A dangerous serial killer targets Elizabeth Keen as the newest Blacklister hits too close to home for Red Reddington.

On a personal note, Elizabeth is receiving cryptic letters of ominous warnings from a dangerous stalker which only adds to the threat.

She must rely on the one person her instincts tell her she can trust.

Liz finds herself inexplicably drawn closer to the only man capable of protecting her from this insidious new threat.
When in Rome...

March 26

Only his first day back in Italy and he was already reacquainting himself with the local flair, and in spectacular fashion.

Red melted back into the pillow, threading his fingers through the long lustrous hair tickling his thighs. His eyes stared blatantly, filled with repressed fire, as the brunette head attached to his raging erection bobbed sensually, sucking feverishly, licking the rigid hard on.

He loved watching those pink sensuous lips sliding down his cock. They were so full and wet and felt so damned good. This woman was well acquainted with the art of pleasing a man.

And that little fucking tongue... *God*

Red loved when she rolled that tiny pink muscle against him like she was doing just now. He closed his eyes, savoring the moment.

The suction this girl had was perfection.

Red relaxed totally, shifting into the activities she performed for him. She suckled, tonguing him just so, causing the head of his cock to vibrate, pulsating heavily.

*Damn...*

“Yes... there.” he sighed, his voice low and soothing. “Suck it.” he commanded.

He felt the muscles in his thighs flex as the owner of that phenomenal mouth readily obeyed.

She drew heavily on his flesh, slurping noisily, drawing on the fat crown on his shaft.

“*Shit...*” Red spread his legs further apart, humming his gratitude when her small hand rolled his balls just right.

“If you want to fuck, you should stop,” he grunted, “or I’ll come down your throat.” he stated bluntly.

As much as he was enjoying the blow... and damn, was he ever. He really wanted more.

Apparently his partner did as well, because she drew on the rigid length, letting him go with a wet pop before crawling up on all fours, waving that sweet ass wantonly in the air.

The man rolled onto his knees, sliding the condom into place, glancing at the treasure before him, chuckling lowly, his mood high.

“You do like sucking cock, don’t you.” he crooked his head slightly, staring at the beautiful sight afforded him. “Look at how wet you are.” he praised approvingly.

He stroked the swollen folds with his warm fingers, rubbing his hard shaft against her thrumming clit.

“*Come on.*” the woman urged, pushing back against him.
He dipped his head into her wetness then slid deep inside, hissing his contentment. She rolled her hips against his pelvis, driving him in further until his balls pressed tightly against her sex.

“You’re always so impatient, Lexa.” his tone holding a measure of reproof, though he rather liked that about the woman in reality.

“Only when I have a big cock filling me up.” she purred. “And I do want it to fill me up.”

“Well, unfortunately for you,” he snapped his hips, bouncing her off his shaft, “I’m wrapped up tight.”

“Red...” Lexa pouted then cried out appreciatively when he fingered her clit expertly.

“Stop pouting.” he smiled, rubbing her little puckered hole as incentive.

He knew she was on birth control. He even knew she was clean of STD’s since she had conveniently left her test results out when he had gone to pick her up for dinner.

But to not wear a condom seemed too personal. Too intimate.

And while he liked Lexa, he wanted nothing more than this.

To blow off steam with her. To enjoy her company, then make a clean break.

She slammed back into Red as he drove forward, breaking his thought pattern. He reached for her nipple, growling angrily at the interruption...

“Pardon me, Lexa.” he leaned against her back, grabbing the phone.

“Are you kidding me?” she panted, deep within in the throes of the passion he had created.

“I’m not stopping,” he pooh-poohed such a notion, “you know how I love to multi-task.” the man hunched over her back, rolling his hips against her, making her moan in delight.

“However, you do need to stay quiet.” he whispered seductively.

She loved this sort of thing, so all was well and good.

“Yes?” Red answered pleasantly, his eyes on his activity, his hand running slowly up Lexa’s spine.

“Red?”

The man immediately altered his tone and manner, instantly recognizing the voice on the line.

“Sweetheart, what can I do for you.” he raised the phone from his mouth. “Be quiet.” he suggested strongly, gripping Lexa’s waist for leverage.

The woman clenched around his shaft, reacting to his tone, as he knew she would, falling silent.

For how long, he could only guess.

“Are you busy?” Liz asked.

“No.” he sucked in a lung full of air as Lexa tightened herself around his throbbing arousal, smiling coyly over her shoulder. She knew he loved that shit.

“What’s wrong?” he had thrown the woman a scolding glance as a reprimand.
He listened intently as Lizzy rattled off about the newest Blacklister. They wanted to know his whereabouts.

“The docks, New Jersey, warehouse Num–,” he growled carnally, closing his eyes to the ecstasy coursing through his body. Lexa had dropped to her shoulders, reaching between their legs, teasing his ball sack, “...Number five.”

“You all right?”

“Fine.” Red leaned into Lexa, tweaking her nipple, pulling the stiff peak hard, making the woman squeak her approval.

He placed his hand gently over her mouth, “Shh...” he crooned silkily.

A knock on the door caused both head to jerk to the unexpected intrusion.

Red’s face allowed his consternation. Lexa groaned piteously.

“Red, we have to leave in like thirty minutes.” Francis Holbrook’s deep voice filtered through the door.

Red’s head fell back, and he sighed heavily.

“Fine...” he called out bleakly.

“Red?” Elizabeth’s voice was laced with concern.

“I wasn’t talking to you sweetheart.” Red advised.

Lexa quaked under him, her thighs shaking against his own before her pussy slathered him in her thick cream.

“Shit...” the man’s grumbled his irritation.

“Red?” Liz’s voice held a measure of annoyance as well.

“Hey!” Francis called out, tapping lightly on the door. “I would have already been finished!”

Reddington glared at the door but smiled as Lexa’s husky voice replied for him. “And that’s why he is here and you are not.”

“I’ll get back to you, Lizzy.” the tight pussy rippled tightly around his pumping shaft. It took only seconds and his lover came again. “Someone is at the door.” he slapped the phone shut.

Francis beat out a cadence on the door facing, his face beaming. He loved giving Red the business.

“This is the rhythm I use.” he called gingerly. “Works every time, eh, Lexa?”

“Consider yourself a dead man.” Red gritted his teeth.

Francis glanced at his expensive watch. “Twenty-six minutes and counting.”

“I’m coming dammit!” Red grated huskily. He wrapped his hands around Lexa’s waist, lifting her into his thrusts, giving his concentration over to where it was needed. For several seconds he got lost in the proceedings.
“God, Li...”

Shit!

He hadn’t meant to do that. To use another woman’s name was more than bad form in his book. He knew this was Lexa.

It was just a habit that whenever Lizzy called or was near, she stayed his focus for a goodly length of time.

Apparently, no matter what he was doing.

Lizzy...

Thrusting deep, he slowly rocked, filling the condom quickly.

Lexa giggled into the pillow which mellowed his mood considerably.

Not quite how he thought this evening would play out, but as he finished emptying his cock of its load...taking everything into consideration, it hadn’t been all that bad.

He gripped the condom, sliding it free, holding Lexa in place, “Tissue.”

She reached across to the night table, handing the object over her shoulder. He disposed of the heavily filled latex sheath, inching backwards off the bed, keeping his back from Lexa’s view.

He slipped on his robe, heading to the bar for a drink.

“You must have been in need of a good fuck, Red.” the woman giggled, turning over, brushing her lovely hair out of her face. “You’ve never come that fast.”

“Well,” he glared at the door, “I was under a little pressure to finish.”

Though if he was honest with himself, his arousal had spiked when he heard Elizabeth’s voice.

Even with Lexa having prepared him, he expected it might take a good fifteen minutes to actually finish the task. But then he had heard Elizabeth, and his balls tightened in the blink of an eye.

“Then why don’t you come find me later, when you’re done,” she stroked him through his robe, squeezing his cock gently, “and we’ll give you your regular workout, yes?”

Red handed her a tumbler, letting her get a sip before kissing her pouty lips, “...Yes”

Two days later:

“Red, where the hell are you?” Elizabeth’s tone was acerbic.
“Why,” Red smiled into the phone, recognizing her annoyance, “do you miss me?”

“I don’t know.” she countered, sweetly. “Since I can’t find you, I can’t get you in my gunsight, now can I?”

“My dear Lizzy,” Red chuckled his amusement, “I am in Italy and have been for the last three days.” he scanned the enormous airplane hanger absently. “I believe I mentioned I was here when we last spoke.”

Red watched Francis Holbrook speaking with a group of men across the way, making sure the man was following his instructions to the letter.

Francis was a good guy, a smart guy. Red however, was the connection needed to make all involved feel more at ease.

The man’s experienced eyes continually returned to one individual in particular. Though Red couldn’t quite pinpoint why, the older man felt an indescribable something... amiss.

This guy was jumpy.

And why? This was a commonplace transaction both sides had conducted a thousand times before.

“When are you coming home?” Liz’s voice broke his train of thought.

“Sometime today.” Red’s scowl deepened. “... I hope.”

The youngest of the men was definitely skittish. Red’s brow rose slowly as he witnessed the boys hand dropping once again to his weapon, as if reassuring himself.

Why was this guy so twitchy? None of Angelo’s men were unprofessional, quick tempered or excitable. But this guy was different.

“Red?” Elizabeth Keen’s voice asked uncertainly. “Are you there?”

“I’m here, sweetheart.” Red muttered offhandedly.

Francis opened the briefcase that he had sat on the trunk of the car. Angelo’s right-hand man absently checked the contents, nodding his approval before holding his hand to shake on the deal.

The loud wail of a siren abruptly filled the air.

“Shit.” Red sighed, suddenly resigned to the inevitable.

He casually pulled his weapon, a little annoyed, truth told.

The “nervous” young man pulled his gun from his waist, firing blindly as he ran for cover.

Francis slammed the briefcase shut, gathering it under his arm, bolting for the stairs of the plane.

All hell was breaking loose, men pulling weapons, running for cover, cursing, shouting in general. Total chaos reigned supreme.

Red Reddington calmly watched and waited until Angelo’s right-hand man, his face grimly set, trained his gun sight on Francis Holbrook.

“Don’t fucking think about it!” Red warned the tall Italian, his tone even and unflustered.
Something in the dark eyes determined Red’s next move. He lowered his weapon, striking the other man in the leg. The guy went down, hard and fast.

Francis made a jump for cover, bailing behind a row of large toolboxes.

Red rolled his eyes, sighing heavily.

“Sweetheart, I have to go.” he fired off a shot, wounding another of the opposition. “Can I call you back?” he asked sardonically.

Angelo was going to be so pissed. Red shook his head woefully.

“Red–”

“I won’t be long, I promise.” he remarked casually. Pulling the phone from his ear, he smiled slowly, snapping it shut on her bitching.

“Francis!” the young man had not quite reached his goal before the gunfire had escalated. “Get on the damn plane!” Red turned quickly, wounding one man creeping up on Francis’ position.

“Kinda busy trying to not get capped in the ass here, Red!” Francis yelled right back.

“I’m about to do it myself!” Red laid down a series of well-aimed scatter fire. “Now, go!”

Francis ran for the stairs, leaping melodramatically from the third one into the interior of the plane.

Red’s face was incredulous. He grumbled his consternation, dialing the phone, waiting semi-patiently.

“Angelo!” Red growled, “Put down your fucking drink and get your lazy ass in here!”

“What in the h–” Angelo stuttered when he heard the gunfire, sighing heavily. “I’ll be right there.” he muttered dejectedly.

Red continued to fire, only wounding the other combatants. Perhaps this could yet be salvaged if no one fired a kill shot.

Angelo’s car arrived on the scene almost immediately, the slender man sliding effortlessly from the backseat even before it skidded to a stop.

“Lower your fucking weapons!” he ratted off angrily to his people. “Cease fire, dammit!”

Red waved his gun languidly in the air, signifying for his men to follow suit.

Angelo approached the men, his face almost purple with rage. “What in the holy hell happened!” he asked disgustedly, stepping over a man groaning loudly on the floor.

Red’s gun changed directions indicating the needed route. “Your man has an itchy trigger finger.”

“What the hell are you talking about!” Angelo scowled as the young man in question came out from his hiding spot, armed and panicky.

“He heard a cop siren and then this...” Red waved around the room.

“They called the cops! They’re here.” the sweaty and wild-eyed youth breathed out as he came closer. “Probably outside.” his eyed darted frantically about.
He kept Red in his sights until Angelo stalked over to him, ripping the gun from his hand and snatching him across the back of the head, hard.

“You did all this!?" he yelled, hitting the boy again. “You caused all this bloodshed!”

“I’m telling you,” the young man muttered tightly, “he’s ratted us out.” his eyes flew to Red accusingly.

“There’s no one out there, you fucking...” Angelo clenched his fists at his side, fuming. “Are you on that shit again?!” he grabbed the kid’s collar, shaking him like a rag doll. “Are you?!”

Red examined the kid closer, finally seeing the dark circles under his wild eyes. Under the sweat, his skin was pasty and flushed. His muscles jerked, tense and spastic. The kid was high as a fucking kite.

Red shook his head agitated, working the tension out of his jaw as he checked his men, making sure they were functional while Angelo handled his own problem.

“I’m dropping you in the darkest hole I can find until the very thought of that shit is abhorrent to you. Until you understand that just being in its vicinity means your certain death!” Angelo shoved the kid toward two men who approached slowly. “Because I find you like this again, I’ll fucking put you down where you fucking stand!” the young man was dragged off to an SUV, shoved roughly into the back, the door slammed with a finality that ended ensuing scene.

“Reddington, you have my deepest apologies.” Angelo sighed deeply, “I should have known... should have seen...”

“No one was seriously hurt. But, we can’t have a repeat of this.” Red warned.

“I assure you. We won’t. I meant what I said, he’s going to get clean and stay clean even if I have to keep him locked up for a year or more.” Angelo looked around anxiously.

“Are you sure your men are—”

“They’re okay. A little more awake now, but fine.”

Angelo glanced about, frowning. “And Francis?”

Red sighed, staring at the plane. “Francis?”

Francis peeked his head around the door frame. “Yeah?” He asked cautiously.

“You can come out from hiding now.”

“What the hell was that about!” Francis asked, bouncing gingerly down the stairs.

“Drugs.” Red said to the approaching man.

“We didn’t have any drugs.” Francis reminded helpfully.

“I know that.” Red rubbed his eyes, trying to keep matters in perspective. “I meant... that one of Angelo’s men was high. The one who started all of this.”

“Oh, I thought maybe they didn’t accept our offer.”

“Do you normally reject an offer by shooting up a room?” Red asked the man.
“It’s been known to happen.”

“And even with that past history, you came unarmed?”

“Oh.” It dawned on the younger man. “Well, no, actually.” he bent, taking the gun from his ankle holster. “I forgot I had this.”

Red’s mouth fell slightly agape as he shared a look with Angelo. “You have your idiot. I have mine.”

“Um, excuse me!” Francis stuck his finger up in the air. “How was I supposed to know one would start tweaking.” he defended himself staunchly.

“You sound like a Valley Girl.” Red made mention.


“Angelo, in light of recent events...” Red nodded his head in the direction of Angelo’s men, who were carrying off another of their unit who was groaning in pain. “I’d understand if you wished to set negotiations aside until another time.”

“No... no. We’ll do it now.” Angelo decided firmly. “This has been in the works for three days. Unless of course, you’d rather deal with another source.”

“This is your baby.” Red signified the ball was in Francis’s court.

Francis thought quietly to himself for a few seconds. Red knew very well all the man had to take into consideration.

The travel time, waiting for another shipment, bad feelings with Angelo and his men. He hoped like hell Francis made the right decision.

The young man’s eyes raised, “No, we’ll finish the deal. We’re here.” It was nodded with finality. “Let’s do it.”

“All right, gentlemen. Let’s get this over with.” Red smacked his hands together, pleased with the decision made. “I have a high tempered brunette waiting anxiously for me to return a call.”
“Lizzy.” Red swallowed his drink casually. “I’m sor–”


“We’re all fine. Just an unfortunate misunderstanding.” Red propped his feet on a nearby table. The hollow echo of the wind rushing around the streamline jet, relaxing him greatly. “We should be landing in DC in about six hours.” he hadn’t actually asked, but he had traveled enough to know the time references from any given location.

Francis passed by, having closed the door to the restroom, heading to the galley. “Is that your pissy brunette?”

Liz’s brow furrowed deeply, having heard the offhanded remark. “...Excuse me?” she tilted her head slightly. “Who is that?”

“This is Francis.” Red continued to sip his drink, “Not to worry sweetheart, you will never be graced by his presence, ever.”

Francis took umbrage, “Say what?” he asked highly disgruntled. “Hey! I’ll have you know I’m highly sought after.”

“By the police.” Red mumbled into the line, making her chuckle, which in turn made him smile.

“Many people love spending time with me.” Francis continued his tirade. He ticked off on his fingers, “I have an amazing personality. I’m handsome, to be sure. And... I’m... I’m... ”

“Modest?” Liz smiled gently into the phone.

“Modest is not a word that comes to mind when I think of Francis.” Red played along. “Demented, on the other hand.”

“I’ll have you know that I can be incredibly modest.” Francis insisted firmly. “Modesty is my middle name.”

“That he disclaims, not the other.” Red said enjoying the giggling coming over the line. “Would you like me to tell her your middle name?”

Francis backed off immediately, “We said we’d never discuss that again.” he warned.

Red held his smile, “Do you mind, I’m on the phone here.” he gestured.

“You’re the one who dragged me into the conversation.” Francis reminded peevishly.

Red rolled his eyes to the heavens, sighing. “Go to sleep, Francis.” he said tiredly.

The man shrugged and settled into his chair, reclining the plush seat, dragging a blanket over his shoulders, falling blessedly silent.
“Speaking of sleep, when’s the last time you had any?” Liz asked of the obviously exhausted man.

“I’m fine.” he waved the question aside.

“Are you really okay?” Concern laced her voice.

“Yes, we’re fine.” he dismissed.

“I said... you.” she reiterated.

Red was touched, his voice softening, “I’ll come by the Blacksite as soon as I return.” he promised. It surprised him to realize that he really needed to see her. When it had become a need, he had no notion.

“Okay, I’ll let you get some sleep then.” she felt better. “Get some rest, Red. I mean it.”

“I think you do.” He hung up the phone gently.

Red had been asleep a little over an hour when the phone rang. He groggily felt for the object.

“Yes.” he rubbed bleary eyes.

“Reddington. I don’t know if you’ve heard,” a disconnected voice came over the line, “Carlos and Victor have been taken out.”

Red blinked the sleep from his eyes, sitting up slowly. “By whom, anyone know?”

“If I had to guess, and I’d say it was a very good guess,” the voice continued, “Carver.”

“Are you sure?” Red shifted the kinks from his back.

“If not, we have a new loony stripping flesh from people then making a rug from it.”

“Thank you for informing me.” Red stared vacantly as he hung the phone up, lost in thought.

The new Blacklister he had in mind to hand over to the team would have to wait. A new danger was on the horizon. A deadly one.

Laying back in his seat, he willed his eyes to close. The burning in his gut increased two-fold.

Things were about to get messy and violent, and there was nothing Red could do but try to catch the son of a bitch and make it all stop.

Elizabeth Keen stared at the phone, willing it to ring. For the past hour, there had been nothing. Even though Red had been in the middle of a fire fight earlier, he had been so blasé about the matter, that she felt she had no recourse but to wait for his return call.

She was so concerned that for a moment, she even considered tapping into his chip to pull up his location which would be an abuse of power, of course.

They weren’t working a case right now. He wasn’t technically needed.

But he was her asset...
She should know the welfare of the man, shouldn’t she? She convinced herself that was the reason she felt so unsettled.

Liz sighed, kinking the tension from her neck.

*One hour.* She’d give him one hour and then call. If he didn’t answer, she’d have him tracked, she decided.

After having cleaned her desk of the day’s paperwork, she shut down the lights, heading out of the office, trudging tiredly to her car.

Most people would be dancing their way out to the parking lot after their workday, but she had another night of fast food and an empty house waiting for her.

Okay, so maybe that part wasn’t so bad. She was more than glad Tom was gone.

*The jerk.*

“Let it go, Lizzy.” she muttered to herself, backing out of the parking spot. “Great, I’m calling myself Lizzy.” she sighed. “Even better, I’m talking to myself.”

She drove down the darkened streets, glancing right and left at her food options. With it getting late, her choices were limited, but she finally zeroed in on Chinese takeout and felt her stomach rumble in response.

“I know, ‘feed you’. ” she growled back, pulling up in front of her Savior for the evening.

Elizabeth dashed in, intent on grabbing something quick, but then smelled the heavenly food and ordered enough to feed an army. But not all was lost. It did heat up really well the next day.

The woman grabbed her bags, heading home. An overwhelming desire to see Hudson invaded her thoughts, then she remembered in the next second... someone else had her dog.

“Don’t even know where my damn dog is...” she grumbled, pulling up in front of the dark house.

She grabbed her things, wearily making her way up the stairs. Either she needed to add more cardio to her workout, or these stairs were steeper than yesterday.

Elizabeth pulled up short, glancing back at the offending steps. That little excursion had been exhausting.

After pushing her way inside the doors, she dropped her purse and keys on the nearby surface. She exhaled a sigh of relief, kicking off her shoes, making a beeline for the couch.

She plopped down heavily into its welcoming cushions, lifting her feet to the table.

She sat quietly, listening to the reassuring sounds of the house for a moment before grabbing a container of food, then the remote control.

She flipped through the channels mechanically, her agitation growing until finally she recognized something watchable. The woman sighed blissfully...

“Ahh, Mr. Darcy...” she smiled, “a better welcome home than I expected.”

She settled into the comfort of the couch, nibbling at her food. Within moments she was lost in the
delectable, brooding, and right now... quite deliciously wet, Colin Firth.

Maybe the day wasn’t a complete loss after all.

During a short break in programming, she put her leftovers away, then started a load of laundry before settling back on the couch.

She immersed herself into Jane Austen’s world, blocking the outside from her thoughts.

An hour later, she jolted awake and upright to the incessant ringing of her phone.

She fumbled for the object in the room, highlighted only by the light of the television screen. It seemed forever before she heard the reassuring sound of his voice.

Red...

After assuring herself that the man was fine, she enjoyed the short chat. This Francis person was an amusing character. She could hear his constant remarks in the background and Red’s genuine annoyance amused her. He always seemed to surrounded himself with the most interesting people, to say the least.

Liz had told the older man to get some rest because he had sounded exhausted. Having hung up shortly after, she was in higher spirits and ready for bed.

Turning off the tv, she stood, stretching before heading upstairs.

She stepped in under the pounding spray which felt wonderful, the hot water of the shower beating down on her sore body, easing the aches.

A few minutes later, Liz grudgingly shut it down, finishing her nightly routine before crawling in between the sheets, moaning with relief. It felt like only seconds before her body molded to the bedding, her eyes drooping sleepily.

Glancing at the clock, the woman was surprised to find that she was actually getting to bed before midnight. An anomaly this week.

She yawned, curling into the comfort of her bed, falling asleep moments later.

Elizabeth’s eyes popped open, her ears alert suddenly. She blinked her tired eyes, looking at the clock and finding only an hour had passed.

What the hell was she awake for then?

She stretched, listening to the dark, quiet house, hearing nothing but silence and the air being circulated.

That must have been it. She had just started using the air conditioner a couple days back and wasn’t used to the sound yet.

She rolled over to her side, her legs closing together, an instant twinge infiltrating her body.

Not of pain, but arousal.

She hadn’t felt that in a while.

The woman grasped her pillow closer, snuggling into it, sighing when the cloth of her t-shirt brushed
against her breast. She was embarrassed to admit, even here in the privacy of her own room... that had felt really good.

“How hard up are you that your clothes turn you on?” she muttered in irritation. She wiggled into a more comfortable position only to feel her arousal heighten.

She slapped her hand irritably on the bed, sighing heavily.

“It’s your fault Mr. Darcy.” she huffed then dropped a hand between her legs.

She was surprised to find herself swollen and slick, her clit more than wanting of some attention.

Well, no matter. She’d just take the edge off and go back to sleep.

Liz circled the peak of her sex, inching her closer to where she needed to be then increased the pressure on the bundle of nerves.

Sliding a hand under her shirt, she pulled and pinched her nipples, jerking into her hand in response.

She closed her eyes, floating in the haze of raising endorphins and pictured Darcy, with his dark penetrating gaze and ridiculously handsome face.

He was all of those things, handsome and brooding and prideful.

He had come to Elizabeth Bennet’s defense when Miss Bingley had cuttingly diminished the other woman’s fine eyes. He was a man’s man, and yet so sensitive in that he scoured the streets to find Wickham, to fix Elizabeth’s dire family situation.

The modern day Elizabeth had thought it so chivalrous. Romantic.

Red was a lot like Darcy, come to think of it.

Red was handsome, and there was an air about him... a confidence that was very attractive. It did not detract that the man knew it.

Or at the very least, he knew he wasn’t hard to look at. With his dapper dress, confident swagger and charming good looks.

Elizabeth could see the attraction.

He was ruggedly handsome, very manly. He had very masculine features that were appealing. His eyes and lips certainly drew your attention that was for sure.

Red had the most hypnotic shade of eye color that seemed to change with his moods. When he was in a playful mood, they were the softest, clearest blue. But when he was mad, they took a hunter green hue that boarded on being black.

If his full lips weren’t spouting five-syllable words with ease, they were leisurely wrapped around a cigar, spouting articulate prose.

Sometimes they were pursed in agitation or twitching in barely held amusement, which was charming. She had learned however, when they were expressionless, holding no sort of emotion... the man was highly pissed.

Regardless of his mood, the man was fascinating.
She sensed that he was very experienced in the art of kissing and that he did it well... as everything else he attempted.

Red Reddington was a chameleon, even his physical being seemed to adapt to his surroundings in any given situation.

While he was fastidiously groomed, he wasn’t above getting dirty. She had seen him covered in dirt, blood and other grime she couldn’t specify but he looked completely comfortable in such filth. As though he and such things were old companions.

But then, he’d also been quietly seething at the time and couldn’t be bothered by social niceties.

She had been so shocked by Red’s unusually unkempt appearance, she could not look away from the sight. Which she found at once both oddly sensual in nature, and yet somehow comforting.

Liz remembered that night vividly. The man had a deep cut across his scalp which he didn’t even appear to notice.

She never thought she’d be into balding men, but it somehow worked for Red.

She imagined that’s what he had looked like in his military career. She knew he had longer hair and other varying styles throughout the years, but something about that short shorn was where he appeared most comfortable.

After Tom and his six-pack and sinewy body, the thought that Red with his little paunch and broader body would be more appealing was confusing.

She felt a measure of comfort with her former husband when Tom held her, but until Red had done the same, she noticed a decidedly marked difference.

Thinking back now, Tom had offered a token state of expected emotional support.

But Red in his warmth and bulk, spoke of safety and protection.

She had the hardest time not snuggling into Red’s embrace. She wondered if he had noticed? When she felt that urge to cuddle into him, the man always tightened his hold, muttering soothingly to her. Often she found herself craving the contact.

Plain and simple, she found Red Reddington a very sexy man.

There was something about the way he talked, walked, stood... something, that spoke of an underlying sensuality that Tom couldn’t begin to muster.

She had yet to meet a woman who didn’t adore Red. They welcomed him with open arms or at the very least, unabashed flirtation. There was a definite underlying anticipation of wanting more from the man.

Even Madeline Pratt, in spite of the apparent bad blood between them, had turned on her sexuality when Red was present. It very obvious, she was still hopeful that he would offer her a weekend escape, if nothing else.

Elizabeth was more than intrigued. What the hell was he doing, or had done to them, that he had their continued loyalty and interest?

She personally could attest that Red was supportive and focused on her abilities, even when it
appeared an older more experienced team leader like Ressler should have been his choice.

He bolstered her confidence when they had worked with Madeline. He had even escorted her on his arm like a gentleman and had danced with her.

Granted, she had been stiff in his guidance, but ever the gentleman, he hadn’t made fun of her lack of grace... too much.

“What the hell am I doing?” she whispered quietly to herself. “Get him out of your head.”

She sighed, focusing back on Darcy, and how he gazed at Elizabeth Bennet.

Darcy’s regard for his Elizabeth had grown, one could see it in his eyes or the subtle tilt of his lips. When Elizabeth had wept, the need to console, to hold her close had consumed the man.

For the first time, Darcy had met a situation he was incapable of handling. It had undone the man completely, shattering his usual reserve and confidence. He had finally broke, unable to take it any longer. He had rushed from the room, lest he do something improper.

Like take her in his arms as he yearned to do.

Fitzwilliam Darcy was a man for all ages... especially if you were a woman.

Only Red’s regard for women matched Darcy’s, in Liz’s opinion.

Red could stare at her sometimes, and she felt like the very center of his universe.

Which was probably silly to believe. In comparison to Red Reddington, she was a true simpleton. He was so worldly, so brilliant sometimes, thinking outside the box... where she was just trying to find her way out of the paper bag.

He never made her feel stupid. He did teach her however, coax her, guide her, but he’d wait for her to catch up if she was lost or slow on the uptake. She was learning to piece the clues together herself. He had taught her to think beyond the linear.

His intelligence, his ability to read people... she was completely captivated by it all.

“Damn, damn damn!” she gritted in annoyance. “Mr. Darcy, hot English guy! Looks great on the back of a horse.”

She focused on that, how he had looked on the horse, then flashed on him in the long coat and how well he wore his clothes.

How he had made that ruffled neckline seem masculine, she’d never know. But he had done it and so remarkably well. Darcy was all kinds of hot. Even with the clothes of the day and that too tall hat, he looked amazing.

She had to admit, Darcy would probably look great in a fedora. But then, she hadn’t seen anyone pull off the hat as well as Red. Sure, there were some old movie stars that wore it well, but Red owned it.

She had tried picturing it on Ressler, Aram and even Tom. But they always came out in her mind as looking like some boyish newspaper man working at the Daily Planet.

“What the hell am I doing!” she muttered tightly in confusion. “Focus...” she squeezed her eyes shut, sliding a finger into her core, petting her insides.
Darcy was so gentle when he had taken Elizabeth’s hand when he helped her from the carriage. His support was steady, but his hold on her, delicate.

Red was a lot like that. He was constantly setting his hand on her back, guiding her into a room. He opened doors for her.

He offered an arm to steady her. He’d help her over slick spots or catch her from sliding in the snow or mud, depending where they were.

His hands seemed to engulf hers, his touch always feather light and gentle. Those same hands could be deadly and uncompromising to a foe.

Over the course of his illustrious career, how many women were thinking the same thoughts about Red that she found herself thinking? She didn’t know if he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing or was he truly just that gallant?

He was a paradox she found absolutely enthralling.

The woman wiggled her fingers harder against her pleasure center, increasing the attention to her breast and felt herself teetering on the edge of an amazing climax.

When he touched her, his hand spanned the entire width of her back, making her feel incredibly feminine. Though the touch was light, his presence was intense.

His hands were warm, his fingers thick and strong. How did he touch a woman? Was he as gentle as she was accustomed or was he demanding? Was he teasing or attentive?

Liz rocked her hips, aiding her hand in her goal and felt the tale tell signs she was nearing the peak of passion she so craved. She felt electric shocks intensifying, vibrating into her clit. Her nipples strained tightly against her shirt, rubbing tantalizingly against the soft cotton.

Her mind shut down as she allowed her body to dictate her next agenda...

She gritted her teeth harshly, growling into the pillow for the phone was suddenly ringing most incessantly... again.

“Damn it!” she muttered dejectedly, fighting harder for some sort of release. “Just a few more seconds,” she squeezed her eyes tight, rocking harder against her tiring fingers, “please...”

The distraction fell thankfully silent, allowing her to refocus on Red’s hand...

“Oh my God...” she gasped tightly, shoving her mound against her fingers, finally quaking and pulsing, her thighs shaking as the phone made its presence known, yet again.

Liz slapped her hand to the nightstand, grabbing the phone, her mood certainly no better having only achieved an essence of what she might have.

Her slick fingers, wet and shaking, hit the answer button. The phone dropped from her trembling hand, clattering loudly on the hard wood of the floor.

“Shit...” she panted her lost equilibrium, hanging over the side of the bed, fumbling for the object in the dark room.

“Sweetheart?” she could barely hear Red’s tinny voice.

She grappled with the phone, the damned thing slipping just beyond each attempt.
“Lizzy?” the man called again. “Elizabeth!” he called out sternly.

She gripped the phone tightly, hastily bringing it to her ear. “Red...” she gulped breathlessly, the pulsing between her legs spiking.

“Sweetheart, are you all right?” Red’s voice was laced with concern.

“Yeah...” she took a shaky breath, pushing hard against her sex, getting her nerves under control. She swallowed hard clearing her throat a little, giving herself a second to collect her breath. “I dropped the damned phone.” she stated breathlessly. “What’s up?” she asked a little too casually for one in the morning.

“You tell me?” he asked seriously. “Is something wrong?”

“What do you mean?” she asked shakily, not immediately following his line of thought.

“Is someone there with you?” he asked tightly.

“You mean like...” she blushed. “I mean...”

Oh my God. Did he think he called in the middle of her having sex with someone? Could he tell she’d just...

Oh God. What had just happened? Had she just masturbated thinking about... Red?

“Are you in danger?” he growled impatiently. “Can you talk freely?”

She jerked back into the headboard, shocked from her previous thoughts.

“I... uh...” she stammered. “W-What?!?”

