He’s the computer genius, not you. He designs the cyphers. Poor kid.”

“Save your pity for your girl” the woman spat.
Just then there was a momentary flash on the screen, as Liz wrenched several parts of the mirror on the wall away. She proceeded to arrange them at an angle in front of the door to the cell, and resumed her place kneeling by the lock.

“What is she doing?” Rosalind asked curiously, as though watching a precocious animal in a cage.

“That’s my girl” Reddington murmured.

The door in front of Liz suddenly sprang open and they watched on the screen as she slipped out of the cell. A moment later an alarm began to blare throughout the house and the lights cut out, followed by the sound of boots stomping on the ground above them.

Reddington turned to the alpha woman with a thin, plastic smile, palming his fedora onto his head.

“I think that’s my cue to leave… Perhaps if you play your cards right your Cabal friends will see to it that you don’t suffer the indignity of the slow, wasting death you deserve” he commented with an unpleasant smile before leaving her alone in the room.

Reddington walked stealthily down the darkened corridors, using his heightened senses to determine the number and location of the Cabal’s people. When he discerned an isolated guard, he disabled him quickly with a sharp blow to the neck, claiming both the rifle and the handgun the man had on his person.

He was proceeding slowly along the corridor, when suddenly a slim hand grabbed his wrist and yanked him into another darkened room. He twisted his arm elegantly until he had his assailant pinned against a filing cabinet, his hand cupping her face.

“Lizzie it’s me” he said gently.

“I know” she breathed, exhilarated, her eyebrow cocked. “Only you could smell so self-assured in a situation like this.”

Reddington smiled in amusement, tucking an errant lock of hair neatly behind her ear. “In my own defence, I knew you’d managed to escape. Diverting the beam using pieces of mirror – that was really quite ingenious.

Liz looked at him questioningly for a moment and then rolled her eyes. “There was a second camera.”

“I’m afraid so” Reddington nodded “but I have to admit to being glad; I do tend to feel much calmer when I can see that you’re ok… That was quite a shock you had” he finished, his tone quieter.

Liz smiled at him reassuringly. There was a time when his admission would have needled her, knowing that he watched her to check on her, but now she had a better understanding of the depth of his compulsion to protect her.

“I’m fine, I promise” she said, her eyes sparkling with pleasure that her alpha cared so deeply for her.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Though I’m glad I’m out of there. I have a feeling that room was about more than just containment.”
Reddington’s jaw tightened but he said nothing, and she knew he was protecting her from the truth about what could have happened to her. She fixed him with a determined stare.

“Let’s go get the cypher.”

Reddington frowned at her, his eyes narrowing. “That’s out of the question” he said firmly. “We’re woefully outnumbered, not to mention we don’t know the layout of the house. We need to go. Now.”

“We won’t get this chance again!” Liz pursed her lips stubbornly.

“Elizabeth-”

“Are you telling me that if I wasn’t here you still wouldn’t go for it?” she pressed.

He remained silent, working his jaw unhappily, and Liz knew she had him.

“I know you want to protect me – I’ve accepted that. But you can’t keep treating me like I’m made of glass” she said gently. “The best way to help me now is for us to get that cypher, decode the book, and get closer to crippling The Cabal. You know it’s true.”

Reddington stared at her, the tension in his face palpable. “You follow me” he said eventually. “You do everything I say immediately and without question. Is that understood?”

Liz nodded, and Reddington passed her the handgun he had taken from the guard. “You should feel right at home – it’s government issue.”

Her eyes widened as she tucked the weapon into her jeans. “The Cabal – they’re cops?”

“Cops, judges, motivational speakers… They’re everywhere.”

Liz approached and looked up at him, her eyes hard and serious. “We’re going to stop them.”

He slung his weapon over his shoulder and surprised her by bending his mouth indulgently to meet hers, pressing his lips to hers in a sensual movement that sent a sweet pulse to her groin.

He gave her a small smile, leaving her in no doubt that he could smell her arousal, before gently touching her arm and moving her behind him as they stepped out into the corridor.

He began to move back towards the main part of the house, and Liz grabbed his arm in confusion.

“Wait, wouldn’t the cyphers be hidden down here where the cell was rather than upstairs?”

“That cell had nothing to do with Rosalind’s side business in encryption, believe me” Reddington said darkly. “No, I think if we want to find what we’re looking for we need to try a much more mundane location… a teenager’s bedroom, perhaps.”

“A teenager…” Liz repeated. “Her son. You think he’s running the encryption business?” she whispered as they moved along the corridor and up a set of stairs.

Reddington squinted in the dark as he looked round a corner. “No, but I think he’s the brains of the operation…”

He turned back to her with his finger pressed to his lips. Liz nodded her understanding and they surged forward, quickly disabling the guard outside of the boy’s room before slipping inside where they were met by the kid’s frightened stare, his face illuminated by the glow of a computer screen.
“We need to get this done quickly” Reddington murmured.

Liz smiled at the boy. Though he wasn’t yet well developed, she could scent that he was an alpha, which meant he knew what she was too. She stepped close enough in the dark for him to see her face.

“Hello” she said softly. “It’s Jake isn’t it?”

The boy nodded, glancing nervously at Reddington where he stood guard by the door, and then back to Liz.

“We’re not going to hurt you, I promise” Liz said softly. “The truth is I’m in trouble and I need your help.”

“I’m not allowed to speak to omegas” he said hesitantly.

“I’m sure your mom is just trying to protect you” Liz said sympathetically, but this earned her a disdainful grunt from the boy.

“Yeah, that and she doesn’t want me interfering with the girls she keeps downstairs. Like I don’t know what she’s up to.”

Liz stared at him in surprise and the boy continued, his scent betraying his discomfort. “I tried to do something to help. One time I even went to the sheriff, but he sent me away. He didn’t believe me.”

“Oh I think he did believe you” Reddington murmured darkly. “But your mom’s encryption business is too valuable to the people who pay his salary. Perhaps if you’d told him that you’re the one who write the cyphers he would have been inclined to be more helpful.”

Jake’s eyes widened. “How did you know? What do you want from me?”

Liz looked at him seriously. “We need a cypher – just one. To help us decode a book. This book” she finished, holding up a picture on her phone.

“That’s it?” the boy asked suspiciously.

“That’s it” she smiled encouragingly.

“And if I help you, what do I get out of it?” he asked with a hint of bravado.

Reddington turned from his position by the door and Liz could smell the boy’s fear as the large alpha locked eyes with him. How many times had she been warned that Reddington was a powerful, ruthless man who wouldn’t allow anyone to stand in his way? This boy didn’t have the first clue what he was capable of. Her muscles tensed and she was regretfully aware of the scent of her own apprehension in the air.

“What do you want?” Reddington asked quietly, his voice low and stern.

The boy paused uncertainly and Reddington shook his head in a disapproving manner. “Never go into a negotiation without knowing exactly what you intend to walk away with.”

The boy seemed to go very still then, staring at Reddington with a resolute expression. “I want it to stop” he said in a hard voice. “I want her to stop.”

Reddington nodded. “That can be arranged.”
“Wait” Liz said with a frown. “You don’t mean-”

“We don’t have much time” Reddington interrupted, turning his attention back to the door.

Liz’s ears pricked up as she heard the sound of multiple footsteps approaching from down the hall. She turned to the boy but his fingers were already typing furiously on the keyboard. He hit return with a flourish and turned to Liz.

“I’ve pinged it to your cell” he said with a triumphant smile before turning to Reddington. “You’ll keep your word?” he asked earnestly.

Reddington looked at him thoughtfully. “When the dust has settled a representative from my organisation will visit you at an undisclosed time and location, and ask you if you’d like a job. If I were you I’d be ready with an answer.”

With that, he crept from the room and Liz followed, her adrenaline racing. “We’ve got company” she whispered.

A second later they heard shouts down the corridor and the sound of running feet; they’d been found.

“Up here” Reddington said matter-of-factly, stalking down the hall and pointing to an air conditioning vent in the ceiling.

Liz pulled a chair underneath and stood on it, pushing the grate up.

“Up you go” Reddington commanded, putting his hand on the small of her back to steady her and holding out his palm. Taking a deep breath she stepped onto his hand and he pushed her up into the vent, watching her scramble up.

Her heart was thumping as she looked around the narrow crawlspace and began to thunder even more as she heard gunfire in the corridor below her. Reddington’s hands appeared through the vent a moment later, and she crawled forward, helping him as he hauled himself up, his muscles straining under his shirt.

“I can smell fresh air that way” Liz whispered. “There must be a way out.”

She began to crawl down the narrow space on her front and Reddington grunted as his broad shoulders pressed painfully against the sides as he moved.

“You have me at a disadvantage” he grumbled breathily as they shuffled their way down. “The architect clearly didn’t anticipate that an alpha would need to fit in this space. Especially not one with a weakness for strawberry Pączki.”

Liz smirked. “I guess this is one of the few times when it pays to be an omega.”

The continued until they reached another vent above them. Pushing their way through, they came out on the roof of the house, gulping the fresh air appreciatively.

They froze suddenly at the sound of a gun being cocked behind them, and turned around to see Rosalind pointing a weapon at them, her hand trembling.

Reddington moved smoothly in front of Liz, holding her behind him with an iron grip on her wrist.

“The game’s over, Rosalind” he said firmly. “You’ve been compromised, and I sincerely doubt
they’ll forgive you for that.”

“They might” she breathed unsteadily. “If I give them you two… Help!” she yelled then. “It’s him, it’s Reddington and the girl. They’re on the roof!”

Liz felt his grip tighten on her wrist as the Cabal’s guards appeared on the roof; she knew his instinct to protect her was as fierce as it had ever been, but now he needed to trust her. She twisted gracefully out of his grip, taking out two of the guards behind them in one smooth movement. On cue Reddington spun and deftly dispatched the three in front.

They worked so well together it was almost like dancing; Liz was aware of every twitch of his muscle, every message in his scent - it was like she could read his mind. Her chest was so taught with triumph and adrenaline that she didn’t notice that the Cabal’s guards had returned fire until she smelt blood in the air.

She turned and saw Rosalind stagger backwards, a red stain appearing on the neat, light blue of her dress turning it a strange purple color. Liz darted towards her but Reddington reached the woman first, just in time to grab her hand as she slipped off the roof.

Rosalind dangled over the edge, spluttering in pain and surprise, grappling at Reddington’s arm to prevent herself from falling to her death.

“Help me” she hissed.

“I intend to” he responded quietly.

There was a gasp and then a sickening thud as the woman hit the patio below.

Reddington remained where he was for a moment, his eyes dark and breath coming hard and fast, until he turned around and saw Liz staring at him, her pupils round.

He swallowed hard, his lip curling to hide a snarl, and they stood for what seemed liked minutes observing one another; the criminal laid bare and the beautiful, innocent omega, revaluating everything that she thought she knew.

Liz approached him slowly and he watched her apprehensively, as though waiting for her reproach, for her to tell him that he was every bit the monster she’d always feared. Her touch, when it came, was not what he expected, and more beautiful than he could have imagined.

She raised her hand softly to his weathered cheek, before placing her lips ever so gently on his. His sandy lashes fluttered shut and he was perfectly still as she kissed him, the softness of her mouth on his telling him she accepted everything he was.

When she drew back she was struck by his expression of wonder.

“What is it?” she asked quietly.

Reddington shook his head, his stormy eyes fixed on her. “A kiss from you… It’s like a burst of sunlight. Warmth I thought I’d never feel again. The promise of…”

He broke off hesitantly, but Liz smiled up at him. “A future” she whispered.

“Yeah” he breathed heavily, as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

She leaned up again, but this time he was ready for her, his hand gripping the back of her neck as he
kissed her artfully, his tongue moistening her lips before probing her mouth and teasing more to come. She pushed herself into his body, unconsciously trying to satisfy the urges he was stirring in her while the sweet musk of her arousal scented the air around them.

He broke away breathing hard, and rested his forehead on hers, inhaling the scent of their love and pleasure.

“I need you” she whispered.

“Tonight” he panted, his voice little more than a growl. “I’m going to knot you tonight.”
Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

A little angst warning for those who aren't in the mood for it :-)

When they arrived at the accommodation Reddington had procured, Liz was delighted that wasn’t a hotel at all this time, but a pretty little cottage near Louisville. It was painted a dusky blue and white, with pale yellow roses creeping up trellises and dangling fragrantly over the veranda.

The inside was cosy, with a large, inviting kitchen and lovingly worn cushions scattered about.

“This is amazing” Liz said softly.

Reddington smiled in pleasure. “It belonged to an old acquaintance of mine, an extraordinary woman - she was the most talented card sharp I’ve ever met, ran rings around professional poker players in Atlantic City until well into her nineties—”

Liz raised an eyebrow with a small smile, and Reddington laughed, shaking his head nostalgically. “It’s ours as long as we need it, sweetheart.”

“I love it. I could even forget we’re on the run. It almost feels like a home… Like we could have a real life together” Liz said wistfully.

Reddington’s smiled faded and he looked at her, his expression pained.

Liz returned his gaze uncertainly. “Do you think that could ever be possible?”

Reddington’s lips parted and he gazed at her for a moment. “I think anything is possible” he responded quietly.

“I have this fantasy…” she began hesitantly.

“What is it?” he asked softly. “What is your fantasy?”

“It’s been the same thing for as long as I can remember” Liz murmured, looking at him hopefully. “I’m walking in a park with my husband. In between us is our little girl. I’m holding her hand in mine and I never let go.”

Reddington continued to stare at her as if from very far away, his eyes misty.

“I’m sorry” Liz said quietly, seeing his expression. “That must be painful for you.”

He swallowed, shaking his head. “No sweetheart. Your fantasy… It’s as it should be. I never thought… I never dared think…”

Liz approached him and he opened his arms, folding her into his chest. They clung tightly to one another, each of them holding on to the future they craved, to the glimpse of it that they had seen. She breathed in his scent and there it was again, the thing she could never place.

Suddenly it came to her, she finally understood was it was, the scent she had detected so often on
him. She blinked as tears came to her eyes. It was grief. It was wrenching grief and loss but tinged with something else, something that only came when they were close: Hope.

His embrace tightened a little as though he had sensed her understanding and the emotion she felt on his behalf. They said nothing, only held each other, breathing in one another’s scent as they dared to think of the future they could have.

She smiled as she felt his lips on her temple gently nuzzling her, followed by his tongue touching hesitantly against her hairline. She tilted her head slightly, letting him know it was ok. Slowly he began to lick her soft skin, pausing occasionally to tug affectionately at her ear with his teeth as he groomed her. Liz sighed in contentment, her body delighting in the feeling of being cared for by him, in awe of the extraordinary gentleness he was capable of.

 Eventually Reddington kissed her forehead and looked down at her, smiling softly. “There’s no better way to make a house a home than to fill it with the scent of cooking” he murmured. “Why don’t we make a night of it, hmmm?”

His tone made her shiver in anticipation of what was to come, of what he had planned for her when she’d been fed and the night drew in. Then a thought struck her. “You cook?” she asked, pleasantly surprised.

He smiled sadly. “It’s not something I’ve had to opportunity to do for a woman in a long time. But yes. There are few things more enjoyable than home cooking, the scent of herbs and basted meats, red wine reduction…” he said enticingly.

“Ok that sounds amazing” Liz grinned. “But if it’s ok, there’s something I need to do first” she said seriously.

Reddington raised his eyebrows inquisitively and Liz continued.

“If we’re going to have a chance…” she said softly “a chance of a future… we need to defeat the cabal and end this war for good.” She waved her phone. “Just because we have the cypher it doesn’t mean that we know how to apply it, nor do we have the equipment we’d need. I do know someone who can use this to decode the ledger we found. It’s not going to be an easy call to make. But I need to do it.”

“Aram” Reddington said gently, and Liz nodded, concern etched on her face.

“The human capacity for forgiveness is extraordinary” he continued softly. “I have no doubt that there’s still friendship there.”

Liz smiled gratefully and squeezed his hand. “You get started. I’m going into town, I won’t risk making the call from here. Maybe I’ll pick up a bottle of wine for us on the way back – it won’t be the fancy stuff you’re used to” she teased.

“I’m sure whatever you choose will be sublime. Be safe” he finished as she exited the house, leaving the scent of hope and excitement behind her.

Liz took a deep breath and put her phone to her ear as she walked towards the centre of town. “Aram, it’s me.”

“Liz! I mean, Agent Keen. I mean… Where are you?”
Liz shook her head. “You know I can’t tell you that.”

“No, of course not” he said tightly. “Silly of me, I guess.”

“No” Liz said softly. “It wasn’t. Aram I need you to know I’m sorry. For what I did to you back at the black site. I couldn’t have them think you helped me.”

Aram sighed. “I would have helped you though. You just didn’t give me the chance.”

“I know” Liz whispered. “I am sorry. But I’m glad you’re ok.”

“It’s alright” he said quietly. “It’s not every day that a guy gets taken down by… I mean, you’re certainly not a typical omega.”

Liz laughed in spite of herself. “Yeah, I’m starting to realise that. Aram… I know I have no right to ask this, and I don’t want you to do anything that could get you in trouble…”

“I want to help” he said in a low voice. “What can I do?”

Liz sighed with relief. “Reddington and I have recovered an encrypted document which contains information about the Cabal’s financial activities. We have the cypher but we need someone who can put it all together.”

“In which case, you came to the right place. I’m going to text you a number, send what you have there and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can... You know, I’m supposed to be looking for you” he said hesitantly. “Agent Ressler, he’s like a lion on the hunt… I guess he hasn’t taken this very well.”

Liz swallowed. “You guys do what you’ve got to do. I wouldn’t expect anything different.”

“It’s not too late” he ventured. “You can turn yourself in, we’ll make sure you’re given a fair trial. I’m working on gathering evidence that proves Connolly was corrupt.”

Liz smiled sadly. “I’m grateful for that. I really am. But you need to understand – if I’m arrested I’ll never make it to trial. They’ll kill me first. Connolly practically even told me how they’d do it – an assault in prison” she told him, shuddering at the memory. “This is bigger than we imagined. The only place I feel safe is with Reddington.”

“I’m happy for you, Liz” Aram said gently. “I think it’s wonderful – you and Mr Reddington.”

Liz colored. “I just meant that Reddington knows the Cabal, he knows how to protect me” she muttered defensively.

“Liz, it’s alright” Aram said quickly. “You don’t need to pretend. Anyone can see that he’s deeply in love with you. I’m sorry it took this terrible thing to bring you together, but… I’m glad you have him. You deserve to be happy.”

“Thank you Aram. I won’t forget this.”

Liz smiled as she hung up, and the phone screen lit up with the promised number. She quickly sent him the information, saying silent thanks that Reddington had been right; friendship endures.

As she put her phone back in her pocket she heard footsteps on the sidewalk behind her. She picked up her pace, and as soon as she heard the footsteps increase in time with hers she spun round, but it was too late.

She turned straight into a wall of black cloth being pulled over her head, disorienting her. She
punched out blindly as hard as she could but missed her mark, and a second later she was being pushed sideways into a van that screeched away the moment she was inside.

Liz blinked as the cloth bag was pulled off her head by someone standing behind her, a bright light shining overhead in an otherwise darkened space. It looked like she’d been taken to a doctor’s office, though the walls were peeling and there were dusty papers on the floor. No one had used this room for a while before now.

She was sitting on what felt like a padded dentist’s chair, her wrists and ankles strapped tightly down. Her mind was racing, trying to figure out who might have done this and what they wanted. She was on the run from a deadly organisation; it was too much of a coincidence to think that a random psychopath had kidnapped her, yet this didn’t feel like the Cabal’s m.o. It seemed personal.

“Who are you?” she asked sharply. “Show yourself!”

“As you wish” came the reply in heavily accented English.

A second later an older man with a pointed beard appeared in front of her, his scent calm and clinical.

Liz swallowed, watching him keenly. “What do you want?”

“It’s good to see you again, Elizabeth.”

She frowned at that, looking up at him in confusion. “We’ve never met.”

“We have, a long time ago” he said conversationally. “When you were just a little omega. You were a charming little girl. But very troubled if I recall” he mused. “I do not expect you to remember” he finished, chuckling humorlessly.

Liz’s stomach dropped as the man moved to a nearby table and returned with an IV bag and a needle.

“What is that?” she breathed, struggling against the restraints as panic began to grip her. “What is it? What do you want?”

“Don’t worry” he said nonchalantly. “You were brought to me for treatment by a mutual acquaintance. This will not hurt you.”

“What treatment?” Liz asked, panicked. “What does that mean?”

He looked straight at her then, his shrewd eyes a sickly blue color. “Have you ever wished that you could forget the things that hurt you? That you could be free from troublesome emotions and doubts. I am going to give you that. When you leave here you will see things clearly. You will be free.”

Liz pulled wildly at the straps as he approached, but then froze as she saw a second figure appear in the doorway.

“What are you doing here?” she gasped.

In her surprise, she barely felt the IV needle slide into her arm.
The evening was beginning to close as Liz looked around her in confusion. She was in the centre of town by the entrance to the park, though how she got there, she wasn’t sure. The street was pleasant enough but she felt a strange sense of foreboding, as though she could be found at any moment and there was no-one to protect her. She was utterly alone.

Feeling exposed and vulnerable she walked into the park, keeping her head down and her eyes darting around her in case someone recognised her. The park was almost empty, and Liz made her way to the deserted bandstand, sitting heavily on the steps staring bleakly ahead. The last light of the day faded around her, and the shadows of the trees in the park grew longer, their branches reaching out ominously towards her.

It would be night soon but she didn’t care. The desperate emptiness she felt inside grew and grew until it felt like a sickness, like something fundamental had been taken from her but she had no idea what. The only thing she knew for certain was the man responsible for making her feel this way. The violent man whose dark obsession had destroyed her life and given him control over her, mind and body.

It was near dark when he found her, the chilling sound of his Italian leather shoes on the concrete path unmistakable. Her stomach clenched; her first instinct was to run but she had nowhere to go. She began to rub her scar nervously, determined not to make eye contact. Reddington walked slowly up the steps of the bandstand and sat next to her, his knee almost touching hers, but not quite.

Liz swallowed, the scent of her own distress in the air making her nauseous. If it bothered him he didn’t show it; maybe he liked it, she thought numbly. Maybe it aroused him. Finally, he broke the silence, his voice quiet and gravelly.

“When you didn’t show up tonight I made enquiries as to your whereabouts. It didn’t take me long to find you. You’ve made quite an impression in this town already. Not as one of America’s most wanted… but no one can forget seeing an omega quite as beautiful as you.”

“Don’t” Liz whispered, swallowing tears of rage.

“Don’t what?” he asked slowly.

Liz wiped her eyes angrily. “Don’t tell me I’m beautiful.”

“Ok then” he nodded sagely. “You know what else was beautiful? The filet mignon I lovingly prepared that’s now sadly colder than a January grave in the Yukon.”

Liz huffed in disbelief. “You’re angry with me because I didn’t come home for dinner like a good girl. You expect me to eat with you, as though I’m your girlfriend. What’s wrong with you?”

Reddington frowned, and turned to her then, his blue-gray eyes laced with concern. “I might ask you the same thing” he said gently.

“Maybe I’m just seeing things more clearly” Liz said tightly, wrapping her arms around herself against the cold of the closing night.

“How long have you been out here? You’re freezing” Reddington observed, removing his jacket. He went to put it over her shoulders but she flinched so violently at his touch that she slipped slightly, putting her hand out behind her to steady herself. He reached for her instinctively, but she cried out in fear, shrinking away from him.
Reddington’s frown deepened. “What’s gotten into you?” he asked, shaking his head.

Before she could answer, a quavering voice came out of the darkness. “Hey mister, stop that!”

Reddington turned in the direction of the voice, and saw a teenage beta boy of no more than sixteen pointing a pocket knife in his direction, his hand shaking.

“Just ‘cause you’re an alpha don’t mean you get to do what you want” he yelled bravely. “Let her go!”

Reddington shook his head in confusion, momentarily speechless. It was enough time for Liz to scramble to her feet and walk quickly away down the path, not pausing to look back. Reddington watched helplessly as she left, while the teenager’s courage faltered and he too fled across the park and away into the gloom, leaving Reddington alone.

When he returned to the cottage, he found Liz in the bedroom, stuffing her clothes into a carryall. She spun round when he entered, watching him nervously.

“Keep away from me” she said sharply.

Reddington’s jaw tightened but he made no move to leave. “Elizabeth I need you to tell me where you went today. I need to know what you have learned and from whom” he said heavily.

“Nothing I didn’t already know” she told him bitterly. “God… all you care about is if I’ve found out your secrets.”