“Elizabeth, no one is that winded picking up a damn phone.” he replied, his tone clipped and focused. “I called before and you didn’t answer, now this.”

“Look, I was sleeping, the phone startled me, I had... lotion on my hands...” she grimaced, for that explanation had not sounded as stupid in her head. Nor had she meant to blurt it out like an idiot, “and I dropped the phone...” she finished weakly.

“I see...” the tone was expressionless.

She couldn’t be sure, but she was almost positive the bastard was smiling.

“And you’re alone?” he repeated.

“Yes, I’m alone.” she snapped.

“You’re shaking.”

Elizabeth looked down at her hand, lifting the shaking hand.

How the hell did he know that?

“I most certainly am not?” she defended herself staunchly, clenching her fists tightly.

“I can hear it in your voice.” he drawled slowly.
“I’m fine.” she swallowed heavily. “Why are you calling?”

Red was quiet for a beat, then sighed.

“I will be at the Post Office at nine to hand over a new case.”

“Didn’t we already discuss this?” she asked.

“No.” Red smiled at her barely held vexation. “I only said I’d come to the Post Office, not when.”

“Oh...” she pursed her lips, “right. What is thi–” she stopped, falling silent quickly when she heard the subtle whooshing sound, like a door opening.

“Liz–”

“Shh...” she hushed the man, straining to hear, her nerves jangling alarmingly.

She heard a muted sound from Red’s end. Then silence.

“Sorry, I thought I heard something.” she apologized, finally allowing herself a breath. “Where w–”

“What did you hear?” he asked tightly.

“I uh... nothing, I guess.” she shrugged mentally.

“What did you hear?” he repeated, stressing his words.

“I thought I heard a door open... or something.” she shrugged it off. “It was nothi–”

“You didn’t set your alarm.” he stated, knowing very well what the answer would be. She was horrible where her own safety was concerned.

“I... don’t remember.” she confessed weakly.

“Set it.” he fairly demanded.

Liz could almost see his jaw working into a frenzy with that one expression and knew he wouldn’t let up until she got out of her warm bed to set the damn thing.

And why she just didn’t hang up on him, was a mystery. Or was it?

If she hung up, he’d just send his goons over to check on her.

But there was also the fact... that she didn’t really want to hang up yet.

But why?

She sighed, rolling from the bed, huffing her annoyance before standing.

“My feet are cold.” she complained... childishly.

“So put some socks on.” he countered, listening as he perceived the small feet clumping grouchily to the keypad. He smiled slowly because he knew she was punching those numbers as hard as humanly possible.

“Happy now?” her tone was more than snarky.
“Stop pouting.” he scolded. “Especially since all I did was care for your well being.” he turned his mouth away from the phone, nodding his consent to a patiently waiting Dembe. The large man turned on his heel instantly attending to the task assigned.

Liz’s shoulders slumped, her tone filled with chagrin, “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so bitchy.”

“You’re tired.” Red brushed off her rudeness, just as he always did.

Come to think of it, he very rarely ever responded to her apologies except to make an excuse for her, just as he had this moment.

“Where is your weapon?” he enquired.

“Beside me.” she reached over, pulling it closer, yawning. “Look, I think I just heard the central air kick on and I’m not used t–” she gasped, as the sound of sudden beeps disturbed the quiet, shocking her to the core.

She stared transfixed at the wide open portal of her bedroom door, her nervous system suddenly on high alert. She sat frozen, unsure of her next move.

“Lock your door!” Red demanded quickly, having heard the alarm being disarmed from inside the house.

Red’s eyes flew to Dembe who was speaking with Elizabeth’s security team on the ground. The man cursed the fact that he himself, was thirty-thousand feet in the air.

“What’s wrong?” Francis had sat up from his comfortable position having noted his friends features and body language. The young man fell silent when Red held up a brisk hand.

Liz sprang from the bed, grabbing her gun, rushing for the door, her training kicking in. She stood rooted by the side of the wall every sense she possessed attuned to the sounds of her home.

“Lock the damn door.” he directed brusquely. “Do not move from that room.”

“Someone is in my house!” she hissed.

“And security is a minute away.” he snapped. “I would rather they not shoot you.”

Liz closed the door, locking it securely, waiting impatiently. She placed her ear to the door, listening for any movement. She wrapped her arm tightly around herself, warding off the cold which had suddenly invaded her body and mind.

She went numb as she heard quick footsteps on the hardwood floor downstairs.

“Are your guys inside my house?” she whispered huskily.

“Not yet.” Red advised curtly.

“I heard footsteps.” she hoped her voice did not belie her growing fear.

“How close?” was his only concern.

“Downstairs.”

Red relayed the information to Dembe, who relayed it forward.
“Back door, Red.” Liz guided the man’s efforts having heard the sound quite distinctly.

“Back alley.” Red orchestrated effortlessly, his voice an ever calming entity in Liz’s world.

Normally, she would feel foolish standing here waiting, being an armed, trained FBI Agent. But she realized, the person had left the premises. Red’s man had a better chance in locating the intruder.

She heard a car rev its engine, then the catch of tires peeling down the street.

Red muttered aside, keeping abreast of the situation.

“What’s going on?” Liz stated.

“My man saw a car speeding away from your area, he followed, got a make of the car.” Red relayed. “He lost the car in the alleys two miles over.”

She knew the area of which he spoke. It wasn’t just a fork in the rode, it was a web of offshoots.

She really freaking hated DC streets sometimes.

“Who knows your alarm code?” the man turned his attention fully back to the woman.

“I changed the codes after Tom left.” she said. “No one knows my codes...not even Aram.”

It was ridiculously simple to break the codes on today’s security devices, especially for someone as skilled as Tom. Red knew as much, but there was no need to worry the woman at this time.

He would have the matter looked into in the morning. Along with having her house swept for cameras, just on the off chance.

“You’re about to hear your door open, it’s only security.” Red notified.

“Should I go down?” she offered.

“The back door is unlocked, Lizzy.” the man reminded peevishly. “Stay where the hell you are...they’re going to sweep the house and make sure it’s empty.”

“And I so wanted to sleep tonight.” she quipped feebly.

“And you will.” he promised. “There will be guards outside tonight.”

“Those poor men.” she sighed heavily.

“This is a normal shift for them, Lizzy.”

She sat down on the bed, stretching her legs out, throwing the still warmed blankets over herself, then stared out into the darkened room.


She pulled the blankets higher under her chin, listening to the quiet chatter of Red as he spoke to Dembe. She could hear men moving around the house, totally reassured now.

“Is her door locked?” she heard Red ask some unknown individual.

“My damn door is loc–” she narrowed her eyes when she heard the handle jiggle, then Red scoff quietly.
“It’s a wonder.” he replied. “She never listens to me.”

“I do too!” she complained around her yawn.

“Name one time you’ve done what I said the first go round.” he asked, a smile in his voice, relaxed now that his men were there, protecting her.

She opened her mouth, then quickly closed it shut. She stared off into the darkness, trying hard to come up with a suitable answer.

“That’s what I thought.” Red grinned, pleased with his results. “Put your phone on speaker and sit it beside you. I’ll wake you if needed.”

“My bill will be outrageous.” she muttered.

“I’ll pay the damn bill.” Red exhaled in exasperation. “And thank you for proving my point, again.” he chuckled quietly. “Now, do it.”

She did as asked and rolled to her side, yawning again, listening to Red’s evened breathing.

“They’re watching, you can rest.” he reassured.

“You sleep too...” she yawned.

“I’ll rest.” he smiled softly, listening to her snuffle quietly as she drifted.

“Promise?” she mumbled sleepily, zoning off into his translucent voice talking, feeling herself float into a relaxed Zen state.

“I promise.” his eyes softened. “Sleep sweetheart...” Red coaxed. “I’m here...” he whispered quietly, as her breathing deepened as she fell into a peaceful sleep.
After a four-day break, the agents had caught up on paperwork and other necessary housekeeping that kept their tight ship running smoothly.

The quiet of the last day had lifted their spirits and as they entered the late afternoon, even the dour Agent Ressler seemed in a jovial mood.

The sound of the elevator descending had some in the area tensing. All eyes turned expectantly. After Anslo Garrick had breached the site, it paid to be cautious.

After a few moments, the door opened. Then a familiar voice called out, “Honey, I’m home.”

Aram and Samar smiled their relief that it was friend, not foe. Ressler’s face grimaced, his jovial mood a thing of the past.

Liz smiled sympathetically at her partner. They all knew of his hot date tonight and had been wishing that nothing would hamper his plans.

Unbeknownst to Ressler, the entire Post Office placed bets on whether or not he would score, and any info gained was a hot topic around the water cooler.

Red and Dembe came striding into the pen as cocky and blasé as ever.

Liz scanned them both for new wounds or physical ailments, finding none, relaxing mentally and physically.

As she watched Red swaggering toward them, grinning as though he had not a care in the world, she wasn’t sure why she had been so worried after the phone call had ended yesterday.

For a brief second, their eyes met and the facade he wove about himself dropped completely, replaced by a slight scowl of concern, a questioning look appearing on the handsome face.

Liz shook off his unasked questions with a brief gesture of her hand, her eyes reassuring the man all was well. She was having difficulty holding the penetrating gaze, lowering her eyes, shifting about almost anxiously.

He inclined his head briefly in response.

She cleared her throat gently, busying herself with paperwork she had already addressed.

Reddington’s mouth curved sensually, sensing the reason behind the woman’s sudden awkward state. He gallantly gave her a reprieve putting his private thoughts aside for the moment.

Although his security team had assured Elizabeth’s safety, both last night and of course, her arrival to the Blacksite itself... Reddington felt better after seeing the woman himself.

The fact that she trusted in him to protect her, was a moment of epic proportions for a host of reasons.
The one upper most in his mind at this exact moment in time... had shocked him. Not an easy task by any stretch of the imagination.

The whole episode itself had been so unlike Elizabeth Keen. A pleasant change, to say the least.

Red replayed the events as they had happened, his mind wandering briefly.

A minute smile touched his lips.

He allowed himself just a second to imagine that he was hearing that breathy voice in his ear once again, not through the phone, but as he lay next to her.

The sweet moment was shattered by the incessant ringing of a thousand phones. He grimaced irritably, brought back all too soon from a very pleasant visual.

Reddington shifted the burden in his arms, trying to retain his train of thought.

Surely she didn’t see anything wrong with self pleasuring. Aside from being perfectly healthy and an activity he very much loved watching, it was a need.

For a beautiful young woman such as Elizabeth, just hitting her prime, it was an incessant need. Especially with everything going on in her life... the stress relief, the rush of endorphins, the high of orgasm...

It was just what Lizzy needed even if she wasn’t aware.

Its effects seemed to be filtering over into today.

They had silently communicated, and it had felt as comfortable, as natural, as it was between he and Dembe.

A week ago she would have avoided the evening’s events, acted as though they had never happened.

The subtle gesture she had offered spoke volumes. There would be further discussion on the matter, simply at a more opportune time.

He was satisfied with the outcome so far.

“She should masturbate more often...” Red mumbled to himself, but obviously not low enough when Dembe’s mouth turned upward at the corner, having heard the innocuous remark. Red shared a small tilt of his head with his friend, then shrugged as if to say, *Well, she should.*

The man scanned the group, frowning when he reached Ressler’s pouting features.

“How the long face?” Red pointed his chin in the strawberry blondes’ direction.

“He has a date tonight.” Aram helpfully supplied.

“You can always back out if she’s that bad, Donald.” Red looked confused, setting down his burden. “Tell her someone died.”

Liz and Samar exchanged perplexed glances over the nondescript boxes Red had sat aside, their curiosity more than piqued.

“He wanted to go.” Liz shrugged her slender shoulders. “But now that you’re here...”
“Have no fear Donald.” the man smiled, whipping the fedora from his head with a flourish. “If you’re positive you still wish to go.” Red shrugged.

Donald eyed the felon warily. “You didn’t come here to give us a new name from the Blacklist?”

“I did.”

Ressler deflated, Red held his smile. “But he will not be state side for another two days. I am merely here to give warning.”

“How do we have a name?” Liz asked.

“A killer for hire. A psychopath who calls himself Carver.” Red sat on the stool, spinning it in Lizzy’s direction. “You’ve probably seen his handiwork throughout the States, but hadn’t connected the *modus operandi*.”

“Then what am I looking for exactly, Mr. Reddington?” Aram asked meekly his hands poised over the keyboard.

“Carver strips the flesh from his victims, usually hanging the pieces along a handy line of rope, like putting out the laundry. Even uses the clothes’ pins.” Red’s mouth pinched with distaste, “I’m not a fan of his work. After you’ve stripped a line or two, if they haven’t talked, they’re not going to. He finishes out of pure enjoyment.”

Having seen some of the worst of which people were capable, Red was surprised to note some of the faces present, exhibited a range of emotions. Some squeamish, some disturbed, all taken aback by the information given.

“This is a man who takes extreme pride and delight in his work, who ends his ‘slice and dice’ by carving the initials, CRVR.” Red scratched his head, “I have to wonder,” he had to admit, “if you’ve gone to the trouble of going that far, why not add the vowels?” he scoffed at the stupidity of it all.

“And you know he’s coming here, how?” Ressler asked.

“He’s taken out two of my associates in the last few weeks.” Red said. “It only makes sense that he’d come for Edward.”

“And why is that?” Liz paused in her writing. “And who is this Edward?”

“Besides Edward being a weasel of a human being, it’s a food chain.” Red explained. “Edward is somewhere near the bottom but a vital connection.”

“And where are you on this chain?” Liz had to ask.

“Sweetheart, I’m always on top.” Red leered playfully.

Samar’s full lips curved into an inviting grin.

Liz tried very hard to not be amused, “So why didn’t he come after you?”

“He wasn’t hired to come after me.” Red waved his hand nonchalantly, “These men are loose ends and need to be erased. It could be a contract gone south, an action not performed to the specifications of the hiring party. Any and all of the above.”

“Who are these guys in the grand scheme of things?” Liz queried.
“You mean their specialty?” Red assumed. “Victor was receiving, Edward is shipping, Carlos was money, the go between.”

“Of what exactly?” Ressler asked.

“Drugs, arms, miscellaneous merchandise.” Red shrugged, giving a noncommittal shake of his head. “They moved what needed to be moved. If they were paid enough, I’m sure they weren’t discriminatory.”

Not having limited his search parameters, had slowed Aram’s success greatly.

“I think I’ve found something.” the nervous young man piped in, popping pictures up on the screen’s overhead. “I’m still running a search to see how far back this signature goes.”

Liz looked up at the grotesque pictures, grimacing. “How did no one see they were connected?”

Red studied the photographs closely, his innate sense of humanity coming to the fore. He glanced away, disheartened.

“If someone didn’t enter it into the database correctly, there would have been an oversight.” Red said. “He changes it up each time in some small way.”

“Do you know any of these people, Reddington?” Ressler demanded.

“Thirteen of the twenty.” Red refused to look back at the pictures behind him.

“But you don’t know the others?” Cooper was curious having entered the Pen a few minutes back.

“These were husbands, wives, bosses.” Red picked up his fedora, smoothing the rim. “Normal people, personal hits. They weren’t even felons or criminals.” the man’s shoulders slumped slightly as he crossed the room, “Looks like he didn’t discriminate about where the work came from either.”

“All right people, let’s get this sorted.” Cooper said, limping to the clear boards, tacking up a picture as a starting point.

Three hours later and the agents had a working time line, not that it would really be of any use in the following days.

The FBI way of doing things, the procedures, the routines, gathering evidence for court, made Red want to vomit. So much time wasted, so many resources that could be put to better use. Often, Reddington had rethought his affiliation with such people or such a system, rather.

He knew why he had done it, but he found the tedium unbearable at times.

He had sat out of the way, rereading War and Peace. It seemed appropriate, since the length of the book was equal to the amount of time misspent.

At least he had filled them with scrumptious food which everyone had seemed to greatly appreciate. Such a break fed the body, true, but also the mind.

Dembe amused himself with New York Times crossword puzzles. He originally had tried to emulate his Mentor, using only ink. Red smiled to himself, for the man now had downgraded to pencil.

Cooper’s loud voice, stilled the scurrying agents. “Now people, we’re moving on to...”
“Oh for God’s sake Harold! Let them go.” Red said smoothly, not looking up from his book. “It’s Friday night. Ressler has a hot date. How often does that happen?”

“Reddington,” Cooper objected strenuously, “we have a lot to do here.”

“All of that,” Red pointed to the pictures wrapped around three walls, “is not going to help you catch him.”

“Then why did we do it?” Cooper asked disgustedly

“I don’t know why you’re upset with me,” Red sipped at his tea. “I only said, take a look at his work, not make a book report out of it.” he shut the book gently. “Not all is lost,” he waved over the data nonchalantly, “you’ll need this for the courts,” he muttered quietly, “assuming you get Carver there at all.” he sat his book aside.

“You have no faith in us Red?” Coopers tone mellowed, having heard the remark.

“I get the feeling that he’s not a ‘take me alive’ type of guy.” Red stood, walking to the neglected boxes. Aram’s interest was immediate and focused. “You may get him, but it won’t be a walk in the park.”

Red grabbed the top package, handing it over with a flourish to Cooper. “For you and Charlene.”

Cooper removed the top of the box to reveal a slew of fresh made chocolates. The smell was mouth watering.

The others craned their head to see the contents.

“While we were in Italy, we happened upon the most amazing confectioner who didn’t seem to have one particular specialty.” Red peered in the box. “Not that it mattered, everything was so delicious.” he checked with Dembe. “I think we gained ten pounds.” Dembe nodded to his smiling friend in agreement.

“Steal a piece or two Harold.” It was advised. “Charlene won’t let you near it when you get home, and you know as much.”

Cooper gingerly pulled out a small piece, biting into the soft chocolate. “Delicious. Absolutely delicious,” the man smiled warmly. Holding out the box to share with the others. “Thank you, Reddington. Charlene will be pleased.”

“Oh... my... God!” Both women burst out in unison as they savored the delicacy. One would have thought they were having a religious experience.

Ressler and Aram had swallowed theirs whole, not understanding what the big deal was about. Both exchanged perplexed glances.

Red lips quivered with amusement watching the pair, Dembe, bowed his head slightly hiding his big grin.

“It’s just a piece of candy.” Ressler gestured helplessly.

Aram fingered the stack of remaining boxes, questioningly. “That’s a lot of candy.”

“Have no fear ladies,” Red stated, passing box after box to the correct recipient, “I’m not completely idiotic.”
Beautifully wrapped gift boxes of expensive chocolates seemed secondary to the larger items embossed with name brand designer labels.

Respective mouths dropped. Samar and Elizabeth did not have to be told twice. Both ripped the tops off their packages, eagerly gazing inside, having moved aside tissue paper.

Liz’s blue eyes widened, and she gasped, stunned. A silver pair of the most amazing high-heeled shoes with intricate straps shimmered in the light. If she had to classify them upon first sight, she would have said Cinderella could not have worn anything except these fantastic shoes to the Ball.

Samar gently fingered the champagne straps running her nail from toe to ankle. Red crooked his head, bending lower. “Agent Navabi,” his voice held a trace of awe, “I don’t think I’ve ever truly seen you smile.”

Liz’s eyes grew even larger as she held up for all to see, the handbag which matched her phenomenal gift, perfectly.

Samar’s voice almost squealed her delight holding up her own matching purse. “I know!”

“One simply does not go to Italy and not buy shoes.” Red nodded knowingly, again checking his facts with Dembe who stroked his chin thoughtfully, in total agreement.

The women were inspecting their gifts, feeling the cushy and supple insides of the shoes, running their fingers delicately over the beautiful lines, mesmerized.

Red playfully waved a hand under their faces and chuckled when neither woman acknowledged him in the least.

Aram held up his black shoes, a perplexed look on his face. “Uh, thank you Mr. Reddington.”

Ressler who had been just as lost, frowned hard at his own nine hundred-dollar pair of shoes.

“God, you are such barbarians.” Red punctuated the next sentence carefully and slowly, “Put... them... on.”

Aram immediately did his bidding, sitting hastily pulling the rich leather over his feet. Ressler scratched his head, looked around for a seat, found one and followed suit.

Both men stood carefully, their expressions altering drastically.

“Aweome...” Aram exclaimed, glancing at Ressler’s feet and then his own again.

Ressler looked at the shoes in wonderment. “Damn.”

Red ticked off his fingers, “I gave you the flight number, time of arrival, a very detailed description of the man...” he seemed at a loss. “And you lost him? What did you do, send Ressler?”

Ressler weakly defended himself, “Navabi was there too.”

“You two shouldn’t broadcast that fact.” Red laughed, holding his stomach. “Donald, you constantly exceed my expectations.”

He turned his attention to the business at hand. “Edward, is not as of yet, in the State. Which might buy us a couple days.”
“Carver won’t track him down?” Liz asked.

“Carver has already been paid to do the job. He’ll bide his time.” Red supplied. “If you’re lucky, he’ll take a couple days off, go sightseeing.”

“The cherry blossoms are in bloom this time of year.” Aram helpfully piped in.

Everyone glanced curiously at the man. Reddington waved his hands expressively, shutting his eyes in remembrance. “Ah, the fragrance. So wonderful.”

Cooper chuckled the tension from the room.

“You don’t think he’ll take on another job?” Liz got things back on track.

“I don’t know the man’s complete social calendar. He’s highly in demand.”

“Do you know where he might go to ground?” Ressler said.

“Our best bet right now is finding and tailing Edward.” Red countered.

“Who knows who could die while we’re waiting for this Edward to show up.”

Red could feel all their frustrations, especially Liz’s.

“We’ll find him.” he reassured, knowing full well there could be a high head count by the time they were done.

Red Reddington was damned frustrated.

His men were down to the last popular flop on the list, every major hiding place known to man, and they had turned up nothing.

Red was the best at making people disappear, so not being able to find someone as despicable as Carver, left an itch under his skin that wouldn’t go away.

The filthy bastard may not be in the city, granted, but his men were the best at their jobs. They knew people who knew people. With a tri-state search going on for the psychopath, they had nothing...

When he came face to face with the son of a bitch, and he would, eventually. Red knew he would definitely have the asshole questioned in depth by Brimley.
The upcoming character, Silas, is based on Baz.

Unsure if it was allowed to use a real person in fictional fanfic - I just changed his name.

But Silas for all intents and purposes, is Baz.

April 1

“Do you wish for me to call Elizabeth?” Dembe asked from the driver’s seat.

Red focused his eyes to the front, shaking his head. “I’ve grown so fond of the annoyance that flashes across her lovely face when I show up unexpectedly.”

Dembe chuckled softly as they turned the corner, inclining his head to the right of the street. Red glanced over. Elizabeth and Samar were walking down the sidewalk to a popular bistro.

“I can turn the car around so you can see these facial expressions delivered in their natural habitat.”

“Circle the block and come back.” Red’s tone changed from playful to serious.

Dembe did as instructed.

“I saw Tom.” Red supplied.

Dembe looped around carefully so as to not draw attention, coming slowly back up the street. He slipped into an empty slot, leaving the engine running.

Both men watched Tom Keen’s progress. The slimy bastard paralleled the women’s movements, stopping when they entered the delicatessen.

“I doubt, Raymond,” Dembe said, “that he will approach, seeing as Agent Navabi is with her.”

Red picked up his cell phone, punching in a number. “I think Dembe, I can kill two birds with one stone and still get that irritation I so enjoy.”

The bistro answered, Red described the two women and placed his order. He put his hand over the speaker, “Dembe, what would you like to eat?”

Dembe never took his eyes off Tom Keen, replying casually, “My usual, hold the pickles.”

Red sat back after the call, getting more comfortable in the seat. He watched the women through the large plate-glass windows of the establishment.

At length, the cashier at the counter slid a large bag across to Elizabeth Keen, waving away her attempt to pay. Red chuckled lowly watching the woman’s head dip in defeat. She turned to the window, scanning rapidly.
Having found his location, she flipped him the bird then turned away, but not before Red saw the grin spreading across her face.

Red’s chuckle turned into a genuine laugh as Tom Keen made a hasty exit down a convenient alley way.

“He thought she was flipping him off.” Red saw the humor in the situation. He leaned closer to the window to get a better view then muttered to himself.

“But that gesture was just for me.” his tone was laced with pride.

Dembe slid out into the light traffic easily, pulling up along the curb just as the women exited the restaurant.

Elizabeth grasped Samar’s elbow, directing them to their ride. She automatically headed for the backseat, leaving Samar to the front. Dembe seemed to appreciate the gesture.

“Ladies, what a pleasant surprise running into you here.” Red said cheerfully as they each took their respective seats.

“Aren’t you just the sweetest stalker ever, buying our lunch.” Liz grinned placing the large bag between them.

He smiled charmingly. “Dembe, the park.”

They sat together at a picnic table, Dembe actually joining them, sitting opposite him for a change. And of course, next to Samar.

“I’m glad we took some time. It’s nice out today.” Samar looked up, basking under the sun as she bit into her sandwich.

Dembe pulled his attention from his watchful surveillance. Red’s eyes shifted absently from this spot to that, both men always alert and cautious.

“Yeah,” Liz grimaced, picking small pieces off her sandwich, “the fresh air was needed after seeing more of Carver’s portfolio.”

“I’m only sorry that we have to go back so soon.” Samar smiled openly at Dembe.

Having cleaned up their wrappers, Red escorted the women back to the car. Each man respectively opening and seating the occupants inside.

As they neared the Post Office, Liz leaned over, speaking conspiratorially. “Is something wrong?”

Red’s eyes trained on the back of Samar’s beautiful black hair.

“Samar,” Elizabeth took the hint, “I shouldn’t be too long. I don’t think? Why don’t you go on ahead?”

Dembe escorted the woman to the door. Samar smiled up at him charmingly before entering the building.

“Tom was following you.” Red stated bluntly.

Elizabeth’s head whipped around, “I don’t know when he started or for how long he’s been tailing you.” Red answered the unasked question.
“Can’t you ask one of the guys you have following me?”

“I don’t have anyone on you.” Red pulled out his phone, dialing. “You told me to back off, so I did, against my better judgement.” the man spoke into the phone brusquely, “Resume normal operations pertaining to Ms. Keen.” he nodded shortly. “Yes, thank you.” he hung up, returning his stare to her. “I want you to stay with me for a couple of days.”

“Why would I do that?” she asked neutrally.

“Because you had no idea you were being followed.” Red continued, motioning curtly. “Because your house has terrible security.” she rolled her eyes as he continued. “Because you aren’t ready to face him yet.”

She stopped, having to confront the truth, her spirits sinking. “I don’t think I’ll ever be.”

“I think you will, but until then,” he advised gently, “stay with me until we get your security upgraded.”

He watched her battle her demons, sensing her will weaken.

“He hurt you last time. The bastard held a gun to your head.” It was reminded. “Please don’t make me come over to find he’s done worse. Especially when it can be prevented.”

She looked at him, astounded by his forthrightness, then nodded. “Okay . . . ”

Accompanying her into the Post Office, Red stayed out of her way, genuinely trying to avoid annoying the woman for a change. After making preparation to update her security system, he waited patiently about for her work day to end.

He had gained her trust, and he wasn’t going to do anything to shatter the fragile peace.

She approached him tentatively, “Everything is wrapped up for now.” she crinkled her nose, “Would it be an imposition to swing by my place to get a few things?”

He took hold of her arm, causing her to hastily grab her bag as he guided her through the hallways to the elevator. She adjusted the strap on her shoulder.

“What exactly are they doing at the house and how long will it take, do you know?”

“Probably three days, I’m guessing.” Red pushed the elevator button. “The technical side would bore you to tears. I know I had a good cry over the phone when Silas was trying to explain it all to me.” he patted her hand reassuringly, “Let’s just say, you’ll be as safe as a virgin in a chastity belt.” he chuckled happily. “Not that, that applies to you of course.”

She gave him an old-fashioned look, removing her arm from his grasp.

“What?” he asked innocently, trying to hold his smile.

Her brow furrowed deeply, a thought striking her, “What about Hudson? He’s staying with a friend, but I can’t impose forever.”

“You may bring him if you wish.”

His response actually surprised her. He didn’t seem the type to be fond of dogs or any pet, per se, “Thank you very much.” she replied hesitantly. Totally shocked.
Her thoughts returned to their previous conversation, “Three days?” She questioned. “Don’t you think that’s a little overkill for a new alarm system?”

“For what we’re up against... it’s not enough.”

Arriving at her place fifteen minutes later, Red walked behind her until she reached the top step of the brownstone. She fumbled in her purse for the keys. Red’s hand stilled her movements, she glanced up, perplexed.

Dembe stood silently a few feet away, his eyes vigilant.

A quick silencing motion to Red’s lips, quieted Elizabeth’s natural inquiry. He waggled his fingers, and she handed over her keys. The man silently placed the key in the lock, turning it quietly, easing the door open.

Dembe was suddenly at the man’s side, all but pushing the woman from the vicinity.

Both men crept inside, weapons’ at-the-ready. Red’s arm snaked out preventing Elizabeth her intended movement, holding her back behind the safety of his bulk.

The stocky man inched around the doorframe, just seeing the leg of someone fleeing the room. Rushing forward, he fired off a shot, the bullet splintering the doorframe where the assailant had been.

Red motioned Dembe forward.

Both men headed toward the back of the house, quickly but cautiously. The back door stood wide open and Dembe dashed from the premises into the silent dusk of a day just ending.

Liz whispered, “You’ve got ears like a damn bat.”

Red holstered his weapon, “Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded in compliance.

“Look around.” Red advised. Stepping to the door, he checked the lock, then closed the door. “Is anything out of place or missing that you can see?”

The woman walked the room slowly, “I don’t see anything out of the norm.” She turned back at one point. “Was it Tom?”

The man did not bother replying, “Don’t worry about it right now. If there’s anything in here worth finding my men will secure it later.”

Dembe returned, a silent shake of his head indicating Tom Keen had vanished into the night.

Red clapped the man on the shoulder.

“You’re getting old, Dembe. You could have scaled that wall two months ago easily.” Red teased. He held his grin. “No more Twinkies for you.”

Dembe raised unamused eyes then glanced pointedly at Red’s developing waistline. It was Red’s turn to frown. “You know I can’t resist Baklava.” he turned to a pensive Elizabeth Keen, “Lizzy, do
you think I’m fat?”

The woman, in no mood to reply, obviously, frowned. “Let’s get you packed shall we.”

“Aren’t you glad God created takeout?” Red handed her a bag of food, shifting about the spacious backseat of the car.

Liz took the food absently as she glanced out the window at the two-story stone facade of a beautiful Victorian house. Red stooped down a tad following her line of sight.

“My newest acquisition.” he turned his head, his mouth suddenly very close to hers. “I enjoy owning things.”

Liz felt the warm breath fan her face, his breath smelling of cinnamon. He handed over her purse, sliding out of the opposite car door. Ever the gentleman, he came around to assist her from the vehicle.

“You go ahead,” he motioned, to the well-lit walkway, “we’ll be right there.”

She nodded, stumbling a bit as she walked up the beautifully etched walkway to the inviting entryway. She passed through the two side bushes, the fragrant blooms distracting her.

She started visibly, for a long-haired, bearded man stepped out suddenly from the shadows.

“Jesus!” she reached for her gun automatically, her purse falling from her fingers, landing with a heavy thud on the ground.

She managed to keep the food bag safe and sound on her free arm. In the night air the delicious whiffs of food were washed away by the shot of adrenaline racing through her body.

“Really, Silas?” Red stepped up behind her, easing her tension with a gentle stroke of his hand down her back.

“Lizzy, this is your new bodyguard, Silas.” Red held his smile. “How’s he doing so far?”

Liz dropped her weapon to her side, sighing, exasperated.

Dembe stepped past the trio, opening the door, sending the new Head of Security a doubtful glance.

“I’m sorry, Ma’am,” the bulky man smiled gently to ease her discomfort. “I’m used to lurking about. I’ll do better in the future, I promise.”

Elizabeth clutched the bag of food placing her hand to her heart, attempting to calm her frayed nerves.

“She’s a little jumpy, Silas.” Red explained. “She had an unexpected intruder in her home.”

“Was it you?” Silas smiled at the woman, who laughed the tension away.

“How you paint me.” Red scolded with his look. “Silas, could you have someone grab the bags?”

They entered the spacious foyer, Red unburdening her load. The man crossed to a nearby bar, pouring a vintage Merlot.
Dembe reappeared from the kitchen, loaded down with plates and cutlery.

Elizabeth followed Red into the enormous dining area, her eyes settling on one interesting object after another. The man handed her the glass of wine.

“This will steady your nerves.” he took a mouthful before handing it over to her, “and mine.”

They sat down pulling out containers, Red spooned out decidedly large proportions, handing out plate after plate.

“Red,” Liz leaned forward, a thousand questions coming to the fore. “I was wondering...”

“Stop thinking,” the man held up a fork. “Just eat.”

Liz sat back looking glumly at her food for all of two seconds, concentrating fully on the gourmet selection before her, before diving in with a relish.

Throughout the meal, both men exchanged amused glances at the enthusiasm with which the woman consumed her food.

“Would you like dessert Lizzy?” Red was well pleased with her appetite.

The woman looked down at her empty plate. Good grief. Had she eaten all of that?! A mischievous thought hit her.

She held out the plate, taking on a childlike innocence, bat the lashes, coyly, “May I have some more please, sir?” She asked using her very best English accent.

Red threw back his head, laughing heartedly, shoving over one of the larger containers with a careless hand. “Here you little waif... enjoy.”

Dembe shook his head in open amusement, returning to his meal.