His lip twitched as he watched her zip up her bag. “Whatever has happened… Whatever you’ve been told, I can’t let you leave alone. It’s too dangerous.”

“Too bad” she said, slinging the bag over her shoulder, pushing past him and down the stairs.

She tried the door, rattling the handle, but it was no good. He had locked it behind him. She turned round in disbelief and found him standing behind her.

“Open the door” she said firmly.

Reddington looked down at her, his eyes dark and his powerful shoulders full of tension. “No.”

Her eyes widened as the horror of her situation came into focus. He was going to force her to stay with him, and there wasn’t a thing she could do to stop him.

“You’re keeping me here against my will?” she asked incredulously.

Reddington’s lips parted, his eyes widening, giving him a strangely lost look. “I’d prefer you not think of it that way. But yes” he said quietly. “If I have to.”

She dropped the bag on the floor. A wall of anger, frustration and fear began to push up inside her and she thumped her fist against the door, once and then again, followed by a furious, pointless kick to the frame.

“While this behavior is certainly invigorating, perhaps it would be more productive for you to tell me why you’re upset” he said drily.
Liz turned to him, her eyes flashing. “If you have a problem with my behavior why don’t you just spank me, huh?” she breathed, swallowing anger and fear. “That’s what you want isn’t it? To control me? To be my alpha?”

“Not unless you want it” he answered her evenly.

Liz frowned. “Want it? How could I ever want that?”

Reddington took a moment, his tongue pushing agitatedly against his teeth. “Elizabeth, if you regret your decision to pursue an intimate relationship with me you need only say” he said quietly.

Liz exhaled loudly. “Relationship…” she repeated in disbelief, tears rising in her throat. “What relationship? What decision? The last time we were ‘intimate’ as you put it, it was because you put me in heat. I had no choice” she broke off, biting her lip angrily and looking away.

Reddington stood completely still, his tempestuous eyes fixed on her and the color draining from his face. He frowned, shaking his head, his scent in that moment almost as distressed as hers.

“Lizzie” he breathed. He stepped urgently towards her, his hand reaching instinctively for her cheek. “Lizzie no-” He leaned in as if to kiss her and she pushed him away, shrinking back against the door, a whimper of terror spilling from her.

“What are you doing?” she whispered in horror. “Don’t, please” she faltered, her hands shaking.

The scent of her fear was sharp and acrid in the air and he stepped back, the shock evident on his face.

She shook her head, wiping her damp eyes with trembling hands. “Is that what this has all been about? You’ve been waiting until I’m alone and there’s no one but you? You couldn’t touch me while I was with the FBI, but now… There’s nothing stopping you from taking what you’ve always wanted. How could I have been so naïve?”

“No Lizzie” he whispered.

She breathed out a shuddering, exasperated breath. “Don’t. I am not your Lizzie! I’m not yours to control and be told what to do. You can force me to stay, but understand this - I will never give in to you.”

“I see” he swallowed eventually with the faintest nod of his head. “Elizabeth you’ve made yourself perfectly clear so allow me to do the same” he said in a low voice. “You are a fugitive from a deadly organisation hell bent on destroying you. You will not leave the safety of this house or any other we occupy without my permission, is that understood?”

Although he spoke quietly his tone was so hard and final that it resonated appallingly with the omega inside her, flooding her with the need to comply. For a brief, strange moment she was overcome with the urge to placate him, to make him pleased with her again, and she hated herself for it.

“Yes” she whispered, her chin crumpling with the effort of holding back tears of anger.

“Good. Now I suggest that you get some sleep.”

She looked back at him, her eyes wide and apprehensive. “I’m not sharing the bed with you” she breathed. “Please don’t make me.”

He closed his eyes for a moment and when he opened them his expression was shuttered and empty.
“The bed is yours. Believe me I won’t be getting any sleep” he said hollowly, before turning and walking slowly away.
The next morning Liz came down to the kitchen to find Reddington at the table, a cup of coffee in one hand and a newspaper in the other. He looked up as she came in and she saw that his eyes had dark circles underneath.

“There’s fresh toast on the side” he said neutrally.

“I’m not hungry” she responded tightly, pouring herself a coffee.

Reddington’s cheek twitched unhappily. “You haven’t eaten in twenty-four hours.”

“You can’t stop it, can you. Acting like an alpha. You want to choose when I eat, when I sleep…” Liz said, shaking her head.

Reddington folded the newspaper in front of him and observed her directly. “Elizabeth, my concern for your wellbeing derives in no small part from the fact that you are a fugitive. You need to be alert and ready to move quickly if the situation requires.”

“It’s more than that” she said quietly. “You were like this before I shot Connolly. Having me followed, interfering in my life. You’ve watched me since I was a child, haven’t you…”

Reddington looked at her in silence and Liz continued, swallowing hard. “From the moment I met you. Even before you put me in heat. You’ve looked at me like…”

“Like what?” he asked in a low voice.

“Like I belong to you.”

He paused, looking at her heavily. “That was never my intention.”

Liz nodded tightly. “I wish I could believe that.”

“I can only lead you to the truth” he said softly. “I can’t make you believe it.”

Liz tilted her head in resignation. “The truth is that you need to accept you can’t control everything. That’s the only way I’m going to get out of this mess and clear my name.”

Reddington raised his eyebrows questioningly and Liz tossed her cell phone on the kitchen table. “Aram decoded the ledger and analysed the content. He says he’s found something. It sounds like something big.”

“But he didn’t tell you what that was” Reddington surmised.

Liz shook her head. “He wants to meet in person.”
Reddington’s lip curled disapprovingly. “I fear that would be unwise.”

“I trust him.”

“As you should. But do you trust the rest of the task force not to have him followed? Do you think Harold will look the other way? And I can’t imagine Agent Ressler has taken this well.”

Liz folded her arms defensively. “Aram is cautious. He would never do anything to jeopardise my freedom - he wants to help me.” She paused, shaking her head at him. “You have to let me help myself.”

Reddington observed her in silence for a moment. “Well then.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “I can go? I have your permission?”

“Yes” Reddington responded in a clipped tone, returning to his newspaper.

After she had left he removed a burner phone from his inside pocket.

“Dembe. Something’s happened… Please restore Elizabeth’s security detail with immediate effect. And one more thing – I need to know where she was yesterday afternoon. Where she went, who she spoke to. I need to know everything.”

When Liz reached the address Aram had given her she found it was a small public library. Almost immediately she saw him sitting in the reading room, and casually went to sit opposite him, opening a book in front of her.

“You weren’t followed?” she murmured.

“Ah, no” he said in a low voice. “And I have a super powerful signal distorter on my cell. It was actually a birthday present from my cousin…”

Liz smiled. “It’s good to see you Aram.”

“You too, Liz. It really is.”

“How is Cooper?” Liz asked hesitantly. “He looked so disappointed in me…”

“You haven’t heard” Aram said, shaking his head. “Cooper is on administrative leave. He was with you when… When Connolly…” Aram trailed off. “Agent Ressler is in charge for now.”

Liz nodded her understanding, biting her lip to prevent herself from crying with the unfairness of it. “I never wanted any of this” she whispered.

“I know” Aram said quietly. “You look…different.”

“The hair wasn’t my idea” she said, rolling her eyes.

“But Mr Reddington likes it?”

“I don’t know what Mr Reddington thinks” Liz said icily.

“Oh…” Aram said, confused. “I thought you two were a thing.”
“Yeah? He seems to think that too” she muttered tightly.

Aram looked about him to check that they weren’t being watched, before leaning forward, looking at her directly. “Something’s changed. If you’re in trouble…” he said in a low voice. “I mean-”

“I couldn’t be in much more trouble than I am” Liz smiled wanly. “I just need your help to bring down the people hunting me. Then I can put it all behind me, the Cabal, Reddington, everything. Now what was so sensitive that you couldn’t tell me over the phone?”

Aram frowned uncertainly and then nodded. “Ok… So I ran an analysis on the ledger and I noticed a pattern in the way the payments were recorded relative to the bar’s outgoings. I designed an algorithm to see if I could detect a similar pattern in IRS records and so far I’ve found over two-hundred thousand business whose books are too similar for it to be a coincidence.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “You’ve found a way to trace the businesses the Cabal uses to run their money? That’s huge!”

“I can’t say for certain yet, but maybe, yeah. I’ve downloaded what I have for you” he said, passing her a thumb drive.

“This is amazing” Liz whispered. “Thank you Aram.”

“It’s ok” he said quietly. “It’s not right. What they’re accusing you of. That man with his throat slit… You could never do something so horrible.”

Liz swallowed, and nodded. “I know what you risked to do this. I won’t forget it” she said, rising to her feet.

Aram looked up at her. “Liz, if you need help… If Mr Reddington has done something-” he began, but she was already walking away.

As she moved quickly along the street, she took her cell phone from her pocket and stared at the screen, chewing her lip. After a moment she shook her head in discomfort and dialled a number.

Liz paced the narrow alley impatiently, the scent of car fumes and rusted fire escapes irritating her delicate nose. She could have chosen to meet him anywhere, but somehow a back alley seemed fitting for what she was about to do. She turned as soon as she detected her former husband’s clloying scent.

“Hey” he said, his tone serious. “Are you ok?” Then he shook his head. “Of course you’re not. You shot the Assistant Attorney General. It’s all over the news. Christ, Liz.”

She looked at him stonily, taking in his appearance. His hair had grown out a bit, and he wore glasses much like the ones he had worn when he had pretended to be her husband.

“You’re not fooling anyone” she said drily.

“Neither are you” he responded quietly. “With this tough girl routine. You’re still a scared omega on the run. What has Reddington gotten you into?”

Liz shook her head tightly. “I don’t have time to explain. I need something – you owe me.”

“Anything” he said earnestly.
“I need passports.”

“Anything but that” he quipped, looking about nervously.

“I’m serious” Liz said darkly.

“Hey, so am I” Tom insisted in a low voice.

“No” Liz said shaking her head. “You have multiple identities, you can be whoever you want. I need to do the same. I need to know I can get away. You do this all the time, you must have a way!”

Tom sighed. “I did have a way. And I lost it when I fell for you.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “Reddington.”

“Yeah. So, you’re trying to get away from him, huh? I figured he’d got to you. You went on the run with him – some of the news channels are calling you guys Bonnie and Clyde” he said bitterly.

Liz bit her lip. “I didn’t want to go with him. I wanted to turn myself in.”

“Oh my God, Liz - these people are dangerous, you can’t just turn yourself over and expect justice!”

“I know that now” Liz snapped. “But I also know I can’t expect it from him. He’s dangerous… I’m worried he’s never going to let me go.”

Tom sighed a thin smile. “That’s good Liz. It’s good you realise the trouble you’re in. Reddington is a very bad man. He’s bad for anyone who comes in contact with him. And for you it’s worse. When he hired me… Liz, he had me watch you wherever you went. Every class, every date… I could tell it wasn’t just about keeping you safe. He wanted to know everything. You’re the center of his world and it’s only a matter of time before…” Tom trailed off.

“Before what?”

“Before his obsession devours you.”

“What are you saying?” Liz asked shakily. “You think Reddington will hurt me?”

Tom grimaced and looked away. “I know that obsession like this doesn’t end well. You have to get away.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do!” Liz fumed. “I need passports, a new identity. I need his help to take down the Cabal, but after that I’m going to need an escape plan, something I can use when the time is right. Please, Tom. Do this for me. You said yourself… He’ll hurt me if you don’t.”

Tom ran his hand exasperatedly through his hair. “I’ll see what I can do. I will find a way to get us away from him, Liz. I promise.”

“Us?” Liz repeated uncomfortably. “Tom, this doesn’t change anything.”

Tom frowned, his expression darkening. “But you said-”

“I said I needed help” Liz said firmly. “If you care about me, you’ll come through.”

“I don’t understand… What are you saying? Liz, please-”

“I gotta go. He’s expecting me back” she finished, walking swiftly away and leaving Tom in the
ally, staring after her with a confused expression on his face.

Reddington sat silently in the living room of the cottage, pinching his temples between his middle finger and thumb. The burner phone in his hand began to vibrate and he lifted it to his ear on the first buzz. “Dembe. What have you found?”

“We have attempted to track Elizabeth’s movements over the last twenty-four hours… A camera outside a bodega in the centre of the town shows her being taken yesterday at 1600 hours. It appears she did not go willingly.”

Reddington inhaled sharply, his fingers gripping the arm of the chair. “What else?”

“They put her into a van heading north. We tracked it for about ten miles before we lost the lead. I’m sorry.”

“There’s more” Reddington observed tightly. “Tell me.”

“Raymond… Over the years you have asked to keep tabs on the movement of certain items. Yesterday a large number of supplies were stolen from the office of a clinical psychologist, Dr Selma Orchard. She specialises in memory therapy. I do not know if these events are connected-”

“They’re connected” Reddington said heavily. “I’m certain of it… The woman who all but asked me to father her child less than twenty-four hours ago is now mortally afraid of me… The woman who found it in herself to love me no longer exists.”

“There is one thing from which we can draw comfort” Dembe said quietly.

“I’d love to hear it” Reddington huffed bitterly.

“They returned her to you. It means they did not want to harm her.”

“No” Reddington said hollowly. “They wanted to harm me. And they’ve succeeded” he acknowledged tightly. “The exquisite pain of seeing the ghost of happiness that could have been. Whomever is responsible has executed an extraordinary revenge on me.”

There was a pause on the line before Dembe spoke again. “Raymond it is not too late. They may have taken her memory, but they did not take her soul. You can put things right. Tell her the truth.”

Reddington nodded distantly. “Perhaps. But then, perhaps this is for the best” he swallowed. “I’ve been searching for years for a way to undo the wrong I’ve done. If this is it… if this is the price I must pay… then so be it.”

“Raymond-” Dembe protested.

“It’s done” he said quietly. “Kate was correct, as usual. I had no right to touch Elizabeth. She is… everything that I am not. When this wretched war is over she’ll be free of me and the darkness I bring. She’ll have the life she deserves.”

“If that is what you think” Dembe said slowly “then there is something else you should know. Her security detail have reported that she met with someone else after seeing Agent Mojtabai.”

“Who?” Reddington asked coldly, though the answer was already taunting at the edge of his subconscious.
“Tom Keen.”

Supressing a snarl, Reddington hung up abruptly as he heard the front door close.

He could scent her clearly as she came down the hall and into the living room. She was nervous. Excited. He could practically sense the beat of her darling heart, the blood rushing under her intoxicating skin.

The thought that it was Keen - the arrogant, violent, libertine - who had rallied her spirits twisted in his mind like a knife. The alpha inside him howled silently with rage, his anger crackling like fire in his blood. He closed his eyes momentarily and thought of a ship, sturdy and sure on a calm blue sea.

He looked up at her as she entered, and saw that her eyes were clear and determined.

“I have news” she breathed. “Aram came through big time. He decoded the ledger and found a pattern in IRS records. He’s linked the Cabal’s bar in Pity to thousands of other businesses across the country.”

Reddington nodded sagely. Maybe it wasn’t Keen who had buoyed her after all. “Well that is interesting” he remarked guardedly.

“It’s more than interesting” Liz frowned. “This information could be enough to ruin them, get Cooper reinstated - Aram says he’s been placed on administrative leave, because of me. This is what we need to end them!”

“Perhaps.”

“What do you mean, perhaps?” she asked exasperatedly. “We could use this to identify their largest earners. Destroy those businesses, we could do them serious damage for a start-”

She broke off apprehensively as Reddington sighed and rose from his seat, approaching her at a measured pace.

“Elizabeth, you need to let me handle it from here. I assume Aram provided you with the information he has so far” he said firmly, holding out his hand.

Liz’s mouth fell open in disbelief. “You can’t be serious!”

“I assure you I’m perfectly serious. If, and I mean if, this information is verified then you have my word I will take the necessary action. Give it to me.”

“No” Liz said defiantly, her jaw tightening.

Reddington’s expression grew stony. “Elizabeth” he warned.

“No” she repeated, pursing her lips stubbornly. “You can’t expect me to just hand this over without any assurance-”

She gasped in shock as she felt him grip the back of her neck, his expression pained. She tried to pull away but he only tightened his hold on her, his lip curled unhappily. He held her firmly with one hand, while he slid the other perfunctorily into her back pocket, removing the flash drive that Aram had given her. Her face burned in anger and humiliation as he released her and tucked the drive into his inside jacket pocket.

She stood in silence, shaking with impotent rage at his gall, his high handedness, his arrogant
assumption that he always knew better. She hated him, but in that moment she hated herself more, that as an omega she was so susceptible to his alpha strength and influence that she hadn’t been able to stop him. That was when a thought struck her: he had used his capacity as an alpha against her, but she could goddamn use it against him too.

She covered her face with her hands and sighed in defeat. “I hate this” she whispered, a sob catching in her throat. “I hate fighting with you. Every instinct, every urge… *Everything* inside me is telling me to please you… To let you look after me.” She looked up at him, her long dark lashes framing large, tearful eyes.

He observed her closely, his eyes creased in a frown as she stared weepily up at him. “Will you hold me?” she whispered. “Can we… Can we just pretend that you’re my alpha? Just for a moment…”

She stepped forwards to embrace him but stopped short as he grasped her wrist tightly, holding her firmly in front of him.

“I don’t think so” he said drily. “Elizabeth, you can count being an accomplished pick pocket among your many talents” he continued dispassionately. “Deception, perhaps not so much. You need to leave the flash drive to me.”

She twisted out of his grip with a snarl of frustration, her eyes glittering with anger at having her ruse laid bare. “Why are you doing this? You’re taking away my one chance to bring down the Cabal!”

“I told you I would do what needs to be done” he informed her tersely.

“Do you even *want* to clear my name? Or do you just want to make sure that I always need you? To keep me here!” she flared, breathing hard.

Reddington curled his lower lip over his bottom teeth, stifling a growl. “Elizabeth, when it’s safe to do so you can leave. Have the life that you want. You’ll never have to see me again. But until then, you are in my care. You need to accept that.”

Liz choked back a sob. “That’s just it” she said quietly. “Who gets to decide when it’s safe? When I can be free? You? Can’t you see how wrong that is? You’re not the only one who can protect me!”

Reddington’s eyes flashed. “I suppose you think Tom Keen is a more suitable candidate” he said tightly. “I know that you met with him today.”

Liz’s cheeks turned pink, her heart beginning to race with anger and fear. “How did you know? You couldn’t have scented him on me, I didn’t let him touch me-”

“How *dare* you” Liz spat angrily. “Have you forgotten what he did to me?”

“No” Reddington said in a hard tone. “Have *you*?”

“I know exactly what he is” Liz ground out between clenched teeth.

“And yet he’s back in your life” Reddington concluded stiffly. “Elizabeth I want you to remember what your life really was with him, and imagine everything your future could be without him.”

“Right now it’s hard to imagine *any* kind of future” Liz shot back. Then a thought occurred to her and her lips parted in disbelief, her hands beginning to shake.
“Oh my God. You’re having me followed again. That’s how you knew I’d seen him. That’s why you let me leave today…” She ran her hands through her hair, her anxiety spiking. “You’re a sick, twisted man. This… your obsession with me is ruining my life. You have to stop this. You have to stop!” she choked, her breathing shallow and uneven.

The choking scent of her own anxiety seem to strangle her as she became more and more agitated, and Reddington walked quickly to her, placing his hands gently on her shoulders.

“Elizabeth” he said softly. “Look at me.”

She stared up at him with enormous blue eyes, her chest tightening with panic, shaking her head as it began to overwhelm her.

“Breathe, sweetheart. You’re going to be ok” he rumbled, his voice almost a purr that resonated with her inner omega on an almost primeval level, calming her in spite of her fear of him.

As she looked at him she saw that his eyes were dark and heavy with concern, observing her intently, his hand resting on her neck where her pulse was thrumming hotly under her skin. His gaze was so intense that for a moment it was all she could focus on, dizziness clouding her mind as she stared at him, his rich, complex scent caressing her. Try as she might, she couldn’t prevent her mind from imagining their naked skin pressed against one another, the warmth that she could feel radiating from him heating her body, keeping her safe, protected and aroused.

She saw his nostrils flare slightly, and realised with deep, crushing embarrassment that he had detected her desire; she trembled a little in shame and fear of what he would do now that he had found her weakness. He frowned, his expression pained and urgent, as though there was something he desperately needed to tell her, but all he said was her name – Lizzie - so quietly it was almost a broken whisper.

The sound and the scent of his that accompanied it seemed to push at the edges of her mind, as though her body knew something her mind did not. But that wasn’t it, she thought forcefully, gulping down a breath. It was her body that he had deceived; even now he was using every alpha power at his disposal to confuse her, to stir up her hormones and play on her vulnerability. Angry and frightened, she pushed him away and ran upstairs to her room.
Chapter 45

Liz sat alone in the lounge of their latest safe house. It was comfortable – luxurious, even – but every house they’d moved to over the past week had seemed colder and less personal. Reddington had, however, chosen places with at least two bedrooms. This one had five, though she’d seen no evidence that he had actually slept in any of them. The air in the lounge was tinged with the scent of cigars and scotch, and she wondered with a shudder how much he drank when she wasn’t around.

She tensed as he stalked into the room, the hairs on her neck prickling as she scented the intense urgency he was feeling. He walked straight past her and began to gather the few effects he had left on the table.

“Elizabeth, we have to move.”

A jolt of fear ran through her as she saw his grim expression. “The Cabal – they’ve found us?”

“Worse” he responded, tossing his things into a bag.

“What could be worse than that?”

“You need to pack your things” he responded tightly, ignoring her question.

“Not until you tell me what the hell is going on! You’re frightening me” she said, unable to supress the slight tremor in her voice.

Reddington paused then, and came to sit in the chair opposite her, clasping his hands between his knees, his expression drawn with worry.

“A man was found dead on a park bench in DC. The coroner has recorded an open verdict but his death was undoubtedly not a natural one. His name was Mitchell Harper.”

“What has that got to do with us?” Liz asked slowly.

Reddington sighed. “Harper was the head of a large fertility clinic called Conceive.”

“I’ve heard of them – they’re one of the city’s largest IVF treatment facilities. They help couples struggling to have children.”

“Officially, yes” Reddington said. “Unofficially, it’s a little more complicated than that. Some clients go to Conceive because they’re desperate to have a child. Others go there because they are desperate to have a particular kind of child.”

Liz frowned. “What do you mean?”

“For an astronomical fee, Conceive will implant omega eggs into women who want to ensure they have an omega baby. Unfortunately omega egg donors are very rare.”

“You’re telling me they take eggs from omegas without their consent?”

“Yes” Reddington said tightly.

“That’s horrific” Liz said. “But I still don’t understand what it has to do with that man’s death or why we have to go!”
Reddington grimaced. “Harper was careful. Most of the women from whom they harvested eggs are completely unaware that it happened to them – women who came in for IVF treatment themselves, or patients at hospitals which share doctors with the facility. I have information that Harper was killed to make way for another CEO, Eric Lund, a man willing to go the extra mile on behalf of his clients. With Lund at the helm, Conceive will provide omega eggs with the specific genetic traits requested.”

“What are you saying?” Liz whispered.

Reddington looked at her, his jaw clenched unhappily. “Elizabeth, you’ve become a target. Your face is on every news channel, the daughter of an alpha Russian intelligence officer, an omega FBI agent… You’re the holy grail of genetic material, and according to my sources, Conceive has already been overwhelmed with requests.”

Liz’s lips parted in disbelief. “Me… These people want their children to have my DNA? The DNA of a criminal on the most wanted list…”

Reddington frowned. “They want beauty. Strength. Intelligence. The television coverage you’ve received since you absconded is practically an advertising segment.”

Liz scoffed bitterly and stood up, drawing her arms around herself. “So where are we going?” she asked tightly.

“Somewhere I can keep you safe” he responded, his voice low and regretful. “Elizabeth these people have extraordinary resources. There’s a contract out for you. We’re not just dealing with one blacklist - every bounty hunter worth their salt is looking for you, and they won’t stop until they find you.”

Liz swallowed and nodded her understanding, her face pale. “I’ll get my stuff.”

She made her way upstairs to her room and looked about her numbly. Putting her bag on the bed she began to throw in the meagre possessions she had amassed during their time on the run: plain cotton underwear, a shirt and a spare pair of jeans, a toothbrush, a comb and a crumpled notebook. She thumbed through the pages of scribble, flicking through lines and lines of her scrawl about Connolly, the Cabal, their businesses… On the latest page there was nothing except one word, scored deeply into the page where she had gone over and over it with her pen.

Reddington.

Her stomach swirled unpleasantly, while strange thoughts clawed at her mind without quite making it to the surface. She bit her lip hard, anger and resentment building inside her at what she had been reduced to; prey with one change of clothes to her name, a commodity hunted throughout the country so that a corrupt company could steal her eggs. Slowly, she put the notebook back on the bed with the rest of her things, and reached into the nightstand for her gun.

Shoving in a clip, she tucked it into the waistband of her jeans, and went to the window of her room, keeping her ears pricked to ensure that Reddington was still downstairs. Quickly and silently, she pushed open the window and made her way gingerly out, climbing stealthily down a trellis nailed to the wall to accommodate a climbing plant that had long since withered.

Staying near the perimeter, she slipped away down the garden and through the copse of trees behind until she could be sure that she was clear of the house and Reddington’s security detail who were parked out front. When she was sure that she had put enough distance between herself and the house, she made for the road, undid a button on her shirt, and flagged down a pickup truck.
The driver pulled up beside her, his hair graying and face a jowly red colour. He rolled down the window uncertainly.

“Hey there miss, you ok?”

Liz smiled brightly, widening her eyes. “I am now! I’ve been waiting just ages for a ride” she said coquettishly.

“Where you going?” the man asked doubtfully.

Liz fixed him with a determined stare. “D.C., or as near as you can get me.”

“The capital” he said, whistling. “You an actress or something?”

“Or something” she answered coyly.

“You got big dreams, huh.”

“I’m going to knock them dead” Liz smiled wryly.

“Well then!” the man said, chuckling. “You’d better get in.”

It didn’t take Reddington long to realise she was gone, but those precious minutes might as well have been hours. By the time he had conducted a desperate search of the property and alerted his security team, she was long gone. His heart pounding uncharacteristically, he took a burner phone out of his carryall and began to dial, a grim expression on his face.

“Donald.”

“Reddington?” Ressler said incredulously on the end of the line.

“I need your help.” Reddington said tightly.

“You need my help” Ressler scoffed. “That’s rich coming from you. How about you turn yourself in, you and Liz, and I’ll give you all the help you need.”

“There isn’t much time” Reddington continued. “I need you to listen to me very carefully. Elizabeth is in grave danger. She’s been targeted by an organisation that have put a considerable price on her head. The consequences of her capture by this organisation would be unspeakable.”

“If we haven’t found her, no one else will” Ressler quipped stubbornly.

“Donald, this organisation has an entire network of bounty hunters, mercenaries and kidnappers at their disposal. They’re better than you. They’re better than me. That’s why I need your help to protect her.”

“Look” Ressler said tersely. “If you really wanted to protect her, you shouldn’t have taken her on the run with you in the first place. Deliver her to us, and we’ll be lenient. No one wants to see an omega in a maximum security prison. Bring her in.”

“I can’t do that” Reddington said tightly.

There was a pause on the line and then Ressler whistled loudly. “You lost her, didn’t you? She
finally got away from you!"

“By far the most dangerous person looking for her is already in the Bureau’s cold case database” Reddington pressed, ignoring the jibe. “He’s a hunter, goes by the name Okeus after a native American demon. His signature is a combat knife, U.S. Army issue. He finds people that others can’t. So far he’s tracked down at least eight people in your witness protection programme and ensured that their testimony was never heard. Find him and stop him before he finds her” he said urgently.

“Alright” Ressler huffed. “But I’m not doing this for you, or for her. If I find this Okeus, I find her, and when I do, I’m bringing her in to stand trial” he growled firmly.

“I admire your fortitude, Donald” Reddington said distantly. “If only your government remotely resembled the shining paragon of justice you think it is” he finished, hanging up.

When Liz reached D.C. an unpleasant feeling of doubt began to gnaw at her insides. She was met with an onslaught of sensory information, a cacophony of familiar sounds and scents, places she knew, places that knew her. Would she be able to avoid detection here? How many bounty hunters were actually looking for her? she wondered with a shudder. Were they alphas? Would she evade them only to be taken in by the FBI?

She took a deep breath, determined to focus on Lund, the man who was responsible for terrorising her and marketing her body. She’d decided the moment she picked up her gun in Reddington’s safe house, she wasn’t going to be hunted and on the run like a wounded rabbit. She wasn’t going to wait for the people Lund invited to look for her to find her. She was going to go straight to him, and make him stop. Zipping up her hoodie, she kept her head down and began to make her way towards Conceive’s headquarters.

She was twelve blocks away by the time she realised she was being followed. There was so much footfall around her on the busy city streets that it took longer for her to pick up on a distinct, steady rhythm of a heavy boot some way behind her. She could scent pollen and wet grass in the air that reminded her she was fairly near Rock Creek Park, and she broke into a run, aiming for a densely wooded area where she could take cover.

When she got there she slipped between the trees, and lent against a trunk to catch her breath. Peering over her shoulder she saw no one and bent down in relief, resting her hands on her thighs. Suddenly she yelped in pain as she felt a sharp sting on her leg, and saw a combat knife embedded in the ground, stained with blood where it had grazed her calf.

Crouching behind the tree, she looked back and saw a large man approaching in the distance, his green fatigues going some way towards concealing him in the undergrowth. He was clearly an alpha, his large muscles visible under his shirt, while his light brown hair was thick and pulled back into a ponytail.

“Hey sweet thing” he called out. “I’m not gonna hurt you. Good news for you is, they want you alive. It’ll be a whole lot better for you if you just come with me. Whaddya say? I’ll look after you baby girl.”

Liz rolled her eyes to herself, tucked the knife into her waistband under her hoodie and fled, her long, nimble legs carrying her swiftly through the trees like a deer in the hunt. A gust of wind blew in her face and she changed course sharply, knowing she couldn’t afford to let him pick up the scent
of the blood on her leg so easily. As she moved she caught a flash of sweat in the air; it made her look round and she saw him break into a sprint behind her, bearing down on her.

Suddenly her foot caught on a root and she fell down hard, the impact winding her. The hunter was surprisingly fast for such a large man and he reached her just as she tried to scramble to her feet, pushing her down on the ground before she could reach for the knife or her concealed gun.

She cried out as he knelt over the back of her legs, pinning her down and panting as he caught his breath.

“You’re a sprightly little thing” he grunted as she struggled. “Just stay down now, behave yourself. This won’t hurt you” he murmured gently as though he were talking to an animal.

He reached into his pocket and removed a small plastic gun with a tiny dart at the end. Catching sight of it out of the corner of her eye, Liz went obediently still. The hunter grunted approvingly, and shifted his weight as he prepared to sedate her.

As soon as he moved, Liz kicked out as hard as she could, thrusting the heel of her boot into his shin bone. He reared back swearing and she sprang up, taking the opportunity to roll out from under him and sprint ahead into the trees. She made good progress but was forced to pause when the foliage began to get more patchy towards one of the paved walkways. There was no way she could stop and hide from him in the trees; even without her bloodied leg he would still detect her scent soon enough.

If she proceeded, she would soon bring this monster out into the open park which could risk the civilians who were going about their days. To make matters worse, she noted two cops strolling down the path in her direction, and knew there was a significant risk they would recognise her, even with her blonde hair.

She looked behind her fearfully, her heart thundering as she saw the hunter approaching her slowly now, as if he were afraid of scaring her into running again.

“That’s it baby” he crooned warily, wiping the sweat off his brow. “You stop now. That was a dirty trick you played back there. You’ve had your fun, now it’s time to rest up a while, let me take care of you.”

Liz swallowed and took a decision. She darted out into the open and ran straight to the police officers, whimpering and covering her face with her hands.

“Help me” she gasped, “he’s after me, help me please!” she said, turning away and pointing towards the tree line.

One of the officers patted the back of her shoulder reassuringly. “You’re ok Ma’am. Now take a breath and tell us who’s after you.”

“A man” she sobbed hysterically. “He cut me with a knife – this knife.” As she spoke she dropped the bloody knife shakily on the floor and the atmosphere changed instantly.

“All units requesting back up and a bus at the south east park corner, we have a knife attack victim, the suspect is at large” one of the officers said urgently into a radio.

“Oh my God” Liz gasped. “I see him, he’s right there in the trees!” she stuttered, spinning around wildly, her tousled hair falling over her face.

The officers whipped round and one began to run towards where she pointed, his weapon drawn. “I got it, you see to the omega!” he yelled.
But by the time the other officer turned back to her, she had discarded her hoodie, and run to the safety of a crowd where she could not be identified. With any luck the officers would track down the hunter and keep him busy long enough for her to get to Lund and force him to call off the bounty on her, but what if there were more hunters? she thought, her lip trembling slightly.

Suddenly she was overcome with a treacherous thought – or more of a feeling really – that if Reddington were there, he would be able to protect her. That he was the only one in the world who could. He understood who was after her and he would tear apart anyone who tried to hurt her. He would ruin anyone who came between them. But then, she thought bitterly, his obsession would ruin her as well. Shaken but determined, she made her way quickly out of the park and resumed her course for Conceive HQ.

“Ah, Guys?” Aram said to agents Ressler and Navabi, hurrying out from behind the console at the black site “Firstly, Agent Ressler, I think it’s great that you’re letting us help Agent Keen, I mean Liz-”

“Let’s get this straight” Ressler responded tersely. “Keen is a fugitive. We’re not helping her. We’re going after blacklists, and that includes her.”

“Okay…” Aram said slowly. “Well whatever she is, I think… Well I think I’ve found the person Mr Reddington said was hunting her. I’m monitoring local law enforcement scanners for any activity which may match our cold cases and came up with a match. Two patrol cops in Rock Creek Park picked up a man in camouflage gear who had been carrying a combat knife – he matches the description of Okeus, the bounty hunter.”

Samar shrugged. “There are plenty of people out there who carry combat knives - ex-military, gang members – we don’t know it’s him.”

“There’s more” Aram said knowingly. “The arresting officers said that he had attacked an omega in the park, but by the time the arrest had been made… she’d fled the scene.”

“Keen” Ressler said, gritting his teeth. “She’s right here in D.C.!”

Reddington paced the living room of the safe-house like a caged lion, his usually calm instincts giving way to aggressive bursts of alpha energy that took immense effort to control. She was out there alone and vulnerable, his omega, being hunted by other alphas. The hairs on his neck stood up at the thought, and for a brief, desolate moment he revisited his fantasy of her promising to trust him and allowing him to care for her, both inside and outside the bedroom. How far away that ideal seemed now.

Dembe entered the room quickly, handing him a cell phone and he clutched at it.

“Yes?” he said sharply.

“Mr Reddington… It’s Aram, ah, it’s Agent Mojtabai-”

“Aram” Reddington said with a frown. “Please tell me you’re contacting me because you have good news.”
“No” Aram said slowly. “Oh but it’s not bad news either!” he continued hastily, as Reddington hissed on the other end of the line. “I have news about Liz.”

“What is it?” Reddington asked sharply.

“I know where she is, or at least I found the man you said was looking for her and he’s been arrested, and she escaped from him. The thing is, Agent Ressler knows and he’s going after her, and on the one hand I thought I should tell you because I know how much she means to you and I don’t want anything to happen to her if she’s arrested, but there’s a part of me that… Well I know you could kill me for saying this – please don’t kill me - but… I don’t think Liz trusts you right now. And I don’t know why. It’s like she’s two different people. But ultimately I know that when Liz has been trouble, you’ve protected her.”

“Aram, tell me where she is” Reddington said in a strained voice at the end of the agent’s garbled speech.

“I hope I’m doing the right thing” Aram murmured hesitantly. “She’s here. She’s back here in D.C.”

Reddington nodded, closing his eyes. “Thank you, Aram. Thank you.”

He hung up and tossed the phone back to Dembe.

“We’re headed to D.C” he said, grabbing his fedora and throwing his overcoat over his arm.

“Elizabeth is there?” Dembe said with frown. “Perhaps she wanted to be somewhere familiar.”

Reddington shook his head. “That’s not it. It’s Conceive. Eric Lund. She’s going after him.”

Dembe nodded solemnly. “It was not wise. But it was extraordinarily brave” he said with admiration.

Reddington paused then. “Yes” he responded heavily. “But she shouldn’t have to be brave. I should have protected her. She’s not there because of Lund” he said shaking his head again. “She’s there because of me. If anything were to happen…” he trailed off, swallowing the thought that was too painful to utter to his dear friend.

“Raymond” Dembe said, his expression calm and steadfast. “You will get her back.”

When Liz arrived at the Conceive centre she marched through the elegant foyer and straight up to the reception desk, where she was met by a delicately manicured, red-haired omega receptionist in her early twenties.

“Eric Lund, where is he?” Liz asked sharply.

The receptionist raised her eyebrow, before curving her pouty lips into an insincere smile. “He’s in his office, but he’s super busy. Do you have an appointment?”

“He’s expecting me” Liz said drily, and walked off down the corridor, leaving the receptionist protesting fruitlessly behind her.

Liz carried on until she reached the grand office at the end of the hall, her rage building with every step. This man, a man whom she had never even met, had decided that he owned her. That he could have her hunted throughout the country, that he could sell parts of her to get rich. Seething, she hurled the door open and then slammed it behind her, her eyes like cold fire as she caught sight of
Lund sitting alone behind his desk.

Although he wasn’t a particularly large man, he was clearly an alpha, packed with lean muscle that Liz could sense under his expensive suit. He had a very neatly trimmed designer beard and sharp, intelligent eyes that looked at her appraisingly as he rose from his seat, calmly buttoning his suit jacket.

“Ms Keen, what an unexpected pleasure. Please sit” he said, gesturing to the chair opposite him.

“I don’t think so” Liz snapped.

“You’re even more breath-taking in person, aren’t you” Lund murmured softly, his demeanor calm and unaffected.

“Yeah? I guess there’s nothing like being hunted across the country by a bunch of criminals and lowlifes to really put some color in a girl’s cheeks” Liz said sarcastically. “You’re going to call them off. Now” she said firmly.

Lund smiled appreciatively. “Beauty, tenacity, bravery – you’re worth every bit of what I’m going to charge.”

“It’s not going happen” Liz said through gritted teeth. “Call them off!”

Lund gave her an appalling smile. “I can imagine your offspring now” he said softly. “Beautiful little omegas with perfect skin, enormous blue eyes, A+ on every test… Every woman will want one, only the most elite will have one. I’m going to sell your girls like limited edition handbags” he breathed excitedly.

Shaking with rage, Liz reached behind her and pulled her gun, pointing the weapon at the man’s head.

Instead of cowering, Lund only sighed with a small shrug. “Do you know what I see when I look at you?”

“The woman who’s going to put a bullet in your head?” Liz whispered.

“No - I see dollar signs” he responded nonchalantly. “I see my bank balance climbing, my shareholders getting richer… Do you know how many eggs you’re carrying? About 100,000 give or take, and I’d wager at least a third of them can be used to produce an omega baby. You’re worth more than a literal diamond mine.”

Liz huffed in disbelief, steadying her grip on her gun with her other hand. She watched sharply as Lund stepped slowly out from behind his desk, his hands raised in front of him in a gesture of surrender that somehow managed to be simultaneously predatory.

“You didn’t think this through, did you” he said softly, walking towards her. “You came in here ready to shoot the bad guy. But you’re still a cop on the inside, aren’t you. You weren’t prepared for me to just stand here, unarmed, right in front of you. Go ahead, Agent Keen. Shoot me.”

Liz’s eyes widened and she swallowed, tightening her grip on the metal of the gun, her palms sweating. She took an involuntary step back as Lund reached her, his eyes calm and clinical.

“You won’t shoot an unarmed man. And you can’t arrest me. You’re a fugitive” he taunted coldly.

Liz lashed out at him with a snarl, attempting to elbow him in the neck but he was faster; he grabbed
her arm as she swung, twisting it behind her back and shaking the gun violently out of her hand.

She yelped and he gripped her tighter, whispering in her ear. “Shhh, hush now.”

She gasped as she felt a sharp pain in her leg, and looked down to see he had jammed a needle into her thigh.

“You came right to me, didn’t you” he murmured as she struggled ineffectively in his grip. “There’s a good girl… You’re going to get nice and sleepy now, that’s it. Don’t fight it. What a good girl you are” she heard him say before she closed her eyes and darkness engulfed her.
Chapter 46

When Reddington and Dembe arrived at Conceive HQ they made straight for the reception desk where the red-haired omega receptionist sat, eying them prettily. Reddington removed his hat as he approached her, and she sat up a little straighter, smiling shyly at him.

“Hello there” Reddington said softly. “I wonder if you can help me. I’m looking for an omega woman named Elizabeth. She’s in her early thirties, currently sporting very fetching fair hair, and I believe she visited your organisation earlier today. Perhaps you’ve seen her?”

The omega receptionist smiled apologetically, tilting her head coquettishly. “I’m sorry sir, but I can’t discuss details of any of our clients.”

Reddington nodded understandingly. “Of course, and you’re extremely diligent for observing the confidentiality of your clients, however this particular young woman is not a client, and I’m simply enquiring as to whether she’s visited your offices today” he said encouragingly, his eyes twinkling kindly.

The omega receptionist looked up at him doubtfully and then her gaze slid to Dembe, who stood with his arms folded, his expression stern.

“You should give him what he wants” he said firmly. “Now.”

The omega receptionist frowned, her scent becoming tinged with unease, and Reddington laughed regretfully. “Oh dear, now we’ve frightened you. Don’t worry, I’m not going to hurt you – not personally, at least – although I do have an associate who is rather talented at persuading reluctant subjects to give up their information, Brimley is his name, and I have to say he does have a peculiar fascination with omegas that, truth be told, makes me a little uncomfortable-”

“She was here” the omega blurted, her green eyes large and petrified. “She wanted to see Mr Lund, I told her he was busy but she just marched right in.”

“I’m sure she did” Reddington said nodding sagely. “And did you see her leave? Her or Mr Lund?”

The omega shook her head, biting her lip agitatedly. “I haven’t seen either of them, I promise. But Mr Lund sent me a message to hold all his calls, and he signed out of the system. He’s definitely gone.”

Reddington’s lip twITCHED unhappily. “Is that so. Well I think we’ll check, just in case. Thank you for your assistance.”

They moved down the corridor, and as soon as they reached Lund’s office they threw open the door, weapons drawn, scanning the room. It was empty. They moved forwards and opened a second door at the back of the room leading to a set of stairs which they followed down to an empty carpark.

“She is gone” Dembe said solemnly.

“Yeah” Reddington said quietly, the agitation apparent in his scent. “But she was here. I can scent her as clearly as if she were in my arms” he murmured, closing his eyes momentarily. “She was in this office. And now she’s been taken off the premises. Hand me your phone.”

Reddington put the phone to his ear, surveying the carpark as he did so.
“Agent Ressler. How goes the case?”

“Are you checking up on me?” Ressler asked incredulously.


Ressler scoffed. “That’s not going to happen. He’s in police custody.”

“What has he said?” Reddington asked sharply.

“He gave us squat. Right now the evidence against him is circumstantial. He’s being transferred for arraignment but without something more concrete I doubt he’ll stay locked up for long. Believe me I tried, but he’s got no incentive to help us.”

“Perhaps I can give him an incentive” Reddington murmured darkly before hanging up.

The hunter sat stoically shackled in the back of a police van, flanked by two armed guards as he was transferred ahead of arraignment. There was a sudden screeching sound and the van began to zig zag wildly across the road before twisting onto its side and skidding to a stop.

Dazed and bloodied, the hunter squinted into the light as the back doors were forced open by two large masked men, who unceremoniously dragged him from the back of the police van and into another van, this one plain black. As soon as he was bundled inside it sped off smoothly, rolling him a little on the floor as they turned a corner. He looked up in the dark and saw that he was not alone.

Reddington sat on a bench in the back of the van, a black overcoat pulled over his broad shoulders, his hands gloved in black leather. The effect was frightening, his hard, weary face ghostly against the darkness.

“Okeus – the demon. That’s quite an intimidating moniker” he mused. “But you don’t look like a demon to me” he continued disdainfully, looking down at the bruised man on the floor. “You look entirely human. Vulnerable. Capable of suffering, just like your victims.”

The hunter licked his lips nervously, pushing himself into a sitting position as best he could with his arms and legs still shackled.

“Whatever your beef is, it’s not with me” he grunted. “It’s only a job. I get paid, that’s it. It’s not personal.”

“I see” said Reddington. “You know, I’ve always thought that when I eventually walk those cavernous steps to hell - and I’m quite certain I will - one of the messages carved on the stone to taunt the damned will read ‘It wasn’t personal’. Because murder is always personal. If to no one other than families. Loved-ones. It’s an act of destruction perpetrated on a community you may have no knowledge of whatsoever, but will change forever.”

Reddington paused and stared grimly down at the hunter shackled on the floor, the acrid scent of the man’s discomfort beginning fill the van. Reddington’s nose twitched in distaste as he continued.

“I have destroyed communities. Families. Waged war on those who took far less from me than you have tried to. Elizabeth Keen. You answered the call to hunt for her. Where were you instructed to take her?”
The hunter eyed him warily but said nothing.

“Oh come now” Reddington said tightly. “You must have been given instructions for where to take your charge. How to claim your prize.”

“We had to take her to Lund. At the Conceive Centre in town” the hunter muttered.

Reddington shook his head, his lip twitching in annoyance. “I detest being lied to, and having my time wasted still more. A man like Lund does not instruct a band of mercenaries to bring a kidnapped young woman to his place of legitimate business. That young woman is now in his grasp. I want her back. Every second you waste reduces the chances of that happening. You’re going to tell me where he has her.”

“Lund posted a huge reward for the girl” the hunter shrugged. “The biggest pay out I’d have ever seen. What are you offering?” he asked boldly.

Reddington become dreadfully still for a moment before rising slowly from his seat in the back of the van. He tugged delicately at his black leather gloves, flexing the fit on his fingers before looking down at the hunter, his expression cold as stone.

“I’m offering you the chance to see what a real demon looks like” he growled.

It was a medical facility on the outskirts of the city that the hunter had finally directed them to. The odor that met Reddington when he and Dembe burst into the procedure room made bile rise in his throat. There was no doubt that she was in there, though her scent was heavily tinged with an antiseptic tang that hung ominously in the air. The two doctors at the far end of the room fled immediately through the exit behind them, but the third, a young beta man who was sitting by a computer was trapped in a corner, raising his hands as Dembe pointed a gun at him.

Reddington stalked past him without a second look, making straight for the bed where Liz lay unconscious, hooked up to machines that beeped quietly in the background. He removed his fedora and lent over her, studying her breathing, her sleeping features.

“Elizabeth” he said urgently.

“She… she can’t hear you” the doctor faltered, his voice shaking as he looked nervously between Dembe and Reddington.

“Tell me everything” Reddington said with quiet menace, without looking away from the bed. “Has the… procedure… been performed?”

“No!” the doctor said hurriedly. “No, we just put her under.”

“You should be very grateful that I’m not too late” Reddington said darkly, taking a seat next to the bed. “Wake her up. Do it now.” he commanded.

“Ah… That will be difficult – no!” the doctor trembled, stumbling back when Dembe cocked his gun threateningly in response. “I just mean, she’s heavily sedated, bringing her round now will take a few minutes, she’ll be confused - ”

“Is it safe” Reddington asked, his eyes never leaving her face. “Could she be harmed in any way?”
“No” the man replied. “If it’s done carefully, she’ll be fine.”

“Do it” Reddington said firmly.

He stared at Liz’s sleeping form as the doctor walked gingerly over, filling a syringe and injecting it into her IV. Her breathing was slow and even, her newly blonde hair curled on her shoulders in a way that made her look even younger and more vulnerable, and Reddington’s chest ached at the sight.

He waited silently by her side, and a few minutes later she began to stir slightly, her forehead creased in a frown, her mouth moving as though she were trying to speak. Instinctively, Reddington grasped her hand in his, rubbing his thumb reassuringly against her palm.

“Elizabeth” he murmured roughly. “Lizzie… can you hear me? You’re going to be alright, sweetheart. I’ve got you. You’re going to be ok.”

Her frown deepened as she surfaced to consciousness, her breathing becoming shallower. Her heart monitor began to beep faster, and a moment later the machine started to sound an alarm.

Reddington’s brow creased in anxiety. “What’s happening?” he asked sharply.

“I’m not sure” the doctor responded tensely, anxiously scanning the monitor.

Liz opened her eyes then and met Reddington’s tempestuous gaze, his hand gripping hers urgently. She gasped a great shuddering rush of air and he shook his head in confusion – “Elizabeth” – he said breathily.

“Oh God” the doctor murmured, laying a hand on Liz’s forehead and shining a pencil torch in her eyes. “She’s… She’s going into heat.”