Liz stuck her fork into the soft gooey offering, bringing a small bite to her lips, smelling the decadence long before it reached her tongue. She closed her eyes letting a sweet sound build in her chest.

“Nirvana.” she whispered sacredly. She took another bite, savoring long and hard, “My hips are going to hate me later.” she suddenly didn’t give a shit.

“That sound you just made gave me an erection.” Red mentioned in passing as he took another bite of his food.

Dembe chuckled appreciatively from the opposite side of the table.

Liz’s mouth fell open but then the woman waved her fork in the air, signifying, I’ll get to you later, instantly returning to her glorious piece of heaven.

“Who needs flowers or diamonds, Dembe,” Red wanted to know, “when you can stuff them with chocolate mousse fudge brownie cake.”

Elizabeth Keen followed Red Reddington docilely as he led her throughout the spacious luxurious surroundings. The man had explained on the ride over that this house would be their temporary lodgings for the time being.
The man opened the doorway, having bypassed three subsequent ones, stepping sideways, to usher her in.

Liz’s eyes swept her new surroundings, her mouth falling gently agape.

A gothic four-poster canopy bed centered the room. To the left was a gigantic marble fireplace over which hung a magnificent ocean scape. Liz was immediately drawn to the stormy, almost violent hues of the choppy waters and the full mast sailing vessel that weathered the tempestuous waves.

Liz had difficulty pulling her eyes from the strange beauty of the painting.

“I stole that painting... do you like it?”

Elizabeth scowled at the man, never quite sure when he was being serious. “Don’t tell me things like that... but I do love it.”

A ladies desk sat to the right of the fireplace, an oversized stuffed chair lay silently awaiting its occupant.

Red had disappeared momentarily into another room. Seconds later she heard the inviting rush of taps being turned to full on. The man reappeared instantly, a smile on his lips. He waved an imperious hand.

“Towels are in there.” he indicated a side cupboard. “Along with a nice clean fluffy robe, stolen from the Hyatt just last week.” his facade had not cracked one iota. The woman sighed heavily, her head dropping slightly for the unnecessary rejoinder.

“Dembe is upstairs, and I’m across the hall.” he closed the shutters, shutting out the night. “Divide and conquer. That’s my motto . . . actually it’s Dembe’s, but I stole it.”

The man stepped a few steps closer, his eyes softening. He placed his hands on her upper arms, rubbing gently. “Take a long relaxing bath, Lizzy. After today, if anyone deserves it, you do.”

His hands fell away. She smiled up at him. “You could tempt Satan himself.”

“I have him on payroll.” he turned slowly, halting by the bedside. Red lifted his eyes, “Drink the wine sweetheart... you’re tense.”

She took quick stock of her body language finding his statement true. She dropped her shoulders, rolling her head back and forth as her hand squeezed her neckline to ease the growing headache.

“What the hell does he want?” she had to ask the question. “Why can’t he just leave me alone?”

Red did not pretend to misunderstand. “Tom Keen is a sociopath. You told him, no.” he shrugged stocky shoulders. “His job was to get the Fulcrum, he failed. Two very wrong things in his world.”

Short and to the point. Sometimes she appreciated it, but only sometimes.

She crossed to the window, then retraced her steps. The blinds had been closed.

“I used to love that house. When I bought it. It was mine. My home. Now,” she sighed, “now I don’t want to go there. I don’t want to be there... I hate it.”

He reached out, pushing the hair off her shoulder, “No big decisions tonight. You’re safe. You’re secure. Tonight just, let it go... trust me.”
He handed her the glass of wine, pushing her toward the oasis awaiting her. “Soak until you shrivel, then sleep.”

“You don’t have to twist my arm.” she absently unbuttoned the first three buttons of her silk blouse. Kicking her heels aside, her mind already settling into a relax mode.

“Nothing can harm you here.” Red’s voice soothed her.

Closing the bathroom door behind him, he leaned into the doorframe, blowing out a breath. He shut his eyes, pushing away the vision of her half-undone shirt and that scrumptious glance of pale skin. He forced his breathing to calm, shaking his head slightly for his lack of control. He left the bedroom.
Let it Simmer

April 2

Liz awoke, surprised to find herself refreshed and rested, having slept the entire night through. She had, last night, instantly melted into the plush warmth of the most comfortable bed she had ever known.

She reluctantly sat up, stretched, throwing the back the blankets, she padded to the bathroom. Forty minutes later, dressed and famished, she headed out, fastening the watch on her wrist. She followed the smell of delicious food down the corridor and the foyer steps.

She found Red and Dembe in the kitchen. Dembe looked up from his coffee and Red, sleeves rolled up was slaving over a hot stove.

He sat a plate with a fluffy omelet beside Dembe, waving his spatula with a flourish. “An Army travels on its stomach.” he declared with a finality that she found amusing.

“Are you going to attack someone today?” she jested, taking her seat, the fantastic aroma of the food making her mouth water.

Dembe shifted his eyes in a non-committed manner. Liz’s smile slipped a tad then craned her neck searching out Red Reddington. “You aren’t, are you?”

“What time is it?” Red asked absently, sitting his pan aside, going to pour everyone a fresh cup of coffee.

“Almost ten.” Dembe answered smoothly, his nose seemingly buried in the morning headlines.

Liz bolted upright. “Oh my God, I am so late.”

Red hands cupped her shoulder gently receding the woman, “Everyone has the day off. Except me, of course.” he pointed at Dembe who had glanced up surreptitiously. “And him.”

Dembe’s scowl deepened.

“Sorry big guy, you’re needed.” Red placed cream and sugar in Dembe’s cup. “I’ll buy that new Ducati you’ve been pestering me to get.” Dembe’s frown disappeared. The man went back to his newspaper.

“And what do I do?” Liz wanted to know. “What are you gonna buy me?”

“Do you want a new Ducati too?”

Red sighed, seeing the woman’s expression had not changed one iota. “Read a book, do yoga, take up water coloring.” He exasperated. “What do you usually do on your days off?”

She pouted effectively, her tone sullen. “None of the above.”

Then Red sighed again, pulling her along, making his way to his office. Liz pulled away quickly, hastily retracing her steps, grabbing her plate and coffee.
After finishing her book, Liz toured the house walking room to room.

The place was enormous. Just on the east side of the two story building she had found two sitting rooms, two bathrooms, a game room, an entertainment room and an atrium. In her search, she found Red Reddington sitting in a semi-enclosed porch, drink and cigar in hand, enjoying the evening air.

“There you are.” she said as she neared him. “I’ve been looking all over for you.”

“What did you need?” he reached to roll the cherry off the end of the fragrant smoke.

“That smells good, please don’t put it out.”

He put the tip back to his lips, tonguing the end then drew on the cigar, blowing the smoke out in a thin stream.

“Anything new on the western front?”

“No, nothing yet.” He waved his cigar aimlessly, “Not that I mind, to be honest.”

“Tired?”

“Yes.”

She was a little shocked that he had answered her so simply.

“There’s something to be said for the quiet before the storm.”

“There’s something about this one that’s bothering you, isn’t there.” Elizabeth stated.

“From what I know of Carver, when he does surface, it’ll be messy and eventful.” he rubbed his eyes tiredly, “I’m not looking forward to it.”

“We’ve dealt with worse, haven’t we?” Something was making the hair on the back of her neck stand on end.

“There are too many unknown variables in play.” he thought aloud.

“And Tom isn’t helping any.”

“He needs to get the Fulcrum and will do whatever it takes.”

“I don’t know anything about the Fulcrum.” she exasperated.

He lifted consoling eyes, “That’s enough for today, Lizzy, not to worry. I have it covered.”

“He won’t give up.”

“He’ll get it or you,” Red mumbled, puffing on his cigar, “over my dead body.”

Liz had spent the last two days with Red and Dembe. The only development so far, was that Edward Costa had been found, in New Jersey of all places. Red’s crew kept tabs on him and now it was a waiting game.

Red had scheduled a meeting with the man for the following night via an associate.
During her time with the two men Liz had smiled frequently at the lively discussions concerning books and music. Both men were well read, versed in many different subjects. Liz was fascinated by the array of knowledge Red Reddington possessed. The man had scattered a potpourri of weird facts throughout any narrative he undertook.

Liz found herself laughing out loud on many different occasions. As for Red, his thoughts often turned to Carver. The itch under his skin grew each day that the bastard was not found.

This guy was like Houdini.

Red settled back into the comfort of his dining room chair, shifting his body, lifting his chin regally. Tonight they dined on amazing Mexican dishes from one of Red’s favorite ‘hole in the wall’ establishments. And he had to say, he was enjoying watching Liz enjoy the meal. Truth told, he had enjoyed each meal with her. She had taken such pleasure in each and everyone.

“Do you have copies of the Stewmaker’s victims on your computer?” Red asked, before sipping from his beer.


“I thought I might be able to assist you with identifying a few.” Red waved his hand casually about.

“Narrow down your search.”

The woman eyed him warily, and Red saw her hesitation, perplexed by it.

“Lizzy, I assure you,” Red assured her, leaning forward slightly, his arm resting on his thigh, “I have nothing to gain by offering my assistance.” his brow furrowed slightly, “Although, perhaps I did.”

He had her full attention. “About five years ago I was having a minor rivalry with a man named Hector Pineda.” his chin heightened, his eyes narrowing into a slight slit. “We were both vying for a large deal, his supply was closer... my shipment arrived first.” he shook his head and leaned forward slightly. “Because I’m just that good.” the man leaned back totally satisfied himself. “I didn’t hear anything out of him after that.”

His mouth pursed thoughtfully, and he seemed in deep concentration for a long spell.

“You gained a financial boost from his disappearance.” It was summed up.

“A very large one, yes.”

The woman stuck her fork in her mouth as she stood, gesturing for Red to wait and took off to her bedroom. Several minutes later she returned with her laptop. Red held his smile, reaching behind him for a ream of paper and a couple of pens.

“I’ll look, you write.” He said as he pulled out the seat next to him and slid her plate across the table.

“The pictures are numbered.” She explained. “If you recognize one, I need the number and the name, I guess.”

“Eat.” he directed, sliding her computer closer. The man scrolled through the photos rapidly, his movements finally slowing by degrees. “Number eleven, Josef Nance.”

For the next fifteen minutes the routine was unvaried. Except when they reached...

“Number thirty-two is William Kelley and he is not dead.”
“But... he’s in the book.”

“Doesn’t mean he’s dead. I saw him, a month ago in Macao.”

“You’re sure?”

“I sat across from the man at a poker table.”

“Why would he be in the book then?”

“Proof of death.”

“Again, if he’s not dead...?”

Red shrugged. “If there was a hit out on him, he could have bought his way out. Because of the Stewmaker’s reputation, his word that Kelley was dead was good enough proof.” Red smiled wryly, “There isn’t supposed to be a body left, after all.” It was reminded needlessly, “Trust me, he’s very much alive.”

Liz watched him scroll through the photos, bypassing some, hesitating on others. Red’s eyes skimmed the page moving slowly downward, then hastily revisited one photo after another, his photographic memory coming to the fore.

“Number forty-eight, Sasha Valencia.” Red frowned, then reached for his beer.

She watched his face closely, the handsome profile allowing anger at first then oddly, sadness. “You knew her.” She surmised.

“Yes, I knew her.” his tone was resigned. “We were romantically involved at one point.”

The woman mulled over such a simply stated revelation. “Maybe she’s like William Kelley.”

“No, she’s dead. I would have crossed paths with her by now.”

“I’m sorry.” And she was. It was one thing to end a relationship, another to know the woman you’d made love to was discarded in such a manner. It bothered her to see Red so upset by it as well.

“Red, out of all these people,” Liz had to ask, “how many would you consider a friend?”

“I’ve said before, I don’t have friends.”


“Dembe is more than a friend...” the simple statement seemed a form of prose coming from this man. To be considered ‘a friend’ in Red Reddington’s world was quite a concept in Elizabeth Keen’s universe.

“Would you like another beer?” He arose, awaiting the reply.

“Uh, sure.” The man returned with two chilled bottles, handing her one as he sat back down.

“... Me.” Elizabeth shyly offered.

“Excuse me?” The penetrating eyes sought her out instantly.

“Granted, I am your handler and you’re my CI, but I consider us friendly... friends.”
“Do you normally go about sticking pens in friends’ necks?”

“When the occasion calls for it, maybe.” She teased right back, “When I say, don’t drink and drive, I mean it.”

The silence came then an odd thought struck the woman, “Red, you know I don’t have any friends.”

“You do. Aram, Dembe... me.” he corrected easily. “Number sixty.” he sing-songed his head, “Well, he had it coming.”

After twenty minutes of Red throwing out names, she sagged in her chair, sliding her empty plate away.

“I can’t move.” she suddenly realized then glanced down, “I’m just going to slither to the floor and sleep right here.” the woman pointed to the Oriental rug beneath her feet.

Her phone rang, and Red recognized Ressler’s ring tone. “No sleep tonight.” he smiled around the bottle at his lips.
Red leaned on the trunk of Ressler’s car looking at the gathered crowd. He frowned at them, wondering what it was about ‘tragedy’ that called to people. And where the hell had they come from?

It was an eclectic bunch. Men and women in business suits, teenagers, parents with a stroller.

Meeting the eye of more than a few, he made a quick game of their interest in him. Staring at them until they inevitably looked away.

While nosy, people would forget what made them uncomfortable. The chance of seeing a dead body in a bag would make great story telling to their friends over the next day. A man in a three-piece suit that made them uncomfortable, would be forgotten by the time they made it down the block.

“Scaring the tourists?” Lizzy asked as she approached.

“It’s sad, Lizzy.” he pouted, “I’m number four on the Most Wanted list. My face is plastered in Post Offices across the world and no one recognizes me.”

She patted his shoulder consolingly. “Take heart,” she opened her notebook jotting down her notes, “they may think you’re in police custody.”

Red scoffed before snorting.

“Or, even with the substantial reward on your head, the danger of getting involved with you just isn’t worth it.” she finished writing her notes then looked at the man.

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.” he dismissed airily. “Speaking of which, you have a little color back now. Do you feel better?”

“I don’t know what you mean?” she lied convincingly. When she had seen the condition of the body, it had turned her stomach.

Red had sought a trash can had she needed it, but was in a quandary. How to find one without contaminating the crime scene. He had been proud when she had pulled herself together, continuing her work in a professional manner.

“I don’t know how that didn’t bother you?” she practically accused.

“I’ve seen some of the worst mankind can do to one another, Lizzy.” he readily explained, “Adults,” he dismissed entirely, “they did something to get in their predicament.” Red’s eyes narrowed and turned ice cold, “Kids on the other hand... then you’ll see emotion.”

Elizabeth Keen shivered involuntarily. The man did not have to finish his thought.

“I can honestly hope I never have to experience that emotion coming from you.”

He thought maybe she meant that as a put down, the way it had been said, but then he realized that she didn’t want to ever see it because it would mean a child had been hurt.

“I hope you don’t either.” he commiserated.
“Keen.” Donald approached gingerly.

“Yes?” She turned to him, taking the file he held out. “What’s this?”

“Statements from the people who found the body.” Ressler settled his hands on his hips, turning to Reddington, “You sure you don’t know him?” he asked Red yet again.

“You can keep asking and I’ll keep telling you no, I don’t know…” Red stopped, turning his head slightly, as though listening for something.

“What?” Liz picked up on the change in the man.

The man hesitated for a long moment, “Carver’s here.” he spoke brusquely. “He’s watching us.”

Ressler was more than annoyed, “How can you know that?”

“It’s called intuition. I haven’t survived twenty years without trusting my gut.” Red’s tone sharpened, not suffering idiots easily at this time. “I’m telling you... he’s here.”

She hesitated to look, “In the crowd maybe?” she had picked up on his tone.

Red shook his head sharply, “He’s behind me, I can feel it.”

“This is ridiculous.” Ressler snapped, “Now we’re relying on your Spidey sense.”

Red took off his hat, scratching his head moving to the car. He threw his hat on the trunk casually. “Switch positions with me.” he instructed quietly, taking her vacant spot slowly but surely.

He focused on the two Agents, “Talk casually amongst yourselves.” They stared blankly at him, and he sighed deeply, “Something, Anything!” he exasperated instructions. “The pets you had as a child, new apps on your phone... Ressler’s love life. I need to look bored.”

Liz narrowed her eyes at Red, then perked up a bit. “How is your love life Ress?”

“Better than yours.” Ressler shot back.

“Score for Donald.” Red mumbled as he casually scanned the area.

“Hey! I only recently got divorced you know.” Liz defended herself.

“You never did tell us how that date went, Donald.” Red leaned into the car, crossing his arms. He schooled his features into the most put upon expression he could muster, tilting his head up, looking at the roof tops.

“It went fine!” Ressler replied heatedly.

“Doesn’t sound like it to me, does it you Red?” Liz snickered.

Red shook his head ‘no’ in complacent camaraderie.

“We have plans this weekend, just so you know.” Don preened. “We’re going – ”


There it was again. A slight movement on the roof top, two buildings back. Blocking out all other
vision, his eyes centered on that dark shadow. Then he saw the glint.

Scope. His mind screamed.

“Gun!” Red grabbed Liz, shoving her behind the wheel well of a nearby police cruiser, covering her with his own body as Ressler dove behind his car.

Seconds later there was a pop, then a whistling fizzle in the air before a bullet smashed into the gravel where they had been standing, followed by another.

Ressler snapped out commands to seal the area. The crowd panicked, running amok, trying not to become targets. Cops and agents scattered, hiding behind anything of use, weapons drawn.

Red heard the crunch of tires driving over gravel, nearing their position.

“Stay low, lay down on the seat.” he urged Liz forward, having turned her around, shielding her with his body. The car came to a stop alongside Ressler’s vehicle. Red had a perfect shot to the now open backdoor.

Dembe’s low velvet voice came out of the night, “Raymond.”

“Get in the back.” Red commanded.

“I can’t leave.” Liz protested, pushing back at his insistent hands.

“Where the hell are you two going?” Ressler demanded.

Red grabbed her arm, pushing her roughly. “You’re going!” Red barked as a bullet hit the ground closer to their position, spraying them in a fine mist of dirt.

“Go Keen!” Ressler yelled at the pair as the bullets grew closer. “Get out of here!”

Red peered over the car, watching as the lens moved upwards.

He’s reloading. His mind clicking into gear.

“Get down.” he hissed, his palm cupping her head. The shot that followed tore through the bumper of the car they were hiding behind.

“Go!” Red dragged her beside him, crouched over her small body. “Now.”

She moved up over the bottom door frame, climbing into the back.

Red crawled in after her, his body covering Liz’s smaller body completely. He glanced back checking on Ressler’s safety.

The young man was well hidden and safe for the moment. Red pulled the door with his foot, just as a shot hit the passenger window.

The car lurched forward, slamming the door closed. The tires threw gravel as they made their getaway.
A block down, Red put his leg into the floor board, then raised his chest off her back. “You can sit up now.”

“I thought you said he wasn’t after you?” Liz caught her breath, pressing her rib cage.

“You all right?” he gestured to her torso.

“Yeah, seat belts aren’t comfortable when they dig into your chest.” she squirmed aimlessly about.

“You didn’t answer me.”

“I don’t think he’s here for me specifically.”

“Well, someone was shooting at you.” she reminded.

“There’s a running bounty on my head. Maybe he thought he’d get lucky and collect on it?” he pulled his phone from his pocket. “For all you know, he could have been aiming for you.”

“Me?!” she squealed breathlessly. “What for?”

“You’re just as popular out there as I am.” Raymond reminded. “The Fulcrum, Lizzy.” he sighed lightly. “Do you not listen to me? What you have is priceless. There are a couple dozen groups out there willing to kill, well, you, just so they can get their hands on it.”

She fell silent, thinking for the first time that what he had been saying was true. She had always just assumed that he had wanted the Fulcrum for himself. And maybe he did, but he wasn’t going around gunning for her. If anything, he had gone out of his way to protect her.

He could have just killed her, ransacked her belongings and taken it. But he hadn’t.

Why? She asked herself that on a daily basis these days.

“Cooper.” Red spoke into the phone. Liz leaned over, straining to hear the conversation.

“Is Keen all right? Ressler said your car had been hit.” Cooper’s voice held his consternation. He missed being out in the field, seeing the action first-hand.

“She’s fine.” Red looked the woman over, assuring himself that she was fine.

“Ressler said the shooting stopped when you two left.” Cooper was grateful for the little things in life these days.

“I expected as much.” Reddington shifted, pulling his jacket down in the back.

“Tell me where you are. I’ll send a couple of men to bring Keen back to the Blacksite? We’ll make sure she’s sa–” Cooper took charge, as was his way.

“No, she’ll come there when I bring her in and she leaves when I do. I’m not letting her out of my sight unt–”

“They want her debriefed. Find out if she’s noticed anybody following her.”

“Don’t you think she would have mentioned that?” Red shook his head when she opened her mouth. He didn’t think this had anything to do with Tom, so there was no reason to mention it. Not in his world at least.

“They think it would be better to separate you two, in case this has something to do with your
business ties.”

“That is not going to happen.”

“I told them that. So they said that a safe house with rotating guards, maybe they’ll catch this Carver character with a twenty-four-hour watch.” Cooper tried reason. “She’s become a valuable agent and they want to protect their asset.”

“She was already valuable.” Red snapped peevishly. “Who are they? Who said?”

“Tom Connolly’s people, for one.”

“I’m sure he did.” Red stated sarcastically. “It’s not happening.”

“Damn it, Red. They aren’t going to be happy about this.” Frustration poured off the man. “At least let me give you a detail, maybe it might appease them.”

“The FBI’s protection detail is bullshit.” In Red’s humble opinion. “We’ll be just fine on our own.”

“They’re going to insist.”

“Then you tell them that if they can find us, they can put as many people on us as they like.” He snapped the phone shut, tossing it out the window.

“What did Cooper say?”

“Shut your phone down.”

“Why would he say that?”

“Shut off your phone.” He sighed. She pulled her phone from her pocket, powering it down.

“Now, what did he really say?”

He repeated most of the conversation.

“What else did he say?”

“Cooper’s higher ups want to know where we are, give us a battalion of men in FBI jackets and ear pieces, see if they can catch Carver. Like that won’t draw attention. The idiots.”

“Maybe we should...” She stopped when he looked at her, just begging for her to finish her thought.

“All they’ll do is keep him from coming at us.”

“Isn’t that kind of the point?”

“Generally, it’s easier to catch someone when they’re in the same vicinity as you.”

“What now?”

He leaned his head back into the headrest, closing his eyes. “I think I might have an idea about what to do tomorrow.”

After a quiet night at Red’s place, where he had spent a good hour on the phone making plans, a
time and place had been arranged to meet Edward Costa.

They had headed to the Post Office the next morning, with Liz going to her office and Red seeking out Cooper.

“No, Harold!” Red shook his head, adamant. “You and your storm troopers can’t go. You all scream ‘cop’.” He stated the obvious. “I’ve just got Lizzy to transform out of cop mode. I don’t have time to deal with the whole team.” The man disdained. “I sure as hell can’t make Ressler suave in three weeks, let alone three hours.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to go in alone.” Cooper stated.

“It’s a party, Harold.” The agitated man tapped his hat against his knee. “Not a drug deal.”

“What about Agent Keen’s safety? She’s walking into a den of criminals.” It was subsequently pointed out. “Who’s to say something won’t go wrong?”

“You know, contrary to popular belief,” Red rolled his eyes. “We don’t whip out our guns the minute someone walks in a door. This isn’t Chicago in the 1920’s.” Both men fell silent, upset. “Although, I do hold a certain fondness for that Era.”

“Harold,” Red compromised as much as he ever would. “Because of my invaluable tutelage, Agent Keen has become quite capable maneuvering in the underworld.” He narrowed his eyes at the man, “Stop discounting her so quickly.” He insisted. “Besides that, Dembe will be there. I’ll be there. And you know I won’t let anything happen to her.”

The black man reclined into his seat, thinking. “All right, she can go. But you watch her.”

Red nodded, aggravated. She was going regardless of what Harold said. “Sure, and I’ll have her home by curfew.”

A discrete knock interrupted the conversation. “Come in.” Harold called out.

Liz breezed into the room, sipping her ever present coffee. “You wanted to see me, sir?” She smiled in Red’s direction as an afterthought.

“Agent Keen.” Harold broke the news gently. “I hope you have a little black dress on hand.”

Liz scrunched her face, grimacing. “Eh...yes, sir.” The woman immediately glanced suspiciously at the man to her right.

Red frowned back, a little put out by her attitude. He thought they had been getting along well lately. Maybe he’d been wrong?

“Your assignment, is simple. You’re to stay with him or Dembe the entire night.” Cooper dropped into his ‘Task Force Director’ mode. “Observe, listen, stay quiet. Let Red work his angle.”

The woman looked decidedly uncomfortable and confused.

Red sighed loudly, dropping his head into the wall before standing and walking away.

“Yes, sir.” She frowned as Red swept past her, watching his back as he left the room. “Is there anything else?”

“Reddington will give you all the pertinent information.” Harold waved her off.
Liz, who had waited for the dismissal caught up to Red as he walked down the corridor.

“Red! Wait up.” She shuffled quickly up to him, “Where are we going?”

“You don’t have to go if you don’t want to, Lizzy.”

She pointed back to his office. “But, Cooper said...”

“I know what he said.” Red interrupted. “But, I can get all you need and deliver it later.” He decided with finality. “You won’t leave the Post Office until I get back, understand?” He scolded. “Especially with Ressler, because basically... he’s an idiot.”

“You don’t want me to go?” She frowned.

“You didn’t look like you wanted to go.” Red stated.

“No, I want to go. It was the thought of heels that I didn’t like.”

“Excuse me?” Relief washed over Red.

“My feet are killing me,” she lifted her foot, showing her new boots, “breaking them in.”

Red felt a little lighter than he had a few short moments ago, when he thought she hadn’t wanted to spend the evening with him. “Wear short heels, go barefoot. I don’t care.”

Liz nodded, thinking it wasn’t such a bad idea. “So what’s this thing we’re going to?”

“I’m going to reconnect with some associates and I’m hoping to get a line on Carver and his whereabouts.”

“You think he’ll be there?” she shivered involuntarily at the thought.

“No. Not his kind of crowd.” Liz looked confused, so Red explained. “The closest he’ll come to wearing a tux is if it’s printed on a t-shirt.”

Liz snickered at the mental picture. “So it is black tie?” She pouted.

“Afraid so.”

“Wait, Red. I have to get a dress! That ‘black dress’ I mentioned is hideous and I need to feed Hudson and get ready at my place ... all my stuff is there but...”

“Breathe.” He instructed, slightly amused. “Take Samar and Dembe with you.” He had it figured out already. “As a matter of fact,” He pulled a card out of his wallet, handing it to her. “Go here. They’ll put you in a private room which will be easier for Samar and Dembe to cover.”

She flipped the card, vaguely recognizing the dress shop name. “Don’t you need Dembe?”

“I need to speak to Cooper about something important.” He ignored the question. “Tell Dembe I’ll be there at seven.”
Scent of a Woman

April 3

Red Reddington looked like a million dollars when he stepped out of the car which had pulled up to the curb seconds before.

He walked jauntily around the backside of the freshly washed Mercedes, his footsteps slowing then stopping completely. A deep frown creased his forehead. His eyes had caught the sight of a slip of paper tucked carefully beneath Liz’s windshield wiper.

He stepped forward slowly, removing the neatly folded note, his eyes scanning rapidly the typed words.

_You really are a beautiful woman. Not that I haven’t noticed before. I know that you’re going through a hard time. Just know . . . I am here._

Red’s scowl deepened considerably. He looked around rapidly for his friend Dembe who just, as if on cue, rounded the South corner of the street.

Red removed his fedora, motioning the man forward.

Dembe hurried his steps, reaching the rendezvous point in record time, sensing a problem.

Red handed the note over, waiting patiently for the large black man to read it. He motioned with his head to the vicinity of Liz’s windshield.

“This was not here seven minutes earlier.” Dembe’s scowl matched Red Reddington’s. “There has been no traffic to speak of, no people on the street... nothing of concern.”

Red touched the man’s shoulder, trusting Dembe implicitly.

“Don’t worry Dembe,” Red decided to put it out of his mind for the present. “We’ll find this ‘would be’ poet laureate, sooner or later.” He straightened his bow tie. “Tonight we’re not going to worry about anything.”

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“Wow.” Samar looked at their reflection and then to the woman standing beside her, silently applauding their efforts. Liz turned back and forth, studying her body. “You look stunning.”

“Is that the word we’re going with?” She asked, unsure, turning this way and that to check her reflection once again.

“Let me put it this way,” Samar assured, “Reddington will be proud, happy and very annoyed to have you on his arm tonight.”

“Annoyed?” Liz questioned apprehensively.

“He’ll have to fight off your potential suitors all evening, so yes, he’ll be annoyed.” Samar snickered.

“Don’t do that.” Liz released the breath she’d been holding, backhanding Samar’s arm playfully. “I’m already nervous.”

Samar fluffed the small train lightly, the heavy crystals clicking on the hard wood floor. “Damn, I like this dress.”

“It is nice, isn’t it?”

Thankfully Red had told the sales woman what the evenings plans were and what type of dress might be needed, so there were gowns waiting when they had arrived. In her size, no less. How he did that, she didn’t want to know.

“I hope he likes it... since he paid for it.” She had been annoyed with him at first, having had everything placed on his account. But she figured, why not. It was his turf, he knew what was expected in his crowd. And it was expensive.

Samar hid her smile, “Why is that?” In her short time there, she had seen the way Reddington looked at the woman. He was completely infatuated with her. How Liz didn’t see it was beyond her.

“Why is what?” She threw some lipstick and other needed things into her silver bag.

“Why do you hope he likes it?”

“He’s always so put together and I’m not. Not really.” Liz believed in facing facts. “This isn’t my type of thing. I’ve only been out to these functions with him.” She worried her hands, second guessing herself. “I don’t ever know if I’m picking the correct attire.”

“Has he ever said anything?” Samar questioned, intrigued since she didn’t see the previous attempts to fit in with the ‘In’ crowd.

“No, but maybe he’s just being nice?” Liz fretted.

“He has a reputation to protect. He wouldn’t...” Samar stopped, hearing the knock downstairs. “I’ll go down, you finish.”

Making her way down, she pulled the door open, smiling. Her eyes softened at the ‘vision’ standing so gravely quiet before her. “You look very dapper.” Eyeing Red in his evening coat that allowed just a glimpse of his bow tie.

“Is Lizzy all right?” He removed his black felt hat, looking around for the woman, not having expected the agent to still be hanging around so late.
The beautiful agent beamed her approval, having noted the exquisite bouquet hanging limply in Red’s hand.

“Yes. She’ll be down in a minute.” Samar explained the questioning glance. “I’m still here because she forgot the logistics of the dress.” Red frowned, tilting his head in question.

“She needed help with her zipper.” Samar explained. “Those are absolutely beautiful.” she motioned to the flowers.

Reddington glanced down as if having forgotten the fragrant blooms lay against the side of his expensive trousers.

“Ah.” Red relaxed, minutely, gallantly offering a perfect single rose to Samar. “So she’s about ready?”

Samar brought the soft petals to her lovely mouth, inhaling the rich scent. She smiled warmly at the man.

“I’m coming, Red.” Liz called from the upstairs, hurrying to finish the last tasks required.

“Take you’re time.” He called up to her, then turned his attention elsewhere for the time being.

“Oh, you’re wearing them.” Red said, pointing down at Samar’s feet and the heels he had gifted her.

“I sleep in them.” She lifted her trouser leg, showing them off. “I didn’t say before, I don’t think?” she had been so enthralled by the shoes, “Thank you.” she smiled happily.

“It was my pleasure.” Red returned the warm smile.

Hearing Liz descending, he turned his head to see her own silver heels touching the stairs, the delicate straps shining brightly against the dim light. When he saw her leg peak through the slit of her dress, his eyes lifted ever so slowly, enjoying the trek...

“Damn...” he blinked his eyes, focusing on the woman.

Samar snickered quietly at his appreciation. Liz had just been saying how unsophisticated she felt next to Reddington. She could see how, from Liz’s point of view, Red would have no real interest in a young, inexperienced woman.

In Samar’s world, the man not only showed ‘interest’ but ‘involvement.’ He still had not taken his eyes off the young woman.

He stood transfixed.

The form fitting blood red gown didn’t have any give what-so-ever. A sash, just under her waist held in place by a tasteful flower broach, accentuated her hips and the high slit that ended mid thigh, drew attention to her leg.

The deep neckline stopped just at her sternum and straps ran up each shoulder in a halter-like style.

The gown was unlike anything he thought she would have been comfortable with. Even with him assuring her many times that she could carry it off.

“Lizzy, you are absolutely enchanting.” Red extended his hand, helping her down the last few steps. Still holding her hand, he stepped back looking her up and down. “Red definitely suits you.” he
grinned at his own unintentional double entendre, then sobered slightly, his eyes mellowing. “Stunning!”

“Okay.” The other woman felt suddenly very much the ‘third wheel’. “I’m going to go ahead and take off.”

Both snapped their head to look at Samar, having forgotten she was even there.

“If you need help later...” She offered, knowing full well she wouldn’t get called.

“Thank you so much for being here, Samar.” Liz hugged the woman, then stepped back quickly, unsure the embrace would be welcomed.

“Have a good night, be safe.”

Red politely opened the door for the woman. He watched her clear the steps, and disappear across the street. He closed the door quietly, having assured Samar’s safety, hearing the car pull away from the curb. Clearing his throat gently, he returned his attention readily.

“Your wrap?” he asked.