Reddington jerked back in shock, releasing her hand and shaking his head in consternation. “No! That’s not possible…”

But even as he said the words he knew that it was, that it had happened. He could already scent his sweet little omega’s body calling to him, the warmth beginning to pulse between her legs. He could feel the sweat gathering on his neck, the deep tug in his groin urging him to mount her, his all-encompassing need to take her away from everything, to shield her… to mate her. One look in her eyes told him that she understood what had happened.

She was trembling deeply, her eyes terrified and glancing from the doctor back to Reddington, her chest heaving with shallow breaths. A quiet, animal sob rose in her throat and Reddington winced, his teeth clenched in pain at her distress.

“It will be ok” he tried to say, but she was already shaking her head vehemently.

“No” she moaned. “Please no, not you. This isn’t happening, this can’t be…”

Sobbing, she began to tear at the tubes and leads that adorned her body, pulling the IV roughly from her arm and pushing herself up. Wearing only a hospital gown, she stood shakily beside the bed, her legs wobbling under her like a new-born deer.

“Elizabeth” Reddington said sharply, but she ignored him, and addressed the flustered doctor.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked tightly.
“Ah, in the cupboard over there” the doctor said uncertainly. “But you know what this means” he protested. “You’re in heat - you’ll die if it’s not resolved, your immune system will shut down-”

Liz shook her head and moved on shaking legs to where the doctor had gestured without waiting for him to finish. She yanked her things out and pulled on her crumpled shirt and jeans, ignoring her racing heart and clammy skin. When she was done dressing, she walked straight for the door with her head held high, without looking behind her.

“Elizabeth!” Reddington tried again desperately, his chest heaving, but she left the room.

“Raymond?” Dembe asked urgently, waiting for instruction.

“Follow her” Reddington said shakily. “See that she’s safe but leave her be. She needs time” he added, swallowing hard. “She just needs time” he repeated quietly.

Dembe bowed his head in acknowledgement and left the room, his scent betraying the sorrow that he felt for his friend and the omega he loved.

When they were alone, Reddington rose heavily from his seat and turned to the doctor, his eyes burning. “How did this happen?”

The doctor frowned. “I… You and she… you must have…” he stuttered.

“She was on heat suppressants” Reddington continued darkly.

A look of understanding settled on the doctor’s features and he swallowed guiltily. “Ah… We can’t harvest eggs from an omega on suppressants, we needed her clean… We filtered her blood to remove any medications…”

Seeing the look on Reddington’s face, the doctor began to panic. “Wait! I didn’t hurt her – I didn’t know-”

The doctor’s words ceased abruptly along with his heartbeat, as Reddington violently emptied five rounds into his chest.

It was late when Eric Lund returned to his penthouse apartment. It was chic and minimalist, with sleek, designer Scandinavian chairs next to the broad window which offered a panoramic view of the city lights. Tonight the view was partially obscured by the corpse of a large man who hung upside down from a rope attached to a ceiling fan. A further glance told him it was Okeus, the hunter he had been counting on to bring Keen to him. It was not a reassuring sight, but more concerning was the fact that he was not alone.

One of the chairs was occupied by a man in a fine tailored suit, his fedora resting neatly on the table beside him. He held a pistol with a silencer attached and tilted it slightly when he met Lund’s eye.

“Close the door” he said quietly, his expression grim.

Lund shut the door and observed the alpha cautiously. “You’re Raymond Reddington” he murmured. “If you’re looking for your partner in crime I’m afraid she’s not here. Elizabeth Keen” he breathed knowingly. “She’s the type of omega that will make a man do crazy things – like breaking into a man’s apartment and threatening him with a gun…”
“You will not utter her name again” Reddington replied, his voice low and hollow.

Lund’s eyes narrowed warily. “What do you want?”

“Your hunt is over, Eric. Call off your dogs. You had her, you lost her. It ends now.”

Lund nodded and removed his phone slowly from his jacket pocket, tapping on the screen and holding it up to Reddington. “It’s done” he said calmly. “My best hunter is dangling from my ceiling looking rather the worse for wear. I’m a business man, the same as you Mr Reddington. I know when to cut my losses.”

“We’re not the same” Reddington responded heavily. “You are driven by the basest desire of all. Pure greed. You cannot begin to comprehend the forces that motivate my actions.” He paused then, shifting his head slightly as his collar chafed uncomfortably against the sweat beading on his neck.

Lund frowned and raised his nose slightly, sniffing the air. “You shouldn’t be here” he said softly. “You have somewhere else you need to be – there’s an omega that needs you. I can scent it.”

He stepped forward slowly and regarded Reddington in the shadows cast by the twinkling lights of the city outside. The older alpha’s face was grayish despite the flushed and glistening skin visible under his shirt collar, his eyes dark and bitter.

Lund clenched his teeth nervously, his smooth, confident demeanour slipping a little. Alphas were never more dangerous than when they had an omega in heat waiting for them. Usually there was no business that would ever come between an alpha and an omega in need; an alpha would be fully focussed on resolving their omega’s heat as quickly as possible, and woe betide anyone who tried to prevent him reaching her. Something was deeply wrong here.

“It’s her, isn’t it” Lund said hesitantly. “The FBI agent. Hey man, I’m not stopping you – I know you raided my facility, she’s free. You should go to her - you won, fair and square” he said, panic beginning to creep into his scent.

“Fair” Reddington repeated bitterly. “Let me be perfectly clear. Your actions have resulted in a situation that is so horrifically unfair that it defies even my capacity to describe it. If there is a shred of good left in me I will need to crush it in order to do what needs to be done. To help her now… I need to become the monster she believes me to be” he finished, swallowing hard.

Lund raised his hands, his eyes sharp with apprehension, fear that was compounded by the decaying scent of the corpse and the bitter, sexually charged pheromones Reddington was emitting. “You can shoot me, but it won’t help her – you need to go to her!”

“I’m not going to shoot you” Reddington said darkly.

“What?” Lund asked, a hint of confusion and desperate hope apparent in his voice.

Reddington put the gun down delicately on the table next to him and rose to his feet. In a flash Lund had dived for the gun and turned it on Reddington, firing again and again, his face contorting in horror as Reddington continued to approach him unscathed.

“Blanks” Reddington told him, his voice dripping with menace. “I told you I wasn’t going to shoot you. You don’t deserve a clean death. You’ve turned me into an animal” he growled. “So that is what I shall be. I’m going to rip your throat out, Eric.”
Reddington stood in the bathroom of Lund’s apartment, his hands gripping each side of the sink as he stared at his own lined, haunted reflection in the mirror. The elegant white china was smeared with blood where his fingers gripped it, the red color almost garish as it mixed with water and dripped in rivulets down to the plug hole. In the mirror he could just make out a dramatic smear of arterial spray that swept across the window in the lounge. His cock was horribly and inappropriately swollen in his pants as his body raged with one thought, of her, of his need to plunge deep inside her, to give her everything he had and save her life.

The door to the apartment opened then, but Reddington did not flinch. He could detect Dembe’s scent clearly despite the cacophony of death smells that filled the air. His friend stood in solemn silence for a moment, surveying the scene. Finally he turned to Reddington, his eyes heavy with concern.

“Elizabeth?” Reddington murmured.

“You must go to her soon” Dembe responded quietly. He paused, looking sorrowfully at his friend. “Raymond… I believe she intends to run.”
Liz stood in the bedroom of her old apartment, biting her lip as she looked about her. It was as though she had never left; everything was where it had been, including her old yoga pants and favorite T-shirt that she had gratefully slipped on. Her skin was warm and clammy, her breasts swollen and tingling, and her thighs trembled when she thought about the reason why. It was heat. And this time it would kill her.

Her hands shook as she crammed the last of her things into her carryall, the fake passport Tom had procured for her tucked into the side pocket. She paused and leant against the bedroom wall, her body already weakening. It was happening faster than last time; it was quick, intense, her thoughts already dominated with aching, desperate desire for the man who had destroyed her, as though her body knew that she intended to escape from him, even if she paid with her life.

Her heart seized as she heard the front door open and close quietly, the gentle click of the catch deafening to her. She waited, frozen in place as heavy footsteps ascended the stairs, until Reddington stood in the doorway to her bedroom. His customary vest and tie were still in place, though he had removed his jacket and fedora, and she could detect the sheen of sweat around his collar.

The masculine scent of him provoked an involuntary pulse of slick between her legs and she blushed miserably, her chin crumpling in shame and fear.

“Why are you here?” she bit out defiantly.

“You know why” he answered gently, his tone deeper than usual. “The question is, why are you here. You took a considerable risk revisiting your apartment. Lund’s hunt may be over, but you’re still a wanted fugitive.”

Liz raised her eyebrows hesitantly. “Lund’s bounty is off?”

“It is.”

“Then I guess the only one hunting me here is you” Liz answered, her lip trembling slightly.

Reddington’s jaw tightened unhappily, and she noticed dark circles around his eyes, deep purple stains that betrayed the same lack of sleep that she had experienced.

“I had planned to give you as long as I safely could to come to terms with the situation but it seems you’ve forced my hand” he said in low, disapproving tones. “The Caribbean, Elizabeth? What were you thinking?” he murmured, shaking his head desolately.

Liz paled. “How did you-?”

“Tom” Reddington replied evenly. “He reached out to an associate of mine to procure you a new identity – a passport and a one way ticket to The Dominican Republic. Thankfully that associate is
Liz swallowed an angry sob. “You can’t even let me have this” she whispered angrily, her hands balled into fists.

“Have what” Reddington responded heavily, emotion creeping into his voice. “Assuming you aren’t recognised at the airport, assuming they even allow you to board a flight in your condition… You’d find yourself gravely ill in a hellish resort surrounded by inebriated college students on spring-break drinking two-for-one cocktails. That is where you would die, Elizabeth. In pain. And alone.”

Liz drew a shuddering breath at the bleakness of the vision he had painted, her gut twisting at the thought of it. “That was cruel” she choked, blinking away tears. “Even for you.”

“Yes” he answered tightly. “It was also the truth. I’m not certain if there is such a thing as a good death. But this…” He shook his head. “This is not it. This is not how your story ends.”

He sounded so rational, so final, while the omega inside her was frantic with need for him. Everything would be so much easier, the omega whined in her head. It’s what you need. Submit. Roll over. Take off your panties and show him you’re ready for him. Let him lick you there, make you feel good. Prepare you for his knot, make it hurt less. He’d be so gentle. He’d keep you safe.

She was so dizzy with the scent of her own need, her body’s craving to be saved, that she almost let go, leaning heavily against her bedroom wall. But she knew that she couldn’t give in. In that moment it was as though a familiar voice was telling her to stand firm; it had a kind of power and authority that she recognised from long ago, and it made her feel like a child again. He’s a wicked man. He’s done terrible things. Don’t let him touch you.

She willed herself to look at him, to stare him down and fight every desperate urge inside her to submit to him.

“You don’t get to choose.”

Her voice was not strong, but the power behind her words was palpable, and Reddington visibly flinched.

“Elizabeth-” he said sharply.

“No. I’m finishing it. I’m not going to let you take anything else from me – even if it kills me. Now get out. Leave!”

Reddington stilled, his golden lashes flickering slightly as he stared at her, a strange, almost desperate look in his eyes.

“I can’t do that” he said softly.

Liz’s lips parted with a small gasp as she processed what he had said. She felt a sweet burst of moisture between her legs and knew that her body was desperately trying to prepare her for what he was going to do; he bared his teeth slightly at the scent and she shrank back against the wall with a whimper of fear.

For a fraction of a second her eyes darted to the doorway behind him. Reddington was stock still but she sensed his muscles tense, tightening in anticipation of her next move. Then, wordlessly, he reached up slowly and began to tug at the knot of his tie.

“What are you doing” she breathed, trembling in horror as he removed it, her mind swirling
dizzingly as the oxblood paisley silk slipped from around his neck and dangled between his fingers.

Reddington swallowed, his brow creased, and his voice low and pained. “Elizabeth… I am asking you not to fight me. Listen to your body. I know that this is… difficult… to comprehend. There’s a truth there that your mind cannot access. Listen to that.”

Liz frowned, dizziness and confusion clouding her head. He sounded so strange, so desolate - he was pleading with her – but he was clearly trying to trick her, to exploit the fact that she was an omega. He wanted to hurt her, and she had to get away whatever it took. She felt her calf muscles wind tightly, ready to spring. In a flash she darted to the side, nimble as a jackrabbit, so fast that she almost made it past him – almost, but not quite.

His hand shot out like lightning and she slammed into it like an iron bar, his muscled arm catching her tightly around the waist. He used her momentum to lift her off the ground and carried her struggling and crying to the bed. As soon as he placed her on the covers she curled into a tight ball face down, covering her head with her hands, a last ditch defence mechanism that was utterly heart-breaking.

“I’m so sorry, Elizabeth” he murmured brokenly.

She sobbed when she felt the bed dip as he climbed on behind her, whimpering with fright while he gripped her slender wrists and prised her hands away from her head, pulling her up towards the top of the bed and leaving her struggling on her front.

“Oh no no no!” she gasped in fear as he began to bind her wrists to the metal bed frame with his tie, his breathing heavy and scent agitated. She screamed into the pillow but it was no use – even if someone heard her, no one would come. Omegas scream when they’re being mated. It’s normal. Her mind suddenly flashed back to being bound to a table by Victor Lattimer, the terrifying omega cult leader. You can’t rape an omega. That’s what he had said.

Once her hands were bound, Reddington shifted his weight momentarily. She kicked out blindly back at him but he grabbed her ankle, one then the other, and stretched her out, placing his knee over the backs of her legs to hold her in place. She was trapped.

She blinked through tears, looking up at the knots he had tied and found that they were strangely beautiful; they were intricate sailors’ knots, the silk folded cleanly so as not to bite into her skin as she struggled, she thought numbly. Elegant, but impossible to escape from, even for her.

“Untie me” she gasped. “Please – I know this has to happen. I won’t try to run.”

“We both know that you will,” he sighed, his voice thick with emotion.

Liz sobbed loudly, panicking as she saw her chance to break free slipping away. She turned her face into the pillow, feeling her chest tightening, willing darkness to come. He took her chin firmly in his fingers and moved her head to the side, opening her airway.

“You need to breathe, Elizabeth” he said in a low voice. “Concentrate on breathing.”

She felt him place his hand gently on the back of her neck then, his palm warming her and thumb stroking her reassuringly. Despite her fear it calmed her a little, and she took a few deep, shuddering breaths. The scent in the room was overpowering; fear, desperation, need. Her own arousal was so heady, her body betraying her mind and preparing her sexually whether she wanted it or not. She whimpered in shame as she felt warm slick come between her legs and soak into her yoga pants as she responded to her alpha’s touch.
“Shhhh” he breathed softly. “It’s ok. It’s ok.”

She felt the rough pads of his fingers hook into her waistband, and gasped as he tugged down her pants and underwear in one go, pulling them off her and leaving her naked from the waist down. He reached for a pillow and she spluttered miserably as he positioned it methodically under her hips, lifting her exposed bottom and angling her for penetration.

Wriggling fruitlessly, she sobbed angrily as he felt his hand on her bottom, resting there before he moved it down and slid two fingers gently between her legs. She cried out desolately, tugging at her restraints and hating that her omega sex pulsed gratefully at his touch. She knew what he would find; she was dilated and ready to accept his alpha cock. It was time.

“You’re ready” he swallowed.

“No” she whispered. Her throat was ragged and sore from crying, her cheeks red and puffy. “Please don’t, please stop” she sobbed, but it sounded wretched and defeated even to her own ears. Under the stench of her own fear and arousal, she could scent him, his desire strong, bitter and infused with sadness. It was the scent of inevitability, an unequivocal message that he would save her, whatever the cost.

Her breath caught in her throat when she heard the metallic clink of his belt buckle, followed by his zipper. The bed shifted under her as he positioned himself between her legs and she felt him return his heavy palm to her neck, minimising her struggles as he pushed at her entrance. He growled painfully as he forced himself inside her and she cried out, a desperate sob that seemed to mingle with the scent of her fear in the air and agitate them both.

“Oh Lizzie” he said brokenly, resting his hand gently on her head, his breathing shallow and ragged over the sound of her sobs.

Once he was settled inside her he began to move carefully in firm, measured strokes, his hand caressing her head and neck, gently stimulating the gland behind her ear to calm her. She lay still and numb then, her flushed cheek resting against the cool, damp pillow, her inner omega flooding her with hollow relief that it was happening, that she wouldn’t die after all.

From where she lay on her front she could see his freckled forearm, his muscles trembling from the strain of bearing his weight so as not to crush her. She could see his wristwatch up close, an elegant Patek Phillipe with a deep blue liquid face, so dark it was almost black. She noticed that the watch partially obscured a neat, circular scar, the pale, shimmery skin running in a thin line around his wrist. He had been bound once too she realised, with something far less forgiving than the silk tie he had used on her.

She closed her eyes, the sensation of him thrusting gently inside her growing more and more intense, scattering her thoughts until there was nothing but the sheer power of him enveloping her. As he slid into her in long, devastating strokes she knew that she was his. However far she ran from him, she would always be his, and he would pursue her as surely as if she were a piece of his own self. The thought sent a powerful pulse of desire through her belly and into her swollen sex, a primeval omega response that made her sob in confusion.

Reddington groaned quietly, his pace quickening and breathing labored.

“Oh, sweet girl” he murmured sorrowfully, his hand gripping the back of her neck firmly now. “My sweet girl—” he said again tightly, breathing hard through his nose.

He began to pulse hotly inside her, his warmth filling her as she twitched underneath him, her
breathing harsh and shallow. She knew what was coming, but somehow that hadn’t prepared her for agony of his knot. The pain was exquisite, made worse by the bruising she had sustained in the struggle, and only intensifying as his flesh expanded inside her.

“Oh, no, no, please!” she gasped as she realised it was going to get worse.

Her chest tightened with panic, and she began to struggle wildly under him, fighting blindly to get away.

“Elizabeth no” Reddington said sharply. “You need to keep still-”

But it was no good. Overwhelmed by fear she continued to kick and twist, until with a low growl, he held her down hard, his large hand planted between her shoulders and his body weight pushing down on her, forcing her to submit to his knot.

“I know it hurts, sweetheart. I know” he said quietly as she wept, his voice trembling a little.

Unable to fight him, there was nothing she could do but squeeze her hands into angry, desperate fists. To her surprise she felt one of his hands reach out and softly cover hers, his fingers sliding under her own and pressing softly into her palm. He was the monster who had done this to her, but in that moment it felt a *lifeline*. She gripped his hand in return, squeezing hard as she breathed through the pain.

“Good girl” he murmured. “That’s right, hold my hand. It will be over soon. You’re a brave girl… Elizabeth, this pain will fade. You’re going to be ok” he breathed. “You’re going to be ok.”

Gasping a few deep breaths, she nodded faintly and closed her eyes as her muscles relaxed a little at the sound of his voice and the promise it held, for now and for her future - a future she would live to see. It was strangely familiar, being held by him, and she felt as though she had trusted him once in a time she could no longer recall. She focussed on the warmth of his hand, on his fingers wrapped around hers, and he never let go.

This time, she felt the moment her heat resolved. She felt it like a wave of extraordinary calm washing over her exhausted body, soothing her, telling her that she would live, and that she was cared for deeply. On the other side of the pain and confusion, her senses were impossibly heightened. His scent, now that she could appreciate it fully, was full of heart-breaking sadness and turmoil, and she wondered fuzzily how someone so evil could be so full of grief.

Soon she felt him shift inside her as his knot began to subside, followed by his hand coming between them and gently removing his penis from her. The moment he’d done so, he leaned over her and untied her wrists quickly, freeing her before discarding his tie on the pillow.

She ought to run, she thought numbly, but she was utterly spent. She felt as though she were floating in his scent, their pure animal instincts surrounding her. She lay perfectly still, and closed her eyes. She was vaguely aware of him moving abruptly off the bed, the bathroom door closing behind him followed by the sound of retching.

When he emerged, she had covered herself with the bed sheet, drawing her knees up to her chest. She could feel him observing her, but couldn’t look at him, her eyes fixed on a point on the sheet in front of her.

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“Elizabeth” he said in a low voice.

Her teeth bit deep into her lower lip and she remained silent, her eyes lowered.
“I need to know” he continued tightly.

She closed her eyes momentarily and shook her head. “I’m fine – it’s resolved. You did your duty” she said hollowly. “Saved my life… You had no right.”

He didn’t respond immediately, but she could hear his agitated breathing, his scent arousing her senses and demanding her attention. The omega inside her was no longer able to look away; she looked up through her lashes and saw the older criminal who had become her alpha leaning heavily against the doorframe, his leg noticeably stiff. His eyes were dark and red-rimmed, his lip curling with emotion as he watched her.

“I won’t allow you to throw away your life. To destroy yourself the way I have” he said heavily. “The untimely death of an omega is a stain on the conscience of their community. A sin on the part of those who cherish them most. Those who by loving them… are tasked to protect them.”

She stared up at him, unable to prevent herself from trembling a little in his presence.

“You didn’t give me a choice” she whispered.

He looked at her sadly, the lines now deep scores around his tempestuous eyes.

“No. I gave you every choice you will make. The choices that will shape your future because you will live to see them. And I have no doubt that they will be extraordinary… Goodbye, Elizabeth.”

He stared at her for a long moment as if committing her face to memory, before nodding fractionally and making his way from the bedroom.

Reddington sat heavily in the back of the black sedan, watched with deep concern by Dembe in the rear-view mirror as they drove away.

“Raymond” his friend said quietly.

“It’s done” he rumbled stiffly. “Listen carefully. I need you to close the accounts.”

“Which ones?” Dembe asked slowly.

“All of them” he answered wearily. “Pay my debts. Settle everything. See that my associates and their families are comfortable.”

“Raymond, what are you planning to do?” Dembe asked in a low voice.

Reddington turned to look at him then, his expression resolute. “It’s a story you’ve heard before, my friend” he said gently. “I’m going to turn myself in.”

“To the FBI?”

“To main justice” Reddington said tightly.

There was a long pause before Dembe spoke, observing his employer intently in the mirror. “The Cabal will almost certainly intercept you. They will not risk you exposing their secrets.”

“I’m counting on it” Reddington said quietly. “They are the only ones who have it in their power to pardon her. To return her life to her.” He paused, offering his friend a regretful smile. “Elizabeth was
right. This needs to end. And as with many things, the most elegant solutions are often the simplest. A trade: My life for hers. It ends tonight.
Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Reddington sat behind the heavy oak desk in his Bethesda apartment, completing the paperwork that would pave the way for his departure. The room around him was darkening as the evening light faded, but he made no move to turn on a lamp. His collar and shirtsleeves remained open, and he flexed his fist agitatedly, unable to dispel the visceral memory of Elizabeth struggling beneath him.

He closed his eyes against the darkness but his brain was immediately tormented by terrible flashes of that day; her frantic screams pleading with him as he had bound her wrists, the accusing bruises forming on her delicate skin as he held her down, the grip of her hand in his when the pain became unbearable. He let out a low growl of deep distress and covered his face with his hands. The poor girl had fought him as hard as she could but it would never have been enough. He was an alpha, possessed of brutal strength which he had used on her – which he had used to force her to take his knot. She had no chance against him; nature designed it that way.

His eyes flickered to the scotch decanter on the sideboard, desperate to burn the images from his mind and dull the harrowing pain that came with them. But tonight it wasn’t an option. He needed to stay clear-headed; he didn’t deserve an anaesthetic and he sure as hell wouldn’t make her wait for freedom a moment longer than was necessary. His hand trembling slightly, he picked up his fountain pen, pausing when he heard the unmistakeable sound of sensible, hob-nailed shoes in the hallway.

He looked up as Kate Kaplan entered the room, her demure handbag hanging stiffly on her arm. She regarded him in silence for a moment, her black, beady eyes blinking rapidly, before coming to sit opposite him, her ankles crossed tightly.

“Dembe told me your intentions. He’s worried about you” she said grimly.

“How much did he tell you?” Reddington inquired in a low voice.

“Some of it. Raymond… You put her in heat. Again.”

Reddington lowered his fountain pen and nodded silently, his hand covering his mouth anxiously.

“How could this happen” Kaplan whispered fiercely, her gaze dark and glaring.

“Eric Lund’s designer baby scheme” Reddington answered quietly. “They filtered her blood to remove the suppressants.”

Kaplan closed her eyes momentarily, her lips pursed. “Did she accept it?” she asked tightly. “Did she accept you?”

Reddington shook his head sharply, his teeth clamped against the inside of his cheek. “No. She did not.”

Kaplan hissed. “She’ll die if she doesn’t, Raymond” she said sharply. “You have to reason with her. Tell her the truth if you have to-”

“It’s done” Reddington cut her off stiffly. “She’ll live. That’s what matters.”

Kaplan became very still as understanding dawned, her withered, bony hands clenched around her
“You raped her” she whispered accusingly.

Reddington’s expression darkened, his eyes sharp and haunted. “I saved her life” he said emphatically.

“When I think of that poor child, all alone in the world…” Kaplan growled in a low voice. “You stood in front of me almost thirty years ago and you swore to protect her. I’ve seen what you do to men who’ve done what you’ve done. I’ve disposed of the bodies, and I’ve done it gladly.”

Reddington swallowed, his teeth clenched. “You forget I know you, Kate. You would never allow her to die. Whatever the cost.”

“Of course not” the older woman answered in clipped tones. “It should never have been this way in the first place. The way you obsessed over the child. Watched her. You stalked her like prey… It wasn’t right. You should have known better. And now she’s paid the price.”

“You cannot judge me more harshly than I judge myself” Reddington said in a low voice. “There is nothing in this world that will make up for what I’ve taken from her. I can only hope that… after tonight she will find peace.”

He nodded briefly and picked up the fountain pen, signalling the end of the discussion. Kaplan rose from her seat, her expression tight and pale.

“I hope we can all find peace, Raymond” she murmured before leaving the apartment, the echo of her shoes growing fainter as she disappeared down the corridor and out into the night.

At the black site Ressler ran his hand exasperatedly through his hair as he and Samar looked through traffic cam footage for the twentieth time.

“It’s been days and we have nothing” he growled. “If she was ever in D.C., it’s like she’s vanished like a ghost. Dammit, Keen – where are you?”

“She was here” Aram said quietly.

“You’ve got something?” Samar asked, surprised.

Aram swallowed, his expression grim. “In a way. She contacted me. She needed to see a doctor.”

Ressler frowned accusingly. “And you helped her. She’s a wanted fugitive!”

“You’re damned right I helped her” Aram said in a low, forceful tone. “And I’d do it again. Liz… Agent Keen is one of our own. And she’s innocent.”

“That’s for a jury to decide!” Ressler snapped angrily.

“Is she sick?” Samar asked slowly. “You said she needed a doctor.”

“It happened again” Aram said swallowing grimly. “Mr Reddington… he found her. And she went into heat. I think… I think he forced her.”

The room fell quiet for a while before Samar broke the heavy silence. “What choice did he have if
she refused? The alternative is that she dies. He would never allow that.”

Aram looked at her, his eyes burning with shock. “How can you say that” he whispered. “There should always be a choice.”

Ressler cleared his throat uncomfortably. “I sorry it happened that way, Aram. But there’s a reason it isn’t illegal to force an omega when she’s in heat. All we can do now is try to bring her in safely so she can get the help she needs.”

Aram stared incredulously at his colleagues and Samar looked back at him steadfastly. “If Liz were standing on a bridge about to jump, you’d do everything you could to save her, right? Whether she wanted help or not. It’s the same thing. You do understand that?”

Aram looked at his two alpha colleagues, his jaw set firmly. “Maybe it’s because I’m not an alpha. Or maybe I’m the only one who’s managed to keep some humanity. But no, I don’t understand. I don’t understand any of this” he said quietly, before turning and walking away.

“What a mess. We have to find her” he spat through gritted teeth.

Just then their cell phones lit up and Samar’s eyes widened as she looked at the screen.

“Unbelievable. We may not have found her… but it looks like we’ve found him - Reddington has turned himself into main justice.”

“What?” Ressler exclaimed.

“You heard me. It’s over for him.”

Ressler nodded bleakly. “He’s finished. And so is the taskforce. The DOJ will never cut a deal.”

“I’d like to cut a deal” Reddington said genially to the silent, hulking guard that stood in front of him. The room was dark with no windows, lit only by a low wattage bulb that flickered unpleasantly. Reddington’s wrists were chained to the metal table in front of him, his cuffs reinforced steel that chafed painfully. He wore a gray cotton jumpsuit that reeked of sweat and death underneath the scent of industrial starch. Crossing his legs casually under the table, he leaned back and smiled at the camera in the corner of the room.

“You heard me.”

Some moments later the door swept open with a metallic clang and an angular, blonde alpha woman with cruel mouth walked in and smacked a black folder down on the table just out of his reach.

She stabbed a manicured finger down on the file. “Do you know what this is?”

“You’re Laurel Hitchen” Reddington said, ignoring her question. “National Security Advisor. Tell me – is propping up a clandestine society of global despots such as The Cabal in the interests of national security?”

Hitchen made an ugly sound that was somewhere between a laugh and a sneer.

“In this folder is everything you’ve done with your little taskforce. Every bad guy you helped put
behind bars, your immunity deal – it’s the only record in existence that you are anything other than America’s most wanted fugitive. And when I leave this dank, shitty little room in about thirty seconds, I’m going to set it on fire… and forget you ever existed.”

“That’s probably for the best” Reddington said nonchalantly. “Where I’m going it makes life so much easier if one’s fellow inmates aren’t aware that you’ve been supplying the government with information on their criminal empires.”

Hitchen smiled cruelly. “Where you’re going you won’t see another inmate. You’ll be locked in a box for 23 hours a day. No windows. No human contact. No books. Of course we can’t forget your constitutional rights” she continued in a sing song voice. “You’ll be allowed into a concrete courtyard to exercise – alone - for one hour each day. I can’t say it will be up to the standard of living that you’re used to.”

“I’ve never been one for exercise” Reddington responded, smiling tightly. “Although I do recall enjoying those workout videos as young man, Jane Fonda and her legwarmers-”

“I don’t think you understand” Hitchen cut him off, unamused. “You are going to die in prison. Alone. Without hope.”

Reddington stilled then, his expression thoughtful. “I don’t think I’ve ever given up hope in my life” he said softly.

Hitchen raised an eyebrow witheringly. “The girl – Elizabeth Keen. You’ll never see her again.”

As she spoke, Reddington’s expression shuttered. “Can I assume that you’re not interested in the deal I’m offering?”

“What do you have that I could possibly want?” the alpha woman asked with a shrug.

Reddington nodded. “If you recall I have an mutual agreement in place with your organisation. I keep your secrets, you keep me out of prison.”

“Had an agreement” Hitchen corrected him. “Alan Fitch is long gone.”

“But his secrets aren’t. And neither are yours. And since my freedom is no longer my priority, I am currently lacking an incentive to preserve the global empire that keeps you in Birkin bags… and out of a prison like this one. We could be cellmates, Laurel” he finished, smiling unpleasantly.

Hitchen’s expression turned stony, her lined mouth pursing. “Assuming for a moment that I believed you were at all capable of that, what do you want? What is so important that you’d throw away your life for it?”

“Elizabeth Keen” Reddington said quietly. “Stop your hunt. She goes free - with a full pardon.”

Hitchen snorted a laugh. “You can’t be serious.”

“I assure you I am.”

Hitchen laughed again, pretending to wipe a tear of mirth from her eye. “That’s a good one” she chuckled before her tone became serious. “Elizabeth Keen is a Russian double agent who murdered a human rights attorney in cold blood, and went on to assassinate the Assistant Attorney General of the United States.”

“We both know she is no such thing” Reddington answered coldly.
“Newsflash – I don’t care. And the AG is out for blood over Connolly. Let me make myself clear, Raymond: hell will freeze over before your little princess gets off scot free.”

Reddington’s mouth twitched. “Either you’ve received a considerable promotion, or you’re in no position to make that call. I suggest you speak with someone who is.”

Hitchen paused for a moment, staring at him icily, before grabbing the folder and leaving the room.

When she returned her face was hard, all trace of humor gone. She walked round to the other side of the table where Reddington sat chained and looked down at him, her expression one of barely disguised disgust.

“You’ve got your deal” she said bitterly.

“I’ll need proof.”

“You’ll get it” she snapped. “You know what I think? I think you’re full of shit. But there are those in my organisation who don’t want to take the risk. Cowards” she hissed.

“You’re gutsy” Reddington observed neutrally.

“And you’re a licentious prick” Hitchen murmured, sucking in her cheeks with anger. Suddenly she leant down over the desk, close enough for Reddington to feel her breath as she spoke.

“Pretty girl, Agent Keen. Does she know who you really are? Who you are to her? I do.”

His eyes sharpened, but he said nothing. Noting the change in him, Hitchen smirked.

“What was it like, hmmm? You turn yourself into the FBI, you bond with her… Did you tell her? Did you tell her who you really are?” She leaned in closer then and whispered in his ear.

“Daddy.”

Reddington’s jaw clenched, his teeth bared a little; he remained silent but Hitchen continued triumphantly.

“Did you tell her she was being fucked by her own father? Did you tell her she was a good girl? Did she like it? No really – I want to know” Hitchen laughed nastily. “I want to know how an alpha knots his own daughter.”

Reddington looked up at her then, his eyes burning and his voice dripping with menace.

“I can’t think of even one circumstance where that would be any of your business.”

Liz lay listlessly on a motel bed in sleep shorts and a tank top, a two day old carton of noodles untouched on the nightstand. This place was only marginally worse than the last; maybe better than the one before that. She stared at the ceiling, the paint peeling and cracking with water damage where someone had once left the faucet running in the room upstairs. She reached unconsciously for her scarred wrist, rubbing the circumference where she had been bound. Where he had bound her.

Swallowing hard, she sat up and drew her knees up to her chest, closing her eyes momentarily when she caught sight of the faded, yellowish remains of bruises on her thighs. The TV was flickering in the background with the sound turned down, as she’d had it in every motel since it had happened, as
though a window to the outside offered some kind of protection. Now she caught sight of
Reddington’s picture on the screen and felt a jolt of nausea run through her. She grabbed the remote
and went to turn it off, but stopped as she saw the rolling banner claiming ‘Breaking News’.

Her heart quivering unpleasantly in her chest, she reluctantly turned up the volume and listened to the
perky blonde news anchor give the update.

“...it’s the Bonnie and Clyde case that’s gripped the nation. In a shocking twist, Raymond ‘Red’
Reddington has surrendered to the authorities after decades on the run. It’s believed that Reddington
was instrumental in facilitating the escape of former omega FBI agent and alleged Russian spy
Elizabeth Keen, who became a fugitive after the brutal slaying of human rights attorney Martin
Hannover, and Assistant Attorney General Tom Connolly. Earlier today at a packed news
conference, National Security Advisor Laurel Hitchen made a game-changing statement revealing
that Keen was framed for her crimes. Many details are still unclear, but the Office for National
Security has today acknowledged that the framing of Special Agent Keen is related to a conspiracy
in the highest levels of government, of which the Assistant Attorney General may have been a part.
At this time it’s not known whether the clearing of Keen’s name is related to Reddington’s surrender.
Keen’s former partner Special Agent Donald Ressler had this to say:

Liz’s mouth dropped open in disbelief as footage from the press conference began to play, showing
Ressler stepping up to the podium in front of a packed audience.

“Special Agent Elizabeth Keen was the victim of a conspiracy, which saw her accused of being a
Russian sleeper agent and the killer of a prominent attorney. I can confirm that Keen has been fully
cleared of these crimes. We now know that Assistant Attorney General Tom Connolly participated in
this conspiracy. While Keen did fire the shot that killed him, a judge has ruled it involuntary
manslaughter. Agent Keen’s whereabouts are still unknown, so I’d like to take the opportunity to say
this:

Liz, if you’re watching this – it’s over. You’re free. We’re concerned for your safety, and ask that
you make contact with us as soon as possible. Let us help you. Thank you.”

Liz let out a sob as she saw Ressler’s concerned face staring back at her from the television. Shaking
badly, she rose from the bed and staggered to the bathroom, kneeling down over the toilet in time to
choke up watery bile. When she was done she splashed cold water on her face and looked at her
drawn, pale reflection in the mirror, her enormous blue eyes hardening. She’d been pardoned. She
was free. And she knew exactly where she needed to go.

Later that evening Liz knocked on the door of a little cottage, a small overnight bag in her hand. She
heard the sound of shoes on floorboards before the door opened.

Liz stood in silence for a moment, steadying herself before speaking.

“I’m pregnant.”

A pair of black, beady eyes looked at her appraisingly, before their owner's weathered hand opened
the door wider.

“You’d better come in, dearie.”

Chapter End Notes
HEAT is back, and oh so fun to write! While you're tripping over bombshells, remember this fic broadly follows canon (at least where I feel like it... ;-) so we can expect to see some further revelations as we go. Enjoy! NTDxx
Aram Mojtabai walked sleepily out of the bedroom in his apartment, pulling his bath robe around him as he made his way to the kitchen. He opened a cupboard and pulled out a box of Fruit Loops, emptying a healthy amount into a bowl. He turned to the fridge to retrieve some milk and stopped short, realising that he was not alone.

“What the-”

Dembe sat at his kitchen table, observing him neutrally, bowing his head sheepishly when the FBI agent started in shock.

“Please accept my apologies, Agent Mojtabai” he said quietly. “I did not think it wise to wait outside.”

“Ah, of course” Aram said nervously. “I mean, make yourself at home. Would you like some cereal?” he asked waving the box in his hand somewhat unstably.

“No thank you” Dembe responded soberly.

“No, of course not” Aram murmured, shaking his head. “Um… Why are you here?”

“I need your help” Dembe responded simply.

“I’m sure I’m going to regret asking this” Aram breathed. “What exactly is it that you want me to do?”

Dembe leaned forward a little at the table, looking earnestly up at the agent. “I need your help to get Raymond out of prison.”

Aram laughed mirthlessly. “Right. Is that all? Yeah… That’s not going to happen. They won’t deal. No one has the power to free him.”

“There may be a way to use intelligence collected on The Cabal. Intelligence gathered by you” Dembe explained.

“Even if I could help…” Aram trailed off, shaking his head.

“He will die in prison” Dembe said quietly.

“Well maybe he should” Aram said quietly, folding his arms. “What he did to Liz, to Agent Keen-”

“He did because he loves her” Dembe finished gently.

Aram swallowed and nodded bitterly. “It’s really that easy to you. To alphas.”

“No” Dembe said, his voice low but vehement. “It cannot be called easy. But it is simple. You do not allow the one you love to die. You must save them. Even if it kills you to do it. Raymond expects to die at the hands of the cabal. He is prepared.” Dembe paused and looked stoically at Aram. “I am not.”

Aram sighed and ran his hands anxiously over his face. “And if I say no?” he asked warily.

Dembe lowered his head. “Then I will leave you in peace and try to find another way to help
Raymond.”

Aram nodded shortly. “Ok. But I need something in return.”

Agents Ressler and Navabi stood waiting impatiently in the darkened black site, the old post office quiet and cavernous without the guards and whirring computers. Aram arrived shortly afterwards, flustered and carrying a laptop, which he proceeded to plug into the big screen, bringing it to life in a flash of eerie illumination.

“Aram” Ressler said sternly. “What’s this about? This site has been deactivated, we’re not authorised to be here.”

“Have you heard from Liz?” Samar asked. “Is that why you’ve brought us here?”

“No” Aram said seriously. “No one has heard from her in weeks. The press statement has been playing again and again on the news cycle and she hasn’t come forward. I think she’s in trouble.”

“I’m worried too” Ressler sighed. “But we’ve got a BOLO out for her, we’ve done everything we can to make sure she knows it’s safe to come in. There’s nothing more we can do.”

“Well that’s not quite true, is it” Aram said enigmatically.

“What do you mean?” Samar asked slowly.

Aram looked from one of his fellow agents to the other, lowering his voice even though the black site was deserted. “Who do we know who has more resources than any law enforcement agency? Who has access to the best trackers, hackers, mercenaries… whoever it is that finds people that others can’t?”

“You’re talking about criminals” Ressler said darkly.

“You mean Reddington” Samar surmised. “You want to use Reddington to find Liz.”

“He is her alpha” Aram said quietly. “For better or for worse.”

“You can’t be serious” Ressler scoffed. “Even if that wasn’t an insane idea, no one can get Reddington out of prison. The task force is over. Hell, it’s better this way. Reddington belongs in prison.”

“There is a way” Aram said firmly. “It’s possible to get him out. Surely he can do more good working with us than locked in a hole. There are hundreds of criminals he could help us catch. But first of all, he can help us find Liz.”

“What makes you think you can get main justice to release Reddington? They’re not going to bargain because you asked nicely” Samar said drily.

“No” Aram said, evenly. “But they might if members of the cabal who own main justice find out that we’ve frozen their accounts and crippled their cash flow… across the entire global network.”

Ressler frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Aram tapped on his console and a world map appeared on the big screen, showing hundreds of lines connecting countries.
“When Mr Reddington and Liz were fugitives, Liz contacted me with information they’d found on The Cabal’s finances. I ran an IRS analysis which showed a pattern in the records that began to identify the business they use to launder money. A couple of days ago, Dembe approached me with more financial records from suspected cabal business and that gave me enough data to create an algorithm that fills in the blanks.”

Aram paused and gestured to the map on the screen behind him. “What you’re looking at is The Cabal’s financial activities all over the world. It operates like a network of pipelines; I’ve already identified enough of the key spots to be able to cripple their cash flow by hitting those nerve spots at once.”

“This is incredible” Samar said in awe, taking in the implications of the map in front of them.

“I’ll say it is” Ressler said sardonically. “You’re telling me that Keen contacted you while she was a fugitive to ask you to run this for her and you did it?”

“You didn’t say anything” Samar added. “You could have told us.”

“Could I?” Aram challenged. “Look, whatever you might have thought, Agent Keen was framed by a really, really scary organisation that’s responsible for hundreds, probably thousands of deaths. Lives ruined, including hers. Why hasn’t she contacted any of us? Why isn’t there a single trace of her? She’s in trouble, I know it. And the only way we are going to help her and take down The Cabal is with Mr Reddington’s help.”

Ressler sighed. “Aram… Even if he could find her. What makes you think she’d come in with him? After what he-”

“She trusted him once” Aram cut him off quietly. “I think… I think she even loved him. Something changed, and I don’t know what, but I do know there’s only one way we can sort out this mess” he finished, gripping the sides of his consol.

The room was silent for a few moments before Ressler put his hands on his hips. “Right then. As of now the Taskforce is back online. Our first assignment: To get our informant out of jail.”

Ressler sat outside an office in the DOJ, and stood as he saw Laurel Hitchen walking down the corridor towards him, her expression stony.

“Ma’am” he greeted her politely.

“Don’t ma’am me” she sneered, throwing open the office door and striding in with Ressler on her heels. “Do you think I want to be here? That I don’t have better things to do than deal with your pathetic task force?”

“Then why are you here?” Ressler challenged.

Hitchen stared down her nose at him, her gaze icy. “I am here because when a federal agent walks into the Justice Department and demands the release of one of America’s most wanted fugitives it tends to get attention” she hissed. “And if you think for a second that Reddington is going to be released so you can carry on your lame little project, think again, Agent Ressler. It’s over. Reddington will rot in prison where he belongs.”

Ressler nodded, holding up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. “Hey, I’m with you. Before this
taskforce I spent my life working to put people like Reddington behind bars. Frankly it turned my stomach to think I’d be working with someone like him. But right now I’m starting to think we’re on to something” he finished, looking at her pointedly.

“And why is that?” Hitchen snapped.

“Because when I walked into this building I had no idea who would show up to talk to me. Hell, I thought I might just be thrown out. But instead I’ve been here fifteen minutes and I’m talking to the head of national security. What does that tell me? It tells me that you’re pretty interested in keeping Reddington in prison. And it also means that you’re going to let him out when you hear what I have to say.”

Hitchen’s expression had soured into an ugly grimace, her lips set in a thin, cruel line. “Spit it out, Agent Ressler. What makes you so sure?”

Sensing the alpha woman’s discomfort, Ressler gave a small, triumphant smile and dropped casually into a chair. “It’s like this. Reddington’s currency is information. You’d be amazed what he knows about people. This conspiracy which your department has just acknowledged, this cabal… Reddington knows all about them, including how they run their cash all over the world. Now that in itself doesn’t necessarily help him, but we have an agent who’s a bit of a tech wizard, and he’s run Reddington’s information through IRS records, and, well, the system lit up like a Christmas tree.”

Ressler paused as he saw Hitchen’s face pale a little. “So the way I see it, ma’am, is that unless you have Reddington released, the cash flow that keeps the entire cabal’s empire afloat is going to crumble, and the decent cops there are left in this country are going to start making arrests. Now, I’m not saying you’re a member of an organisation like The Cabal… but if you were, I reckon you’d be figuring out a way to give me what I want right about now.”

Hitchen’s jaw hardened and her alpha scent had taken on a fatigued, chalky quality. “I can’t authorise Reddington’s release from a level ten facility” she said tightly. “But Reddington is resourceful. He has friends in some low places, including the FBI… I wouldn’t be surprised if he managed to escape before long.”

Ressler rose from his seat with a nod. “We’ll make it look real.”

“Oh you won’t make it look real, Agent Ressler” Hitchen said icily. “It will be real. The best I can do is forget we had this conversation, which should be easy – you’re not all that memorable” she finished spitefully.

Ressler raised an eyebrow. “One more thing – I think we’d like our director back. Harold Cooper. I’m sure we wouldn’t be quite so unruly if we had a bit more oversight” he said with a smirk.

“I’ll see what I can do” Hitchen replied with a faux smile.

“Thank you ma’am” Ressler said cheerfully and turned to leave.

“Don’t think this changes anything, Agent Ressler” Hitchen murmured drily. “The truth is you’re a blip on the radar of the organisation you’re referring to. Nothing you do will make a difference in the end.”

“Maybe” Ressler said quietly. “But I’ve got to try.”
Reddington sat perfectly still in the darkness of his tiny cell, his eyes shut serenely. Although he wore a rough, gray prison jumpsuit and had a dark bruise on his temple, his expression was one of pure calm as though he were a thousand miles away from the dank level ten detention facility in which he was imprisoned. His reverie was broken when a guard pushed open his cell door with a loud clang, and Reddington’s eyes squinted open, unaccustomed to the light.

“It’s your lucky day, Red” the guard told him. “The doc’s here to check you over and she’s a hot one.”

The doctor raised a dark eyebrow, unimpressed, but stepped into the cell without comment. Reddington looked up at her as she entered, his eyes suddenly sharp and shoulders tense. It was Agent Samar Navabi, dressed as a government health worker.

“I didn’t ask for a medic” he growled darkly.

Samar shrugged as she got a stethoscope out of her kit and put it in her ears. “Mr Reddington, I’m Doctor Bahar with the prison service. I just go where they tell me. The quicker you let me do my job, the quicker I can get out of here” she said flatly, gesturing to his chest.

Reddington unbuttoned the top of his jumpsuit, his eyes burning into Samar as she placed the stethoscope on his chest.

“Besides, you can never be too careful” she murmured as she listened to his breathing. “Sometimes you think someone is ok, but it turns out they’re actually in trouble, and need your help” she said, looking at him meaningfully.

Reddington’s eye twitched fractionally but he stayed silent. Samar turned to the guard who was standing amused in the doorway, blatantly checking out her ass.

“He’s fine. I just need to give him a shot and then I’ll be leaving” she said, pulling a syringe out of its packet and filling it from a vial.

“What is that stuff?” the guard asked suspiciously.

“Vitamins” Samar answered casually. “Roll up your sleeve” she instructed, nodding curtly to Reddington.

He did so, staring at her intently, but her expression gave nothing away as she wiped his arm with an alcohol swab and injected the contents of the syringe. When it was done she straightened up and disposed of the syringe in her kit, packing her things neatly away.

“Hang on” the guard said suddenly, and Samar turned in time to see Reddington slide off the bench and onto the floor, his body shaking violently. She grabbed a pencil light from her bag and knelt quickly beside him, checking his pupillary response and pulse.

“What’s happening?” the guard asked gruffly.

“He’s having an anaphylactic seizure” Samar responded, her voice low and urgent. “He must be allergic to the protein binding in the vitamin shot. Why wasn’t that in his records?” she snapped, looking up at the guard accusingly.

The guard shook his head helplessly, alarmed, and Samar rolled her eyes.

“I’m not having a patient die on me because you were too incompetent to take an accurate history. We’ve got to get him to a hospital, now.”
“Hey, no way – I can’t let a prisoner out of a level ten facility” he responded, his tone a little panicked.