She pointed to the long coat hanging on the door. The garment, also new, thanks to Red’s urging via the saleswoman, complimented her outfit to perfection.

Glancing in the mirror by the door, she automatically checked her hair.

“You couldn’t be more lovely. Don’t bother trying.” Red held her coat open, coming towards her.

Turning her back on him, she heard him grunt appreciatively.

“Fuck...” he whispered his awe.

“What! What’s wrong?” She looked over her shoulder at the dress, afraid she’d ripped it.

He stared, transfixed on the sight of the back of the dress hugging her, curving tightly against the woman’s backside down to her thighs before flaring out in a short train. The shimmering beadwork caught in the low light of the hall, blinking diamonds of light danced along her entire body and the surrounding hallway with her slight movement. The top of her back and shoulders were bare and warm under the low light.

Damn it all to hell! He had not planned on such a distraction tonight. This was going to be “iffy at best”.

When he saw that dress, he knew that his contemporaries, when they caught one glimpse of her, were going to circle like a bunch of foaming mouthed wolves.

In civilized company, he’d have nothing to worry about. But a room full of criminals... it was going to be an interesting evening.

“Nothings wrong.” he stepped forward, helping her get one arm then the other into her coat. “Just admiring your gown.”

Leaning forward, he captured the light scent of her perfume, inhaling deeply. “You smell just as wonderful as you look.”
He lifted the bouquet, “These pale in comparison.”

The woman flushed with pleasure, receiving the flowers graciously.

It took damn near all his self control not to bury his nose in the curve of her neck and lick the scent away until he found her natural one and even then, he wasn’t sure he’d stop.

Liz flushed brightly at the compliment, beaming, “Well, thank you, Red.” She absently grabbed her clutch. “Very much.” She smiled, her new found joy, burying her nose into the soft petals. “It’s been so long since I…” she lifted wistful eyes, her embarrassment coming to the fore. “You look very nice too.”

She blurted the faux pas, taking the time to really observe the man.

*Very nice.* She thought the ‘compliment’ so lame... this man looked phenomenal.

She couldn’t help but see the marked difference between Red and Tom in a tuxedo. While Tom was handsome, he always seemed to look like a little boy playing dress up in the too baggy formal suit. But Red was dashing in his tailored finery, highlighting his broad shoulders and chest and tapered waist.

One attempted sophistication while the other reeked of it, because no one swaggered in a tux and could carry it off, like Red Reddington did.

And he smelled so good. She had even started sniffing colognes at the store trying to find the elusive brand he used and had been admittedly disappointed in her search.

“And you smell absolutely delicious.” she gushed.

“Thank you.” he accepted graciously, finding her maladroit ramblings utterly charming. “I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty of calling in a reservation for dinner. I was sure you’d be famished. Though,” he ogled the dress hugging her tightly, “I’m not sure where you’ll put it.”

“I’ll manage.” She quipped, “Come on, I’m starving.”

“As am I, dear Lizzy.” Red tilted his head, eyeing her sensually as she walked away. The woman was blissfully unaware, to interested in her bouquet to note his interest.

It was going to be a long night.
I wanted to thank everyone who left a comment and kudos! They have ALL made my day!

April 3

Dinner turned out to be a delightful affair. Liz was very impressed in spite of herself, when Red ordered the complete course in French. She secretly hoped he had not ordered her something along the lines of ‘monkey brains’ but when the entrée arrived, it was delicious beyond belief.

Liz felt very sophisticated in her new ensemble. She found herself sitting straighter, decidedly watching her table manners.

All in all, it was a totally delightful episode.

“What’s our cover, Red?” she hated to break the moment, but business called.

“If we want all access at this gathering, the only way to achieve that is for you to arrive as my... fiancée.” he held up a restrictive hand. “Cliché, yes. But effective.”

He cut her a look, “Trust me on this.” a frown creased his intelligent brow. “I know these people, I know how they think and what they expect.”

“Fine. So why don’t I rate the lofty position as wife?” she half-way quipped, a little uneasy with the new role assigned her, truth told.

“It would have gotten around that I had married. Even if it had happened in the last day.” he stretched luxuriously. “Good news, as they say, travels fast.”

“I don’t understand why I couldn’t have just been your new accountant?”

“As I said before,” Red iterated, “if you are uncomfortable with any of this, we don’t even have to bother.” he reminded tactfully. “It is just that, people will more comfortable and not so mistrustful of my motives if I show up with a beautiful woman on my arm.”

Liz opened her mouth hastily to reassure, but the man continued.

“I can get the information needed...” he hesitated then slightly shrugged the well defined shoulders, “you are just making my job that much easier.”

“I was just interested in your accountant... Luli and her position in your organization.” The beautiful Asian woman had always intrigued Elizabeth and she found herself more than curious about any personal relationship that might have existed.

“She was a trusted part of my team, but damn any loyalties.” Red almost smiled, “I always realized, if a good thing came along, she would jump on it.” he shifted his eyes momentarily, “One grows to expect such things. Nor did I blame her.”
“But a fiancée...” Liz was still perplexed.

“In this business, you don’t get romantically involved with someone you can’t shut your eyes around.” Red leaned forward, placing his hand on the back of the seat, “They’ll talk more freely because it’s apparent that I trust you.”

Liz pondered all that had been said. “And when we don’t marry?”

“We will tell them of our intimate ceremony we have planned on the back of a camel with a Bedouin holy man.” Red’s voice held a measure of amusement. “The women will think I’m charming but the men will find me totally in character.”

She grinned at the thought of Red on the back of a camel. “And the back story?”

“We met at an art exhibit. We’ve been dating a little over a year. We’ve been engaged for four months.”

“Did that just now come to you?”

“Yes.” he seemed surprised as well. “Why?”

“No reason, just fascinated by how quickly you come up with this stuff.” she sat back grinning. “But, I have to ask, if we’ve known each other and been engaged this long, isn’t it odd that you’ve never introduced me before?”

“No, I’ll handle that part, you just follow along.”

She shrugged, making mental note of the request.

Red reached into his pocket, grasping the object inside. He opened his hand revealing an enormous diamond ring that sparkled translucently in the moonlight filtering through the car window.

Disregarding the slight gasp of awe, the man gently took her hand in his, sliding the ring on her slender finger, twisting it until the setting gleamed upward. His warm fingers gently stroked hers as he reluctantly broke contact.

The gorgeous diamond and sapphire wrapped band shimmered when she rotated her hand back and forth, as she marveled at the weight. It was much heavier than her old one. And that even while huge, the stone fit her hand perfectly, as did the size of the band.

“I could put an eye out with this thing.” She watched the light bounce off the diamond. “Probably my own.”

As they pulled into the circular drive, she had the hardest time not gaping at the enormous house.

“And they say, crime doesn’t pay.” She muttered, craning her head this way and that to take in her astonishing surroundings.

The two story house and grand porch were warmly lit. A soft bathing blue light highlighted the gigantic columns lining the gothic veranda. Guests walked up the decorative path lined by beautiful and lush gardens that were all neatly trimmed and tended.

As they glided to a stop, two valets stepped forward, one heading for the driver side, the other for her door.

Red exited first, making his way to the passenger side, waving the young man away. Offering her a
hand, she turned in the seat and felt a pull on her coat.

Red looked down to see what was keeping her when he saw the slit in her dress fall aside, revealing her stocking covered thigh, followed by a patch of creamy white skin, then the elastic tie of her lacy red garter.

*Good God.* He desperately tried to look elsewhere, but his eyes constantly returned to the alluring sight.

Fixated on the small patch of pale skin, he didn’t feel the presence at his side until he saw movement out the corner of his eye.

Turning, he saw the young valet craning his head for a peek.

Fixing the boy with a cold stare, he blocked Lizzy from any further view. Although annoyed, he supposed he couldn’t fault the boy. He had been looking as well. But if anyone was going to see her naked thigh, it was going to be him.

Sticking his head through the door, he braced his hand on her knee then reached over, pulling the coat free with little fuss. Backing out of the doorway, he held his hand out, helping her ease out of the seat.

“Sorry.” She smoothed her coat and gown, nervously. She was beginning to feel the weight of this particular “assignment”. Liz fidgeted anxiously with new weight about her finger.

For one horrible moment, she wondered... what if she accidentally lost this thing.

“How much does this ring cost?” she whispered jerkily, leaning into the man’s sphere.

Red held his amusement, “How gauche a question.” he teased.

Her troubled eyes met his warmly amused ones. “Relax, there are no thieves here tonight... only drug runners, axe murderers and tax evaders.”

For some reason, the statement made her feel better.

She wrapped her left arm through his, casually showing the ring. Ascending the stairs, he felt her tensing with each step.

“Take a breath. You’ll do fine. The man felt the slight tremor racking her body. “Just be yourself.” He smiled absently to one of the couples ascending the stairs beside them.

“Red, I don’t belong... I don’t fit in here.” She inhaled shakily. She felt more than awkward, unsure of her own abilities suddenly.

“You could go anywhere you please and belong, Lizzy.” He felt the frustration rolling off her. Pulling her to a secluded spot on the long porch, he turned her to face him. Dembe stood a short distance away, blocking guest’s view of the private conversation.

Inhaling, attempting to settle her nerves, she stared back at him. “Do I really look okay?” She blurted out. “Is this dress all right?”

“Do you really not realize how stunning you are?” he seemed taken aback.

“I don’t want to embarrass you in front of your friends.” She drew in a shaky breath, lifting her eyes
to the heavens, which in this case was the top of the magnificent porch under which they now stood. “I knew I should have picked the light blue.”

“Lizzy, you’re going to turn a lot of heads in that dress.” his hands tightened around hers.

She rolled her eyes, until he gripped her chin, aligning their eyes. “Listen to what I’m saying. Hear the words.” Red’s brows lifted significantly. “I mean them.”

“Only someone confident enough to deal with me would be confident enough to wear this dress.” He lifted her hands to his lips caressing the soft skin briefly. “And I could give a damn what the hell they think.”

“How I come across to them reflects on you...”

“It’s a different type of women behind those doors.” he pointed absently to the large entranceway behind them. “Unlike them, you’re beautiful, charming, can carry on a conversation.”

“And I can do math... up to a point.” she tried to lighten her own mood.

Red chuckled lowly, sending chills up and down her arms. She suddenly felt better. “Let them see what I see.” he held her gaze.

“Those women are beautiful, yes. But you will come to know,” he continued, “that is all that they are. There’s no substance. They are purely decorative pieces. You are more than that.”

She took a deep breath, blowing it out slowly. She nodded absently. “I am more than that.” she repeated, verbatim.

“You can do this.” He bolstered. “Just relax and enjoy the evening. Everything will fall into place. Trust me.”

The magic words. Trust me.

Liz felt the panic ease. Though he didn’t reveal anything he didn’t need to and kept her on edge all the time. He hadn’t given her any reason to not trust him. He had always come through and he would this time.

Meeting his eyes, she nodded, ready.

Entering the front door, she tried her best not to gawk at all the opulence. She had never seen so many people so obviously of the elite class. All were clothed in the best designer names, festooned with jewels that literally took her breath away. Each female she passed seemed to exude poised sophistication.

Liquor was free flowing, while unobtrusive wait staff floated among the crowd with heavy laden trays holding countless delicacies. Red gripped her hand reassuringly, before handing their coats over to a coat check girl.

Steering her into the throngs of people, he leaned closer, mumbling quietly, “There’s our host. We should make our introductions. You ready?”

Smiling wanly, but straightening her posture, she nodded.

“Good girl.” Red’s rough voice comforted her, settling her nerves.

They neared the man, Red calling out jovially. “Francis. It’s good to see you again.”
Red’s hand slipped down, catching hers in support, his free one wrapping around the other man who slapped his back with great affection.

“Red!” They each drew back, smiling before gripping shoulders. “I didn’t think you were going to make it.”

She was never really sure how Red felt about anyone. He greeted this man like he was a long lost brother, but she had seen him do that before and later turn on the person in the blink of an eye.

“Who is this breathtaking lovely on your arm?” Francis smiled genuinely at her. “Let me guess,” he said, “this your pissy brunette?”

Red held his smile, as Liz’s head spun hastily toward him, eyes narrowed suspiciously. “Francis, this is Elizabeth Scott. My fiancée.” Red stepped back, allowing the other man closer. “Lizzy, Francis Holbrook.”

Francis... the man she had heard on the phone with Red a couple of days ago. Liz smiled her recognition, offering her hand in greeting.

The younger man extended his hand taking her pre-offered one, bowing slightly over it, before laying a gentle kiss on her knuckles.

“It’s a real pleasure.” Francis artfully managed to put himself between Elizabeth and Red. Red rolled his eyes at the maneuver, huffing shortly under his breath.

Liz couldn’t help but be charmed. Sure, the man was a criminal but he was so polite and welcoming, she felt instantly at ease.

“It’s so nice to meet you.” She stepped back, taking Red’s arm. Taking her place at his side again was deeply symbolic to males. She didn’t fully understand it, but she knew some of the rules, especially in Red’s crowd.

Besides that, Red’s arm settled around her waist, calming her some. Any other day she might swat him away, but right now, he was an anchor in the rough seas.

“Where’s Dembe?” Francis looked around.

“He’s probably following the waiters around, eating you out of house and home.”

“Still the healthy appetite, eh? Don’t you feed that man Red?”

“Every minute of the day.” Red stated offhandedly. “Speaking of which, I’ve been here all of five minutes. Who do I have to kill to get a drink?”

Francis stuck his fingers in his mouth, whistling out over the din, catching a waiter’s attention, who scurried over to them.

Liz had jumped at the unexpected gesture but settled hastily, hoping no one had noticed her momentary lapse.

“Such class, Francis.” Red sighed, tapping her hip consolingly before taking the pre-offered glass, handing it to Liz.
Ain't Easy Being Green

April 3

Floating the room for an hour had been advantageous for Red. He had reacquainted himself with old allies and made new ones. Liz stayed silent for the most part, listening intently.

She did her bit of course, occasionally speaking with another wife or girlfriend, when called upon to do so, which had been just as enlightening.

A couple of times during the evening, she had noticed Red getting quite a bit of attention from the ladies in the room. At first, she was felt lucky to be with someone so recognized and apparently, highly sought after. Then she realized they were totally looking past her.

She had subtly touched his arm or stood closer to him, until his admirer looked away. But as they moved deeper into the room, the stares continued and held. With each passing woman, her touches became more frequent until she finally looped her arm through his, squeezing it fiercely as she stared down his latest fan.

Red looked away from the man he had been speaking with, down at her tight grip, frowning. He found Liz scowling at a busty redhead across the room.

“Something wrong sweetheart?” he asked innocuously.

“You’re being eyed like you’re a pint of Ben and Jerry’s.”

“I beg your pardon.” Red chuckled appreciatively.

“You didn’t tell me you had so many in your fan club.”

“Lizzy, what are you babbling about?” he chuckled lowly.

“You could have mentioned a harem of your past lovers would be here.”

“I’ve introduced you to exactly three women since we’ve been here.” he held his amusement.

“Romance was not an issue with any of them.”

“I’m not talking about them. I’m talking about the couple dozen women I’ve had to stare down since we’ve been here.” She pointed her chin back at the redhead staring in his direction, as an example.

“You better not leave my ass here alone.”

“First of all, I would never leave you alone.” Red said, quite seriously. “And secondly, I don’t know that woman.”

“You don’t know that woman?” she repeated. “We are of course, speaking in the Biblical sense.”

“I would love to speak in the Biblical sense with you,” he chuckled a dirty laugh. “But where as that woman is the subject at the moment,” he inclined his head discreetly, “as Jesus is my witness... I don’t know her.”

“Do you have a reputation as putting out easily or something?” she was more than serious.

“There is nothing on the bathroom wall of which I am aware.” Red jested.
“You know, I am standing here.” she gestured. “Beside you.” she fumed. “They make me feel rather like a nonentity.” her good feelings about the way she looked were rapidly fading.

“I am sure they just want to talk business. That’s sort of what these parties are for. To make connections.” he countered rather coyly.

Elizabeth glared at the woman across the way, pinching her lips in annoyance until the other looked away. Red’s lips quivered when Liz smiled in satisfaction to have won the match of wills, only to be thwarted by a new admirer just across the way.

“She doesn’t look to me like she has Wall Street on her mind.” Liz informed him in no uncertain terms. “Why doesn’t she just come over here and undress you all ready.”

As if the dress hadn’t already made her utterly ravishing, Red found that stern expression on the pretty little face even more captivating.

“Are you jealous, Lizzy?” Red was slightly touched by the thought.

“Excuse me!” the woman flared instantly.

“Why do you care if they stare?”

“I-I’m supposed to be your fiancée.” she stuttered uncertainly. “Aren’t I?”

“Lizzy, you don’t have to protect my virtue.” he gently broke the news. “I don’t think I ever had any to begin with.”

“I won’t argue with that.” she mumbled. “Regardless of your impurity though, wouldn’t it be odd if I didn’t tell them to back off?” She whispered.

“I can take care of them myself.”

“Okay, Red Reddington, since you clearly aren’t understanding my point.” she faced him squarely. “If a man was staring at your fiancée, like she’s staring at you, what would you do?”

“Besides killing him.” Red replied seriously. He had all ready stared down his fair share of men interested in her tonight. Nor had he enjoyed the emotions attached with the effort.

“I feel like I should have phrased that question differently,” she mumbled to herself, “but hopefully, you get my point?”

She had expected him to say he’d stare them down, maybe even have words, if the man was persistent enough. But this was Red Reddington she was talking to.

“You may phrase it however you wish but my response will stay the same.” Red snapped. “I’ve had my own battle of wills tonight, in regards to you, Elizabeth.”

“What are you talking about?” she snapped waspishly.

“One male in particular, is not picking up on the hint in the least.” he looked over Lizzy’s head at the man in question, hardening his eyes. “As you’ve subtly hinted, there is a certain reputation to uphold, most certainly on my part.”

“That killing him thing is not an option here, okay.” she quickly established rules.

“And yet, it doesn’t negate the fact that you have gone out of your way to ward off any women who
threaten your territory.” Red lifted innocent brows. “With that said, if he doesn’t stop staring at you and your ass,” the man reached around under his coat inconspicuously, “I fear, I will be forced to teach him the manners he so obviously lacks.”

Her hand hastened to halt any further movement, her eyes widening at the brazen threat because she knew without doubt, this man did not make idle threats.

“Re–”

A boisterous man approached, moving the crowd aside as he made his way forward. A beefy hand was held out in greeting, which served as a welcome distraction for all concerned.

Liz didn’t know what had just happened, but was ever so glad that someone had offered a reprieve to the tension that had been building.

Red’s protectiveness of course, had all been work related. Logically, she knew as much. But why then, had the incident that had just preceded the large man’s arrival, seemed so personal to her?

But that could not be. This surely, was all a show. Something for those gathered to see and accept as part of Red’s plan. That’s all.

“Lizzy?” The man distracted her from her thoughts. She found herself suddenly gazing into the clear eyes staring at her so oddly. She followed along docilely as Red’s arm wrapped around her waist, pulling her along to a nearby couch.

They had been sitting side by side, talking with a couple when Red had turned to her, nuzzling her neck which made her jump slightly.

Covering her faux pas quickly, she rubbed her neck gently, scolding him. “Red, you tickled me!”

She felt his soft lips curve into a smile against her neck, “Would you care to dance?”

Smiling at the woman she’d been chatting with, she excused herself. “I’d love to.” He stood, offering her a hand.

Making their way to the floor, she asked under her breath, “Did you learn something?”

“I did. But right now,” he searched for a convenient spot on the crowded floor, “ I just want to dance with you.”

She slowed, cursing slightly under her breath, her attention diverted suddenly.

“Is something wrong?” he halted his steps, waiting patiently.

“My heel strap slipped.” she sighed lightly.

Red held out his hand in offer, which she readily clasped for support. She bent slightly, readjusted the strap, the movement pushing her breasts together for his viewing pleasure.

Liz righted herself, having fixed the problem. The man stared blatantly downward, so much so, the woman’s eyes followed the same path.

Finding nothing amiss, she lifted questioning stare. “What?”

Reddington more than reluctantly left his pleasant pastime, meeting her gaze stalwartly.
Taking his hand, her arm slid gently to his shoulder but the man’s smile returned as he pulled her into his body, wrapping his arm low about her waist, fitting her form snugly to his more masculine one.

They swayed gently with the music for a long moment, Liz feeling his warmth and strength transmitted through his touch. She hated to break the moment in reality, but one thing kept plaguing her.

She pulled her head back, looking up at him. “Were you staring at my breasts?” she blurted.

“Yes.” the man nodded jauntily.

Liz’s mouth feel agape, her eyes blinking at the open honesty. “Oh...”

Red settled his palm on the small of her back, his fingers falling casually on the gentle swell of her rounded bottom. He felt her breath deeply then straighten.

“Relax.” he instructed smoothly.

“It’s hard to do when you can’t breath.”

“In my opinion, I can’t hold you too tight, so what’s the problem?”

“I feel any sudden movement on my part will send this zipper careening across the room like a guided missile.” she quipped, his nearness affecting her decidedly, already adding to her confused state. “It could put someone’s eye out.”

“Everyone here knows how to duck flying projectile.” he chuckled. He rubbed his thumb on her spine, sending little shivers down her back, stepping closer as they moved in time to the music, his thigh rubbing the satin dress intimately. “Are you having a nice time now?” he inquired.

“It’s not as bad as I thought it would be. I’ve met some very nice people.” she tumbled over the words rapidly attempting to maintain the same level of casualness he seemed want. “They’ve all been very welcoming.” she had been pleasantly surprised. “I believe we were speaking about...”

“Not now. Later.” he cut her off short, nodding in the direction needed. “Doesn’t look like a very pleasant chat, does it?” he had indicated the stocky man speaking with Francis over by the fireplace.

“Is that Edward?”

Red nodded minutely halting his steps. He sighed, squeezing her once before dropping a kiss to her bare shoulder, his arm gently guiding her off the dance floor.

“Could Francis be...”

“Lizzy...”

She fell silent, obeying his reminder... save the shop talk for later. “Where are we going?” she whispered.

Red guided her right into the middle of a rather heated conversation. He approached the two men gingerly, a smile on his face. “Everything all right Francis?”

The perturbed man looked over at them, “Red, tell this idiot he shouldn’t take...” He stopped, shifting his gaze to Liz, before glancing back at Red, silently asking if he should continue.

“Go ahead.” Red acquiesced.
“He wants to take the shipment through Zapopan on the way to Guadalajara. Tell him it’s insane. You know the area well.”

“It is faster.” Red glanced at Edward, who was already puffing up with arrogance. “But there is a higher chance of merchandise vanishing. You have to be in good graces with Fermin.” He looked at Edward. “Do you even know Fermin, Edward?”

“Uh, no. I don’t.” Red had to give the man a little credit for giving up on not knowing his connection. But on the other hand, he would have been a fool to have said he did, when it was something so easily checked.

“Francis, if you like, I could call Fermin and clear the way.”

“Yes, would you? You, I trust.” Francis breathed easier. “I know these hotshots have to learn the trade routes, but I wish they wouldn’t cut their teeth on my supply.”

“I’ll do it now.” he gestured to Liz. “Francis, if you could?” Francis stepped closer, picking up the cue. “Thank you,” Red took out his phone, “if you’ll excuse me.” He exited through a nearby door, away from the loud music.

“Are you having a good time Elizabeth?” Francis stopped a waiter, grabbing champagne, handing her a cool glass.

“I am, it’s been wonderful.” she forced a pleasant smile, her thoughts with Red Reddington. “Thank you for having me.”

Edward inched closer, making his presence known.

Francis inclined his head to her, “I beg your pardon, Elizabeth.” his tone was not exactly friendly, but he was the host. “This is Edward Costa.”

She shook the pre-offered hand. Smiling awkwardly when the man retained possession for too long a period.

“Francis, aren’t you going to introduce me?” A remarkably handsome young man came forward eyeing the two men, before smoothly taking her hand out of the Edward’s grasp.

“Ahh, Elizabeth.” Francis made the introductions, “This is Mark Donovan.”

The young man’s eyes hardened as he noticed the interplay between Edward Costa and Mark Donovan.

Costa had not liked the intended slight one bit, clearly.

“Edward,” Francis warned, frostily, “back off.”

Edward narrowed his eyes, then stood erect when Francis stepped into his space, “You’re no match for me asshole,” the man all but snarled. “Let alone Reddington... so back off.”

Any other time, Liz might feel a little embarrassed, being viewed as she was. These men viewed her as Red’s territory and regardless of that fact, Edward wanted to stake some kind of a claim.

It wouldn’t be good if she caused problems in Red’s circle of contacts, particularly on her first meeting.

Thankfully she did not have to make any decisions. Francis was standing by not only his friend, but
herself.

Though she didn’t need the protection, Francis had stopped her from having to ward off the other man’s interest, which would have caused a scene.

She had been enjoying Francis’ company through out the night, but now, he was a life saver.

And the newest arrival, Mark Donovan, seemed just as determined to be of help in Red’s absence. She was grateful to both men, whether they knew it or not.

Francis smiled charmingly at her as though the incident had not even occurred. Edward Costa had relented, however reluctantly, faced with such opposition.

“She is Reddington’s, uhh...” Francis informed Mark, his face twisting comically, his eyes suddenly alight with shared confidence which the other man picked up on.

Donovan eye’s turned cold as the dark stare settled on Edward.

“Main squeeze?” Mark teased, his expression two-fold as it transferred to Elizabeth Keen.

Liz cut her eyes to Mark, sheepishly. “I am not... that.”

“Numero uno?” the man supplied another questionable adjective.

Liz held her smile, grimacing slightly. “I really prefer to be called his old lady.” she corrected. “Maybe even, ball and chain.”

“What a quaint term... my mom and dad referred to each other in the same manner. God rest his soul.”

Mark sighed heavily. “Just because they don’t claim you doesn’t mean you can go around saying they’re dead.” he glanced at Liz. “They’re in San Diego.”

“No one is in San Diego.” Francis disgusted.

“You see what we’re dealing with?” Mark asked quietly.

Elizabeth bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling.

“They just got engaged.” Francis piped up happily. “Her and Red.”

“I see...” Mark scowled his confusion. “What kind of grammar is that?”

“Like, what?” Francis was momentarily confused.

Liz did not miss the fact that both men were making a very conscious effort to exclude Edward Costa from the conversation.

Were she honest with herself, she would have admitted the guy gave her the creeps. Even now Mark’s eyes constantly stared a hole through the man, his gaze unwavering.

“Congratulations.” He smiled at her, literally pushing Edward aside. The bulky man’s countenance darkened considerably, and for one brief second, Liz was sure a confrontation was inevitable.

“Is there a problem here?” Red had finally arrived back on scene, thank God.
“No, just meeting everyone.” She said brightly, answering before the other two men could reply, putting a halt to what could possibly turn out to be a bad situation.

Red sized up the situation in one glance, already well aware of what had transpired in his absence.

He put a protective arm about the woman, pulling her close, nodding his gratitude to his associates. Then threw an icy stare at Edward Costa, his meaning coming through, loud and clear.

“Thank you.” He acknowledged, holding Liz close. “Francis, I told Fermin that you had a line coming through and that I would like him to provide escort. I already paid the fee for safe passage, as a sign of good faith, so you’re good to go.”

“And that is why I let you win at poker.” Francis slapped Red’s shoulder, grinning.

“You keep telling yourself that if it helps you sleep at night, Francis.” Red replied in a deadpan tone.

“Red, you really should have a signal crew preceding Elizabeth. I was about blinded by this rock on her finger.” Mark tilted her hand, making a show of blocking his eyes from the light shining off it. “Why is it I’m just now hearing about this lady of yours?” He asked.

“Because first and foremost, it was none of your business. For obvious reasons,” Red stared hard at Edward, then straight-faced at Mark. “I’ve kept her hidden from you lecherous assholes.”

Mark laughed his delight, “Ahh, afraid she’d fall for my overwhelming charm and sophistication.” He made a show of straightening his cuffs and tie.

“No, I thought she’d be bothered by the smell of bullshit.” Red explained patiently. “It clings so heavily to you.”

Liz giggled quietly at Red’s unexpected quip. It was so rare to see the man having fun, real, honest to goodness fun.

“Now my dear Elizabeth, don’t you believe everything he says. I have a heart of pure gold.”

“Oh my God, it’s news to me that he has a heart.” Pouring Mark a drink from a bottle Red had acquired from some unknown source, he handed it to the laughing man. “Here, drink that. Get the taste out.”
Promises, Promises

April 3

Red had never thought of Mark and Francis as much more than close allies. He was slowly revising his opinion having watched their efforts on his behalf tonight.

Francis had confirmed his suspicions concerning the earlier incident.

Red had never cared much for Costa. There had never been anything concrete to base his concerns on, but the man had an instinct that never failed where people were concerned.

With that in mind, they had kept a close eye on Lizzy and Edward the rest of the evening, making sure their paths never crossed again.

The night had passed quickly for the woman, and Liz was genuinely sad to see it end.

She settled back into the luxury sedan sighing blissfully. She eased the exquisitely crafted heels off her aching feet. Eight hundred dollar shoes still hurt, she didn’t care what people said. The big liars. Red sat into the plush leather, adjusting his silky black vest. “See, now that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Liz shook her head, reluctantly. “No, it wasn’t.”

It had been a nice evening. They had danced more dances, Red even relinquished her to Mark and Francis a couple of times.

They had talked with more of the crowd and she had landed an invitation to Mark’s upcoming party, which he said was an annual event and that Red know all the details, so she could get the exact dates from him.

All in all, it had turned out to be not only enjoyable but productive. And if Liz were honest with herself, she hadn’t minded the appreciative looks from the gentlemen in the room, even if Red had cooled their interest in her quickly enough.

The big party pooper.

Tonight had been an ego boost she had not known she needed.

After the divorce, even though she understood the circumstances for what they were, she had felt undesirable, unwanted, and unworthy.

She had loved Tom, or whatever his name was, in actuality, with her whole being. After two years of marriage and sharing their lives, her love for him had only grown. That feeling had greatly waned after the emotional and physical battle had ensued between them. When he had literally held a gun to her head, any lingering emotions had died along with her dreams of a normal life.

She had to wonder what type of man Tom was, that he didn’t feel anything for her. After all that had transpired between them, how twisted were these people that they not only instilled him into her life, but had thought to have him marry her?

Had he held any sort of affection for her or, in the end, was she just a tool? A means to an end before he moved on to his next assignment?

The FBI wanted her time, her life. Red wanted the Fulcrum. What had Tom and his people wanted?
The Fulcrum? Her parents whereabouts? Red? All of the above?

Why had her life become such a twisted maniacal mess?

So many thoughts, so much mystery, so many questions unanswered. Dizzy from the turmoil, Liz dropped her head into her hand, her fingers easing the tension in her temples.

“Are you all right?” Red placed a light hand over hers, “You look…”

“Tired?” Liz filled in, having heard enough of it from her colleagues over the last few days.

“No…” Red stared at her, his head shaking. Narrowing his eyes, he frowned. “Overwhelmed.”

Liz blinked, thrown by his astuteness. How did he always know just by looking at her?

“I’m too impatient. I want to know what’s going on in my life. I want to know…” She took a shaky breath, closing her eyes. “I think too much.” Her lips turned up slightly. When he didn’t smile back, she fell silent.

Red exhaled slowly, turning his eyes forward. “I despise sounding like a broken record. So I’m going to take a different approach this time.” He crossed his leg, shifting his body to face her. “If a teenager came up to you tomorrow with all these ideas on how they were going to run away or get pregnant, all so they could get away from home and their so called miserable existence. What would you say to them?”

“I’d tell them to wait it out until they turned eighteen. They could leave home without repercussions.” she sing-songed her head slightly shrugging her shoulders to the question. “To enjoy the freedom they have now. Nothing that’s happening in their lives at that moment will be that way forever…” Liz stopped, listening to her own words, suddenly annoyed. “Are you comparing me to a melodramatic teenager.” she sighed.

“No, not at all. I’m merely making a point.” He pushed a stray strand of hair from her face. “You will know all you want in time. And you’ll look back and wish you had appreciated the freedom, the simplicity.”

“You call this simplistic?” She said, perturbed.

“In comparison, yes.” Red rubbed his forehead, then squeezed the tension from his neckline. “Enjoy your life right now, Lizzy. When you have your answers, you’ll have a deep desire to come back to this time, when things were seemingly more complicated.”

She fell silent, suddenly afraid of her future. Red had always placated her, offering what she had always assumed were empty platitudes. But when he had described it in such a manner, she had to second guess her thoughts on the subject.

If Red was telling her these things, to enjoy what she had now, no matter how terrible and unfair it seemed, there had to be a reason.

What the hell had happened? Who were her parents, really?

She wasn’t really asking the vital question, she knew. It was fear, wondering what her parents could have possibly done, that it was still affecting her life today?

“Believe me or not, but all of this.” he waved a hand winsomely. “All of what I’m doing, is to answer those questions. Pandora’s Box has been opened, releasing all the evil into the world and
now, we’re putting it back in the box one evil at a time.”

“So, what you’re saying is that all the people on the Blacklist have some connection to my parents in some way?”

“Not all of them, but most. Some have fallen into our lap and we would be fools to not pursue them.” he grimaced accordingly. “The Stewmaker for one. Whether your parents made use of his services, I don’t know. Regardless, he was someone that needed to disappear.” Red glowered.

Even though as indirect as it was, that son-of-a-bitch had ties to his life. But that was a story for another time.