“You can and you will” Samar said bluntly. “You know as well as I do that your bosses are not going to thank you for allowing Raymond Reddington to die on your watch. It’s both our jobs on the line here. I came in on a prison service helicopter, we can use that to evacuate him to the nearest facility. When he’s stable he can be moved to a secure unit. Right now we just need to keep him alive.”

“I need to get authorisation-” the guard began, but Samar cut him off.

“I’ve lost his pulse!”

The guard bent down to feel Reddington’s neck and paled.

“Let’s move!” Samar barked, and the guard nodded with a gulp.

Between them they lifted him and got him into the elevator, transporting him to the roof of the facility where the helicopter was waiting. As they approached the helipad they were met by two men who helped them get Reddington into the helicopter and onto a backboard.

Samar jumped in and the guard went to follow her, but Dembe appeared, blocking door.

“We are full” he said stoically, before shutting the door in the guard’s face and signalling the pilot for take-off.

The moment they were in the air, the men began to work on Reddington, one starting chest compressions while another set up an IV, shouting over the noise of the helicopter.

“Pushing five of epi. Anything?”

“I’ve got PEA, resuming compressions.”

Samar glanced at Dembe as the medics worked, but his expression was inscrutable as he watched his friend.

“He will be ok” Dembe murmured, though his gaze did not move from Reddington.

Suddenly Reddington coughed, wincing unhappily as he blinked into consciousness. He looked around, taking in the situation with a groan.

“Agent Navabi, was it really necessary to kill me?”

Samar raised an eyebrow. “It was a calculated risk.”

Dembe smiled wryly. “Just like Marrakesh.”

Reddington gave him a withering look. “This was nothing like Marrakesh. Now, tell me about Elizabeth.

Aram and Ressler were pacing impatiently at the black site waiting for news when Assistant Direct Cooper appeared, a wry smile on his face.
“Boy is it good to see you” Ressler said, walking over to shake his hand.

“Likewise, Agent Ressler” Cooper responded. “I hear you’ve been ruffling a few feathers.”

“With respect sir” Aram chimed in, “they needed ruffling” he said with an impish smile.

Cooper grinned and shook the agent’s hand. “I have a feeling you’re right about that. And I can’t say I’m sorry that I’m out of that desk job with only a pot plant for company, however nefarious the means you used to achieve my reinstatement. Now, let me get this straight – you said on the phone that you were going to get Reddington out of prison. May I ask why, after everything you’ve told me has happened?” he asked quietly.

Aram cleared his throat. “It’s Liz, sir. Agent Keen. She’s been pardoned but no one has seen her in weeks. I’ve tried, but I can’t find her. I think she’s in trouble. It’s a risk, but Reddington is the only one who has a chance of finding her. Whatever he’s done… It’s a chance we have to take.”

“I see” Cooper said sagely. “When will you know if your escape plan has been successful?”

“We should hear any time now” Aram began, and just then his computer console beeped. “Ah!” he exclaimed, moving behind the operations desk, tapping on the keyboard.

For a moment he was still as he looked at the screen and then his face and shoulders fell, as though all the energy that kept him animated had drained away.

“What is it?” Cooper demanded impatiently. “Is it Reddington?”

“No” Aram whispered, his voice catching in his throat. “It’s Liz. She’s gone. We’re too late.”

“What do you mean?” Ressler asked darkly, marching to look at the screen.

Aram sniffed and wrapped his arms around himself. “I have every alert possible out on Liz, if anything… If anyone matching her description, her scent…” he broke off and shook his head. “Her body was found washed up on a beach in New Jersey. She drowned. She drowned herself” he choked.

Cooper and Ressler stood in silence, their heads bowed in sorrow as they processed the news. Before they could speak, there was a clank as the yellow elevator arrived and Dembe, Samar and Reddington strode in.

“Harold!” Reddington said jovially. “It’s good to see you back in your rightful position, capturing the most prolific criminals, putting them behind bars, with the exception of myself, of course… I have to say you seem rather reluctant to keep me under lock and key. Now I understand that you need my help to find Elizabeth, so perhaps we should get started.”

Cooper, Ressler and Aram looked at him, their faces sombre and eyes red rimmed, and Reddington’s expression hardened like concrete.

“What’s happened?” he asked sharply.

Aram lifted his sleeve to his nose, sniffing, and when he spoke his voice was thick with unshed tears.

“We just got news” he whispered. “There’s something you need to know.”
Reddington lay sprawled on a tattered red silk couch in a darkened, smoky room. He reached out for a long, ornate pipe, his hand shaking as he took another hit of opium, before falling back on the limp cushions, struck by a wet coughing fit. His jacket was gone and his vest partially undone, the fine shirt underneath crumpled and sticky. He reached down with difficulty and removed his socks, groaning as he lay back and felt the rough, cool material of the couch between his toes.

He was hit by a wave of nausea and closed his eyes, waiting for it to pass, as he knew it would. As all things pass. She was gone, like a brief burst of sunlight extinguished by a capricious cloud. Drowned in the cold sea like her mother, a thought that was still unfathomable to him despite the devastating results of the DNA and scent match. There was no escaping the truth. He raised the pipe to his lips and inhaled again, scattering his thoughts like the curls of purple smoke that surrounded him.

The silence around him was broken by the peal of a child’s laugh, and he opened his eyes, confused. He squinted into the darkness for the source of the sound, and it came again. He smiled in disbelief when he finally saw the owner of that delightful laugh.

“Masha” he breathed joyfully. “Oh Masha you shouldn’t be here!”

The beautiful little girl only grinned at him and ran around the couch giggling, her dark curls bouncing on her shoulders. Dazed, Reddington raised his head shakily to look about him as she ran out of view and back again.

“Come here sweetheart” he said reaching out for her in vain as she darted about, the pink streak of her pyjamas swirling dizzyingly in his peripheral vision. “Let me look at you.”

Suddenly she stopped running and stood right in front of him, her enormous blue eyes looking at him curiously. He smiled breathily, enraptured to see her before him, but she continued to stare hard until he became frightened, certain that she was looking right into his soul.

His mind began to flit over all the terrible things he had done, playing out before the child until the sequence came inevitably to the last terrible act he had committed, forcing himself on the woman she would become.

“No sweetheart” he choked thickly. “Don’t look. You mustn’t see that. I had to help you” he said desperately. “Don’t you see? It’s all I ever tried to do.”

He pleaded with the child again, but she only stared at him curiously with her enormous blue gaze peeling layers from his soul. Eventually he closed his eyes, unable to look at the little girl any longer, praying that she hadn’t seen what he could see in his mind’s eye.

As he lay there in the dark he felt a weight creep onto his chest and realised she must have climbed onto him. Reluctantly he blinked open his eyes, and his mouth dropped open as he saw her again, not the child, but the woman, naked and kneeling between his legs. Her skin was so smooth and creamy that she seemed luminescent in the darkness, her round breasts pert and aroused, her lean, slender thighs taught against him.

“Lizzie” he choked, and spluttered as she reached down and unzipped his pants, slipping her hand
inside. He groaned as she began to stroke him, cupping his sac gently and working her palm over the velvet flesh of his penis until, to his shame, it began to swell in her hand.

“No Lizzie” he murmured brokenly. “You shouldn’t do that. Not for me.”

But she only raised her finger to her lips with a soft smile, and continued to work her hand between his legs, back and forth until he was so swollen it was painful. She eased him from his boxers then and worked her thumb over the dark, leaking head, eliciting a sharp hiss from him. His breath hitched and his chest tightened as she raised herself up over him, and he pulsed involuntarily at the feel of the slick between her legs sliding over his tip.

From where he lay she appeared so delicate and slim compared with the size and weight of him that he did not suppose she could take him inside her, but she continued to bear neatly down on him until he was completely sheathed. Robbed of speech, he could only watch, his lower lip curled over his teeth as she began to roll her hips gently over him, the curve of her ass brushing against his thighs as she moved.

Swallowing, he raised his hands to grip her, his thumbs pressing into the indents below her hips and his fingers pressed into the smooth, warm flesh of her bottom. Enchanted, he watched her ride him, thrusting upwards erratically until all too soon he felt the gland in his ass and his heavy sac begin to contract with the beginnings of orgasm. He raked his eyes up her body, over her sweet little breasts to her face; he needed to see her face.

Her mouth appeared to fall open with pleasure, but as he met her eyes he saw that they had become wide with fear as he had begun to spill inside her, his knot expanding. She began to panic and struggle, fighting to get away, her hands pushing feebly against his chest. Determined to stop her from hurting herself, he clutched at her, bruising her hips, gripping her wrists, and all the while a strange sound in the background appeared to get louder and louder.

He wrestled desperately with her until she fell beside him and he realised that the dreadful sound he could hear was her scream. Panicked, he tried to hush her, covering her mouth, pushing down on her until she stopped struggling. He frowned in confusion; his hands were wet, her hair was sopping and straggled over her face, he was holding her under water-

“Mr Red? Mr Red! Time to go” came a voice from outside the door.

Reddington’s eyes shot open and he groaned as he looked down. He was sprawled on the couch, his hand shoved inside his pants and wet with ejaculate. He hastily zipped himself up and wiped his hand distastefully on his shirt as the elderly Chinese proprietress entered the room, waving her hand through the smoke.

“Time to go Mr Red” she said again.

“No” he responded thickly. “No. I want another one. Give me another one. I paid. I want another.”

“No” the woman said, bustling about him and shaking her head. “You go. It’s too long for you. You go now Mr Red.”

Reddington pushed himself regretfully up from the couch, slipped his feet into his shoes, and staggered obediently out into the harsh light of day.

He wondered aimlessly for a while, squinting in the sun, his sunglasses long gone, lost somewhere
along the road of misery he had walked since his world had shattered. Eventually he found himself in a park and sank gratefully onto a bench, blinking at the scene before him. There were joggers and nannies and men and women in suits, clutching cell phones to their ears, all chattering away. There were hundreds of people, a hotdog stand and, somewhere out of sight, a candyfloss seller, a cacophony of noise and scents disturbing and confusing him.

The sensory sea narrowed then and his focus became drawn to a mother and her child, walking down the path laughing together as though they had never experienced loss or hardship in their lives. That will never be her, he thought desolately. She will never experience the joy of motherhood, drowned by darkness that got too close for too long. Suddenly the joy and light in the park seemed like an affront, a painful insult to everything he had lost.

Unable to bear it any longer, he pushed himself up from the bench and sank into a cab, giving the address of an old but comfortable doss house he hadn’t visited in years. If he was lucky, it would still a distribution point for the premium grade heroin that used to run through there. At the very least he would probably be able to score a joint and a quiet, comfortable place to sleep for the night, hidden from the world and its senseless evils.

When he arrived he was pleased to see that the place looked exactly the same as it ever was. At first he thought it was deserted, but as he began to make his way through the darkened entrance way to the staircase, the hairs on his neck began to prickle unpleasantly. He had caught several fresh scents, an alpha male and an omega, the girl’s scent tinged with fear. The scent of sexual pheromones and distress became more pronounced as he ascended the stairs, and by the time he reached the floor above he knew exactly what he was going to find.

He opened the door to his left to reveal a lean, muscular alpha man kneeling over a young omega girl on a couch, his hand pawing at her shirt. The girl was crying quietly, her long, slender legs drawn together as she tried to turn away from the man.

“C’mon baby, don’t be shy” the alpha began, but stopped short as the door opened, his back arching, making himself appear larger. “This room his taken” he snarled.

“I can see that” Reddington said darkly.

The man let out a low, warning growl, eliciting a quiet whimper from the girl. “I found her” he hissed. “She’s mine. Get your own omega.”

“She’s not yours” Reddington replied softly. “You have no right to take anything from her” he continued, approaching slowly. As he walked through the shadows he removed a pistol from his pocket. “You’re going to let her go.”

The young omega’s eyes widened in fear as she saw the gun, and the man swallowed, raising his hands.

“Run” Reddington said to the girl in a low voice, and she sprang off the couch and took off down the stairs.

“What am I going to do with you” Reddington murmured grimly to the alpha man who was eyeing the pistol nervously.

“Hey man, we’re cool – I was just having a bit of fun.”

“Fun” Reddington echoed hollowly. “You were going to rape that girl.”

“Aww c’mon” the man said, panicked. “She’s an omega – you know how it goes!”
Reddington stared at him, his expression cold and dreadful. He nodded imperceptibly before firing twice into the man’s chest.

He turned and walked back down the stairs, knowing that it was no longer possible for him to stay there. When he reached the entrance hall he heard a muffled sniff from a side room and walked in, his lips pursed. The omega girl was standing there, her arms wrapped tightly around herself, her face streaked with tears. She froze when he entered, her eyes darting nervously to the stairs and back to him.

“I told you to run” Reddington said quietly.

The girl drew her lip between her teeth for a moment, casting her eyes down in embarrassment. “I know… I don’t have anywhere to go.”

Reddington’s lips parted regretfully, and he looked desolately at her. “I know the feeling” he said eventually.

The girl swallowed bravely then, her eyes sweeping over him appraisingly. “Take me with you” she whispered. “Look after me. Please.”

Reddington shook his head sharply. “I can’t do that.”

He saw fresh tears well in her eyes then, her scent taking on a heart-breaking tinge of desperation. “Please sir. I can see you’re a good man” she choked.

“I’m not a good man” he said in a low voice. “I’m a terrible man.”

Swallowing her sobs, the girl sank to her knees in front of him in a submissive position, and began unbuttoning her shirt, her fingers trembling.

“Please” she whispered. “I’ll do anything. Anything you want. Tell me what you like – I can be good for you…”

Reddington closed his eyes momentarily, painfully reminded of a time when another omega had adopted that same submissive position of which he was so undeserving.

“No” he said sharply as she reached the button that would bare her breasts to him. “Don’t do that. Don’t do that” he repeated softly.

She paused miserably, blinking tears of resignation.

“How old are you?” he asked gently.

She looked up at him warily before answering. “Eighteen.”

Reddington huffed a hollow, disbelieving laugh. “You’re fifteen. If that.”

The girl’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “I’ll be sixteen in a month.”

“I see” Reddington said quietly. “Are you hungry?”

She nodded silently, and for the first time he took in her thin frame, her eyes that were too big for her face.

“So am I” he said gently. “I know a charming little trattoria not far from here. The owner is an old acquaintance.”
He gave her a reassuring smile and gestured to the door, where upon she stood and padded out of the house obediently.

She said nothing on the walk over, and although he was concerned that the young omega might draw further unwanted attention from predatory alphas that he would have to contend with, they arrived at the trattoria without incident.

The inside was warm and inviting and the girl smiled gratefully as she curled into a corner booth. She picked up the menu and looked at Reddington with a bright glint in her eye.

“Can I have some wine?”

“Of course” Reddington replied smoothly. “In about 5 years.”

Her face fell sullen again but she said nothing as she studied the menu.

“Do your parents allow you to drink alcohol?” Reddington asked.

The girl shrugged. “My dad lets me have a beer sometimes.”

“And what does your mom think about that?”

“No mom” she replied tightly. “It’s just me and my dad.”

Reddington nodded gently. “Your father must miss you.”

She shrugged again and the silence was broken when the restaurant owner approached them with a broad grin.

“Raymond! Welcome, welcome. Long-time no see.”

Reddington smiled warmly and embraced the man. “Joe, you haven’t changed a bit.”

Joe laughed and slapped his expansive belly. “Thirty pounds heavier but who’s counting?”

Reddington chuckled genially. “You were never one to go easy on the parmigiana, and thank heavens for that.”

“My nonna would turn in her grave if I ever did” he said seriously. “What can I get you?”

“Hmmm, what shall we have?” Reddington said, looking encouragingly at the girl.

“I want whatever you want” she said smiling softly, and Reddington nodded.

“Ok then. Let’s start with a Caprese salad, the bruschetta with garlic and parmesan, followed by two mushroom risottos. And some ice water for the table.”

Joe chuckled as he noted down their order. “Feeling hungry, eh! Excellent, excellent” he said as he shuffled away to the kitchen.

Reddington looked kindly at the girl and cocked his head a little. “How did you come to be in that place? You’re young. An entire future ahead of you. You have a father who’s no doubt worried sick.”

The girl lowered her eyes, a pink blush of shame creeping into her cheeks. “You’ll think it’s stupid.”
“Try me” Reddington said gently.

She looked up at him warily and then lowered her eyes again before speaking quietly.

“There was a guy. He was older… I started cutting school to see him, and he used to take me places. In the end I just stopped going home. He was sweet at first, but he had these friends… He wanted me to… do stuff for them. I thought he loved me. He was just using me because I’m an omega. I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

She shifted uncomfortably, but her eyes were still fixed on the table in front of her; she didn’t see Reddington’s lip twitch in anger on her behalf.

“Go on” he prompted as softly as he could.

She swallowed and drew her arms around herself defensively. “He said if I left him he’d tell my dad I was a slut. Tell my school. My friends. In the end I ran away from him – I knew I had to. But I can’t go home. Everyone will hate me. My dad will be so disappointed.”

Reddington shook his head. “I know it seems that way sweetheart. But this wasn’t your fault. None of it. Believe me when I say your father will be desperate to see you home safe. That’s all he wants. For you to be safe.”

The girl shrugged tightly, and at that moment their food arrived, the incredible smells making their mouths water. Reddington chastised himself a little for appreciating the scent of her enjoyment mingling with delicate, fresh tomato and basil as she bit into the bruschetta. He smiled sadly as he watched her devour it as though she hadn’t eaten for days, and she barely slowed down when their risottos arrived.

Eventually she paused and looked at him, her expression older than her years. “What about you?” she asked quietly. “How did you end up in that place? How did you end up there with a gun?” she added warily.

Reddington worked his jaw in silence, staring out at the flickers of orange candlelight across the trattoria.

“Your scent is so sad” the girl continued softly. “I knew as soon as I saw you. I’ve never scented anything like it before.”

Reddington swallowed, and nodded briefly. “There was a woman I loved” he began in a low voice. She was… my life. My heart. And she died.”

“You couldn’t save her” the girl said gently.

“I tried” Reddington responded tightly. “I failed… She had suffered too much.”

The girl sat back, her expression suddenly stony. “She committed suicide” she surmised hollowly.

“She did” Reddington answered briefly, his jaw tight with tension.

“I would never do anything like that” the young omega said confidently. “I would find a way out.”

Reddington sighed, giving her a sad smile. “I hope you’re right. I hope you never feel that you have no way out.”

“I never would” the girl insisted. “I told you I didn’t have a mom… She killed herself. She left me.
And when I found out… it hurt more than anything I’ve ever felt. So, no. I’d never do that. I’d find another way.”

Reddington nodded curtly. “If you want to avoid hurting the people you care about, perhaps you’d begin by returning to your father.”

The omega girl reddened, her show of confidence leaving her. “I can’t. Not yet” she mumbled, returning to her risotto.

“I see” said Reddington, looking at her appraisingly. “How about a proposition. After we finish dinner I will take you somewhere you’ll be safe. There’s a warm bed, home cooking… You can stay there and recuperate.”

The girl looked at him suspiciously, folding her arms across her breasts. “And what do you want me to do in return?”

“To make me a promise” he answered firmly. “That you will return home.”

He placed a paper napkin in front of her along with a pen he removed from his jacket pocket.

“Write your name and address here. In exactly a month from now I will visit your house, and if at that time I find that you have not returned, I’ll find you, and bring you home myself. Do we have a deal?”

The girl swallowed and then nodded silently.

“Good girl.”

Once they had finished their meal, Reddington paid and summoned a car for them. He could feel the unease radiating from the girl as she got into the back of the black town car with him, her scent betraying her fear. He remained silent as they pulled away, knowing that there was nothing more he could say that would reassure her that he meant her no harm. She was an omega, vulnerable and designed to live at the mercy of alphas like him, he thought bitterly.

When they arrived, the house looked welcoming in the night, the wooden porch lit by a mellow lamp. They got out of the car and the girl looked around warily.

“What is this place?” she whispered.

“It’s a safe haven of sorts” Reddington told her, palming his fedora onto his head and walking up the steps. “A boarding house for girls such as yourself who need somewhere to stay. Constance is a wonderful woman, she’s run the place for years. You’ll be safe here. I promise” he said as he rang the bell.

He turned back and saw the girl standing at the foot of the steps, and for the first time that evening she gave him a beautiful smile. The corners of his mouth curved in response, and he only turned away from the lovely young omega when the door opened and a friendly, rosy-cheeked woman answered.

“Raymond! Bless you, what are you doing here?”

“Constance” he greeted her warmly, kissing her on each cheek. “Apologies for arriving
unannounced, only my young friend here is in a spot of bother and requires a place to stay for a little while.”

“Of course!” the woman exclaimed. “I’ve always got room for one more. Where is she?”

Reddington turned to look behind him but the girl was nowhere to be seen.

“Ah hell” he muttered, stalking back down the steps to the car and knocking on the driver’s window.

“Did you see which way she went?” he asked the man quickly.

“Who?” the driver asked, confused.

“The girl” Reddington said sharply. “The omega girl you brought here with me.”

The driver looked lost. “There was no girl, sir. Just you.”

“Just me” Reddington echoed in confusion, looking wildly about him. Constance joined him shortly, placing a gentle hand on his arm.

“It’s alright, Raymond, just take a minute. What was her name, this girl?”

“I…” Reddington stopped short. “I don’t know. I don’t know.”

Suddenly he began fumbling in his pockets until he located the napkin he had instructed the omega girl to write on. He pulled it out and unfolded it, holding it up in front of him. His blood ran cold as he saw the single word written there, clear as day, in his own handwriting:

*Lizzie*

He swallowed, shaking violently as he cast his mind back over the day’s events. Had there been anyone at the doss house at all or was he just arguing with shadows? Could it really have been exactly the same as he remembered all these years later? Or was it now just a hollowed out, condemned shell? He’d ordered two meals at the restaurant, but there was no one there to share it; no wonder Joe had commented on his appetite.

How cruel that his brain, corrupted by grief and drugs, should have delivered such a scenario, he thought desolately. What possible purpose did it serve, other than to drive him further into the darkness, perhaps to follow her there, the girl he had conjured all day, the child, the woman… and now the teenager.

“Why don’t you come inside for a cup of tea?” Constance said gently. “Bed down for the night. Your generosity has kept our doors open all these years, it’s the least we can do.”

Reddington looked at the woman, momentarily at a loss for words. Then a thought struck him.

“She said… She said she would never commit suicide. That she would find another way out. After her mother… She would never have killed herself.”

Constance frowned in concern. “Raymond, are you alright?”

Reddington stared at her, his eyes suddenly focussed and voice clear. “There’s somewhere I need to be.”

Chapter End Notes
Readers of my other fics may notice that I've borrowed a line from The Red Rose and the White - I can't resist having Red rescue a girl in distress :-)

Reddington sat perched on a tall metal stool in a cold mortuary basement, the scent in the stark, tiled room thick with chemicals. Presently, the county medical examiner, a beta male wearing blue overalls, descended the stairs to the basement, raising his eyebrows with mild surprise when he saw Reddington.

“I would tell you this area is off limits, but I reckon you already know that” the M.E. said kindly. “And I imagine whatever has brought you has got to be pressing, if an alpha is willing to put up with the smells in here. So why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind?”

Reddington sat in silence for a moment before speaking, looking around himself thoughtfully.

“A great many things” he said quietly. “Decisions I have made over the years. Things that perhaps I could have done differently. Each action a stitch in time weaving an inevitable shroud. For those I love… and for myself.”

“You lost someone” the M.E. said gently.

For the first time, Reddington looked straight at the man, his gaze cold. “Did I” he responded in a low voice. “I’ve always found it to be a cruel expression, ‘losing someone’ – it implies that you somehow let go… when in fact you held on as tight as you could. Perhaps too tight” he murmured, before easing himself off the stool.

He planted his fedora on his head and took a couple of purposeful steps towards the M.E., who observed him warily.

“Elizabeth Keen. This office handled her body… Do not make the grievous error of pretending you don’t remember.”

“Of course I remember” the man replied quietly. “I’m the one they come to after death. It’s only right that I take note of them all. She was a young omega. Suicide by drowning – a real tragedy.”

“Yes” Reddington said in a clipped tone. “And one that I am suddenly finding myself struggling to accept. I’d like to see her records.”

The M.E. canted his head sympathetically. “Even if I could give them to you, they’ve been signed off and transferred to county records. You’ll need to take it up with them. I can give you their details – are you family?”

Reddington pursed his lips, ignoring the question. “You saw her” he said tightly. “You performed the autopsy.”

The M.E. shook his head. “As a matter of fact, I didn’t. It was a rather unusual request actually. It seems that the girl’s parents are quite influential; as you can see we’re a small county and while we’re perfectly well set up, they requested a pathologist from out of town. I agreed as a courtesy.”

Reddington had grown very still, the sunken, purplish skin around his grief-worn eyes seeming to darken further “Her parents” he repeated. “And what reason might such a request be made?”

The M.E. shook his head. “At first I was concerned they were trying to cover up cause of death – it was a clear suicide which can be very upsetting for a family to admit. But the woman’s findings concurred with my own – suicide by drowning.”
“The woman” Reddington repeated hollowly.

The M.E. nodded. “Yes. An alpha - not common in my business. Prim with jet black hair. And as steely a woman as I’ve ever met. I dare say I’m relieved there was no conflict there – I’m not sure I’d have had the stomach to take her on. You ever known a woman like that?”

“I have” Reddington whispered, his face drained of color. “Though perhaps not as well as I thought.”

Deep in rural Colorado, an omega woman emerged from the tall, fragrant pines into a clearing in front of a small general store. Her hair, once dyed blond, was now back to its natural brunette, her large blue eyes fatigued but determined. She stepped into the store and was greeted with a friendly smile by the manager.

“Hi Grace, good to see you. I get worried about you up there alone in that cabin. There’s a cold spell coming.”

Grace nodded. “That’s why I’m here. Generator’s out again – got any L14-20 male plugs?”

The store owner smiled. “On your left by the timing belt. But you shouldn’t be doing that sort of thing on your own. How about I come up there are fix it for you? No charge.”

“There’re a lot of things I shouldn’t be doing on my own” Grace responded with a small smile, laying her hand unconsciously on her stomach. “But that’s the way it is.”

The store owner nodded sympathetically. “Well then the plug’s on the house. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks” Grace said. “I appreciate that.”

The store owner watched her leave through the window with a sigh. An hour or so later the bell over the door rang again and this time he was greeted by three men with guns drawn on him. One of the men stepped forward, and when he spoke it was with a heavy Russian accent.

“Elizabeth Keen. Where is she?”

“I don’t know any Elizabeth Keen” the store owner stuttered.

The man held up a photograph in front of him and the store owner’s eyebrows raised in surprise.

“You’re looking for Grace?”

“Where is she?” the man repeated sharply.

The store owner paused for a moment and swallowed, before looking back up, his eyes calm with resolve. “I don’t think I’m going to be telling you that.”

The man gave him a humorless smile. “It doesn’t matter. We’ll find her soon enough.”

With that, he pulled the trigger and the store owner slumped dead onto the counter.
Reddington sat in an armchair, his fingers flexing agitatedly on the leather. He looked around himself, taking in the austere decoration, an old photograph of a young woman the only nod to the humanity of the house’s current occupant. The front door closed and he looked up through dark, heavy lids as Mr Kaplan came into view, clutching her signature handbag. She paused when she saw him, her angular frame stiff and resigned.

“Raymond. I’ve been expecting you.”

“I have nothing for you, Kate” Reddington answered heavily. “No lecture, no florid speeches regarding betrayal or deception or the complexity of the human psyche. I’m simply heartbroken.”

He produced a small revolver and rested it on the armchair, the skin around his eyes lined and moist.

“May I sit?” Kaplan asked crisply, and Reddington nodded wordlessly.

The alpha woman perched primly on the edge of the chair opposite him, her knees together and her hands folded neatly on her lap, the whiteness of her knuckles and a faintly acidic scent in the air the only clue to her apprehensive state of mind.

“Raymond—” she began, but her cut her off, his voice trembling a little.

“Is there hope? Is there something you can give me that will make this hurt bearable. A truth that I long for so dearly that I cannot fathom whether the evidence is there… or a fabricated rod to beat me with. You posed as the pathologist. What possible reason would you have to do that other than to conceal that which I so desperately long for.”

Kaplan shifted uncomfortably in her seat, and Reddington tightened his grip on the revolver, pulling back the hammer, his expression dark and laden with sadness.

“Suffice it to say that with no answer from you I will not rest. I will search the ends of the earth and I will find the truth. It’s who I am. So if, as I assume, I can no longer call you a friend… then as a respected foe… I’d like to hear it from you. Say it.”

Kaplan nodded tightly. “Elizabeth is alive.”

Reddington blinked, the moisture gathering beneath his eyes.

“How?”

“When an omega girl matching her description committed suicide it was an opportunity. I knew I had to act” Kaplan said, swallowing hard.

“The body. They recorded her DNA, her scent profile…” Reddington said, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Is that what matters?” Kaplan asked quietly. “Do you really need to know?”

Reddington tilted his head back and nodded briefly. “I do.”

“I collected samples from her. I used the technique the cabal used to frame her for that attorney’s murder. Though of course this wasn’t a case of planting evidence of her on a body. The body had to become her” Kaplan explained stiffly.

Reddington bowed his head a little, closing his eyes momentarily in pain.

“What do you want to know, Raymond?” the alpha woman growled eventually. “If I’m sorry? I am.
I’m sorry that it came to this. That your obsession with the girl cost her so dearly. I’m sorry that you
convinced yourself that you were in her life to protect her. When in reality you couldn’t bear to let
her go. You forced your way into her life. Forced yourself on her. You crushed her. I didn’t betray
you. I protected you. From yourself. And now I’m protecting her.”

“You’re not protecting her” Reddington said quietly.

“I’ll take the bullet you no doubt have planned for me before I tell you where she is” Kaplan
responded with soft ferocity.

Reddington’s lip twitched unhappily. “You don’t understand. This morning I learned that Alexander
Kirk has entered the country. You know who he is. What he wants. You know that he will not stop
until he has her.”

Kaplan’s face darkened with disbelief and dismay. “Kirk?”

“He arrived at JFK with a large delegation and is currently heading west. Now I know the truth. And
so does he. He knows where she is, Kate. I need an address.”

Kaplan sat in silence, horrified, and after a moment Reddington tucked his revolver back into his
waistband.

“I know you believed you were acting in her best interests. That you were trying to protect her. But
now, because of you, Elizabeth is in grave danger.”

Kaplan looked up at him then, her black eyes hollow and glistening. “Not just Elizabeth” she
whispered.

Reddington stilled, his lips parting in shock as understanding dawned.

When Reddington arrived at the cabin along with Kaplan and a small army of men, the scene that
met them was quiet and eerie. It didn’t take much time to establish that Elizabeth and her abductors
were long gone. The woods surrounding the cabin were quiet, cold and crisp, while the door, now
hanging off its hinges, led to a tableau of quiet destruction.

“Raymond-” Kaplan began but he silenced her with a dark look.

Removing his hat, he stepped inside slowly and surveyed the scene. There was a water broken glass
on the floor flecked with blood, and an upturned fruit bowl on the table. A chair lay broken in the
corner, one of the legs dangling free. He found more blood on the floor near the door and closed his
eyes with a pained frown. The scents in the place completed the scene; a desperate, pregnant omega
fighting for her life, for her child’s life. Men – alphas and betas -, blood, sweat, and crushed fruit. He
could picture everything. His sweet girl, pregnant, vulnerable, and fierce as a lioness. She had fought
so hard.

An attacker had grabbed her from behind, she’d reached the glass and broken it in his face. Surprised
and in pain, he’d thrown her into the table, where upon a second man had attempted to grab her.
She’d twisted free and broken a chair over his head, but by then the first man had recovered, that or
more men had entered to help subdue her. They’d wrestled her to the floor, where she’d hit her head.
She hadn’t struggled after that; he hoped beyond hope that was because she had decided to stop
fighting in order to protect the baby, and not that she was unconscious.
He knew how to read a crime scene like the back of his hand, and had seen much more violent ones, but this was somehow worse. It wasn’t the signs of struggle or even the blood, though that offended his senses and tore at his insides. It was the scene that had been there before it had been interrupted by Kirk’s men; a modest, lonely cabin, with few comforts and the generator burnt out. There was no sign that the occupant was expecting a child other than a packet of prenatal vitamins which, he noted, still lay on the table, and the unmistakable scent of a pregnant omega which pulled strangely in his groin and his heart. She had been here alone, cold and frightened, without him to protect her.

He stalked out of the cabin and walked up to Mr Kaplan who stood waiting apprehensively outside.

“Kate” he said, his voice little more than a growl. “What am I going to do with you Kate?”

She didn’t answer, and Reddington continued to stare down at her, his gaze like steel. “I am many things. A businessman. An alpha. A killer. Today I am first and foremost a father. The most dangerous thing of all. You will not rest until she is returned to me” he finished emphatically, before walking back towards the car.

When Liz came round she was lying in a hospital bed in a pleasant, homely room, sunlight streaming through the windows. The scent was fresh and warm, and she could smell grass and blossom through the open window. It would have been a comforting environment were it not for the soft restraints that bound her wrists to the bed, and the unfamiliar alpha man who sat in a nearby chair, observing her in silence with a cold smile.

“Why are you doing this? What is this place?” Liz asked, tugging at the restraints.

The man’s smile broadened and he cocked his head. “So many questions! All in good time” he said, his accent tinged with Russian inflection. “You must indulge me. I have waited for this moment for a very long time.”

Liz frowned and her eyes flew from him to the monitors beside the bed, which beeped steadily.

“The baby” she breathed urgently, her show of bravado breaking a little. “Is the baby ok? At least tell me that.”

The man leaned forward, the streaks of gray in his blond hair catching the light, his hand resting on his chin thoughtfully.

“Your child is fine” he told her gently. “Though it was foolish of you to try to resist my men. You risked harming the pregnancy” he said, his tone admonishing.

Liz felt a flare of anger and desperation build inside her. “Your men attacked and kidnapped me – as far as I can see you are the only one doing harm here!” she said, and began to yank vigorously at the restraints, her arms straining in their sockets.

The man rose quickly and placed his large hands on her shoulders using his considerable alpha strength to easily push her back down in the bed. “Easy Masha, or you’ll hurt yourself! So fiery” he added with a twitch of a smile. “Just like your mother.”

Liz froze then, staring up at him in confusion. “Who are you?”

He smiled down at her then, placing his cool hand on her cheek.
“My name is Alexander Kirk, though that wasn’t always so. Once, a long time ago, I was known as Constantin Rostov. Masha - I’m your father.”
Chapter 52

Liz stared in horror and confusion at the Russian alpha man leaning over her, her blood racing in her ears.

“My father” she whispered.

The man smiled and brushed his thumb across her cheek. “Masha… You’ve grown into such a beautiful woman. I knew you would.”

Liz pulled away then, her cheeks burning. “My name is Elizabeth. And you’re not my father. If you were, you wouldn’t do this.”

“I understand you’re upset” Kirk responded, stepping back with a sigh. “And I’m deeply sorry it has to be this way. I am your father, and I intend to prove it to you.”

“Tell me why you’re doing this” Liz said firmly.

Kirk walked to the sideboard and opened a sachet, pouring the powder inside into a glass of water and stirring it in. He returned to the bed and held it near her mouth.

“First things first. You need to drink this.”

Liz looked up at him suspiciously. “I don’t think so.”

“You think I’d drug you?” Kirk said, frowning as he set the glass down. “My own daughter. It’s prenatal vitamins. You haven’t been looking after yourself - it hurts me to see it.”

Liz looked away then, her teeth pulling at her lower lip. “I think you’re capable of just about anything.”

Kirk bowed his head and walked to the window, looking out over the garden. “Perhaps in time you will remember this place. We called it the Summer Palace. We used to come here when you were very small. You loved it so much, and you were my little princess. So it became the Palace. A haven for our family. You will come to see that, Masha. We loved you.”

“You left me” Liz murmured. It was little more than a whisper, but Kirk spun round, his eyes flashing and scent deepening with anger.

“You were everything to your mother and me” he growled. “You were our pride and joy. The pride of Russia. You would have become legend. But Reddington took you away from us when you were just a little girl” he spat.

“Reddington” Liz whispered.

“He and your mother had an affair. At first I thought he was your father but I know he isn’t. He’s just an evil man who wanted my beautiful little girl for himself. To satisfy his own base desires. His need to possess the most perfect omega. He was in love with your mother. Then he became obsessed with you. Your beauty. Your purity.”

Liz screwed her eyes shut as he spoke, her stomach roiling horribly.

“How do I know you’re telling the truth?” she whispered.
“You know it in your heart, Masha. That man is the Devil. He stole you from me. I lost you. Our country lost you. I believed you were dead until I saw you on the news. I learned then that you were still in his clutches. That he’d turned you into a criminal.”

Liz frowned. “What do you mean, your country lost me? I saw pictures – pictures of me and other omegas in some kind of clinic. There were doctors… Does this have something to do with that?”

Kirk looked at her for a moment before nodding. “Yes.”

Liz inhaled sharply. “The Russian government… They were experimenting on us. On Omegas. And you let them do it!”

Kirk let out a puzzled chuckle. “Of course – I did not merely allow it, Masha, I’m proud to say I helped to deliver the programme.”

Liz’s face crumpled in horror but Kirk continued undeterred. “Oh Masha, my little kotik. You were extraordinary. An omega born of two alphas, the rarest of jewels. Beautiful, intelligent, strong. You had so much potential. You would have been an even greater asset than your mother.”

“They tortured us” Liz whispered, her eyes stinging with tears.

“Nonsense” Kirk scoffed, shaking his head. “You had fun at the facility. The doctors loved you – you were their favourite. Such a good little girl. So pretty.”

Liz closed her eyes momentarily, swallowing the bile rising in her throat. “And you want to finish what they started” she stated bitterly. “Building super alphas and omegas. Teaching them to seduce American agents. Maybe you didn’t get the memo – the cold war’s over.”

“It’s different, granted, but not over.” Kirk replied. “The stakes have changed, the technology… But if you think that American powers aren’t still just as interested as we are… think again.”

Liz closed her eyes momentarily, her thoughts going to the cabal and their alpha agenda. Her nausea returned and she swallowed hard. “I’m not going to help either side. I won’t be a part of this.”

Kirk bristled. “You sound like him. Like Reddington. But Masha I’m not asking you to help your country. I’m asking you to help me, your father. I’m sick, kotik. I need your help.”

Agents Cooper, Navabi, Ressler and Mojtabai arrived at the black site to find Reddington perched behind Aram’s console, with Dembe standing in the corner, his arms folded.

“So it’s really true” Aram said quietly. “Liz is alive.”

“It appears so” Reddington said, his expression unreadable.

Cooper shook his head. “I thought that by the time I arrived here I’d know how I felt. How to react. But I don’t. I don’t think I’ve never been more happy… Or more angry.”

“You’re right to be angry” Samar said in a hard tone. “She deceived all of us. After everything we’ve done for her.”

“Yeah well maybe she felt she didn’t have a choice” Ressler said pointedly, looking at Reddington. “Maybe she felt it was the only thing she could do to be safe. To get away from him.”
Reddington’s lip twitched and he stared coldly at Ressler. “Whatever Agent Keen’s motivations were, I can assure you that she is certainly not safe. Alexander Kirk entered the country yesterday, bringing with him a large delegation with a single goal. To abduct her. He has succeeded in that effort, and I will require your cooperation in bringing her back safely.”

“Who is Alexander Kirk?” Cooper inquired sharply.

Reddington nodded crisply. “Alexander Kirk is the alias of an oligarch who made his fortune pioneering research into alpha and omega genetics for the Russians during the cold war. He went into hiding after falling out of favour with the Kremlin. Now he’s back.”

“What did he do to fall out with the Kremlin? Get in a pissing match with the wrong alpha?” Ressler asked incredulously.

“He lost a key asset they had been relying on for the delivery of a clandestine research programme” Reddington said quietly. "He failed to recover her and has been living under an assumed name ever since.”

“You said ‘her’” Cooper said. “This asset was a woman?”

Reddington paused, looking at him in silence for a moment. “A little girl” he said slowly. “A girl he believes to be his daughter. An omega.”

“Liz” Aram breathed. “You’re talking about Liz!”

Reddington gave a curt nod. “Whatever Kirk believes, Elizabeth is not his daughter. It’s imperative that she be recovered before he has a chance to resume his tests on her.”

Cooper frowned. “You can’t think that Kirk wants to continue the same work thirty years after the Russians disavowed him?”

“Kirk isn’t doing this for the Russians, at least not now” Reddington said shaking his head. “Before he became Alexander Kirk, he was Constantin Rostov, a soviet patriot from an important family with the dubious distinction of carrying a genetic death sentence on the male line, a defect that leads to aplastic anaemia. A condition that will eventually kill him. Kirk has already lived longer than he could have expected to. But due to the publicity surrounding Elizabeth when she was a fugitive, Kirk now knows that she’s alive and he will do everything in his power to use her to develop a cure for himself.”

“Ah, I’m sorry” Aram cut in, “but maybe in the eighties they thought that blood or bone marrow could cure chronic aplastic anaemia but surely he must know by now that the chances are slim. There’s no definitive cure - there’s some controversial research suggesting that foetal stem cells could change the course of the disease, but that doesn’t apply here… Right?”

Reddington paused, his jaw tightening. “Elizabeth is pregnant.”

The shock in the room that followed Reddington’s statement was palpable.

“Pregnant” Cooper spluttered. “And you are the baby’s father?” he asked indignantly.

Ignoring the question, Reddington looked away from him and surveyed the assembled task force, his expression dark.

“Alexander Kirk is one of the most dangerous men on the planet, more so now that he is dying – as you all know, encounters with wounded alphas usually prove to be the most fatal. The way to find
him is through his money. I have a list of his known aliases – Aram, if you’d be so good as to run them against significant purchases of medical supplies in the last fortnight” he instructed.

Aram nodded with his head bowed, not looking up at Reddington as he moved to the console to begin searching.

“You bastard” Ressler breathed.

“Ressler” Samar chastised.

“No!” Ressler continued, his temper flaring. “No. He did this to her, and now he wants to use us to hunt her down like rival pack dogs!”

Reddington pursed his lips, his expression stony. “Donald, make no mistake. Kirk will think nothing of harming the unborn child he believes to be his grandchild if it will save his own life. If he discovers that Elizabeth is not his daughter, he will not hesitate to kill her. Whatever you think of me, you will do this to save your friend and her child.”

Samar raised an eyebrow. “A friend who allowed us to believe she was dead.”

“Because of him” Ressler snapped.

Reddington tutted and turned to Cooper. “Harold, perhaps you’d like to take this opportunity to reign in your prize Rottweiler – his time at the helm during your regrettable absence seems to have made him insufferably smug.”

Ressler’s hackles flared and he was about to retaliate when Cooper raised his hand sharply.

“Of course we will do everything in our power to help Agent Keen. But let me be clear. We will do it for her, not for you. I entrusted Agent Keen to you once. And you have abused that trust. Since you entered her life she has been in near constant danger. Give us your intel and we will protect her. But Agent Ressler is right. If you think that I am sending a team to retrieve her only to deliver her and her baby to you… think again” Cooper finished, his shoulders square and scent resolute.

Reddington paused and stared at him in silence, before eventually nodding. “Dembe” he said quietly, and his bodyguard wordlessly handed a thumb drive to Aram, before following his employer across the floor to the yellow elevator.

“What are you going to do?” he asked Reddington sombly when they were in the elevator.

Reddington shook his head. “The taskforce can’t protect her from Kirk” he said quietly as they reached the ground floor. “We need to get to her first.”

“Raymond, are you certain that is the right thing to do?” Dembe asked softly.

The elevator doors opened and Reddington straightened his fedora, stepping out into the bright light of day.

“I am.”

Liz tugged fruitlessly at her restraints as an alpha woman doctor held a needle tightly in her arm, filling a vial of blood. When the doctor had finished, Kirk came to stand beside the bed, looking down at Liz regretfully.
“I’m sorry, Masha. But I don’t have much time. We must begin testing immediately.”


Kirk sighed, turned to the window, looking out across the garden again. “I have a rare blood disorder. It has affected generations of my family, though it’s passed on through the male line. Thank God you will be spared this accursed disease. But I have not been so fortunate. My years successfully managing the disease have come to an end. I’m dying, Masha.”

Liz pursed her lips. “I’m sorry you’re sick. But I can’t do anything.”

“On the contrary” Kirk said slowly, turning back to her. “You can do everything. My lost little girl is the only one who can save me. Only you can cure me.”


“Stem cells” Kirk answered quietly.

“Stem cells” Liz repeated, her eyes widening. “You mean from-”

“From the foetus” the doctor said, cutting in coldly.

Liz looked round sharply at the woman. “What? No. No!”

“I will do everything I can to minimise the risk to your baby” the doctor told her dispassionately.

“Forget it” Liz retorted firmly, turning back to Kirk. “I will not consent to anything that could hurt my baby. You can’t expect me to do that!”

Kirk nodded regretfully. “It is my great wish that you agree to help me voluntarily. But let me be clear, Masha – you will do this for me whether you consent or not. It’s the only way we can have more time together. Time Reddington stole from us” he finished bitterly.

Liz’s lip trembled in horror as she listened to him. “Please” she whispered. “Please don’t harm my baby.”

“Your baby” Kirk repeated scornfully. “And who is the father, hmmm? A proud Russian alpha chosen for you by me, as it should have been? Or an evil, American criminal who kidnapped you as a little girl and corrupted you? What has he done to you?”

Liz swallowed hard, glaring at him. “This is my child” she ground out. “And I will fight with my last breath to stop you.”

Kirk shook his head with a sigh. “Oh Masha. So wilful. You were much better behaved as a child.”

Liz glared up at him as he approached her, cupping her chin in his hand. “You will help me, Masha. And then we’ll have all the time in the world to get to know one another. Above all, I promise you this: Raymond Reddington will never touch you again.”
Aram worked quickly and quietly with the information Reddington had supplied, while the task force stood in pensive silence around him. A box pinged on the screen and he paused for a moment observing his colleagues.

“Ah, I know this might not be a popular opinion… But whatever Mr Reddington has done, he genuinely cares for Liz, and he has resources. He can help.”

“Help” Ressler scoffed. “You mean by putting an FBI agent in heat and raping her-”

“Technically it wasn’t rape” Samar cut in coolly.

“Forced her, whatever” Ressler snapped.

“Reddington’s helped us by providing the information we need to find her” Cooper said evenly. “Aram, tell us what you have.”

Aram nodded soberly. “I’ve done what he asked – run Alexander Kirk’s known aliases through the system with significant purchases of medical equipment.”

“And?” Ressler asked testily.

“And nothing” Aram responded. “If Kirk has been buying supplies he’s done it totally off the grid. However, I also ran broader financials for the same list and something stood out. A scientific research and development company called Rubica Innovation recently purchased a property with ten acres of land in Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. That company is owned by Dimitry Kozlov - a known alias of Alexander Kirk.”

Cooper frowned. “Nova Scotia? What kind of property?”

Aram smiled. “According to sale records it’s a large cottage on a private plot of land in an area of unparalleled natural beauty. In the sale paperwork the property is referred to as ‘the cottage known as the Summer Palace’. That’s where he’s holding her. It has to be.”

“It’s a holiday home. The sick bastard wants to play happy families while he runs his tests on her to save his own skin” Ressler said scathingly.

“Excellent work, Aram” Cooper said. “Ressler, Navabi – take a tactical team and breach. Bring our agent home safely. I hardly need to tell you that we need to get to her before Reddington.”

The agents went to move but stopped as Aram hissed suddenly.

“Ah… it seems that might be difficult” he said quietly.

“Why?” asked Ressler.

“Because my security sweep has just alerted me to the fact that Reddington’s flash drive has installed sophisticated tracking software on my console. I mean, not just sophisticated, like really sophisticated. It’s state of the art, really.”

“What the hell” Ressler breathed.

“What does that mean?” Cooper asked impatiently.
Aram swallowed. “It means that as soon as I finished running this programme, Reddington knew exactly where she was.”

“Liz” Ressler said darkly. “He’s going to take her!”

It was dark when Liz woke up, tugging blindly at the restraints that bound her to the bed before she remembered where she was. She was wearing a long white nightdress, a luxurious, slightly old fashioned garment that her captors had procured for her. The room was quiet and still, but as she came to her senses her nose told her unequivocally that she was not alone. She watched sharply as an alpha man emerged from the shadows, dressed from head to toe in black combat gear.

“Miss Keen” he said in a low voice. “We’ve come to get you out of here. I’ll need you to stay calm and quiet. Can you do that?”

Liz nodded warily and the man approached her, making a quick, professional assessment of the bed and the restraints that held her in a way that left Liz in no doubt of his special ops training.

“When I remove the restraints we’ll need to move fast” he said quietly. “Stick with me, do everything I say.”