“Trust me, Lizzy.” Red’s green eyes bored into hers. “You won’t like the answers, but you will have them.” he silently begged for her understanding. “You just have to be patient.” He placed his hand comfortingly over hers. “It’s the safest path right now.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She played with a crystal on her gown.

“Did you believe me when I told you about Tom?” She stopped her intended reply, knowing full well it would be a lie if she answered in the affirmative.

“You will have to unveil these answers yourself to completely believe the truth. It’s just your way.” Red’s jaw open and closed, wanting to say more, but bit back his agitation

“There are times I want to lay it all out for you, but you would always have doubts about whether I was manipulating the situation, twisting things for my own agenda...” he shook his head stubbornly, “this way is best, for in the end... you can arrive at only one solution.”

Elizabeth considered all that had been said. She realized she would have to reconcile herself to facing her own impatience and new, unknown fears.

“All right. I’ll trust you.” Liz flipped her hand in his, lacing her fingers with the thick strong ones. “I can’t say that I won’t be a pain in the ass, but I can promise to not get so frustrated with you.” Her mouth quirked.

Red brought their clasped hands to his mouth, kissing the soft skin, chuckling. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep, Lizzy.”

Pulling up to her door, Red stilled his friend with a gentle hand on his shoulder. “I’ve got it Dembe.”

Exiting the vehicle, he made his way to her side, offering a hand to help her from the back. Looping her arm through his, they made their way up the steps.

“You truly do look beautiful tonight. I’m glad, even though it was work related, you had a nice time.” he made small talk, “And I must say, I find bare feet on a woman extremely erotic.”

The woman glanced down, her cheeks heating slightly. “I love these shoes.” she held them aloft. “Though, I feel like one of Cinderella’s step-sisters.” she made light of the moment. “I don’t think I could fit into them right now.”

Red smiled gently, allowing a genial silence to ensue.

Liz snickered lowly when they neared the top step. “What?” Red questioned, smiling at her good mood.
“I was just imagining what my neighbors think of me.” Liz turned, coming eye to eye with Red who was one step below her. His head cocked, not getting the reference.

“They can’t have missed what’s been going on in my house. With Tom gone... and now you here tonight, as we are,” she indicated his tux, her evening dress and the flowers in her hand, “I’m sure I have a scarlet letter on my forehead, in their eyes.” she laughed softly, “Oh well, to me this isn’t home anymore. So sooner or later, I will be leaving.”

Red’s jaw clenched, hard. “If they only knew what had gone on in your house.” Lizzy’s broken and rumpled form, the splintered spindle on the staircase, the scattered debris, all flashed in his mind, his rage resurfacing instantly.

“They might be greatly relieved to see you with a gentleman now.” He smiled sadly, brushing his fingertip over the place where the now faded bruising had been on her face.

Her eyes misted, knowing what he was envisioning. Blinking, a tear slowly trekked a path over her cheek, as his comforting words of that fateful night returned.

At the one of the lowest points in her life, she had never felt so cherished. So special.

Liz wondered at the man before her. He was a complete contradiction of everything she had learned at the academy.

How was it, that this man, on top of the FBI’s most wanted list... considered the embodiment of evil by some, a self confessed killer.

This same man had shown her such amazing understanding and unrelenting kindness.

The same hands that had caused so many peoples demise, were always incredibly gentle with her. Never once had he raised his hand in anger, even though she had given him ample opportunity, with her uneven temperament, unreasonable anger and outrageous agitation directed totally at him.

How was it she believed him when he said he had never lied to her? There were the times of course, when her own stubbornness barred that belief but in the end, she had always been proven wrong.

His temper was legendary and yet to date, she had never experienced it first hand. He treated her with respect and dignity. He made her feel like she had self-worth.

Ironically, she felt he was the only person she could rely on to never harm her in any way, shape or form.

He understood her like no one else. Always giving her what she needed to hear, see or understand to keep going, to not go insane.

Like now for instance, he understood her need for quiet contemplation. It wasn’t an intimidating silence. It wasn’t to punish or to hurt. He saw it for what it was... an inner need.

Waiting, Red came up a step, standing in front of her. He twirled the loose curl of hair laying along her neck.

“I would never hurt you, Lizzy.” The man stressed, his deep voice resonating with a mixture of emotion.

She wasn’t sure if he was speaking in general or referencing her battle with Tom. It didn’t matter really, she guessed.
“I know...” Raising on her toes, she kissed his cheek, marveling at the fleeting touch of his five o’clock shadow against her smooth lips. Another minor comparison between him and Tom.

Tom could shave in the morning and be fine until the next day. But Red, by midday, a soft growth shadowed his face. Not that it was unattractive, he looked quite handsome.

Maybe it had to do with his virility. Red screamed Alpha Male more than anyone she knew. A fact he had proven repeatedly tonight.

*What was she saying?*

She flushed a deep crimson red. She felt it creeping across her chest, her face flaming with it.

“You’re blushing.” he grinned, tilting his head, scanning her features. “May I ask why?” he laughed softly, enchanted with the change.

“No.” The brunette turned her face, embarrassed.

He wasn’t sure what it was that set her off. He wouldn’t push her, just yet anyway.

Red was more than pleased, none the less.

“I wish you would change your mind about staying at the safe house tonight. Security hasn’t finished here, it’s still not working properly.” Red craned his neck scanning the house. “I’ll be with Mark and Francis for a little over two hours, think of all the things you could snoop into.” he teased gently. “My place has armed guards and let us not forget, a whirlpool bath.”

The added enticement gave the woman pause for thought. She really enjoyed that whirlpool bath.

“All right, I’ll make a deal with you.” She compromised. “You go have your meeting and I’ll pack a few things, get some things in order here. When you’re done, come back and get me.”

Red scrunched his brow, frowning. “I don’t like it. Something isn’t setting right with me.”

“You know, I am a big girl, Red.” It was her turn to tease. “I have a real FBI badge and everything.”

“I still don’t like it.” Something was itching at him, gnawing at his stomach.

“It’s just a couple of hours. If I am staying with you for a while, I’ll need time to gather some things anyway, right?”

“All right. Two hours. Not a minute more.” he glanced at his watch. “I should go...” he pulled back, his eyes raking over that form fitting red gown which delighted him just as much now as it had when he picked her up earlier in the evening.

“And though it pains me deeply to say, let you get into something more comfortable...” he pointed a finger at her, his brows lifting meaningfully. “I’m warning you now, if you don’t answer when we get back, I’m coming in.”

“I guess I better get inside then.” She said, somewhat reluctantly.

“Wait.” Red stepped into her again, his cologne filling her space. “I almost forgot.” he slipped his hand under her coat, running his fingers along her waist, then up her back, searchingly.

“Wha...?” Liz inhaled, electrified when she felt the cloth covered arm and heavy cufflink on his wrist, graze the bare skin on her upper back.
His hand came to rest on the top of her dress, his thumb and forefinger snapped, popping the eyelet loose from it’s partnering hook. Her body unconsciously bowed to the touch.

Keeping her in place, he grasped the zipper. Tugging it, he felt her jerk, her breasts pushing into his chest as the teeth gave way.

“Samar indicated you might need help with that.” He rasped, lowly.

“Getting it zipped.” Liz rolled her eyes. “T-thank you.” she stammered as his fingers traced slowly down her spine. “I mean...for tonight, I had a good time, Red... R-Raymond.”

Smiling, he picked up her hand, kissing the palm. “Elizabeth.” He bowed his head ever so slightly, his eyes holding hers hypnotically. He had enjoyed the way she had stumbled over his name.

Red patiently waited while she fumbled with the key in the lock. He came up behind her, his warm hand wrapping around hers, steadying her suddenly shaking fingers.

He turned his head slightly, inhaling her soft perfume. The man’s mouth pulling at the corners when she exuded a small sigh of awareness, due to his close proximity as his warm breath tickled her neckline.

He enjoyed the returning flush of cognizance. He deftly opened the door, laying a hand just above her rounded bottom, ushering her inside.

The imprint of the warm hand imprinted itself on the flesh beneath the silk dress.

“I’ll be back... soon.” Red reminded, brushing his thumb over the soft rosy flush of her cheek.

“Lock it, Lizzy.” he advised silkily before pulling the door closed. He smiled through the glass when she did obeyed, without complaint, his eyes holding her’s spellbound for a long beat, before the man turned, taking his leave.

He jauntily bounced down the steps to the waiting car, ignoring Dembe’s teasing remarks as they pulled away.
April 3

Watching his lights disappear down the street, Liz cupped her flaming cheeks, releasing the shaky breath she had been holding. Not that she was relieved to see him go, quite the opposite, actually. She hadn’t wanted him to leave and already she was second guessing her decision to stay behind.

Not that she meant for anything sexual to occur, exactly.

Oh my God, why do I keep going back to that?

She clarified to herself that, what she had really meant was that... in the right setting, Red relaxed and regaled her with many different interesting topics that she found quite fascinating. She really did enjoy spending time with him.

And she was only staying with him as a safety precaution until they figured out what the deal was with this Carver creep.

That was all... she nodded with finality, feeling a little better for her lapse.

Leaning against the downstairs door, she dropped the low pumps to the hardwood floor, thankful she had chosen to wear the pair Red had given her. She bent slightly, massaging her feet absently, her thoughts with the night’s events.

She sighed, hearing the low rumble of thunder in the near distance. A good thunderstorm, especially at night, helped her sleep better.

Laying down her flowers, she stared at the colorful bouquet as she pulled off her coat, hanging it on hook. She would have to find a vase somewhere, but for the life of her, she could think of no secret hiding places where one might be found.

Lifting the heavy train of the gown, she trudged up the stairs, smiling, remembering Red’s earlier expression when she had met him at the door.

It warmed her to know that he had found her pretty. FBI agent or not, she was still a women and it was nice to be told she was attractive after so much work.

Isn’t that why they, women, did it? For the compliment? Praise, even?

Entering her room, she grabbed her night clothes, laying them on the sink. Grasping the loosened zipper, she worked it down, shivering, recalling how Red’s hand had felt when he had pulled it free. She wondered what it would have felt like if he had taken it down, all the way?

What was wrong with her? All he had done was pull it down an inch or so and she’s over here fantasizing about...

She shook her head to clear the unbidden visuals popping up in her mind....never mind!

Shedding the dress and hanging it, she hastily rid herself of her undergarments then slipped the soft cotton shirt and boxers on, relishing the freedom. Washing off the heavy makeup, brushing her teeth and combing out her hair, she felt the day melt away.
Running the brush through her hair, she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror, “Oh, damn.”

She held her hand out, wiggling the finger that still held the huge diamond. She had forgotten to give it back.

Well, Red would be back soon enough and she could right the error.

Now though, in the privacy of her own home, she stared at the beautiful ring, fascinated by how the large stone caught the light. It really was a astonishing ring. While it was lavish, it was not ostentatious and it fit her so perfectly.

She wondered where he purchased it. Or even if he had purchased it. Why did he choose diamonds and sapphires? Better yet, how did he know her size?

Her other rings, even as light as they were, kept rotating on her finger throughout the day. This one didn’t move an inch, even though it was considerably heavier.

A bright flash of light bathed the room, followed by a clap of thunder. Liz shielded her eyes momentarily. The storm was getting closer.

Walking to the door, she hesitated, grabbing a soft button down shirt and a pair of long pants to slip over her cami and boxers. Red was coming back after all.

Deciding on a cup of tea while packing, she literally skipped down the stairs, a thought hitting her.

She should let Hudson out before the rain starts.

Rounding the corner, she instantly stilled.

Hudson.

She hadn’t heard or seen the dog since she’d entered the house. While he didn’t normally greet her at the door, he did come wandering in a few minutes after, seeking a treat, if nothing else.

“Hudson?” She whispered cautiously.

Listening intently to the house, she didn’t hear anything. Didn’t see anything. Nothing seemed out of place. But suddenly the air felt... off.

Creeping closer to where it felt most unsettled, if the hairs standing on the back of her neck were any indication, she entered the kitchen, cautiously. Her eyes raked the darkened room, seeing familiar objects here and there...

Her eyes widened with fright, a loud gasp escaping her throat.

Sitting at her bar, a large shadowy figure slowly eased himself into an erect position.

Turning, she ran, her bare feet pounding loudly on the hardwood floors, her panicked heart drowning out the sound.

A couple of blocks away, Red was still feeling the buzz in his body left over from having spent a fantastic, non-violent evening with Elizabeth Keen.
Red held the soft petals of the single rose to his nostrils inhaling the fragrant sweetness. And to think, he had second guessed himself where the flowers were concerned. While a gentlemanly thing to do, he had wondered at Elizabeth’s reaction to such a gesture.

How would she perceive the offering? Just when he was about to hide them from sight, Samar had answered the door.

But then, Lizzy had enjoyed them, much to his surprise. Only when they had left the car, did she let go of her prize. And upon returning, it was the first thing she retrieved.

A good memory.

He remembered how nice it felt when she pushed into his body when he had pulled on that damn zipper.

Now, if only he could get rid of the feeling of unrest in his stomach, everything would be fine.

He wished he could say that his insistence that she stay with him was solely for her protection, but he’d be lying. Over the few short days that she had stayed with him, he had grown accustomed to her light footfall, laughter and that she was just there, with him.

Leaving her now left him feeling agitated, uneasy. He wondered if it was because he wanted to be near her or was it something more?

He stretched further in the seat, pushing his leg into the side floorboard, hitting a small bundle with his heel.

Sitting up, he felt for whatever it was in the darkened car, finally hitting a jeweled embellishment with his hand. Picking it up, he saw it was Lizzy’s bag from tonight.

Opening it, he found the expected items. Lipstick, mints, and her badge. He could wait and give it to her later.

But... if a case should come up in the next two hours, she would need her badge, he thought. *A good enough excuse.*

Waving the bag in the mirror’s view, he said, “Dembe, turn the car around.” Neither man, one more than the other, the least bit put out by the five block trek back.
April 4

*It’s funny, what one thinks of while fighting for one’s life.*

Maybe it was a survival instinct or that she had been hanging out with Red too long and had become flippant while staring down the face of evil. But it didn’t seem normal that there were only two prominent thoughts racing through her head at this exact moment.

One being, that with her attacker’s modus operandi, her life as it was, and the occasional flashes of lightning highlighting his murderous face... all had the makings of a horror film, minus the musical score.

And the second being, that in less time than it had taken for all her new things to be delivered after her fight with Tom, she was already on the brink of having to order more furniture and other sundry. Which was a very optimistic attitude, given her current situation.

The house was tossed, her throwing everything in her wake, trying to slow him so she could get to her gun.

She felt the thin blade her attacker held, slice through her skin once again. The sudden split of her flesh feeling warm, then stinging hotly, as cool air met the fresh flowing blood seeping from the widening wound, all which was slowing her progress.

At some point in the melee, she had not only bloodied her face bad enough that she had to keep wiping the ooze from her eyes, but she had sliced a foot deeply enough that she could retain no traction on the slick floor, all which was slowing her progress further.

Stumbling to her gun box, she felt a hand grip her ankle, yanking her off her feet. Kicking with all she had, Liz fought for purchase, pulling with her upper body. Her fingertips grazed the edge of the wood, finally tumbling the box to the cluttered floor, spilling its life saving contents.

She grasped the black metal, attempting to flip, but she was stilled by a steel-like grip on her arm and wrist.

Pushing harder at the weight on her back with all she had, did little to dislodge the heavy burden which held her flat to the floor. Beefy hands suddenly became painfully tight, as the man shifted, coming heavily down on her right forearm.

The resounding snap of the bone was almost drowned out by her pained scream. The adrenaline coursing through her terrified body gave an extra push, allowing her to flip, the pain a lesser of two evils.

And at this moment, Elizabeth Keen was an expert where evil was concerned.

She kicked towards his groin, missing by mere inches. Her ankle was caught easily, grabbed harshly then yanked viciously, popping it from it’s proper place.

The combination of the arm and ankle were too much for her body and mind to process.

Liz turned her head, throwing up the evening’s meal and drink.
His engaging laughter sounding over her sickness made her stomach rebel again. This man was enjoying every second of this sick game he played.

He stood over her for what seemed an eternity as the woman attempted to regroup which only seemed to amuse the sociopath more.

He reached, deliberately tugging sharply on her injured leg, ignoring her cries of agony before dragging her carelessly towards the kitchen. Liz wondered, having read the guy’s file, if he was going to retrieve his kit.

She knew all about the contents of that kit and their purpose.

With a last ditch effort to escape, she turned to her stomach, grasping uselessly at the floor, her finger nails scraping the thin cracks, breaking as she was pulled along.

“Help!” An ear piercing scream passed through her parched, dried lips.

The man halted his movements abruptly, a latex glove covered hand going to her face silenced her effectively for a brief moment.

She bit the hand as hard as humanly possible. “You son of a bitch!” she spat her fury and frustration.

Struggling with all the strength she had left, she kicked the little table on her right, sending it crashing down the hall.

No one could hear her struggles. No one knew she needed help.

Red wouldn’t be here for another two hours, and when he did come back, he’d find her... dead. The very thing he had been worried about happening was going to happen.

She was going to die.

*God, if I ever needed help, now would be the time.*

With all that she had in her, she let out a loud terrified scream.
Night's Knight

April 4

Grabbing the bag, Red exited the vehicle, sticking his head back in the opened door. “Leave it running, I’ll only be a minute.”

*Unfortunately,* he thought regretfully.

He looked up to the sky, squinting after a particularly bright flash lit the heavens in a strobe of varying colors. He loved night time storms, they relaxed him like nothing else. Maybe tonight he would get more than his usual couple hour’s sleep.

Glancing at the house, he thought better of his decision to return for a moment. The house was pitch black. But surely she couldn’t be asleep by now? He had only left about fifteen minutes ago.

A low crashing sound drew his attention. Looking down the street both ways, he didn’t see anything out of the norm. The area quiet of traffic or pedestrians even.

As he went up the first step, his senses tingled. The hair on his neck stood on end.

Reaching for the pistol at his back, he hesitated, listening out into the night.

Dembe shut the car down, before quietly opening the driver’s side door.

Red held up a hand to still the man behind him. Silently taking the second step, he was brought up short when a bone chilling scream filled the air.

His name bounced down the brick facades lining the street in a nightmarish echo, making his blood run cold.

“Lizzy!”

The frame of the door and nearby windows shuddered with the force of the door being kicked, then a heavy crashing sound indicated the first door giving way.

Liz took heart, unreasonable hope rising in her chest. “Help!” she continued her entreaties hoping someone was now out there to hear.

Hitting out with her good hand, Liz heard a crunching sound, glad she had been able to inflict some sort of injury on the bastard.

He didn’t cry out, but it was enough for her to know he would be feeling an ache for a couple of days, or maybe not at all, if whoever the hell was at the door got in and was hopefully armed.

The sound of a body or foot connecting with the main door and shattering glass stopped both combatants in their struggles. Instantly, the heavy weight on her lifted and she was able to breath again.

The sound of his footsteps retreating to the back, allowed the woman’s brain to begin functioning again.
“Elizabeth!” Reddington searched the blackened area religiously, only able to make out a few discernable shapes and objects. His gun arm was lifted at the ready as he swept the room with a professional detachment. But in his mind one thing and one thing alone, screamed out in alarm.

She could see his silhouette lit by the street lamp in the darkened entryway, followed by that of his friend.

Dembe’s large frame was unmistakable as was the lethal weapon he hoisted.

“Here!” Liz gasped weakly, rolling to her back with great effort. She whimpered with the pain, black spots blurring her vision. “Kitchen!” she croaked out hoarsely.

Both men moved forward, scanning for unseen enemies in the darkness as they neared.

Red slipped in the wetness covering the floor, sliding the last few inches to her. He threw his hat, hovering over her protectively, his hand braced by her shoulder.

“Where?” Red spoke quickly, quietly. His eyes having adjusted enough to see her condition.

Red glanced up to see Dembe disappear out the opened back door. The house fell silent except for Liz’s labored breathing.

“Tom?” he whipped off his black scarf, pressing it against a spot where he could see blood flowing on her face in the hazy beam given by the street light.

“Carver.” she weakly whispered.

Even in the low light, she could see the grimace cross his face. “Are you sure?” The note he had found left on her windshield, flashed vividly in his mind.

“Oh, I’m sure.” She felt the dozens of cuts stinging her skin more acutely now that the adrenalin was leaving her body.

Red leaned forward, looking at the gash on her head, before adding more pressure to the wound.

“You really do come when called.” she laughed, stopping short when she felt the deep ache in her chest.

Red blindly felt for a light switch, “Where do you hurt.”

“Be better to...” she panted with the pain, having moved her leg, “ask where I don’t.”

She gasped as broken bone rubbed against a raw nerve ending, sending a searing pain twitching through her body. “I’m not sure,” she strived for a lightness after such a dark menacing moment, “but I think my arm is broken.” She sought his eyes. “It is still there right?”

Light suddenly bathed the hall in a warm glow. Red had left her long enough to find the switch.

Turning back, he choked on the air, seeing her bathed in blood, head to toe.

Her clothes were a tattered mess of cuts and holes, the blood seeping through the dozens of slashes where the bastards blade had made contact. Her arm and ankle were bent at an awkward, unnatural angle.

“Jesus...” he said breathlessly.
“That bad?” Liz, now that she didn’t feel the overpowering horror she had just moments before, continued to try to lighten the moment when a sharpness in her back left her breathless. Adjusting her position to stop the jabbing agony, a burst of air escaped her battered body.

“Don’t move.” Red brushed a hand over her drenched brow, wiping away the sweat and blood on his tuxedo pants, uncaring that he was ruining the expensive fabric. “God...” he whispered brokenly.

“Something hurts.” She arched her back as much as she could without jostling her broken limbs. She tried to move the object herself.

Gently reaching under her back, Red pulled out a piece of broken pottery, gripping it rigidly. The colored clay bit into his palm, cutting deeply into his skin. It seemed a small penance for being too late, again.

After a few moments, he hurled the piece against the wall, shattering it further.

A sound from the back had Red turning fluidly, arm up and gun aimed. His arm steady. His eyes cold and unwavering.

“Raymond.” Dembe’s soft voice sounded from behind the safety of the wall before venturing out. Red Reddington shot first, then if the person was still breathing, maybe questioned later, if he was in the mood.

Raymond Reddington was in no mood at present, it was abundantly clear.

“Call the Doctor.” Red turned his troubled eyes back to Liz, his lips pursed tightly. “You’ll be okay, I promise.” he stroked Elizabeth, feeling down her body gently.

She didn’t even mind as his large hand brushed over her breast. She didn’t even think he was consciously aware of having done so, not meaning to give an arousing touch, but a reassuring one for them both.

His touch reminded her that she was alive and breathing.

And funnily enough, as his hand brushed her bare thigh, she realized that she hadn’t put her pants on. She had left them laying on her bed upstairs. If she wasn’t hurting so much, she knew she’d be embarrassed for him to find her in only a tank top and panties.

There was something seriously wrong with her to be thinking of something so trivial, when she was laying broken and bleeding, on the floor.

“I’ll be fine... now.” Her head lolled to the side, the adrenaline having left completely, she felt the heavy weight of sleep coming.

“That’s right. You’ll have the best doctor and care.” Red attempted to smile, but his lips quivered with the effort, “Don’t go to sleep.”

“So t-tired.” Liz slurred.

“I know, I know you are. You have every right to be. You fought hard.” his hand shook as it wiped away the blood still seeping heavily out of her head wound. “Are you dizzy? Blurry vision?”

She opened her eyes with effort, looking around. “Not really.” her eyes fluttered shut. “Just tired.”

Dembe came back, crouching beside them, “He wants to meet at the safe house, cut our time in
After a few short commands to Dembe, Red turned back to the broken woman on the floor, feeling the bile rise in his throat, knowing what he had to do.

He cupped her forehead, under the clamminess, he felt the cool. Tiny tremors traversed the entire length of her body. Her eyes were glazed and fixed on his.

She was going into shock.

Liz’s heavy eyes struggled to stay open and aware. “Is he coming?” she asked almost timidly.

“Is who coming Elizabeth?” the man thought perhaps she was still in the throes of the horror she had just experienced. “He’s gone. You’re safe with us, safe with me.”

Liz’s brow furled quizzically as she shook her head slightly, “Doctor.”

His eyes watered at the reminder, what he was going to do, what he had to do to her.

“I’m going to have to pick you up.” Red smoothed her brow, then touched his forehead to hers, “And it’s going to hurt like hell, but we have to get you out of here.” Raising a few inches from her face, his tear filled eyes locked with her own. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

She reached to his face, her weak hand shaking with the effort. Touching the outside corner of his eye, a single drop fell, mixing with the ones coming from her own eyes.

Brushing away the remaining wetness, she streaked his skin red. Her blood marking him.

Shaking her head negatively, “Helping.” she panted with the effort of talking.

Taking a few deep steadying breaths, he grabbed the scarf off the floor.

“I’m sorry.” he whispered hoarsely.

She nodded, then he moved her arm to her chest. She sharply inhaled, the pain agonizing. Her face paled visibly.

“God, I’m so sorry.”

He wasn’t sure if she heard his repeated mantra as he continually apologized for the pain he was causing her, but he felt it deep in his soul, so he continued as if it would cleanse them both of this awful moment if he said it enough.

Pushing back her anguished cries to a corner of his mind, he secured the arm as best he could with the soft fabric. While under the heavy weight of pain, he swiftly wrapped a scarf supplied by Dembe securely around her ankle, holding it in place.

Red wiped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his tux. He fought the tremors of rage and sickness racking his body.

Swallowing convulsively, he kept down what so desperately wanted to come back up but, just barely. It’s acid burning at the back of his throat. The anger roiled inside his mind radiating from him so much, his skin actually burned.

Finished with his task, he waved away Dembe’s silent offer to take her.
“The blanket.” He pointed to one laying on the floor, near the door.

“C-Cold.” She mumbled incoherently.

“I know.” He took the blanket, wrapping it around her then hooked his arm under her legs and one behind her back, lifting in one sure motion. The small movement jostled her ankle slightly, she groaned so deeply, he felt it ripple up his arms.

There had been no strain on her part, but it had exhausted her. She sagged limply into Red’s firm chest. Her head fell back, to hold it up just too much effort on her part.

“Elizabeth!” Red’s stern voice cut through the fog. Mindful of her arm, he cradled her higher on his chest, rubbing his face against her wet one. Her blood and tears mixed with his sweat.

“Resting.” She fought to keep her eyes open. “You came.” Her head bobbed before resting on his shoulder. “You... came.”

“How did you know?” Red questioned, remembering she had called out for him during the attack.

“Didn’t,” she slurred, “only hoped.”

And with that, she blessedly passed into oblivion.
April 4

The fifteen minute drive nearly undid Red.

He urged Dembe to drive faster though the drizzling rain made the road slick and hazardous. Dembe however, used it to his advantage, sliding around the slippery surface like a pro stock car racer.

Red cradled the bleeding woman to his chest, somewhat reassured by her continued breathing and heart beat, but it wasn’t enough after repeated attempts to wake her, had failed.

He tucked the blanket and his coat around her trying to trap his heat inside with little effect. She continued to shiver in his arms, unconsciously curled into his warmth.

“Dembe?” Red ground through his teeth, his frustration at the breaking point.

“I can see the doctor’s car ahead.” His friend reassured.

Shutting his eyes, Red dropped his head, rubbing his face against Liz’s, comforting them both.

Pulling rapidly into the drive, the car slid on the wet concrete. Dembe vacated the vehicle before it had been fully placed in park, the gears grinding viciously. Running to the opposite side, the man yanked open the door, stepping back hastily to allow Red to get out with his light burden, which he did with unpracticed ease.

Hurriedly making their way to the house, Red covered Liz with his body, blocking the rain as they were greeted by the doctor, who immediately began examining his patient.

The physician ran his hand over the head wound, pushing on the affected area. “Can you hear me?” His voice was raised effectively, but garnered no response. Following the two men, he kept talking, asking questions of the woman.

“How long since she lost consciousness?” Doctor Bryan removed necessary objects from his bag, placing them within reaching distance.

“Fifteen minutes.” Red gently placed his precious bundle on the bed, careful of her injuries.

“I will get hot water.” Dembe knew the routine well.

Red yelled after the retreating man. “And more light!”

The IV was readied, administered with ease. “It will help with the shock. Did she mention any
specific pain?

“Specific pain! Have you looked at her?” Red knew he was being unreasonable but he didn’t give a fuck.

The younger man took no offense, pulling a set of syringes from his bag, concentrating on the matter at hand. “Antibiotic and a tetanus shot.” he explained his actions, still very much focused on his patient.

Tossing the used needles into a surgical pan, the slight man probed the cuts, carefully watching the flow. Reaching for his scissors, he pulled at Liz’s shirt, cutting into the fabric in one long slice.

“Help me get her up.” he instructed.

Red slid his hand under the woman’s neck and shoulders, pulling her lax body into an upright position. He helped the doctor remove the last of her bloody garment, holding her naked torso against his clothed one.

She felt so cold against his heat and he desperately wished he could warm her, but other things must take priority, he knew.

Dembe reentered the room carrying heated water and cloths. Averting his eyes away from only a side view of Liz’s breast and naked back, he placed the items on the closest night stand.

Turning his attention back to the doctor, “How much longer?” he asked sternly.

“She has a couple of really bad gashes back here.” the doctor snapped right back. “I know my job.”

After a few minutes, the young man finished his task.

Easing her down, Red saw the full extent of her torso injuries. Gritting his teeth, his fists clenched tightly, the man fought to control his rage.

“She’ll be fine Mr. Reddington.” The doctor said calmly, gently prodding the wound on Liz’s stomach. Grabbing the needed supplies, he immediately started closing the area.

Hearing Dembe’s return, Red placed a cloth over the woman’s breasts out of respect for her dignity.

The doctor had closed the stab wound on her stomach and was now working his way up her torso. He removed the cloth from her breasts, leaning in closer to inspect the deep cut on the upper slope of her mound.

Red watched as the man’s hands pushed at the cut, his palm grazing her nipple, lifting the pert bud.

Red stepped back, his instinct to yank the man’s hand away overwhelming. He closed his eyes, visions of snapping the man’s wrist, literally overpowering for a second.

He wondered in the days which followed, if the rage he felt at that moment was for the physician and his right to touch something Red felt so territorial about or his own unconscionable notice of how plump and soft... how very touchable the woman’s breasts appeared even in such a state.

But admiring them as a man, becoming aroused at the sight, he simply could not... would not allow such a travesty. Not right now. Maybe later when this hell was over. When he wasn’t so anxious and pissed... and terrified.

Right now, he just wanted her to be all right.
“This one isn’t bad, we’ll just bandage it.” The doctor kept his face close to the area, unaware of the danger.

“The stomach wound is deep and will have to be watched for infection, I’m afraid.” he sighed heavily, a heavy scowl on the handsome face. “Her neck is superficial, so to speak” he carefully bandaged her rib cage. “He missed anything vital in both areas. So that’s good.”

The narrative continued “They will be painful, but we’ll manage that.” it was reassured. He disinfected and bandaged the long gash on her foot. “I would be happier with an x-ray before doing this, but I can feel the damage pretty clearly. I can set it and we’ll boot it.”

“No, you’ll cast it.” Red interrupted.

“We don’t really have to do that anymore Mr. Reddington.” the doctor knew better than to condescend, but... “With continued care, we will watch for any movement.”

Red silenced the man. “I want her in casts. We’ll discuss the boot later.”

“Three weeks, then we’ll re-evaluate.” The doctor was not happy, clearly. Gently grabbing the foot, he manipulated it in his hand, hesitating when the woman on the bed stirred. Liz settled back into her slumber quickly and he returned to prodding the area.

“I can feel it here. I just need to slip it back into place.”

Red nodded, sitting on the bed. He stroked her hair, murmuring to her quietly.

“Is there anyway we can get some ice? I’d like to pack her arm while we’re waiting. Keep the swelling down.” the doctor advised.

Red inclined his head, pulling out his phone, in seconds the request was accomplished.

Placing the cloth back over her pale breasts, Red stared down at her strained features, upset that even passed into sweet oblivion, she felt the pain.

“Are you ready to set the breaks?” Red demanded tightly.

The doctor nodded solemnly.

“Give her something for the pain.”

“We don’t know if she had a head injury, Mr. Reddington.”

Red considered all his options. He leaned low, bracketing his arms at Liz’s sides. He whispered softly. “Lizzy.” he kissed her forehead lingeringly, his eyes closing to his own pain. “I’m right here... so you just stay with me and soon this will all be nothing more than a bad dream.”

From far away Elizabeth Keen left her place of relative safety for a more inviting atmosphere. She tried to force her eyes to open, unsuccessfully. The white haze pulling her back relentlessly.

Red opened his eyes, his lips brushing her cheek lovingly. His fists tightened into the cool cotton of the sheets below her until his knuckles turned white.

Liz felt a set of dry unrelenting hands grasp her leg, distracting her from the deep, rich voice cocooning her in warmth and safety. She moved restlessly on the bed, panic rising in her chest which rose and fell laboriously as the persistent hands tried to wrench her from that safe haven... from that
In the otherwise cool room, fine droplets of perspiration ran in rust colored rivulets down her battered body. The reddened sheen covering her rapidly paling skin, stained a grotesque outline of her body onto the ghostly white sheets.

Her body jerked, trying to curl in on itself in defense as the doctor held her foot stationary, causing her to cry out, red tears streaming down her face.

The doctor skillfully snapped the joint back into place.

She let out a piercing scream, the white haze melting into red fog of awareness. She coughed low in her chest, her shoulders turned inward. She gagged once, then twice.

Red turned her to her side, just in time to catch what was left of her stomach contents in one of the doctors medical trays. Bracing his forearms tightly under her shoulders, his hands bracketed her head, her tears wetting his palms.

Edging closer, he lay his warmth over the coolness of her form. He whispered reassuringly to her, reaching between them popping the buttons on his shirt open, laying his bare chest against hers in a bid to warm her, ignoring how the soft mounds of her bare breasts pressed into him.

“It’s almost done baby, I promise.” he soothed, his lips brushing against the soft shell of her ear.

He hadn’t meant to say that out loud, but it seemed to ease her, so he’d forgive the slip.

Red felt her slender hand grasping for purchase against his inner thigh before bunching what little fabric there was in her trembling hand.

He kept crooning softly to her and was grateful when her head fell limply into his hand as her breath evened out and the tension in her muscles eased. Which was more than he could say for his.

“Sleep, sweetheart.” he coaxed softly. “I’m here.”

Staying close to Lizzy, he stroked her hair, tracing her bloodied features with his thumb and forefinger, smoothing out the pained expression on her delicate features.

“Sir, we need to do her arm.”

Red blinked a stony gaze, his eyes never leaving her face.

“Do it quickly.” Red punctuated.

He tightened his hold on her, raising her slowly, keeping her pressed against his body. Her light weight settled into him, her head falling into his shoulder.

The doctor picked up her arm, manipulating it until Red felt a slight pulling movement. He braced his mind against Liz’s body shaking with the action.

“You can lay her back down now.”

Those were the sweetest words Red Reddington had ever heard. He released the tension and anguish he had been holding in, his stomach lurching spasmodically all the same.

After working steadily for forty five minutes putting on the arm cast and double checking wounds, Dembe and the assistant quietly and efficiently started gathering supplies and cleaning up. The doctor
took his leave, instructions left behind.

Dembe returned to the room minutes later carrying a bowl filled with hot soapy water, clean towels draped over his arm.

“Raymond.” He set the supplies beside Red. “Would you like me to assist you?”

Red ran his hand over Liz’s head, nuzzling her brow once before looking over his shoulder. “No, but did you get the sheets for the bed and the heat packs?”

Dembe motioned with his head to where the articles lay waiting.

Red sat up and picked up a soft cloth, dunking it in the hot water, wringing the excess out.

Starting at the woman’s head, he worked at an efficient but gentle pace, cleaning as much of the blood from her as possible, but for now it would have to do. It was imperative to get her dry and warm.

Dembe waited patiently before finally being summoned. “Dembe, grab one of my shirts, please.”

The large man returned with a soft dark button up, then walked to the large picture window which framed the wall to Raymond’s left, looking out into the night.

Sitting Liz up, Red slipped her arms through the open sleeves, careful of the thick cast. Buttoning the shirt, hid her wounds for which he was grateful.

“I’m done.” He lay her gently back into the pillow, taking the heating pad held in Dembe’s hand, laying it on her abdomen, pulling the blankets up around her.

Grabbing the water bowl, he bypassed Dembe, heading for the bathroom. “I can take care of that Raymond.”

Ray set the bowl on the counter top, bracing his hands against the rich marble. Hanging his head, his jaw tightened. Releasing a trembling breath, he pushed off the sink and bolted for the toilet bowl. Bracing a hand against the wall and one on the tank, he repeatedly expelled the fear that had plagued him for the last two hours.

He saw Dembe at his left, a water glass in his hand. Taking it, he swished the lukewarm liquid, spitting it into the water below, repeating until the taste abated.

“I can’t lose her...” He said roughly, his throat raw.

“You won’t.” Dembe’s voice held a finality Red cherished. “She will be fine, my friend.”

Red finally nodded, knowing the truth when he heard it. Leaning into the wall, he steadied himself.

“Clean up, then I will help you with the bed.”

Red frowned, then caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He was covered in Liz’s blood. It even showed against the black of his tuxedo pants. Her hand prints branded on the pristine white shirt, his forearms, neck and face. His bare chest, a mirror image to her wounds, the outline dotting his flesh.

“I’ll be right out.” He swallowed another rise of bile.

Throwing the clothes on the bathroom bench, he turned on the shower stepping under the heated spray, watching the red swirl off him unto the floor.
Leaning into the shower wall, he squeezed his eyes shut against the tears threatening escape. Reaching blindly for the soap, he washed away the evidence of the evening.

Stepping out, he dried off, wrapped the towel low on his waist, then went to the closet, grabbing something to wear.

After dressing, once in the bedroom, he spoke directly to his friend, “We’ll change one side, I’ll move her, then we can do the other side.”

“Give me your hand.” Dembe unrolled some gauze before tearing off strips of tape, placing them along the dresser. Red held out his hand to the man, quietly staring at the woman on the bed until Dembe finished his task.

Afterwards, it took only minutes for the two men to change the linens and get Elizabeth situated for the night ahead.

“I’m going to stay with her a while.” Red needed the time alone with the woman. “Why don’t you go get some rest.”

Dembe nodded, “I have my phone if you should need me.”

“Goodnight and thank you,” Red thought it needed to be said, especially this night, “for putting up with me.”

“Always.” Dembe nodded his head nobly, walking from the room, leaving Red alone with Liz.

Red lay flat on the bed, closing his eyes, exhaustion overtaking him. But his mind refused to shut down, replaying the images of Liz, bloodied and broken, in extreme technicolor.

Turning over, he was soothed by the rise and fall of her breast as she breathed evenly in her sleep.

He would just lay here a few minutes and rest. Then move to the chair. He just needed a few minutes.

Reaching out, he wrapped his hand around her cooler one, in time, matching his breathing to hers.

Sleep blissfully came, moments later.

Chapter End Notes

I fought my Beta for Red to say, baby.

She said it was too soon. What do you think??
April 4

Red awoke with a start, shutting his eyes forcefully, blocking out the bright light that stabbed painfully at his aching head.

There was nothing worse than waking with a headache, especially one that had fed off of extreme adrenaline.

Squinting at the clock over Lizzy’s silent form, he was perturbed to see only four hours had passed since he had lay down.

He sat up, stifling a groan, driving the heel of his palms into his eye sockets, relived by the temporary pressure.

Reaching over, he felt Liz’s warm arm. He sat for a long moment, just watching her breathe.

Throwing back the covers, the man crossed to the long closet, pulling clothes for the day, then went about his morning routine.

Checking Lizzy once more, he left the room, phone in hand.

Entering the kitchen, Red was surprised to see Dembe pouring a cup of coffee. “Did you sleep at all?”

“I woke an hour ago. I assumed there would be much to do today?” the stately man replied.

“I need to call Cooper and inform him of the situation.” Red had nodded his acquiescence, securing a cup of the strong brew for himself. “Tell Kaplan I want that fucking house put up for sale.”

Dembe looked up hastily from his coffee.

“She’s not going back there, Dembe.” he silenced any debate. “Kaplan will know what to do and what Lizzy will need.”

“Elizabeth will not appreciate...”

“Elizabeth can yell at me later.” Red rather enjoyed any heated exchange with the woman in question on any given day, but right now, he would settle for any emotion from her what-so-ever.

Dembe took out his phone. “Is there anything else?”

Red took a drink from his hot coffee, thankful for the caffeine. “Did the doctor give you the prescriptions?”

Dembe nodded, pulling out the slip of paper. “I will get food and anything else she requires.”

The large man stole a last drink of his coffee, then took his leave.
Red watched him go truly thankful for such an ally. He felt the weight of his cell calling to him from his trouser pocket.

The man sighed heavily. Often, the phone felt an extension of himself. More and more recently, he was starting to resent the hell the object. He would have to start making calls but for the present, he would finish his coffee... come hell or high water.

“Why the hell didn’t you stay with her!” Cooper’s voice sliced through Red’s already pounding head.

He *should* have stayed with her, he knew something had been wrong. He had sensed it.

“Suffice to say, it’s a mistake that will not happen again.” Instead of wanting to keep the peace that had come between them recently, Red should have dealt with any annoyance that would have arisen.

“Where is she now?” Cooper’s tone was curt.

“With me.” Red stared at the sleeping woman, frowning.

“And that would be where?” Cooper questioned.

“Until she otherwise specifies, she is perfectly safe and is well taken care of, that’s all you need to know.” Red was not open to compromise.

Harold sighed into the phone. “Are we certain this was Carver?”

“She resembles a fucking Picasso painting.” Red held his anger admirably. “Who else could it fucking be!”

“I’ll assemble a team and have them at Keen’s house in thirty minutes.” Harold stated. “Can you make it, we need some sort of run down about how things unfolded.”

“When Dembe returns, I’ll meet you there.” He hung up the phone, then dialed again.

Dembe remained with Liz while Red drove across town to keep his rendezvous with Cooper.

He turned the corner, slowing the car, the street congested with every sort of Federal vehicle known to man.

He had expected the fiasco which greeted him upon his arrival, but quite frankly he was in no mood to deal with bureaucracy today.

Media crews were already on site. Feds were literally combing through the bushes, surrounding the neighborhood, let alone Elizabeth’s home.

Taking a spot that obviously had been left for him, he exited the vehicle, greeted by Samar.

“Do you think there’s enough people here?” Red pointed to the menagerie surrounding them.

“It’s one of their own.” Samar shrugged slightly.

“Oh, they’re claiming her as one of their own now.” Red said sarcastically. “Only took some media attention and her losing a couple pints of blood for that to happen.”
“Is she all right?” Samar asked quietly.

“She’s alive.” He bit out. She frowned at the tone, backing up. “Sorry. It was a long night.” he instantly apologized.

She nodded in understanding. “Come on, I don’t want to have to repeat this twice.” He took her arm, leading her up the steps to where Harold waited.

Stepping through the threshold, Red felt a wave of nausea crash over him, the smell of vomit and blood combination, that had escaped his senses last night, overwhelmed him this morning.

“Red, what can you tell us?” Harold and Donald stood gravely before him.

“This...” He waved at the doors, “is my handiwork. I kicked in both. They were locked and she used her key to get in.”

“Is that when that happened?” Harold pointed to Red’s bandaged hand.

“No.” Red glanced at the appendage, his tone curt.

He stepped further into the entryway, staring around at the blood smeared all over the floor and walls. Broken furniture left in the wake of last night’s brawl, sprawled through out the area.

Red pulled his stare away from the spot where he had found Elizabeth. His eyes closed as he imagined how terrified she must have been, alone and hurting... thinking she was going to die.

“When I came in, she was laying there.” He pointed to the hallway.

He remembered skidding, and he could see the imprint where he had knelt next to Elizabeth, clearly outlined on the bloodied floor.

The flowers he had given her lay trampled and strewn about the room.

His eye ticked spasmodically for the fatalistic symbolism.

The Elizabeth he saw last emerging was self assured, self confident. She was beginning to believe in herself.

He now feared that her dreams for pushing beyond that self doubt, were just as haphazardly scattered and crushed as the flowers on the blood covered floor.

He knew she would see this moment as a failure instead of an achievement.

*Where others hadn’t...she survived.*

“There’s blood by the backdoor.” Ressler jotted the note down on his pad, having just spoken with a forensic tech.

“It may be hers.” Samar gestured to where Red focused his attention.

“No.” Ressler pointed to the men collecting the evidence. “They said the drops appeared to have fallen from a height of at least six feet.”

Red’s mouth pulled at the corner. *Lizzy wounded Carver.*

“So, Liz got in a few good licks.” Samar grinned. “Check area hospitals, maybe?” she shrugged.
“He would have handled it himself.” Red muttered then squatted, squinting at a piece of something sticking up from between the floorboards. “What is that?”

Samar came over, tweezing the piece, holding it up between them.

“A fingernail.”

Red swallowed convulsively, then cleared his throat. “So he dragged her from there to the back.” the man concentrated his efforts elsewhere, determined to learn all he could of events.

Donald walked the scene beside Reddington, noting each and every detail the older man supplied, good little agent that he was.

Samar stood quietly, arms folded tightly over her chest, the lovely face giving away nothing of her own emotional attachment.

“Dembe followed the bastard out the back but lost him minutes later. He had a car waiting.” Red finished his narrative. “We immobilized Elizabeth then left.”

“And she didn’t say anything else besides that she thought it was Carver?” Donald looked up from his notes.

“She was bleeding out and in shock. That she said anythin–” Red growled.

“Take it easy Red.” Harold stepped between the two men, “He’s only trying to get information so we can help.”

“Help?” Red stepped forward, threateningly. “It would have helped if you had kept this contained.” the man spewed his fury. “Plug the fucking leak, Harold. I can’t keep her safe if the Press splashes her face across every media outlet available,” he pointed to the farce taking place outside.

“We have, all records have been sealed and tagged.” Cooper mollified. “If they’re tapped, warning flags will go up.”

“Where’s Hudson?” Red inquired briskly, glancing superficially about the area.

“He’s out back, we...” Samar started to reply but Red walked away, heading for the area.

He exited the door, scanning for the dog.

Hudson cowered over by the fence which ran the length of the property. People parted ways as the man headed for the furry animal.

Red hunkered down, scratching at the scared animals head before grabbing the leash.

Samar came to his side, “I can take him if you...”

“She’ll want him.” Red interrupted curtly. “When are you going to be done here?”

“Another hour or so, I guess.” Samar shrugged her shoulders, glancing about the chaos. “I could call...”

“Yes, I have Dembe coming to gather her things.”

“Red, are you all right?” Samar asked sincerely.

“I’m fine.” Picking up the dog, he walked away silently, leaving the woman to wonder, in his wake.
Red Reddington sat, hunched over the silent figure before him. Holding Elizabeth’s hand, stroking it, made him feel better.

Thoughts of whisking her away to some hidden place, away from people, away from the danger, wrapping her in a cocoon of safety, had filled his mind from the moment he had sat down. With all she had seen and faced, she was still quite naïve. She was capable, but ill prepared to deal with this life. His life.

A world filled with people that would fight, steal, cheat and even kill to stay ahead of the game. To climb the ladder.

With him backing her, guiding her... she could learn. Without him...

A soft knocking on the door drew his attention away from his dark thoughts, his turmoil. “Come in.”

“Raymond...” Mr. Kaplan’s voice calmed him instantly. With this woman beside him, he knew everything would be well taken care of with no involvement or input from him.

His mouth pulled at the corners slightly thinking that she actually preferred when he didn’t get in her way.

“Kate.” She placed her hand on his shoulder, a slight touch that relaxed him. He felt his shoulders loosen, the sleepiness he’d been fighting all morning making his body sag with exhaustion.

He squeezed his eyes shut, forcing the rising tide away.

Kaplan stroked his head lightly, the sensation traversing his entire form. He instinctively fought his desire to give in to the delicious emotions the woman evoked.

If he didn’t know better, he’d think she was drugging him. There were only a few people Red trusted implicitly and Kate Kaplan was at the top of that list right alongside Dembe.

“Tell me.” Her voice soothed and calmed his tattered soul.

Only two words and he unloaded it all. Everything that happened from the time he saw Lizzy in that red dress to the time he passed out on the bed next to her.

Kaplan sat quietly, listening to the past night’s events, occasionally patting his arm during difficult sequences, waiting patiently until he was composed enough to continue.

When he was finished, she asked, in her no nonsense way, what he wanted, needed of her.

“I want her out of that damn house. I don’t want her ever setting foot in there again. I want it gone.” he stated venomously, then seemed to deflate. “But I’m wrong, aren’t I? Deciding that she can’t go back there. It isn’t my decision.”

“No.” the woman finally spoke. “If you want someone to be the bad guy, let’s have it be me. The house is nothing but a noose around her neck. It needs to go... she needs to move on.”

Red was taken aback. He expected her usual humorous sarcasm, in that he was being selfish, too overprotective, impulsive. Kate hadn’t even scolded him like she had with the incidents that occurred with his ex-wife.
She even agreed with him. And no one, in his opinion, was more level-headed then Kate Kaplan.

“I will take care of everything,” Raymond already felt better. “As for you... you need to rest. So you will get in bed and stay there until I return.”

She pushed at him, making him leave the chair, urging him to the other side of the bed, guiding his sluggish movements.

“Shoes...” he kicked them off, “Vest...” he unbuttoned it, pulling it off, “Belt...” he yanked it free of the loops, realizing he was following her low commands without question.

“You’d be a great Dominatrix.” Red slurred his words sleepily as he lay back into the bed, his head landing in the cushy pillow.

“Who’s to say,” She asked, quietly closing the door behind her, “that was not my first career choice.”

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April 4

Red opened his eyes slowly. The late evening sun’s rays were just now lighting the room.

How long had he slept?

Glancing at the clock, he was surprised to see four hours had passed. His internal clock was definitely off.

*Damn Kate Kaplan.* The thought made him smile.

He stumbled to the bathroom splashing his face with cool water, brushing his teeth, taking a leak and changing clothes.

He then felt prepared to deal with whatever awaited him outside this room.

The man checked on Elizabeth, placing a phone beside her, in case she needed him.

Walking around the corner to the sitting room, he was slightly shocked to see Mr. Kaplan sitting quietly with Dembe, both happily reading away.

His eyebrow lifted as he noted the title of Kate’s book, *Lady Kaitlyn’s Lover.*

His estimation of the woman rose by degrees. Dembe had ordered his special platinum edition of Downtown Abbey’s fourth season. It was more than odd to see a big grin on usually placid face.

“Were there problems?” Red questioned. It was very rare that Kaplan stayed on after finishing a job.

“Are there ever?” she looked up from her book, slightly annoyed.

“We didn’t want to disturb you.” Kate pulled out her phone, typing into it rapidly.

Dembe spoke quietly from behind his fully illustrated hardcover, “And I for one, knowing full well you were sleeping with a gun under your pillow... did not wish to die.” he glanced up too. “How would I know if Lady Mary ever finds a happy ending?”

A few moments later there was a knock on the front door. Dembe got up and headed for the source.

“Do you feel better?” Kate laid her novel aside.

“I do. But then, I did when you came in to the room.”

“Get your nose out of my ass, Raymond.” Kate got up from her seat, her services needed. She cast a slight scowl to the man as she passed.

“I don’t believe a woman has requested that of me before.” Red looked off, lost in thought. “If anything, I’ve been asked to linger a bit,” he cut his eyes to hers, a seductive lift of his brows
signified his mood, “and instructed to lick t–”

“Yes, and I’m sure you complied... like the good little Submissive you are.” Kaplan sighed. “Deviant.” she stared at him, straight faced.

“Speaking of which, tell me about the book you’re reading.” Raymond teased. “Any good pages you’ve marked so far?”

The woman shifted a cool glance. “Try page one sixty seven. You might be amused... now, where do you want this miscellanea placed?”

Red stepped out on to the drive, finding two large trucks sitting there. Kate came to stand beside him.

The man moved out of the way of a large rack of clothing being wheeled past.

“Is this everything?” he enquired.

“The smaller truck holds Tom Keen’s possessions. I assumed you wanted that kept separate, so you could go through it.”

“I do, yes.” Red looked over his shoulder, finding Silas, whom he waved over. “I want everything in that truck scanned and searched... twice. See to it personally.”

“You got it boss.” Silas quipped. “What do you want us to do with it if it’s clean?”

“Donate it to a shelter. Even if the owner couldn’t do anything for society, maybe his possessions will.” Red scoffed lightly. “Did you wave her clothes?”

“We did. Picked up a couple bugs and trackers, mainly in the coats and bags.”

“Asshole.” Red mumbled under his breath, though not as quietly as he thought, when he found Dembe and Silas nodding in agreement with assessment. “What did you do with them?”

“What do you want us to do with them?” Silas asked innocently.

“Put them in his clothing. Let him chase them through the streets of DC.” Dembe and Silas grinned for the irony of it all.

“As for the other trucks, we thought you may be able to direct what stays and goes.”

They started pulling boxes and totes, Red directed most of it back into the empty truck, after it was found to be clear of any mementoes left by Tom.

The next tote that passed by, caught his interest. “Wait. Let me look at that.”

He popped the top off, staring inside at Sam’s smiling face, Lizzy beside him, grinning happily in a photo.

Lifting the album out of the box, he found a stuffed rabbit laying underneath.

His heart began beating wildly in his chest.

Clasping the album, he reached inside, pulling out the singed rabbit. Squeezing it in his hand, he felt the hardened center, furthering the palpitations in his chest.

“Raymond?” Dembe had noticed the man’s preoccupation. “Are you all right?”
“Yes, I’m fine.” He transferred the rabbit and album to one hand, closed the lid on the bin, then waved it off.

Kate stepped next to him, opening her bag. She pulled out a handful of envelopes.

“Here’s her mail. I all ready took care of having everything forwarded to the address you gave me and the utilities are transferred to you.”

“You’re so efficient.” he caressed her sensually.

“And expensive.”

“And worth every penny.” he smiled genuinely enjoying the exchange.

“If I told you to get down and lick my boots, you’d do it, wouldn’t you Raymond.”

“Would you like me to?” He leered playfully.

Kate scoffed, “Save it for her.” She thumbed back at the house and the woman sleeping inside.

A little while later, they had Liz’s personal things inside. Her furniture and decorative pieces on the truck, ready for storage.

And Tom’s things swiped and cleared of any useful items. Money, weapons, blackmail on a couple dozen people Tom had obviously been following, and keys to various banks through out the city, had been found.

But most importantly... besides Lizzy, alive and well and sleeping comfortably in his bedroom.

*The Fulcrum* was finally back in it’s proper place.

Raymond Reddington’s possession.

Chapter End Notes

Was oddly enough listening to Sarah McLachlan's, Possession, when I typed the last word and I thought, why the hell not.

Lady Kaitlyn's Lover, is a shout out. I read this story back when you first posted it. And after all this time, I still think Angus is weird. (She'll understand the reference)
Red glanced up, instantly laying his book aside. He had arisen, his name beckoning him forward. The man leaned slightly, concern on his handsome face.

Liz struggled to speak again, and thankfully a straw was placed gently between her parched lips. She drank greedily. Sipping the cooled liquid slowly, she tried again but the sound remained deep in her throat.

“I’m here.” He smiled sitting down next to her, smoothing her hair out of her face. Her eyes fluttered open, seeking the man’s earnest gaze. “How do you feel?”

“Like I was attacked,” she told the truth as she knew it, “by a blade wielding rabid dog.”

The man held the cool water for her to drink her fill.

“An apt description,” He chuckled, relieved to hear her voice.

She sought his countenance. “H-How long?”

“It’s Sunday. You slept Saturday away.” He checked his watch, then her person as he had the entire time he had been by her side. “What are you feeling?”

“Like I need a bathroom.” If her bladder wasn’t so full, Liz might have been embarrassed, but right now there was nothing but an urgent need.

“All right. Lets get you up...” With practiced ease and efficiency, he helped her to sit up and slide to the edge of the bed. “Let me do the work, just lean into me.”

Standing her with little pain, he righted them both, taking the weight off her leg.

“Crutches?” she glanced around groggily.

After four tiny stilted steps, he damned her pride.

“To hell with it.” Bending, he hooked his arms around her, picking her up with ease, walking quickly to the bathroom. Both worried and elated when she hadn’t protested.

Setting her in front of the toilet, he braced her hand on the bar and turned, only to be stopped by her small voice, “How in the hell am I supposed to...do this?” She gestured to her cast, then her clothes.

Coming back, he looked her in the eye, understanding how difficult such a situation was for her. He placidly set his features.

“I won’t look,” He made work of the string holding the shorts. “I promise.”

“I don’t care right now,” Liz squeezed her eyes shut, the need that pronounce, “ask me later after I’ve peed.”

His lip rose in amusement. Hands at her hips, he pushed at the fabric, moving it quickly down to her
thighs. Then helped her to the seat. “I’ll just be out there...”

After a few seconds her stream started, her hand gripping the handrail, gasping with relief.

He walked away, giving her a sense of privacy.

He hoped that this didn’t embarrass her because for the next couple of weeks at least, she was going to need someone to be there for these private moments.

The stream finally came to a trickle, then stopped. He heard a long sigh, “Thank you, God.”

Putting down her toothbrush, he went back, undid the damage he had done, his manner verging on the professional.

“Thank you, Red. I’m...” She blushed a bit, but was truly thankful.

He gestured to the sink, distracting her. “You want to freshen up a bit?”

“I would kill to ‘freshen up a bit’.” After a few hobbled steps, she set her appreciative eyes on the available seat.

“You can’t take a shower yet, for obvious reasons but a good sponge bath is just as refreshing.” He handed her a soft cloth and soap, stepping back, turning around.

“This smells so good.” Liz had stopped to sniff the fragrance. “It’s just like the soap I use.”

He hesitated, his steps slowing. “I sent Dembe back with Mr. Kaplan.” He made mention. “They packed up your things.”

A scowl crossed his brow briefly. “It’s going to be difficult with that arm... isn’t it?”

Liz looked about her person, the same thought having crossed her mind.

She stiffened her resolve gingerly handing the soap and cloth over to capable hands.

“I feel so lame.” she muttered dejectedly.

“Loose the shirt.” he dampened the cloth in hot water.

“I don’t think so.” Elizabeth started to object. “I can do this.”

He waited patiently for her common sense to surface. At length she hesitantly begin to unbutton the shirt. The man shifted his head slightly when she removed it.

She bunched the garment, holding it protectively over her breasts.

Red wiped her revealed arms gently. Then proceeded to cleanse her. He continually reheated the cloth, at one point, dropping to his haunches, wiping away the last of the blood on her legs.

Her faint skin was still swirled with the now dried red fluid. It looked like a tan gone wrong.

“What happened to your hand?” Liz asked, grasping at anything to take her mind from the fact that his administrations felt so wonderful.

“Little accident.” he grimaced slightly. “It’s nothing.”

“Where are we?” she glanced around her surroundings, not recognizing the room.
“With Tom and Carver hanging around. I went ahead and moved us here. It’s more secure.”

She watched him wipe down her leg, running the cloth up to her thigh.

“Lizzy, I know you might not remember a lot...”

The woman wondered where the conversation was leading.

“Your injuries were... extensive. I just want to warn you.” He bowed his head, hesitating momentarily, cloth poised in the air.

She realized that she hadn’t even looked in the mirror. Looking up, she took in her appearance. Her complexion was so pale, the white gauze against the wounds looked dark. Her lip was split, scabbed slightly but healing.

She gasped, seeing the black threading haphazardly dotting her abused flesh.

She poked at one set of stitches, surprised it didn’t hurt as much as she thought it would. It looked so grotesque, so ugly, that you would think that it would be as painful to touch as it was to see.

“My God...” She stuttered. She could hardly count the cuts, let alone the threads.

“He will pay, Lizzy.” Red mumbled. “As God is my witness.” the man knew he was set on automatic pilot these days. While he had no concrete plans at the moment, he knew sooner or later, his natural instinct would kick in.

That was the time he was looking most forward to... a time when he would face down his demons and in this particular case, her demon.

Carver... would... pay.

Their eyes met in the mirror. She looked away from the bleakness, shivering slightly. At times she almost forgot this man was Red Reddington.

“I guess it doesn’t really matter. It’s just, to see it...” she tried to shrug the matter away. “I can do the front.” she gently gestured for the cloth.

“We’ll have to change some of the dressings. So we’re going to have to figure out how to do the front portion, sooner or later.” He stopped when her head dropped.

“Lizzy. I know you’re highly uncomfortable right now. But please, don’t be.” he stated more than asked.

“I know it might not help,” He gave her the cloth, turning away, “but I’ve been in your shoes so many times... I’ve had to have someone help me in the bathroom, my hands were such a mess. As you can imagine, it’s a bit more extensive for a male than just dropping drawers.” he crooked his brow and tilted his head back and forth. “Probably not the best sight in the world, or feeling. And no... it wasn’t Dembe.”

Red turned to the pantry to give her privacy, taking his time in gathering supplies that he would need.

“I had buck shot in my back down to my ass, how do you think that was cared for?” he remembered that time, not too fondly. “I get it, your frustration and embarrassment, really I do.”

“I understand what you’re saying intellectually, Red.” she took a cleansing breath. “I’ll be okay. I
just woke up. I’m still shaky, hungry. Disoriented” Liz built up her courage. “I’m a little vulnerable right now and not just because of this, I’ll be fine.” She freely admitted her weakness for once.

With that, she removed the barrier between them allowing it to drop aside. She smiled when Red ducked his head, appreciating his gesture.

“I’ll hire a nurse for you.” It had been on his agenda. “I don’t know why I didn’t do it yesterday?”

But between Mr. Kaplan allowing him to sleep and Harold calling every hour on the hour, there hadn’t been a lot of time.

Washing up, methodically removing the red stain, she finally finished, handing the cloth back. Red shifted behind her, soothingly rubbing at her back, removing the thick gauze with care.

Shivering with pleasure, she leaned into his touch.

“Are you cold?”

“No, it feels good.” Why lie? If anyone needed something to feel good about right now, it was the woman.

His only response was to keep up the small circular patterns, which she so enjoyed.

“And you don’t have to hire a nurse.” she extended an olive branch. “It’s only for a couple of days.” Glancing back at him. “She won’t have your touch, of course.” she half-teased.

Red inwardly rejoiced, but hid his reaction well. “If she doesn’t work out... I’m your man.”

That was the problem, Liz was beginning to notice that more and more, of late. That Red Reddington was indeed, very much... a man.

The woman was shaky and weak by the end of the ordeal. Red got her situated on the small couch by the windows so she could look out on the bright sunlit day while they breakfasted.

The next hour was passed most pleasantly, at least in Red’s point of view. His narratives had brought a few smiles and Liz had eaten well.

All in all, the day was looking up.

During the meal, Liz was stumped and surprised when Dembe entered the room carrying a deck lounge. He smiled that quick smile, disappeared into the bathroom then left silently.

Elizabeth placed her fork beside her plate, a question nagging at her.

“Was that my dog?”

“Probably your former dog.” Red shrugged helplessly. “Dembe gave him a bath and treats. Now, if he’s not following our friend around, like a little lost puppy. He’s sleeping in his bed. They’ve become quite attached.”

And they had. The dog had taken to Dembe’s calm nature, staying with the large man through out the day, following him every where he went.
Red had been surprised when the dog came to him after entering the car, that day after the attack.

Maybe with all the time he had spent with Lizzy, the dog recognized his scent. He didn’t know? But he had comforted Hudson the entire trip, who seemed quite content until the moment Dembe entered the room.

From then on, it had been love at first sight on both participants’ parts.

Liz returned to her meal philosophically setting her mind to the fact, that dogs were in fact, man’s best friend.

Red had cooked eggs, scattered with cheese and bacon. Fresh artisan bread, toasted and buttered. Fresh cut fruit, juice and her needed coffee.

Either she was starving, or this was one of the best meals she had ever eaten.

And while it was all delicious, eating had been frustrating.

Predominately right handed, eating with her left was not only annoying, it was proving impossible.

Red had gallantly ended up cutting her eggs and toast for her into manageable pieces. He had even handed one of his own pieces of toast over near the end of the meal. Until that moment, she had not realized, she had been eyeing it covetously.

Red stood, gingerly clapping his hands together, smiling at her expectantly.

Elizabeth frowned. “What?” she asked cautiously.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“I have had enough surprises.” she assured him.

“Trust me.”

It had not taken much coaxing on the man’s part. Elizabeth was delighted to have found the meaning of Dembe’s earlier gift.

Her idea of heaven was coming to vivid life.

Red pulled the spout from it’s resting place, testing the water, slowly moving it over her sensitive scalp. After sufficiently wetting it, he popped a cap, pouring a generous amount of luxurious shampoo into his palm.

Massaging it into the dark strands, the man rubbed strong fingers over trouble areas soothingly. Rinsing the suds away, he repeated the process, starting from her neck line, upwards.

Liz moaned, melting into her chair. The clean feeling and how good his touch felt, made her body quiver with delicious pangs. She relaxed totally into his ministrations.

He rinsed again, when the water ran clear, he picked up her conditioner, smoothing the thick cream through her hair. He paid particular attention to her scalp since she seemed to enjoy it so much.

Her little moans of pleasure and whimpers of delight, pleased him to no end.

Often he would hit a delicate spot, which sent shivers down her back. He knew he had accomplished his mission.
He wrung out the excess, wrapping her head in a heated towel. Loathe to disturb her, he raised her, inwardly rejoicing when her face betrayed her total bliss.

“Come on. Let’s get you back in bed.” She whined piteously but obeyed reluctantly.

“I need a wheelchair.” The man had matched his steps to her slower ones as he helped her back to bed. “Or a skateboard.” she held her arm and leg aloft.

Red steadied her falling form easily. “Yeah, very amusing.” he tried to hold his smile. “It’s Portside, Ensign.” he indicated with his head, for she had listed off course.

“Ensign?” she objected.

“Who’s the higher ranking officer here?” he asked, setting her gently down.

She shrugged the play aside, turning serious for a moment. “Red, I didn’t say it before. But thank you, for everything. Coming back, taking care of me, letting me stay here.”

“I’m not letting you stay here.” Red corrected. “I want you here. I enjoy spending time with you.”

He stepped, his hands removing the towel from her still wet hair. Liz glanced up at his handiwork as he began gently dry the long tresses. His hands stopped their motion slowly.

“Now see, this is a problem.”

“I can’t do anything with it while it’s wet.” she apologized.

“I meant...” he sighed lightly. “The fact that every time I touch you or am near you, you tense up.”

He stepped back to catch her line of sight. “Do you think people don’t notice such things?”

Liz scowled slightly, a little perplexed.

“You are pretending to be my fiancée, correct?” He sat the towel aside for the moment, taking a seat across from her. “With Mark’s party coming up, taking place over the entire week, plus there will be hundreds of people everywhere.” He lifted both brows. “We have to be comfortable with each other.”