Liz looked round as another man entered stealthily, also dressed in black combat gear. As the door opened, Liz tensed as she heard the faint sound of gunfire in the distance. The second man signalled to his partner. “We gotta go.”

Her rescuer nodded and quickly reached over her, undoing her restraints. He smelled masculine, and she detected the adrenaline under his clam exterior; the scent coiled in her joints and it reminded her how much she missed the feeling of being in the field.

“I’m a trained FBI field agent” she whispered determinedly as she stood up, rubbing her wrists. “Give me a gun. I can help.”

“He ain’t gonna like that” the second man murmured, and Liz froze, a cold feeling creeping over her.

“Who isn’t going to like it?” she whispered faintly. “Who sent you? It was Kate, it must have been Kate…”

The men exchanged glances and Liz stepped back, her eyes widening with fear. “No” she moaned quietly, shaking her head. “No, not Reddington. He doesn’t know I’m alive. He doesn’t know…” she said weakly.

“He knows” the first man said quietly. “We need to go. Now.”

Liz drew back, trembling, her muscles coiled to attack. “No. No… I’m better off here than I am with him” she said emphatically, swallowing.

She took a deep breath then as if to scream, but the man stepped forward quick as lightening and closed a gloved hand over her mouth. He pulled her to him in a firm grip, holding her tightly to stop her struggling. She tried to twist and kick, but he countered every move easily, eventually gripping the back of her neck purposefully. Liz trembled involuntarily, and the man began to speak to her in a low, calm voice.

“If you know Mr Reddington then you know that there’s only one way this ends. You are coming
with us tonight” he said softly. “The only question is whether you come willingly or whether I have
to force you. If you choose the hard way, you’ll still be coming with me, but it will cost us precious
time and I’ll likely loose men. Men with families. We all make our peace with the fact that we might
not come back from a job. But I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tip our odds.”

Liz went limp as the implications of his words hit her. His soft and terrible certainty that she would
be returned to Reddington, whatever the cost. That however far she ran, it would never be enough.
Feeling her go still, the man slowly removed his hand from her mouth. When she spoke it was little
more than a soft sob. “It’s so unfair.”

“I know” he breathed sympathetically. “We have to go.”

He moved towards the door with her behind him, his hand never letting go of her wrist. When they
entered the corridor the sound of gunfire and shouting intensified, and Liz could hear the rush of her
heart pounding in her ears as they moved through the building. They rounded a corner and she
yelped when one of Kirk’s guards stepped out in front of them. She’d barely had time to process
what was happening before the man who had come for her had pushed her back behind him and shot
the guard at point blank range. The scent of blood and adrenaline in the air was heady and
instinctively Liz moved her hand protectively to her stomach.

It was then that she scented it, something familiar and far more terrifying than the metallic reek of
destruction. It was Reddington. Her rescuer had pulled her to the top of a long darkened corridor and
it was there that she saw him, his unmistakeable silhouette visible at the other end. He was facing
away from her as he fired steadily at some unknown assailant, but, as if he could sense her too, he
paused and turned, staring at her from down the corridor.

The sounds and scents that had seemed so intrusive were now muffled and faded, the slow parting of
his lips and the depth of his gaze now the only thing she was truly aware of. Suddenly she saw Kirk
appear behind him and for reasons unclear even to her, she cried out “No!”.

She heard but didn’t see the gun shot that pierced the air, as in that moment her rescuer threw his
arms around her, picked her up and ran in the opposite direction. She kicked and struggled
instinctively but he held her firmly, his men running behind and occasionally returning fire as they
reached the garden.

When the cold night wind hit her she saw a black helicopter on the lawn, its propellers beating the air
and two more men gesturing urgently to them. They reached the vehicle in what seemed like a
fraction of a second, and she was lifted by strong arms into the back where another man secured her
safety belt. Her rescuer hauled himself in behind her and slammed the door as the helicopter took off.

Liz twisted frantically in her seat trying to get a view of the cottage below.

“What about Reddington?”

“He can take care of himself” her rescuer said quietly. “We got you. That’s what matters.”

happened!”

She was given no answer, and eventually her adrenaline began to ebb away, replaced by profound
tiredness. She leaned her head back against the cool leather seat, and before long, she was asleep.
She woke as the helicopter touched down and turned her nose up to get her bearings. The air was warm and sweet and she noticed that she wasn’t cold, despite the fact that she wore only the nightgown she had been given by her captors.

“Where are we?” she asked warily as the man who had brought her there helped her down from the helicopter.

“Paradise” he answered enigmatically, gesturing around him.

They had landed in the grounds of a large, white stone villa, the gardens lush, colorful and dripping with fragrant bougainvillea and hibiscus. The shadows of the trees yawned across the lawn, stretching in the morning light. Liz looked around at the exotic foliage and the knot in her stomach tightened. Wherever she was, it wasn’t the states. She allowed herself to be escorted into the house, which was beautiful, homely and eerily quiet.

“Your rooms are at the top of this staircase” the man told her. “Someone will be in later to look after you.”

Liz looked up the white marble staircase before turning back to the man. “That’s it?” she said incredulously. “What if I want to leave?”

The man sighed uncomfortably. “This place might look quiet. But you should know that there are armed guards posted at every exit and a small army patrolling the grounds. They’re there make sure no one gets in… but I reckon they’ll make sure no one gets out too. Understand?”

Liz swallowed silently and nodded, watching numbly as he walked away, leaving her alone in the beautiful house. She’d known as soon as Reddington had come for her. She was as much a prisoner here as she had been with Kirk, and he’d been right about one thing; Reddington needed to possess her, to own her in every way. And now he did. It had come to this. It was always going to come to this.

When she opened the door to her room she found it opened onto a light, airy suite with a stunning view of the villa gardens. From the window she could see a coastline with a turquoise sea, and not another house or building of any kind in sight. As she walked through the suite her senses calmed despite the situation in which she found herself, and before long she realised the reason; the scent in the rooms was fresh and unusually neutral, as though very few people had ever set foot in there, and certainly no alphas in recent months. He had not been in there or touched the place where she would sleep.

She came to a stop in front of a carved, beechwood bed made up with luxurious cotton bed linen, and reached out to touch the soft sheets. As she did so a painful memory came to her of struggling on her front on another bed, ruching the fabric beneath her as the predatory alpha held her down and penetrated her. She closed her eyes, but that only made the memory more vivid: the feeling of him inside her, his gentle, relentless thrusting, and the agony of his knot as his alpha penis locked her to him. She remembered the sorrowful sound he’d made as he released inside her, completing the act, saving her life, and, though they did not know it, creating one.

She placed a hand on her stomach. She wasn’t showing yet, but how long would it be before he realised? Was there a chance he wouldn’t know? Before she became pregnant she had thought that nothing could make Reddington more dangerous than he was, but she’d been wrong. This was the one thing that would make it impossible for her to escape him if he ever discovered it. She knew then with absolute certainty that she needed to get out of there as soon as she could.
She took a quick shower and changed her clothes, selecting a loose sundress from the wardrobe on the basis that it would hide any hint of baby-weight gain under the gentle folds of pale blue material. She wandered into the garden, ostensibly to admire the colorful flower beds and cascading trees, but in so doing got a glimpse of the men guarding the property. Her rescuer had not been wrong; there were dozens of guards placed at strategic points around the property, and more patrolling the grounds.

They nodded courteously as she passed, though none returned her smile, remaining cool and polite. She continued to wander, trailing her fingers over the tips of flowers and bushes, until she reached a patch of orange trees where a lone sentry stood, staring ahead, a large assault rifle slung across his shoulder. He was young – perhaps a couple of years younger than her – and a beta, but tall and handsome, his large, dark eyes widening slightly as she approached.

Liz smiled at him, and noted with relief that the tanned skin of his neck reddened slightly. Perhaps there was hope.

“Hey” she said amiably. “That’s a heavy duty weapon just to keep orange thieves away.”

He seemed a little flustered when she spoke, but recovered quickly. “I’m not here to guard oranges, Ma’am” he replied, his accent thick and telling Liz without a doubt that she was in a Spanish speaking country.

She cocked her head. “Then what are you here to guard?”

It was his turn to smile this time, his teeth brilliant white against his golden skin. “You, Ma’am.”

“You don’t have to call me Ma’am – Liz is fine.”

The beta guard nodded politely. “In that case, I am here to guard you, Liz.”

“Still seems like overkill if you ask me” she continued, looking around. “All this for just one person.”

“One very special person” he said earnestly.

Liz sighed. “There’s nothing special about me” she murmured sardonically.

“I am very sure that is not true” he said shaking his head. “For a man such as Mr Reddington to care so very deeply for you – I think you must very special indeed.”

Liz looked away at the mention of his name, drawing her arms about herself, though it was a beautifully warm day. “What did he tell you all?” she asked tightly. “About me.”

The guard began to look uncomfortable, as though uncertain whether he was permitted to talk to her. “Nada” he said cautiously. “But I do know… such regulations, contingency plans to memorise, months of additional training… these tell me who you are to him.”

“His prisoner” Liz said bitterly.

The guard frowned. “His princess” he said firmly. “For you, we would gladly lay down our lives.”

He was so earnest, so full of naive chivalry that Liz would have laughed were it not for the bleakness of the situation. Instead she tried to focus on her mission to escape.

“You didn’t tell me your name” she said lightly.
The guard smiled warmly, as though he had been dying to tell her. “Soy Sebastian.”

“Encantada” she replied warmly.

His smile broadened and he stared at her, dumbstruck for a few moments. “Sorry” he spluttered eventually. “Sorry – I have not seen many omegas.”

“That’s ok” Liz said gently, but he pulled back suddenly, taking up his original, stiff position, his eyes wary. His gaze went past her and Liz followed it, turning around slowly until she saw what she knew she was going to see.

Reddington stood on the balcony, looking out over the garden like a king wolf surveying his domain, his strong hands gripping the white stone. He wore a cream linen suit and sunglasses, and although she could not see his face, Liz was sure that he was staring right at her.

“He wants you to go to him” Sebastian urged quietly.

Liz swallowed. “I know. That’s what he’s always wanted. I’m afraid” she breathed.

Sebastian nodded. “I understand. He is a very powerful man. But he will not hurt you.”

“He already has.”

Liz give the guard a resigned smile and began the walk back to the villa, to face the alpha who had forced her to submit to him - the man who now held her life in his hands.
When Liz reached the balcony, Reddington had gone. The weight in her stomach eased, and for a crazy moment she thought perhaps he hadn’t been there at all, that she had imagined it. But she hadn’t imagined it; she could detect his scent clearly from where he had been standing, and now she followed it back into the house like a trail of breadcrumbs leading to the danger at the end of the path.

Eventually she heard movement from behind a closed door off the cavernous reception room that opened out onto the lower garden, and, taking a deep breath, she opened the door. Immediately her nose picked up a faint hint of blood and antiseptic, and when she saw him sitting on a couch, she noted that his jacket was gone and his shirt unbuttoned. She stood quietly in the doorway, her arms crossed, watching as he pressed a surgical patch down over his bicep. He looked up as she appeared, and slid his shirt back over his shoulder, grimacing slightly.

“You were shot” she observed warily.

He looked at her in silence for a moment before answering quietly. “It’s a flesh wound.”

“And Kirk?” she asked hollowly. “Did you kill him?”

Reddington’s mouth twitched and he began buttoning up his shirt. “Kirk escaped.”

Liz let out a breath she didn’t know she was holding. “I’m glad” she whispered. “I’m glad your mission failed.”

He looked up at her again, his expression pained. “It didn’t fail” he said softly, his words halting. “You are here. Safe.”

“Safe” she echoed hollowly. “I can’t be here with you. I need to go.”

“Kirk is out there” Reddington answered quietly, “and more determined than ever to take what he needs from you.”

Liz shook her head. “Where are we?” she asked firmly. “Where have you taken me?”

“He answered with a tight smile. “The Pearl of the Antilles.”

“A country with no extradition to the US” Liz surmised scathingly. “I’m leaving” she said firmly, turning to go.

“You’re pregnant.”

He spoke quietly, but his words were devastating, sending a sliver of ice snaking around her belly which seemed to shatter as it reached her core. She turned back to him, trying desperately to prevent her lip from trembling with fear.

“How did you…” she faltered.

He looked at her softly, tilting his head. “I can scent it” he said with a small smile of wonder. “It’s not uncommon for alphas to be able to detect a pregnant omega. It calls to them. Demands that the omega and her child be defended beyond all other consideration. An evolutionary advantage designed to ensure that the most vulnerable omegas are protected. And of course, once Mr Kaplan
realised the danger you were in she did what she needed to do.”

“She betrayed me” Liz whispered, a lump of tears aching in her throat.

“To save your life” Reddington answered stiffly. “Yes.”

Liz held back a sob of frustration and indignation, her stomach twisting at the parallel he was drawing.

“If you expect me to forgive you…” she whispered harshly.

A cloud passed over Reddington’s face and he shook his head sharply. “There are some things that should not be forgiven. That cannot be forgiven. They simply are. Elizabeth…I understand why you ran from me. I know you believe that you and your child are in danger because of what I am. Who I am. But you need to understand that you are also in danger because of who you are.”

“Alexander Kirk’s daughter?” she challenged, scanning his face. She saw his jaw tighten, but when he spoke it was with the same terrible softness.

“I am doing everything in my power to protect you from him. You and the baby.”

“You need to let me protect us” she whispered. “You need to let me go. Tell me I haven’t gone from one beautiful prison to another!” she choked, her chest tightening.

Reddington continued to gaze at her but said nothing.

“That’s what I thought” she said bitterly.

Reddington sighed, his mouth twitching. “The suite of rooms upstairs is yours alone” he said quietly. “Neither I nor my men will enter unless absolutely necessary.”

He sounded so pragmatic, so sure. Liz shook her head, her breathing becoming shallower. “If Kirk is out there then I need to fight not hide. I need the taskforce-”

“The taskforce is aware of the situation” he informed her neutrally.

The feeling of foreboding that had gripped her now settled like a stone in her gut. She’d lied to them, devastated them, and they knew the truth. What must they think of her? She had to explain it to them.

“You can’t keep me here” she breathed vehemently, staving off tears of panic.

He rose from his seat then, and she could detect a surge of emotion under his calm exterior that frightened her in its intensity.

“I can. And I intend to” he responded with soft ferocity. “You have never been more vulnerable than you are at this moment in time. You will not put yourself or the baby at risk by pursuing Kirk-”

He broke off abruptly as she slapped him, her palm colliding with his cheek at furious speed, her eyes glittering.

“How dare you” she trembled.

His eyes flashed for a moment, the yellow flecks sparkling with shock and an instinctive alpha aggression, but it was gone again in an instant, replaced by resignation. He bowed his head for a moment before walking past her and out of the room.
Several days had passed and she had not seen him, or any other living soul other than the guards who stoically patrolled the house and grounds. In her most desperate moments she wished fervently that he would come back, so that she could reason with him, appeal to him. But she knew that even if he did come to her, it would never work. His will was lethal and absolute, something she’d learned at great cost.

She swallowed rising nausea that was a mixture of morning sickness and something else, and went to the kitchen to grab a sprite, staring off into the precipice of her mind. She had to get out of there, to alert the task force. He’d said they were aware of the situation – what would he tell them about her whereabouts? Would they come looking for her or would they let him keep her? Would they think she was better off? Or perhaps after she’d deceived them, they simply didn’t care. She finished her drink and went outside to find the guard, Sebastian.

When she eventually located him he was near the enormous reinforced front gates of the house, his assault rifle slung over his shoulder and his feet planted firmly apart.

“Hola” she said, smiling prettily.

He looked nervous as she addressed him and did not return her smile. “Good morning ma’am.”

Liz’s face fell. “So we’re back to ma’am? I thought we could be friends.”

He looked slightly panicked at that, his dark eyes glancing around the grounds and then back to her. “Forgive me señorita. Liz” He said in a low voice. “I must not speak too much with you. Mr Reddington is a very powerful man. It would not be good to anger him.”

“I won’t tell if you won’t” Liz said with a soft smile and she saw his eyes light up nervously.

“This is a lonely place” he said gently. “For you I think it is more so.”

“You can say that again. Can I ask you – why are you here? How did you come to work for Reddington?” Liz asked curiously.

Sebastian gave her a sad smile. “My father worked for Mr Reddington for many years. When he died I thought we would have nothing. But Mr Reddington looked after us very well– my mother and me. He is a very generous man.”

Liz pursed her lips. “But he asked you to work for him in return – is that it?”

Sebastian frowned. “It wasn’t as you suggest. When a job opened I was honored that he asked me. I wanted to work for him.”

“And now?” Liz pressed gently.

He shrugged. “It is a good job.”

“But you don’t wonder if what you’re doing for him is wrong?”

“My only purpose here is to protect you – how can that be wrong?” Sebastian smiled.

Liz looked around to check they were alone, before leaning in slightly, her voice low. “What if I told you that he is a bad person? That he’s done terrible things… That he has hurt me more than you can imagine.”
Sebastian looked at her solemnly. “From the moment I saw you I knew you carried a great sadness. If you want to tell me… I will listen.”

Liz took a deep breath, and began to speak.

She had to wait another week before Sebastian was posted to guard the orchard again, and when he was, she was ready. She stepped out for a walk like any other day, nodding politely to the guards that she passed on her way until she neared the fragrant orange trees where she had first met Sebastian. It was a beautiful spot, but also happened to be the only area in the grounds where there was an opportunity to scale the property wall.

She hung back, pausing to examine a flowerbed until she was sure Sebastian had seen her approach. Sure enough, he stretched casually and walked off in the opposite direction as they had agreed. When Liz was satisfied that she had not been followed, she slipped through the trees until she reached the high iron wall at the back. She looked up at the tree in front of her, appraising the tall branch that grazed the wall one more time, and felt a wave of nervousness come over her.

For Christ’s sake Liz she thought to herself. You’re a trained FBI field agent and all you have to do here is climb a tree.

Swallowing, she checked behind her one more time, before gripping the branch above her and placing her foot squarely on the trunk. Grimacing, she hauled herself up onto the first branch and nestled herself near the trunk so that the leaves would hide her. It was more effort than she had imagined it would be, and, although she was still very slight, she wondered if she had put on more weight with the pregnancy than she thought. Catching her breath, she moved up again, wincing at the sound of the leaves rustling; while she knew that patch of the garden was currently unguarded, the sound was deafening to her and she felt sure that someone would be alerted.

But there was still nothing, and, buoyed by her progress, she reached for the next branch, the one that would take her to the wall. Up close it was a bigger gap than she had calculated during her reconnaissance visits, and her heart began to race. You’re taking too much time, Liz she thought. Stop thinking and just go! She reached up as far as she could to try to reach the branch, but in that moment her insides turned to stone as she heard a voice below.

“Ma’am, you need to come down now.”

She immediately recognised him as the man who had taken her from Kirk and brought her to Cuba, his voice just as sure and commanding as it had been then. Adrenaline coursing through her, she leapt up, her omega senses guiding her like a cat. She almost made it, would have made it, were it not for the twig that snapped under her foot as she landed. She felt her stomach drop as her foothold vanished and she began to fall, scrabbling desperately for purchase on the branches.

She heard a shout below her – maybe a curse – and a moment later she hit the ground hard, a sharp pain shooting through her ankle. The guard was there a second later, leaning over her with a grim expression on his face. Adrenaline still pumping she tried to roll away from him, but he placed the flat of his arm squarely over her chest, holding her still.

“Don’t even think about it” he grunted as she let out a sob of frustration. “You need to stay still while I assess you.”

He began to perfunctorily press her joints, flexing her wrist and knee on the side she landed.
“I’m fine” Liz breathed, batting his hand away, her face red with humiliation and panic.

“Yeah?” the guard said sarcastically. “Because that ankle looks pretty swollen to me. Not to mention whatever you’ve got going on up here” he continued, tapping the side of his head. “You gotta have something wrong in the head to think that this is a good idea.”

“Maybe I’ve got nothing to lose” Liz shot back.

“Now that’s not quite true, is it?” the guard said meaningfully, and she looked away.

He flexed her ankle and she hissed in pain. “It’s not broken but you’ve twisted it pretty well” he sighed. “Let’s get you inside” he said putting his hand out to help her stand.

She got to her feet, and he moved to help her walk, but she stopped him, gripping his hand. “You could let me go” she said quietly, looking up at him. “No-one knows you were here.”

The guard shook his head. “I could. But I’m not going to. A pregnant omega with a twisted ankle? You wouldn’t last five minutes out there. No, I’m going to take you back to the house, nice and easy, and have the doc check you out. And after that I’m going to call the big guy and let him know what’s happened.”

Liz stiffened. “Please don’t do that” she said, swallowing. “Don’t tell him. Please.”

“No other choice” the guard said with a sigh. “It’s bad enough that you got injured on my watch. I’m not gonna make it worse by going behind his back. He’s like the other big man in that respect – confess and you have a shot. Lie to him…”

The guard shuddered before putting his arm firmly around Liz’s back and helping her back to the house in silence.

She sat numbly on a chaise with her ankle elevated, while guards stood at the entrance to the room and around the edge of the house. By now everyone knew what had happened and she didn’t know whether she was more afraid or humiliated. Her omega ears could hear the man who had caught her on the phone in another part of the house; she couldn’t make out what he was saying but his tone was tense, and she knew he was talking to Reddington. Her mouth was dry and she licked her lips.

“Thirsty, eh? Perhaps one of you gentlemen would be so kind as to fetch this beautiful young lady a glass of water.”

Liz looked up and saw a large, middle-aged alpha carrying a large black doctor’s bag in his hand. He had slick black hair flecked with gray, and his skin carried the dark tan of a native Cuban.

“I am Dr Barragan” he said smiling as he approached her. “Mr Reddington’s personal physician in Cuba. But today, I am all yours” he said with a flourish.

“I’m fine” Liz said tightly. “They shouldn’t have called you.”

The doctor shrugged and pulled up a chair. “You could look at it that way” he said genially as he opened his bag. “But some others might think that if an omega takes a bad fall she could benefit from medical attention. They might especially think that if she has an obvious injury to her ankle. And let us not forget!” he continued dramatically. “If she is pregnant… Perhaps then they would especially think it’s a good idea, no?”
Liz pursed her lips and the doctor gestured for her to hold out her arm. “Just a quick blood pressure…” he said, pumping up the machine. “…And that’s fine. A little high but we must make some allowances for all the playing in trees” he chuckled, amused at his own joke.

“I wasn’t playing” Liz said quietly.

She thought she saw a flicker of concern pass the doctor’s features but she couldn’t be sure. He reached down into his bag and removed a small case. “This is a marvellous machine. Do you know what it is?”

“A portable ultrasound” Liz said without enthusiasm.

“Correct! Now if you could just scootch down a little, lie down, that’s right. Now pop this button on your pants right here and pull up your top just a little bit…”

Liz hesitated and the doctor smiled at her kindly. “I assure you I don’t bite - you are perfectly safe. But if you like we can wait for Raymond to get here – that will make you feel better, yes? Have your alpha hold your hand.”

“No!” Liz blurted. “No. It’s fine” she said, exposing her lower belly as requested.

“This will be a little cold” the doctor murmured as he squeezed the gel onto her. “And… there! A good strong heartbeat. Maravilloso.”

“Are we done?” Liz asked flatly.

“So impatient! There’s still the matter of that ankle” he said, handing her a tissue and moving to place his hands gently on her foot. Liz winced as he flexed it up and down and side to side, hissing softly.

“Hmmm” the doctor said nodding his head. “It’s not broken. This is good. But you will need to ice it, and rest it well for the next few days” he told her firmly. “And no more climbing trees, eh?”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Liz’s head whipped round and she saw Reddington standing in the doorway to the room, his expression stony. A feeling of cold crept over her as she took in his stern look, his dark suit, the scent of his anger. She was overwhelmed with a sense of vulnerability, made worse by her position on the sofa which left her feeling small and exposed.

“Oh, Raymond!” the doctor said jubilantly as he approached him, ostensibly unaware of the icy atmosphere. “I am pleased to report that your beautiful omega is in perfect health apart from a little swollen ankle. My prescription? TLC!”

“I’ll see what I can do” Reddington said with a brief smile that did not reach his eyes.

“See that you do! Any pregnant woman needs affection yes, but for omegas this is everything – she will need lots of attention, cuddle her, spoil her-”

“Thank you, Mateo” Reddington said evenly, his tone cold.

The doctor shrugged and nodded at Reddington, before waving at Liz and making his way from the room. When he had gone, Liz steeled herself and slowly raised her eyes to her captor, preparing herself for the wrath of the man who had taken her prisoner.
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