“I’m already comfortable with you.”

Red held her eyes steadily.

“Well, I am.” she was fairly certain. “I have to ask, if we did this to get me into Francis’s party to get information on Edward Costa and Carver.” the woman shifted facing him. “Once we catch him, will we really need to keep up the facade? Is it that important?”

“I don’t see the harm in getting you established as a familiar face.” Red had already the problem through. “There are rumors that I’m involved with the FBI. I’m seen with you, constantly. If you believed the rumors, who do you believe they think you are?”

Elizabeth had not thought of it in those terms.

“This actually works to our advantage on all levels.”

The woman was given pause for thought.
“If anything changes before Mark’s party, we’ll reevaluate our options.” he warmed to his task. “One of the main reasons you were invited to Mark’s party was because he found you charming.”

“That’s nice of you to say, but you were invited regardless.”

“You misunderstand. He personally asked you to attend.” he corrected the oversight. “Not all my paramours receive an invitation.”

“Oh, I see.” Liz was pleasantly surprised at first, a small scowl puckering intelligent brow. “How many paramours are we talking about?”

“One in particular was incredibly high maintenance and not in a fun way.” he pulled his chair over, bracing his forearms on his thighs, leaning into the story. “Mark took pity on me, casually forgetting to issue an invitation. I so enjoyed the break... that after the gathering, I had Dembe tell the woman that I had been shot, been seriously wounded, taken hostage and offered up to the highest bidder.” the man stopped for a quick breath. “And sold to one of my worst enemies at that time and ended up in a German prison camp.”

Liz’s face was priceless. “German prison camp?” she questioned lightly. “As in World War II?”

“This woman was beautiful.” Red defended half-heartedly. “I never said she was intelligent.”

“And you were actually... where?”

“In the Maldives with a precious little native woman who prepared the most exquisite Tortellini and–”

“Red...” the woman’s brow lifted.

“Well, you asked.” he gave the reprieve. “My point is, you should start getting used to touching me and being touched.”

“I thought I was doing okay with that part?”

“Not really.” he grimaced slightly. “They expect me to be more affectionate with you.”

“I’ll make a concerted effort, really.”

“Don’t look so put out.” He grinned. “You’ve done very well, really.” he reassured. “I’m just pointing it out, now that we have time to work on it.”

He arose, reseating himself directly beside her. “Now, what would you like to do today? Read, watch tv, sleep?” He touched her waist, chuckling when she visibly started.

“Damn!” she closed her eyes to such a stupid mistake. “Sorry.”

She glanced at the man, ignoring his smug expression, deliberately touching his arm in turn. Red’s gaze transferred to the spot. She was a little put out that the man offered no reaction, what-so-ever. Except to lean into it, as if her touch was welcomed. “Are you busy?”

“No, I’ve cleared my entire schedule. Why?”

“I thought maybe you’d like to talk.”

“About what specifically?” Red asked, anticipating the answer.
“You.” Liz shrugged, attempting to come off as indifferent as possible, in case he thought it was stupid. “Where you’ve been, the places you enjoyed the most, the foods you’ve tried, things I may need to know. That type of stuff.”

Well, that had been unexpected.

He was sure she’d try to wheedle information out of him, instead, she wanted to talk about travels and other miscellanea. A real conversation. No work, no Fulcrum, nothing of their past.

“Is this the FBI Agent asking or you?”

“Me.” She brought her good leg up, curling it towards her body, getting comfortable.

Sitting back against the head board, “Is there anywhere you’d like to start?” He smiled when she lit up with happiness.
A Long Time Coming

April 7

After Liz had fallen asleep, Red pulled a chair over near the bed, propping his legs on the mattress. He sat, adjusting the light throw over his legs, closing his eyes, a smile appearing unbidden on his lips.

The day had turned out relatively well. The woman’s appetite was good and she had finally relaxed into the questions with had piqued her interest.

The enquiries had turned progressively more personal. A fact that he had enjoyed.

It had been a long day, but a very productive one.

Settling into the chair, the man relaxed himself, slipping into a light sleep.

A couple of hours later, Red awoke to a slight jar in the mattress. Raising his head, he watched Liz unsuccessfully attempting to arise from the bed.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” He sat up, rubbing his face tiredly.

“I can do it,” she pushed against the bed, finally edging to the side, “go back to sleep.”

“Lizzy, you can’t use your crutches yet. You’re still too weak.” He got up out of chair, offering an arm.

“I said I can do it.” she practically snapped.

“I’ll just stand here until you change your mind and decide your pride means nothing when compared to pissing the floor.”

She huffed, reluctantly taking the offered arm. But after standing, pulled her arm, attempting a shaky step.

“What’s wrong?” Red held his hands out on either side of her, in case she fell.

“Nothing. I feel better now.” the pissiness had not abated. “You can go about your daily business. I can get around fine.”

“Did I do something to piss you off?” Red was lost. Yesterday had gone so well, they talked and had a pretty relaxing day. Now this.

“No, I can take care of myself.” shades of the old Elizabeth Keen had arisen.

Irritation didn’t even begin to describe what Red felt in that moment.

Annoyance was a good word, but anger was an even better one.

He was angry. Damned angry.

“I don’t know what your problem is lately, but I’ve had enough.” Red looped her arm around his neck, more carrying her than helping her, to the bathroom. “I can understand your attitude when we
first started working together, for the most part, but now... you need to grow the hell up.”

“Excuse me,” she took exception, attempting to shake free of his assistance.

“You say we’re done, then call me two hours later for help.” the man was all too willing to explain. “You say you can take care of yourself but The Stewmaker, Tom Keen, and now, Carver, just to name a few... have gotten the better of you.” he was on a roll. “You go behind our backs, keeping Tom a prisoner and what do you have to show for that fiasco? An innocent man, dead.”

Leaving her standing alone in the middle of the bathroom, he turned at the sink, his expression more than vexed.

“Those were situations outside the bell curve. No one could have predicted the outcome if they had been in the same place.” she defended herself.

“That’s because no one else would have put themselves in that situation to begin with. I’ll give you the Stewmaker, because you were surrounded by your team,” he grated, facing her squarely, “But Tom... the Pavlovich brothers would have stayed had you asked them. You could have called Ressler for back up. And Carver...”

“Carver wasn’t my fault.” she practically yelled.

“It could have been prevented had you left with me in the first place. I warned you.” he reminded tactlessly. “I continuously warn you and you ignore me every single time.” he refused to back down. “I don’t know where you got the notion that you couldn’t ask anyone for help. Every one needs assistance at some time or other.”

“Well, if we’re laying cards on the table here. I wouldn’t be in any of these situations were it not for you.” she pointed out bleakly. “I was a Criminal Profiler. I was supposed to sit behind a desk for my entire career.”

“Thanks to your parents and your chosen profession, it wouldn’t have stayed that way for long,” he told the harsh truth. “It’s easier to find you now.”

“You mean like by your friends and associates?” Liz said sarcastically.

“Stop being so damned naïve Elizabeth. The world is not as black and white as you make it out to be.” and who would know that better than Red Reddington. “Those people are not what you think they are. I’m not who the Feds... who you, think I am.”

“And who are you and your friends, pray tell?” Liz dismissed, already knowing what type of men they were.

“Do you mean the men who spent a whole evening cock-blocking Edward?”

“Cock-blocking?” Liz frowned at the rude term.

“They kept him from you the whole night. Not an easy task, let me assure you.” he assured her. “There were three of us and Dembe, and that little bastard almost slipped past a few times.” He had actually meant to keep that information from her. “They didn’t even know you and went out of their way to protect you from him.”

“I didn’t know...”

“That’s the whole point. You don’t know anything. Always just assuming.” he laid it on the line.
“Or believing what you’re told by a government that’s full of cheats and liars and worse.”

Liz stood, shell shocked.

“Mark operates half-a-dozen orphanages and scholarship programs around the world. Michael and his wife, who you’ll meet soon, have fostered and adopted so many abused children, the house is a virtual jungle gym.” he warmed to his narrative. “Francis has Children’s Homes and Women’s Shelters. And I could not even begin to list all their charities.” he defended his associates. “You tell me how many in your government are that compassionate, benevolent?

“If they’re so angelic then why the criminal activity.”

“I could say the same thing about the politicians you champion.” he answered angrily. “Even with their circumstances, more influential parents, better connections, the right prep schools - they are performing the very same criminal activities, only their press agents and Government counterparts, cover their every indiscretion.” Red knew how the world operated. “And if you take into account my associates supposed criminal activities are only labeled as such for not paying taxes...”

“They’re drug runners, Red.”

“No, they aren’t.” he corrected coolly. “They take merchandise stolen by governments, meant to be supplied to the lower class, and sell it back to the bastards at a higher cost granted, but cheaper than retail.”

“They’re still stealing from the poor.”

“Are you listening to me?” he snapped. “No, of course you aren’t. What might have been sacks of grain that the disenfranchised were supposed to receive, my people have instead, turned the profits into shelters, schooling, medical aid and real food.”

“And how do you fit into all this?”

“I don’t have to defend myself to you, or anyone.” he curtly advised. “We’re only criminals because the governments are getting screwed by us financially. We know all their dirty secrets.” he abruptly waved a hand. “We skirt the rules that others obey, moving easily under the radar. We are untouchable.”

“You had a prestigious Navy career, a family.” she was still at a loss. “You chose this life.”

“I didn’t choose anything.” he corrected heatedly. “Listen carefully, because I’m not going to repeat this.”

Liz fell silent, listening.

“I’m not going to tell you much of, well, anything. You won’t believe me anyway.” Red snapped. “What I will say is that, from the time you went to Sam until I disappeared, I, along with your mother... worked diligently to bring down the Cabal.”

She suddenly realized, during his narrative, that she had been four when she went to stay with Sam, but Red hadn’t vanished until over four years later.

“I suppose we got close,” he granted, the man paced slowly back and forth before the woman, continuing his tale. “Too close. Things went sideways, quickly.”

Red waved her off. “They hid my family. They went to the press, saying I stole government secrets.
“Turned my fucking life upside down in less than a week.” he halted hastily, getting his bearings. When finally he spoke, it was in a softer tone. “I was made the patsy.”

“But you did steal secrets.”

“Yes, after the fact.” Red stated simply. “I figured I might as well do what I was accused of doing.” he explained. “No one seems to remember those secrets were sold four years after I vanished and were current Intel.” he stressed. “If I had them to begin with, why wait to sell them.”

“Okay, so you stole them four years later. Why?”

“I needed the capital and connections.” he shrugged, waving off any further questions. “So no... I did not choose this life. I am what they made me. I suppose I should thank them, being that I seem to have found my calling.”

“Why do you keep going then?” she was more than confused. “You could just stop.”

“And do what exactly. Tell them to give me a fair trial and to take me off the most wanted list because I’ve been framed?” he laughed at the absurdity. “Why do you think I’m doing what I do?” he was dumbfounded.

“It’s to find the all the people who put me here. Without them, their stories, nothing will change.” he shook his head, turning aside. “Besides, if there’s anything they taught me, it’s that I finish the job.” he said coldly. “Call it revenge if you want. But I will end this.”

“I’ll help.” she meekly offered, having realized what a bitch she had been.

“Without the attitude!” he warned. “I’m not the enemy.” he pointed an accusing finger.

“In the end, we both want answers from the people who put us in this position. So you want to be pissed off at someone, be pissed at them.” it was strongly suggested. “If that’s a problem, I can keep you updated and continue to protect you. But I can do this with or without you.”

“I want... I need answers.” she reminded herself and the man.

“Then we’ll find them together.” he turned and exited, leaving Elizabeth staring after him.
Understandings

April 7

“Lizzy, I got you a little gift.” Red state, rounding the corner into the bedroom. “And I think you’re really going to enjoy it.”

He was not truly trying to make amends for their early morning argument. Things that had been said, needed to be said.

“What is it?” She asked warily.

“Dembe’s bringing it... I think?” Red glanced back out the doorway. “He was playing on it in the drive...” he smiled, backing out of the way, “oh, there he is.”

Dembe came barreling around the corner on a motorized scooter, pulling up beside the smiling woman.

“For me?” Liz was honestly touched by the gesture.

“Yes, though I’m second guessing myself, seeing how fast that thing goes.” Red cast Dembe an obscure look, as he helped Liz into the seat.

“I won’t go fast.” She said, looking over the controls.

“Yes, and the sun won’t come up tomorrow.” Red quipped benignly.

Dembe smoothed his hand lovingly down the side of the black shiny exterior.

“This goes forward,” He showed her the movement on the handle bar, “this is backwards.”

“How cute, it’s even got a little basket.” she traced the basket happily.

“Well, try it out.” Red waved her forward. Backing himself and Dembe out of the way when she lurched forward then spun in a quick arc.

“Wow...” she was visibly impressed, “this thing does have power.”

Dembe nodded knowingly. Red gave him another obscure look.

“Yes, it does. So be careful.” another look was tossed Dembe’s way. The stoic man’s face was all smiles.

Liz eased the handles forward, smiling as the contraption moved quickly to the door.

“Ahh, blessed freedom.” She backed up hastily, grabbing her book from her table then plopped it in her basket before taking off. “Thank you guys so much. I love this.” her voice fading as she disappeared down the hall.

“I think we’re going to regret this, Dembe.” Red philosophized, sighing heavily upon hearing a loud man’s yelp off in the distance.

“Sorry...” the woman truly sounded apologetic.
“Do you have any questions ladies?” Red asked of the nurse and her aide.

“I assure you Mr. Reddington, all of Ms. Keen’s needs will be met.” the head nurse said with a confident air. “I don’t think we’ll have any problems.”

“Yes, well. Why don’t we see how the day goes.” Red lifted himself from his chair. “Elizabeth can be quiet a handful.”

He ushered the two new employees from the office. They had only gone a few steps when the man threw his arm out, halting the ladies advancement, when the unmistakable whirring sound of Lizzy’s cart had caught his attention.

Liz came flying down the hall, rushing past them.

She released the handles, her front tire squealing slightly on the hardwood when she came to an abrupt stop.

She beamed, noting the two women by Red’s side. “Oh... hello.”

Red smiled fondly, stepping closer to Liz, smoothing down her wind swept hair. “Ladies, this is Elizabeth Keen. As you can see, she has some mobility.”

The ladies looked wide eyed at Liz, then the cart. “Yes, I can see that.” the head nurse nodded a bit stunned, truth told.

Liz looked up at Red, silently asking the rhetorical question.

“These are your nurses, Helen and Diane.” Red pointed to each woman in turn as he introduced the pair. “They’ll help you with your physical therapy, errands and whatever else you require.”

Liz frowned, “I thought you...”

While the first couple days had been slightly awkward, she thought they had finally established a system. But of course, Red had other responsibilities.

He had to deal with so much. It was good that he had hired help for her. But two of them? She could hear the amount she’d have to pay Red back ringing up loudly in her head.

“Thought what, Lizzy?” he jarred her from her reverie.

“Nothing.” She smiled at the man transferring the gesture to the women. “So, where shall we start?”

Liz hit the bed with her fist, having decided on a course of action.

Red’s eyes instantly snapped open. “What’s wrong?”

He sat up in the chair, adjusting the kinks from his back.

“I can’t sleep.” she snapped.

“Are you in pain?”
“No... but you’re a pain.” she shifted directly toward him.

“Excuse me?” Red sat up straighter.

“I can’t sleep because you are sleeping in that damn chair.” she kinked her head side to side. “Just thinking about it is making my back hurt.”

He huffed, grinning. “I’m fine.” he chuckled softly. “Once you’ve slept on a muddy ground, in a desert, getting sand in places sand should never be or at my ex-mother-in-law’s house.” he waved an imperious hand. “This is a dream.”

“Whatever.” she grumbled. “This is a huge bed, get in it, so I can stop feeling guilty and sleep.”

“Lizzy, I’m really okay here.” he placated.

“Red, for once,” she whined, “just shut up and do as I ask.” the whine intensified. “I want to sleep.”

“You want some Camembert cheese with that whine?” he muttered beneath his breath.

Snatching his small blanket, he walked to the other side of the bed and sat down, kicking his shoes off.

Liz rolled her eyes when he lay down on top pf the blanket, still dressed in his slacks and dress shirt.

“It’s so nice to see you get comfortable.” She grumbled watching him adjust the throw over his legs. The man lay back, groaning.

“I knew that chair was killing your back.” She gloated triumphantly.

“My back’s fine, I forgot to remove my gun.” He rolled, pulling the holster and weapon from his back then slid it under the pillow.

“You sleep with your gun...”

“This surprises you?”

“No,” she resigned, “not really.”

She sighed, finally melting into the mattress, relaxing.

He may still be dressed and covered with a small blanket, but it was better than that stupid chair. Maybe now they could both get some decent rest.

“Good night, Red.”

“Night, Lizzy.”
Red awoke refreshed and alert, having slept very well.

The mail had been piling up, so he took his coffee heading for the office.

Dembe had arrived ahead of him and was already going through a batch. An hour later, some headway had actually been made when his damned phone rang. Red picked it up, staring at the screen, sighing.

Ressler. His world turned bleak.

“Yes?” Red said simply.

“Reddington?” Donald’s monotone voice returned the greeting.

“What do you want Donald?”

“First, how is Keen doing?”

“She’s doing well.” The older man replied. “Better actually”

“We’ve found a new victim.” with the amenities out of the way, life moved on in Donald’s world. “We’re wondering if you can ID her?”

“Send me a picture.” Red instructed.

“To where?” Ressler was momentarily waylaid.

Red covered the phone, “Send Ressler an address or a number he can send a picture, please Dembe.”

“Are you there, Reddington?” Samar asked.

He hated when they did that. The speaker phone was such a nuisance. “Yes, I’m here. Dembe will be texting you an address.”

“Is it secure?” Donald ran true to form.

“Just send the damn thing, Donald.” Red snapped. “I’ll call you back in a few minutes.”

He closed the phone waiting for Dembe to hand over the laptop. The page finally opened, so the man shuffled through the pictures rapidly.

Why Ressler had sent six, he didn’t know. But they were from every angle. Red could see in living color, what this woman had gone through. And while it didn’t turn his stomach like it used to, he did feel a great deal of sympathy for her.

Finally finding one of her face up close. He focused on different features, seeing past the horror in
her eyes, the grim set of her mouth and the blood, to piece together the woman she had been.

Flipping his phone open, he dialed Ressler. The phone continued to ring incessantly. He really hated when he told someone that he’d call them right back, then they let the phone ring and ring.

Ressler was taking a play out of Glen’s handbook, Reddington just knew it.

“Ressler.” Donald finally spoke brusquely into the phone.

“I don’t know her.”

“You’re positive?”

“Yes, I don’t know this woman.” Red grated. “Though...”

“What? What do you see?” Samar asked.

“Look at her wounds, compare them to the other victims. He went out of his way to really torture her.” the words sounded hollow and empty, even to Red’s ears. “The others; their face, legs, arms, something on them is always left unblemished. There isn’t one part of this woman he didn’t touch.”

Red scrolled continuously back and forth between the photos. “Something’s off.”

“What?” Donald asked, hopefully.

“If I knew, I wouldn’t have stopped talking.”

“Yeah well, if anything comes to mind, call.” Ressler would always be Ressler. More’s the pity.

Red shut the phone, leaning back in his chair, grabbing a pile of mail stacked neatly before him.

He rifled through it quickly, sorting personal from junk. Red stopped, holding up an envelope. “Why do I keep getting these?”

He made reference to the ‘Planning for your Funeral’ leaflet. He questioned Dembe. “Did you put my name on a mailing list?”

“No...” Dembe did not even look up from his busy work, “not yet.”

Red scowled. Dembe continued, “Perhaps they think you can send them repeat business?”

“I would never undercut Kaplan.” Red threw the leaflet aside.

“That is the parcel Mr. Kaplan sent over this morning, by the way.” Dembe motioned to Red’s right. The man put down his own mail, picking up Elizabeth Keen’s.

He paid the bills with enough to carry through to the next month. Hopefully, the house would be sold by then, but he’d rather have it out of the way.

He pulled over the small stack of envelopes addressed to Liz personally, wondering what to do with them.

Red did not believe in invading anyone’s personal space, and normally he would never do so... but there was something peculiar about this set of envelopes, which had caught his attention.

The post marks were dated from approximately a week back.
Without hesitation, he sliced the first open with his knife. He pulled out the single sheet, unfolding it, rapidly scanning the neatly typed script.

His eye ticking as he read it.

*I saw you with Reddington last night. You looked so beautiful, even from a distance You smiled at him, but I know it’s to keep him close. I don’t know what he’s told you, about your life. It’s probably all lies. He put you in danger. He’s the reason you were shot at. Spreading the lies he’s told everyone. Don’t trust him.*

Red pulled out the second, scanning it.

*I saw you walking out with Reddington with a bag and then you didn’t come home. I tried following, but lost you. I know you’re staying with him. I can’t even begin to fathom how that came about. I’m sure it’s for your job, but I have to wonder what lies he spouted to get you to agree. Don’t believe in the lies, Liz.*

At least Tom hadn’t followed them or been able to keep up with Dembe’s erratic movements through traffic. So, there was that at least.

*You weren’t home again last night. Remember, he is sinful, and taints those around him. No matter what it takes, I will do anything to rid you of his filth.*

How long had she been receiving these and said nothing to him. The man’s ire rose. It may sound on the surface, like the ramblings of an insane man, true...but Red saw a definite threat. That Tom would do anything to rid her of Red’s filth...

What the hell does that mean!? Filth as in, the world Red resided in? Just being in his presence?

If Tom was as insane as he thought he was, if he were to do a little research on how other cultures cleansed the sinful, he’d pick the most horrid, malicious practice he found and make it his own.

*It’s bad enough that you’re staying with him so long. But that you enjoy that time spent with him is mind boggling. I heard you laughing at the Blacksite when he was talking to you. Don’t lose sight of what your job is, Liz. He’s a criminal. A monster. A demon. If you give me a chance, I know we can bring him down to his knees.*

The Blacksite wasn’t that populated a place, so for him to have missed Tom, meant Red wasn’t focused. That would change.

Not that Lizzy was going anywhere anytime soon, but maybe, if Red was alert and ready, he could catch the prick and take him down. Because it was very obvious, Tom had gone around the bend.
Where the hell were you going in that dress with Reddington? That dress was only fit to be worn by a whore. You should not be wearing red or something so revealing. You should wear white, the color of purity and cleanliness. Wholesome and untainted. Be the angel to the demon.

“I’ll buy her an entire wardrobe of nothing but red, you asshole.” Red seethed. He was thankful he trusted his instincts concerning these correspondence.

She had never looked more beautiful than in that dress. Elizabeth Keen outwardly, appeared confident and self-possessed. Red knew in reality, that image was nothing more than an erroneous misconception.

If she had seen these hateful words, there was no doubt in the man’s mind, that she would have believed every syllable. She would have only seen the negative comments about her appearance that night.

Which was a complete load of shit.

He had never felt so proud of her or as privileged, to have her on his arm. He had not missed the envious looks of other males. Part of him felt a surge of pride, but a larger part admitted to pure unadulterated jealousy.

Red slammed the papers down, his blood boiling. He stood, pacing slowly back and forth.

Anger was unproductive, he had to rid his mind in order to function properly.

He set about doing so, with the one person who was always capable of putting his world in order, no matter how chaotic.

He didn’t understand it, but he no longer denied it, if only to himself.
April 8

Red entered their bedroom... when it had became ‘theirs’ he had no clue. The turned on a low light before sitting on the side of the bed.

Pulling back the blankets, he scooted closer before raising the back of Liz’s shirt, staring at the black stitching.

Touching one of the small cuts, he felt the cool of her skin. *Good, no infection.*

He traced a longer cut, scowling gently then smiled when she sleepily swatted at his hand, scratching at the itch his activity produced.

He felt his earlier anger melting into oblivion.

Running his fingers against the threading with a more pronounced touch, she mewled softly, yawning and stretching awake.

He leaned closer, his tone soothingly low. “You want me to take some of your stitching out?” He grinned when the woman rubbed her ear on her shoulder, taking away the shiver he had caused.

It had only taken him a short time to discover one of Elizabeth’s weaknesses.

She was very responsive to the most sensitive of touches around her ears and throat.

With that knowledge, he never failed to take advantage of any opportunity presented.

Holding his position, his tone deepened, “Or do you want to wait for the nurses?”

Liz rubbed the tingles along her neck, opening her eyes slightly. “You do it.” she said around a yawn, before she really considered the implication.

She had not wanted the nurses pawing all over her personal space. And then she remembered... Red would be in her personal space.

“I’ll be right back.” the man rolled from the bed crossing to the bathroom, coming back moments later with little scissors and tweezers. “Did you sleep well?” he made small talk, sensing an awkwardness now that wasn’t there before. He was slightly amused, also sensing the cause.

“Yeah.” She stared at the covered windows blocking out the sun. “What time is it?”

“Almost ten.” Red gently raised her shirt, turning her more to her stomach. “I bet you’re hungry. You didn’t wake last night.” he began the task at hand.

“I can wait a little bit.” She hugged her pillow, rolling over, giving him a better view of her back. “Anything going on this morning.” it was her turn to make small talk. She found the situation suddenly unbearably intimate.

His hands were warm and sensitive and it was very pleasurable, to have him remove the burdensome thread.

Red knew sooner or later, Liz would start asking questions as she became more coherent.
It seemed today was that day. It was such a simple thing for her to ask, but not an easy thing for him to respond to since he promised never to lie to her.

*Why he had promised that...*

If he told her about the new victim, she’d fret about it all day. And the letters... should he confront her about them?

She was still weak, fatigued. Getting into an argument with her now would tire her further. Which would make him a huge asshole.

There had to be a middle ground.

Maybe there was?

The letters, he decided to hold off on. They could wait. She was safe here and would continue to be so, as long as she was with him.

Tom could keep sending his incoherent prose all he wanted because he was bound to slip one day and perhaps reveal his whereabouts.

The other problem was easy enough to fix, because she had been placed on medical leave.

“Oh, Donald called.” She tensed, until he stroked her back gently with his fingers, eliciting a shiver and an instant release of the tension.

_Annother place she likes to be touched._ He categorized, filing the knowledge away mentally.

“Oh, there’s been another victim.” He tweezed a piece of thread, pulling it free. “And before you go off and start thinking about it all day and tiring yourself out - stop. I will be helping them.”

“If I could just see the...”

“Cooper said not to give you anything.”

“He doesn’t have to know.”

“No.” He raised the shirt further, snipping at a longer cut. “You’re on medical leave. You’re supposed to be resting and that’s exactly what you’re going to do.”

“I can help. I’m not...”

“I said, no.” He chuckled silently when she fell silent, pouting into her pillow. He freed the last of the thread. “This damn thing keeps falling in my way.” he had attempted another section of her body, only to be frustrated by the fabric. “Take the shirt off.”

Red helped her with the sleeves. “I know you’re capable of looking at notes, Lizzy. But you wouldn’t stop there.” he knew the woman well. “You’ll keep going until you’re beyond exhausted.”

He gently skimmed his hand down the curve of her spine, raising goose bumps on her soft skin. “You don’t trust me?”

She shifted her head quickly, frowning at him. “Yes, I do.”

“Then trust me when I say, I will do everything I can to find him.” He didn’t add that when he did
find Carver... well, let’s just say Red Reddington believed in an ‘eye for an eye’ retribution. “Roll over.”

He handed her the discarded shirt, helping keep it in place over her breasts as she flipped. She trembled slightly as she settled.

“Are you cold?” he had noticed the fact.

She shook her head, grimacing as she adjusted her position.

“Your leg?” He grabbed a fluffy pillow, stuffing the cushion beneath her leg, sensing the problem. Liz thanked him with a silent nod of gratitude.

“I’m not asking, just wondering.” she couldn’t get it out of her mind. “Has he gone after Edward yet?”

Red leaned in, closely examining a cut on her stomach. She visibly flinched. “Did that hurt?”

“No...” she answered a little too quickly.

He grinned, “Ticklish?”

She narrowed her eyes, making him laugh. “You act as though I’ll use that knowledge to my advantage one day.”

He touched her with more pressure, before cutting the thread. “No, he hasn’t gone for Edward yet.” Her stomach tightened when she felt his breath skirt over her warm flesh.

His glanced at her, his gaze a noncommittal one. This woman was most sensitive to touch. Never a bad thing in his point of view.

Red Reddington enjoyed all aspects of women. Their weaknesses, strengths, insecurities, confidence... the whole package fascinated him.

Lowering his head, he went back to work. “Besides, I think Carver made the team following Edward.”

“Why do you think that?” She gasped when his index finger skimmed lightly against her belly button.

“With where I’ve sent him, Carver has had ample opportunity to make a grab for Edward.” Red blew across her stomach, brushing off the stray threads. And if he was honest with himself, hoping for a reaction from her. And he got one when her stomach rippled, her eyes fluttering closed.

“What are you going to do?”

“Get you dressed and fed.”

“I meant–”

“I know what you meant. Let me worry about that. All that’s important right now is you.”

Red followed more slowly behind Liz as she wheeled to the kitchen.
Liz’s favorite parts of the day were when they dined together. She enjoyed watching Red Reddington being domestic, but mostly she had grown to love the discussions that took place over the meals.

For the first couple of days, Dembe had kept his silent vigilance off to the side, as was his way.

“I’ve been trying to get him to eat with me for years but he refuses.” the man explained, having seen the situation vexed the woman to no end.

“You steal my fries.” Dembe had mumbled.

And it went on from there. Friendly banter between the two men who had known each other for years.

Both so different, but yet so similar in nature. One boisterous, the other quiet. Outgoing, shy. Impulsive, cautious. Oil and water, but they mixed together somehow just perfectly.

After Dembe had left the room one day, Liz asked Red why the large man really refused to sit at his table.

“I made the mistake of taking him with me to meet an honest to goodness, mobster.” Red waved his fork in the air. “Remind me to tell you about him someday. But Dembe saw this guy’s bodyguards sitting at a different table, eyes on both doors. So of course, he picked up the habit.” Red swallowed his food before continuing. “Occasionally he’ll join me, but it’s very rare.”

They’d been dining for about ten minutes when today, Dembe made his appearance.

Red continued his story, the narrative nearing the end, “Natalia and I had a pleasant night then Dembe and I left in the morning.”

Dembe shocked Elizabeth totally by bringing his plate and coffee, taking a place across from Red at the table.

Dembe, while cutting into his sausage, scoffed loudly.

“Dembe...” Red sighed, “I’m telling this story.”

“What?” Liz glanced between the men, one perturbed, the other amused. “Okay, what’s going on here?” she could not hold her own smile.

“Nothing.” Red sipped his tea, giving the other man an ominous brow. The muscled man smiled in return to the glare he was receiving, popping a piece of bacon in his mouth.

“Dembe. What’s he hiding?” Liz was all ears. “Come on!” she beseeched. “Now I know something happened. You have to tell me!”

Red sat back in his chair, folding his arms leisurely. Dembe immediately pulled his chair closer to the woman, eager to tell his version of the events.

Red accepted his fate with good graces.

“He’s leaving out... that another woman that had been interested in him that night, told Natalia that he had been making advances to her.” the gory details were gleefully related. “I can’t speak of the events that took place after he left with Natalia, but I do know that sometime during his stay there... Natalia left with his pants and the phone from her room.” Dembe shook his head woefully,
embarrassed for his friend. “He had to walk back to our rooms in his oxford shirt and boxers... and nothing else.”

Liz giggled behind her hand, envisioning Red walking straight and proud through the hallways, half naked. She wondered if he had put on his fedora?

“Why didn’t you just call Dembe to bring you some pants?”

“She left his phone at the front desk.” Dembe was only too glad to supply that bit of information.

“Look who’s a heavy sleeper.” Liz poked fun at Red.

“We never did actually get to sleep.” Red poked right back. “When she received a call from her man in Tunisia, I showered.” He sipped his coffee. “I should have left her basking in the afterglow before making myself vulnerable or better yet, I should gone to my room.” He shrugged, then took a bite of his waffle.

“Why didn’t you?” Liz asked curiously.

“Truthfully, I was hungover. An oddity for me.” he now knew why however. “I had a splitting headache and felt like hell.” he remembered the incident but not fondly. “By the time I went walking off to my room, I could have given a damn about what I was or wasn’t wearing.” he looked at Dembe meaningfully. “Really, everyone should have been happy I got dressed as much as I did.”

“What had you been drinking?”

“The usual. Which is why I went looking for her.” Red smiled. “It wasn’t until I tracked the little minx down, that she confirmed she had spiked my drink when I was distracted.”

“So that’s why you always carry your glass or have it in reaching distance now.” Liz finally understood. “What happened to her?”

“I turned her in on a small drug charge.” he held up a stilling hand. “Had to serve only a year, but for her it was pure torture.” he offered a sympathetic face. “I imagine she’ll be at Mark’s this year trying to rebuild her contacts... and to kill me.”

Great... thought Liz, as if it wasn’t enough, she was nervous as hell to be around his friends, now she had to deal with one of Red’s old lovers as well.

She was aware that she paled in comparison to Madeline. Who knew what other type of women she would be compared to while there. This was becoming more difficult as they went along.

Dembe finished off his breakfast, then informed Red he was going to check in with the guards. He excused himself and left.

“What’s wrong?” Red stacked his dishes, pushing them to the side.

“Nothing...” She fiddled with her napkin. A sure sign to Red that something was in fact, bothering her.

“Lizzy. I promised not to lie to you. I would hope you would return the favor.” He added mumbling, “At least most of the time.”

“Exactly how many of your old lovers might be at Mark’s?”
“A couple, maybe. Why?”

“I’d like to prepare myself.”

“I will be there you know.” he reminded. “You won’t have to face them alone.”

“Yeah, until you go off for something work related or I go to the bathroom.” she sighed heavily. “Women have a weird habit of cornering one another in the ladies room.”

“I did not know that.” he confessed, holding his amusement. “Listen, most of my old paramours are more concerned with my demise and the method thereof... they probably will not even notice you are about.”

“Thanks...” the woman replied peevishly. “That makes me feel so much better.”
April 8

While Lizzy was resting, Red got busy on the rest of his day’s routine. He opted for a quick call to Dembe through the walkie.

“Dembe, did the mail come yet today?”

The large man came in a minute later, carrying a box full of envelops.

“Is Elizabeth’s in here as well?”

“Yes...” Dembe frowned as he watched Red pull out a handful, swiftly tossing aside letters, before picking up another stack. “Is there something wrong?”

“It seems Sleeping Beauty back there has a stalker.” Red shared. “A stalker who enjoys writing. I was looking to see if he sent any new delightful thoughts for the day.”

Dembe picked up a stack, searching through it, finally finding her name, typed on a plain envelope. “Is this it?” He held up the small letter.

“That’s it.” Red snatched it out of his hand, working on opening the tab.

“You know, it is a federal offense to open someone else’s mail.”

Red eyes flickered with amusement. “How ever will I live with myself?” he asked as he pulled the letter out, reading it aloud.

*Where are you? I know you’ve been injured. You’re not with family or at the hospitals. I checked. No one has spoken with you. No one has seen you. Reddington seemed upset, so obviously he doesn’t know where you are either. Liz, call me. You know how to find me. I can help you.*

“Seems he knows about her injuries.” Red breathed easier. “He’s a bigger idiot than I thought, if he doesn’t think I’d have her with me.”

“Raymond...” Dembe held up more envelopes, frowning. “Are these from the same person?”

“They appear to be.” He took them, looking at the post dates. “Let’s make sure there aren’t anymore.”

They quickly sorted out all the mail, finding nothing else. So Red sat back, reading them aloud as he had the first.
Your partners don’t seem upset that you may be with Reddington. They’re fools to think you are safe with him. With you weak and defenseless, I fear for you. He’ll take this time to cloud your judgement. I know you must be scared. But know I’m looking for you. I will find you.

“Have you noticed anything out of the norm lately?”

Dembe shrugged. “This is a very easy neighborhood to lose a tail, which is one of the reasons you chose it. If someone were to follow, we would know without doubt.”

Red knew Dembe was right. There were a few paths leading in and out of this location, none heavily trafficked. It was disgustingly easy to spot a tail the minute you reached this neighborhood.

I’m positive he has you now. He mentioned you. If you could somehow persuade him to bring you out. Use your injury to your advantage...I could find you and get you to safety. Try, Liz. Don’t get lost in his lies.

“When have you mentioned having her?” Dembe enquired.

“I don’t know?” Red muttered, thinking back. “Cooper and her team knew the first day, the team asked about her on one of the phone calls when we talked about a victim.” Red ran his hand over his forehead, lost in thought. “I don’t recall ever mentioning Lizzy to anyone.”

Dembe racked his brain, coming up empty.

“If I start to say anything in regards to her outside these walls or the car, slap me, will you.”

“Most assuredly.”

Red cut amused eyes to the man, “You’re a good friend, Dembe.”

“All right!” Liz Keen had reached her limit. “That’s it, Red Reddington!”

He stopped taking off his shoes and looked over his shoulder at her. “What?”

“If you don’t get on some comfortable clothes or at least get under the blankets, I’m going to hurt you.” She snapped. “And not in a good way.”

“Sweetheart...”

“Don’t ‘sweetheart’ me.” she pointed a finger at him. “Choose one, or better, both.”

He sat there, smiling at her when she narrowed her eyes and rolled from the bed, grabbing her pillow.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He asked.

“If you aren’t going to get comfortable, I’m going to share in that discomfort.” she had preordained.

The woman hopped along the edge of the bed, hugging her pillow close before reaching over,
snatching the little blanket Red had been using off the bench.

She headed for the couch across the way, secretly wondering if she could make that distance.

“Get back in bed.” the man warned pseudo-stern.

“No.” she jutted her chin out stubbornly.

“Lizzy...” the deep voice held a measure of advisement.

“No,” her voice raised defiantly as she hopped gingerly from one safe spot to another.

“You are not sleeping on the couch.” the man arose swiftly, his decision cast.

“Yes, I am.” She was fairly certain of the fact until she looked up only to find her path blocked by a very imposing figure.

He leaned slowly, his warm breath fanning her upper cheekbone. “Go back to bed.” His tone sounded particularly suggestive on this occasion.

“I intend to go to bed...” she lifted perfectly arched brows, facing down her antagonist, “on the couch!”

Red yanked the pillow from her grasp, tossing it back to bed before stooping slightly, lifting the small bundle over his shoulder, his hand coming to rest on the rounded curve of her bottom when she had squirmed her discord.

“Hey!” She squawked, her hands balling into fists of frustration. “Put me down, you big as–”

“Me doth think the lady protests too much.”

“What the hell does that even mean?” she demanded. “You just better put me down.”

The man continued his swaggering trek. The large palm patted her derrière in open affection.

“Damn it!” She wiggled in his grasp, “Put me...down.”

Red fought the urge to toss the woman onto the awaiting surface, but instead, because of her injuries... lay her gently into the bed.

“Don’t you dare get up.” He pointed a lax finger down at the pouting woman.

Liz lay stiffly ruminating on the options open to her.

Red began to slowly unbutton the shirt he wore, his eyes holding hers almost hypnotically.

In the days she had been here, to see Red without his jacket was not unusual. One day last week, she had been totally taken aback when the man had entered the room, unannounced, his sleeves rolled up the burly arms, sans vest and tie.

It was so odd to see him in such a state of undress.

But now, as he pulled the tails of shirt from his pants, she blushed slightly at the intimacy implied. It did not help that his gaze had not left hers for one second.

“Was there something you wished me to wear in particular, Elizabeth?” he enquired provocatively.
She felt her mouth pinch in aggravation for his carefully controlled tone.

“You do have things you normally sleep in, yes?” he chuckled lowly, annoying her further. “I don’t care if it’s lederhosen, just get comfortable, dammit!” she laid back huffily into the pillow, arms across her chest. “I highly doubt whatever you come out in will make me think less of your normal debonair state of dress.”

“I believe how I normally sleep, how I get comfortable,” he lifted mocking brows, “would shock you.”

What the hell could be so shocking about a pair of sweat pants and a t-shirt? What? That he actually owned a pair and would dare to wear them?

She frowned up at him, finding him holding his laughter. The moment progressed as Liz tried hard to decipher the meaning behind such a knowledgeable look.

Oh... ohhh. She felt herself flush bright red, her cheeks burning.

“So, I restate. Is there anything in particular I should wear so I don’t upset your delicate sensibilities?” He asked innocently.

She almost wished she had the guts to tell the cocky bastard to sleep how he normally did, just to see if he’d back track for once.

But if he didn’t... she didn’t know what she’d do.

Though, she had to admit, if only to herself... she felt a surge of intrigue of late concerning the man’s physique. What did he look like without the thin veneer of civilized armor he wove about himself?

Red’s mouth curved sensually, his eyes lighting with an inner flame, much to her vexation. It was if the man could read her thoughts. And he knew without doubt, that he had won that round.

He gallantly ended her misery, breaking the spell, sauntering across the room... that panther like grace drawing her attention to his well-rounded posterior.

The man took his time selecting his night clothes for the taste of victory lingered with his smug smile. That was something he would have to lose before exiting the sanctuary he had chosen.

Minutes later, he joined her in bed.

She took her pills with only one lethal glance in his direction which amused no end. He took no pains what-so-ever, to hide his smile this time before situating herself comfortably.

Red hit his switch, bathing the room in darkness.

He had to admit, it felt good to be out of his suit, but it felt even better that she had inadvertently thought of his comfort over her own. She was beginning to warm to him and it felt... nice.

Relaxing back into his pillow, he grumbled miserably when the phone started vibrating on the marble top of his side table.

“Don’t answer it.” She mumbled.

He stared at the screen, sighing. “Oh goody, it’s Donald.” He flipped the phone open, his tone abrupt. “What?” he grated, listening intently all the same. “I’ll be right there.”
Liz heard him shut the phone, then saw the subtle shake in his head as he resigned himself to having to get up out of the comfortable bed.

“Call him back, tell him you’ll be by in the morning,” she suggested.

“It’s a fresh scene.” He groaned as he sat up. “He wants to see if I can identify the body and I’m guessing, play clay pigeon.”

“He thinks Carver’s there?” She sat up.

“It’s a good possibility. He said it was so fresh, the blood was steaming in the air.”

She instantly pushed back her blankets, moving to the edge of the bed.

“What are you doing?” he crooked his head around having felt the slight movement.

“I’m coming with you.”

“Like hell you are.” he snapped.

“I’ll just stay in the car.” she reasoned.

“You’re going to stay here.” he stood, turning about to face her

“I should be there, if—” she began her campaign.

“Look at my lips.” he patiently explained. “You are not going.”

“Don’t use that patronizing tone with me.”

“You’re staying.” he ended the discussion. “Lizzy, I can not go into that scene knowing you’re out in that car, a literal sitting target.” he appealed to her reason. “And you know as well as I do, that Dembe will be standing right there, trying to block access to you.”

He played on her vulnerability. Not a threat to herself, but to someone she cared for. And it worked. She hung her head, resigned to the inevitable.

“I won’t be gone long,” he patted her hand. “Stop worrying, everything will be fine.” He pulled the blankets back over her legs. “Get some sleep.”
April 9

Liz stirred, instantly awake. Holding her breath, she listened to the darkened room, only hearing silence. Turning her head on her pillow, she looked at the clock. Only an hour had passed since Red had left.

Red’s side of the bed was still empty. There wasn’t any light, the room was pitch dark. What had awakened her?

Rolling over, she grabbed her phone, dialing, her heart pounding loudly in her chest. She heard someone pick up, speaking instantly, her tone a husky whisper which sounded abnormally loud in the silence which surrounded her.

“Is that you?”

“Are you all right?” Red sat up straighter in the seat of the black Mercedes.

“I thought I heard you pull up.” the woman’s eyes darted about frantically, making out vague shapes now as her eyes adjusted. “How far off are you?

“A few minutes.” the information was given over hastily. “What the hell is going on there, Lizzy?”

A loud thumping sound hit a wall somewhere very near to her location. She jerked visibly, gasping into the phone. “Shit!”

Red grasped Dembe’s shoulder, his fingers sending a signal. The dark man instantly pushed his foot harder into the gas peddle.

“Call for Silas!”

“I heard something hit the wall.” she whispered shakily. Another loud crash and the sound of breaking glass silenced her instantly. But she sucked in a harsh breath, her hand slapping the panic button.

Red had instructed on the security procedures the day the alert was installed.

The man was actually able to hear some commotion on the other end of the line now.

“Get on the floor.” Red barked over the phone. “Under the rim of the bed, there’s a gun.” he instructed. “Move, now.”

The woman threw back the blankets, dropping to the floor. Reaching under the bed, she felt for the hidden weapon.

“Stay there.” he ordered, hearing even more ruckus coming from her end of the line. “Don’t move.”

“Red…” her voice was shaking.

Liz’s eyes darted frantically about her surroundings, seeking an escape route.

“Don’t even think about leaving that room. Get under the bed, now.”
She slid the phone under the bed, wiggling under the frame. It was so dark, she couldn’t see where the dark plastic had gone.

“I can’t find the phone.” her voice betrayed her rising panic.

Red spoke continually as she searched blindly, her fingers finally landing on the object she so desperately sought.

She gripped her lifeline, focusing on the reassuring sound of his voice.

“How far away ar—” She fell silent as a sliver of light grew wider, the door easing open.

Her eyes widened with terror, her hand flying to cover her mouth.

“Are you there.” he demanded. She heard him urging Dembe to drive faster.

Her body stiffened as footsteps slowly crossed the expanse between herself and the door.

“Calm down. Control your breathing.” Red took control of the situation. “We’re turning the last corner.”

She took deeper breath, watching the feet as they moved stealthily about the room. Angry voices carried through the open doorway. Her head flitted back and forth, her eyes wild, her heart pounding.

“I’m almost there, I promise.”

“Where the hell is she?” a coarse whisper asked anxiously.

Red heard the muffled voice of a man feeling the blood rush from his head.

“Don’t make a fucking sound.” Red stated tautly.

She tensed, watching as yet another man entered the room.

“Look in the closet.” anger laced the first man’s tone.

Elizabeth Keen shut her eyes tightly, desperately trying to halt the tremors shaking her entire frame. She lay her forehead against the carpeted floor, silently saying a fervent prayer.

“I’m here.” her prayers were answered.

Dembe pulled around the corner, shutting down the lights, coasting into the drive.

She tensed further, the voices down the corridor growing louder, the tremors in her body intensifying.

“Liz started jerkily, the man’s voice above the bed cursing vehemently. “Damn it! Keep looking for her!”

Then all hell broke loose.

The front door unceremoniously crashed open. There was shouting and indistinguishable chaos. A table flipped over, crashing it’s contents onto the marble floor.

Red’s booming voice commanded attention. “What the hell is going on here!”
Liz gripped the weapon in her hand, hearing the scuffle escalate. Angry voices and the sound of shattering glass was just too much to process for her fragile state at the moment. She curled into a fetal position, placing her hands tightly over her ears, shutting out the horror in her mind.

“Break them apart, damn it!” Red ordered viciously. The demand was carried out instantly.

The silence was deafening for all of two seconds.

“What the hell do you think you two were doing!” Red’s tone was ice cold. “You scared the living shit out of her!”

There was murmured discontent.

“Either of you two move again... or say one damn word,” Red warned, “I’ll blow out your fucking knee caps.”

Liz was vaguely aware once more, of foot steps approaching. She had heard those footsteps before... they stalked after her that night. So unhurried, so casually...

“Lizzy...”

She opened her eyes, focusing on the phone which lay directly in her line of vision.

“Red?” she was not sure where the sound originated.

“Do you hear her fucking voice!” Red barked at some unseen person. “You two idiots did that!”

A pair of hands appeared in the shadows of her safe place, beckoning her forward.

She stayed put.

“When I get her out from under here,” Red growled, “I’m going to beat the living shit out of both of you.”

Dropping his hat to the floor, the man leaned his weight onto his hand, stilling his movement, his tone reassuringly gentle.

“Don’t shoot me sweetheart.” He slowly lay flat, his eyes skimming the darkness. He saw instantly the state the woman was in... the panic-stricken blue eyes stared at him vacantly, as she pulled further away.

“Scratch that!” he turned scathing eyes to his new found nemesis. “I’m going to fucking kill you both.” He looked up at the two men angrily, then back at her, gentling his features.

“Come on sweetheart. It’s okay.” He reached under the bed, holding out his hand, waiting patiently. “It’s all right.” his tone was even and calming. “I’m here.”

The man closed his eyes to the silence.

“I’ll tell you what...” he was an expert negotiator. “What we’re going to do,” he peeked under, his eyes locking with hers, “we’re just going to sit here and wait until you’re ready to do whatever it is that will make you comfortable.” he smiled at her briefly.

Through the haze of her nightmarish state, the woman recognized the gentle smile.

“Are you cold under there?” he motioned slightly with his head and suddenly a blanket appeared by
his side. He held the offering out and again... that smile.

His eyes held hers easily. “See, everything is fine. I can explain everything.” he shifted into a more comfortable position. “Just as I can see how you could have misconstrued all that has occurred.”

She had taken her meds to fall asleep and had awoken to this fucking farce. She was having trouble now, distinguishing fact from fiction. The meds had side effects... paranoia being among the top two listed.

Red held out his hand, yet again. “Take it, Lizzy.”

She breathed out a cleansing breath, her fingers inching closer until they tentatively touched the comforting warmth.

He did not force the issue and soon, the slender fingers gripped his in a tight embrace.

“Good girl...” he smiled happily. “Come to me.”

The woman slid forward until she felt a secure embrace draw her into the light.

She instantly retreated, because she was suddenly surrounded by menacing looking males. All of whom were heavily armed, dark scowls etched on their faces.

The tight hold on Red’s hand turned rigid. He halted his intended rising, sensing her hesitancy.

“It’s just Security.” he soothed, gesturing to the men. “See, there’s Silas.” he smiled down at her. “It’s just Security, I promise.”

Red studied the paled, distrustful features, noticing her dilated pupils.

His jaw tightened angrily, the man holding himself in check. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.” He sat down beside her, his arm laying casually on the bed.

“I should have never left you in the care of these...” He apologized before turning on the men. And he did so with all the force of his fury behind the statements he was about to make. “Your job is to make sure she feels safe. Does she look like she feels safe!” Red waited impatiently but no reply was immediately forthcoming. “That was a fucking question!”

Reddington checked on the woman who to his great surprise, scrunched herself into his side. He felt little tremors traverse her entire body.

Red grimaced for his loss of control, afraid he’d upset her all the more, astonished when she seemed to relax further into him.

“No, sir.” both combatants answered in unison, obviously bothered by their total lack of professionalism.

“She pushed the panic button, because she felt the need to push it. And then couldn’t trust who the hell came through that door.” he pointed meaningfully. “What does that tell you?” he did not wait for the answer transferring his ire elsewhere for the moment. “…Silas, I don’t want them any where near the inside of this house again. Do you understand me.”

“I believe what happened is worthy of termination.” Silas stated his opinion quietly. The woman’s eyes darted to the man’s handsome features, a certain type of fear showing.

“We’ll discuss that later.” Red spat the reply, then gently kissed Liz’s temple.
She closed her eyes, her free arm wrapping tightly about his waist, her head resting on his shoulder. “Right now, I want you to get the hell out so I can fix the damage you caused.” His eyes flicked their rage to the men in question. The room was vacated quickly.

“Do you need anything?” Dembe asked solicitously of the pair sitting quietly on the floor.

“No, we’ll be fine, Dembe. Thank you.” Red smiled at the man, gesturing with his eyes that he now had control of the situation. “Go, get some rest.”

Dembe nodded as he lifted from his crouched position, “As should you...” he said, walking away.

“Good night.” Red said softly over his shoulder. The door closed finally, leaving them alone.

“Termination?” the woman’s voice sounded weak and tremulous. Her eyes searched his for an answer to her fretful state.

“He meant, fire them.” Red clarified immediately, hoping at least, that was what Silas had meant. “Are you all right now?” He asked tentatively.

“Yeah...” She breathed, the tremors easing as the minutes passed.

He sat up, pulling his coat off, laying it over her. His arms embraced her tightly. He eased the weapon from her still clutched hand.

“May I take this?”

She held her hand up, watching him pull her fingers back from their tight grasp on the black metal.

“You’re okay now.” He crooned softly, finally removing the gun from her hand and setting it beside him. “It’s over.”

“I’m sorry.” she shook her head, taking a deep breath.

Red pulled his head back, looking at her, confused. “What the hell are you sorry for?”

“Talk about being a baby.” she tried to laugh the situation off unsuccessfully then looked down at her hands. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I can’t stop shaking.”

“Well, you just had the shit scared out of you. I can see where someone might be a little upset by that.”

“I’m an FBI agent.”

“An FBI agent that’s been injured by a psychopath and then wakened by a couple of jackass idiots fighting in the fucking foyer.” He shook his head in open agitation, placing the gun back in the holster under the bed.

“What?” She asked, for the man had mumbled something incoherently.

“I was just cussing their lineage.” he stated bleakly, halting his narrative abruptly. “Lizzy, you’re injured. You’re on medication that dulls the senses, makes you numb... heightens anxiety.” he reminded.

“You aren’t on guard,” he pulled on his suit jacket irritably, taking his frustrations out on an inanimate object, “because you aren’t supposed to be. You’ve trusted me to see to your care and
believed yourself safe with me.”

He rubbed his palm in the center of his forehead, looking around aimlessly. “You didn’t know what the hell was going on. You were still on edge about what was happening on my end of things, and don’t say you weren’t.” he forewarned. “You have every right to feel the way you do.”

“Divide and conquer.” She mumbled.

“What?”

“I thought...” She exhaled, slumping against his strength, “I thought Carver got you out of the house to get in here... divide and conquer.”

“He wasn’t here.” Red assured himself more than the woman. “So, don’t worry about that.”

“What was going on out there?” Her curiosity was finally aroused.

The man sighed, “I’m sorry they frightened you.”

“It’s okay,” she dismissed, so grateful it had not been what she imagined, “I just–”

“It is most assuredly not okay.” Red stretched his legs out, getting more comfortable, leaning into the bed frame. “A fact I will explain to them personally tomorrow in no uncertain terms.”

“Is there a need for that?” she fretted. “They do their job well, for the most part... very well.”

“Do they? Because as I see it, you’re supposed to be sleeping right now, while they quietly guard the house.” Red’s temper was returning. “Silas is right, they should be fired.”

“I don’t want to be responsible for that.”

“I don’t think the responsibility lies with you.” he reminded.

“You took care of it, Red.” she placated.

“And had I not been here? What would have happened had I not shown up?” he demanded. “Stoned on pain pills or not, your training would have kicked in sooner or later. Silas would have checked your hiding place, I guarantee it.” he stopped for a breath. “When he knelt down next to the bed, you would have blown a hole through him.”

The woman’s eyes widened to such a realization. “I would have recognized his voice, surely.”

“All I heard was a threat.” he interrupted. “You... hell, I need to know... who’s coming through that door if anything like this ever happens again.”

Red reached up, grabbing a radio, speaking curtly into the device. “Silas, come here, please.”

“What are you doing?” Liz demanded.

A knock at the door interrupted the conversation. The large guard scanned the room hastily, seeing the pair in the same position he had left them. He approached cautiously, never certain the older man’s moods.

Silas instantly apologized. “I’m sorry, Ms. Keen.” his voice held his sincerity.

She was feeling incredibly embarrassed by the whole thing, her eyes lowering sheepishly.
I’m the one who should be apolo–"

“No, Ma’am. Absolutely not.” the guards eyes tried very hard to be stern, but clearly his heart was not in it. “I’ll not have you thinking that.” the blue eyes shifted hastily to Reddington.

“We need a safe word, something to tell her who is coming through that door.” Red stated succinctly.

Silas crouched down next to them, “I agree. When I came in and didn’t find her...” The man breathed out, controlling his own anxiety. “Totally unprofessional, agreed.” he shook his head, perturbed. “But I was so damned freaked by your absence in the bed...” he let it go. “So what did we come up with?”

Red looked at Lizzy, “Something that isn’t specifically tied to you?”

The woman looked around, searching mentally, her eyes happening to land on... her safe word.

“Fedora.”

Red smiled, pleased she chose an object relating to himself.

“Who else do you trusting besides me?” Silas asked.

“Joe.” He was the only other guard that she saw on a regular basis, so she was comfortable with him.

“All right, we will be the only two that know the word. I do not want a repeat of tonight.” Silas stressed. “If you hear either of us say anything other than that,” he pointed to the stylish object in question. “you stay where the hell you are because something is wrong.”

With that settled, Silas left them alone.

Red offered his hands, lifting her from the floor onto the bed. He watched as Liz settled into the blankets, exhaling a deep breath.

He smiled down at her. “Better now?”

She released the tension in her body, smiling wanly at him. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head slightly, amazed at such tenacity. “I’m going to get dressed. Be right back.”

Minutes later he settled beside her, watching her stifle a yawn. “What happened tonight, with Ress?”

“We’ll discuss that later. You need to rest and quiet frankly, I don’t want to think for a while.” Red turned to the light switch. “Just know, everything was as fine as it could be, under the circumstances.” the cool darkness bathed the room, and this time Liz felt only safe and secure with this man beside her.

“Now, sleep, Lizzy.”

She closed her eyes, reaching instinctively for that security. Her fingers curved about two of his, holding tightly until sleep finally came.
After their argument of a few days ago, they had come to an understanding. A routine had been developed of sorts, one both found comfortable. Red hadn’t gone any further than her voice carried, which made him comfortable. The only times he left were for quick trips to the Post Office, none of which lasted more than an hour... which Liz found reassuring.

She would have thought she’d feel awkward as hell, being in such close proximity to Red, but she hadn’t. They were all adults here and the circumstances unusual. It hadn’t been as bad as she had anticipated. She thought they were handling the situation very well, all things considered.

But one day, Dembe had hinted towards some business deal that needed Red’s attention. She noticed that the man immediately waved off the task. It was then, Liz realized Red had literally been putting off everything to be here with her.

While she had enjoyed his company, he had a business to run. Traveling to do. Carver to find. He couldn’t put it off for the next six or seven weeks.

One morning shortly thereafter, they were sitting in bed. She had her foot elevated, both relaxing, in the midst of another of Red’s fantastic stories, when Dembe entered the room, phone in hand.

Red’s brows rose, questioning silently. The man was clearly annoyed, not at Dembe, but at the phone the other man held aloft.

“It’s Russia. They’ve had a problem.”

Red sighed heavily, waving the phone forward. Taking the offending object, he reluctantly listened to the voice at the other end of the line.

After a few beats of silence, Red spoke, “So tell them to divert the shipment. Call Edmund and tell him it will be a few hours off schedule. What’s so damn difficult...”

Nodding his head sarcastically, Red continued. “No, I can’t come out there right now.” He looked at Liz, “It’s none of your damned business ‘why’.”

Liz laid a hand on his arm, getting his attention. She nodded vigorously, mouthing the word, Go.

Red’s scowl increased. “Peter, let me call you back.” then rolled his eyes expressively, “Yes, in a minute!” He barked, slapping the phone shut.

He shot her a determined look. “I am not leaving you here alone.”

“I’ll be fine.” she humored, her tone sincere.

“No. With Carver still out there...” Red shook his head negatively. “Absolutely not.”

“You’ll be gone, what, a day?” Liz plaintively searched his face. “Silas is here.”
“A lot can happen in a day.” Red knew from experience. He silently contemplated his options. “I’ll leave Dembe.”

“No you won’t. I won’t be able to rest if I know you’re out there alone.” she presented her point of view. “There’s, how many guys running around this property right now? Men you’ve hired.” she mentally calculated. “I will be perfectly safe.”

“You won’t leave this house?” Red needed confirmation.

“Even if I wanted to..” She waved over her injuries.

“Elizabeth.” the man stated sternly. “If I left and something happened to you...” He shook his head brusquely. “Promise me.”

Liz had never seen him so troubled, well, not since Anslo had a gun held to her head. It unsettled her. “I will not leave this house. I promise.”

“Do not tell anyone where you are.” he forewarned. “We don’t want to risk them being followed and I most certainly do not want them relocating you, and Cooper will.” he ticked off on his fingers. “This is the safest place for you to be right now.”

The woman could find no real argument to debate at this point. Just getting to the bathroom was a chore. Fending off an attacker, and one as strong as Carver, would be impossible.

Red threw the phone to Dembe, “Tell them we’ll be leaving shortly.” he threw an obstinate glare at the woman. “Don’t make me regret this decision, Lizzy.”

“I won’t, I promise.” she crossed her heart, holding up ‘Boy Scout’ fingers. “The sooner you go, the sooner you can get back.”

Liz sat in the back pool area, book in hand, her foot elevated to a comfortable position. Sitting the paperback in her lap, she reached for her ice tea, smiling softly as she watched Hudson pout on the floor near the doorway.

For the first couple of hours, the dog had sat by the front door, looking forlorn and lost with Dembe’s departure. She had coaxed him with treats to follow her. Even so, it was clear how much he missed Dembe. The animal would raise his head hopefully each time he heard the door open.

Red and Dembe had been gone two days now and as promised, she hadn’t left the house nor told anyone her location. And she hadn’t wanted to.

Aside from the heavy casts, the slightly stoned feeling she carried throughout the day and the maniacal killer hunting for her, this was the most relaxed she had been in a long time.

Maybe taking a little breather wasn’t so bad.

She felt her mind clearing a little more each day. After being away from work, she felt fresh and renewed. Which probably made sense, considering she hadn’t taken a vacation since working with Red.

Not that he was to blame. Oddly of late, it seemed she had blamed him for everything wrong that had happened in her life.
She knew, without doubt, had she even hinted that she needed a break, he would have shipped her off to a private tropical island, knowing Red.

But things had been so tense at home, work was her salvation.

This break from Tom and his untimely visits and calls, had been needed.

In the quiet, she had finally taken the time to process, to reflect, on their relationship and had found, in this instance... absence did not make the heart grow fonder.

Liz had let the familiarity she had once felt with Tom, blind her to how seriously clouded her judgement had become. She needed to let the past go and move on.

It was not certain if the man would actually leave her alone, however.

He wasn’t her husband any longer. He certainly wasn’t the man she had married.

Tom Keen wasn’t even his name. He was a virtual stranger. Everything she thought she knew about the man, was a lie. The Tom Keen she knew... didn’t exist.

It was all a charade.

Red, on the other hand, had tried to be as up front as possible. And he had been right, she hadn’t always believed him. When he had taken a chance, giving her more information, she believed he had manipulated the situation. And in the end when she found that he hadn’t, she never apologized for her earlier assumption.

She was abrupt, sometimes down right rude with the man, but he was always there when she needed help. No matter if it was work or of a personal nature...

She looked around the beautiful room, sighing. And even here, he was seeing to her comfort and safety.

He had handled her tantrums about Tom with understanding patience. Then picked up the pieces left behind when her world had unraveled.

Which said a lot about both their characters.

While Red offered a shoulder to cry on, supporting and encouraging words, and in the end she, having realized the truth about Tom, being presented with that beautifully restored music box had touched her heart and in a manner of speaking... restored her soul.

While she, on the other hand, was always the first to say, I told you so. To rub salt in open wounds.

What was more disturbing, she had that character trait before Red had even come into the picture. She had been called single-minded more than once in her life. ‘By the book’, black and white, no gray areas.

That was Elizabeth Keen.

A few days back when Red had given her that tongue lashing, she now had to wonder, had he, in his own erudite way, been saying the same thing?

The muffled sound of the front door closing broke her reverie.

One of the guards was making his afternoon rounds.
There had been several changes the day following the ‘fisticuffs in the foyer’ incident.

Red and Silas had gotten into a heated exchange so intense, Liz had heard them bellowing even in their bedroom.

Dembe had finally arrived, with an explanation of sorts. He gestured meaningfully at one point, “Make him be quiet,” the large man said, “he’s disturbing my morning meditation.”

The woman wondered what the hell she could possibly do to quiet the situation. She found both men toe to toe, gesturing heatedly, hotly debating about how Security should be managed.

Liz sat quietly on her cart debating her own options. She glanced up catching Dembe’s eyes, then acted on instinct because in reality, she had no idea how to calm two Alpha Males who were determined, each to have his own way.

Dembe helped her arise as she shakily steadied herself on the handlebars of her cart. The exchange was becoming more aggressive on both parts.

She stumbled forward, very uneasy with the apoplectic words. At one point, she was so anxious to put herself between the two combatants... her foot faltered and she ended up having to grip Red’s arm to steady herself.

Both men unconsciously stepped back, which allowed her to work her way between them.

She lifted beseeching eyes, her hand gently grazing Red’s firmly set chin. Momentarily the fiery eyes transferred to her clear ones, only to return a staggering glare to a belligerent opponent.

The fact that Red was berating her guard in such a manner, due to something she felt totally responsible for, only added to her anxiety.

Liz ignored the gesture, her fingers falling softly over Red’s mouth. The man’s startled gaze was finally directed to something other than the source of his anger. He stared down at the small woman, completely focused.

The woman watched the tension bleed from his stiff posture, her touch slowly falling away from his face.

She was stunned when his hand halted her own path, the grip light. Red’s tense lips softened as he tenderly grazed the tips of her fingers. The open affection literally took her breath away.

Red breathed in a cleansing breath, taking her hand, he guided her to the couch.

Silas watched the man, his expression a wary one.

Red’s diplomatic tendencies had the situation well in hand within minutes. A suitable plan of action which satisfied all concerned, was agreed upon.

One stipulation which Red insisted be carried out, troubled the woman deeply. He wanted a guard outside their door when he was not present. Giving him peace of mind.

The first night, she had felt awkward. But in the morning, after a refreshing night’s sleep... one in which she had no worries concerning Red or herself. She was able to finally relax and accept the situation as one she could live with.

“David?” She set her book aside, glancing to the door, expecting to see the young guard. Hudson
stood, wagging his tail, excitedly dancing in place.

“Two days I’ve been gone and you’re on a first name basis with the guards.” Red stepped through the archway casually, tossing his hat on the couch.

“Red!” She smiled, happy to see him again. “I didn’t expect you back so soon.” she sat up straighter, her smile widening. “How did it go?”

Hudson sniffed him, waiting for his customary pat on the head before taking off in search of Dembe.

Red poured a drink, then sat down next to her. “As well as could be expected.” he informed her. “I can’t believe I had to fly around the world for...” He took a long drink from the tumbler, rubbing his neck, “God forbid I should take some real time off. Everything would fall apart.”

“What happened?” She took the glass out of his hand, bringing it to her own mouth. Red took her chin in his hand, making her face him.

She offered him a puzzled look.

He quirked his brow, then took the glass out of her reach.

“I am of legal age, you know.” Liz’s brow crinkled, a derisive sound escaping her throat.

“You are also high as a kite.” the man reached over, substituting her ice tea, placing it in her hand. He smiled when she scrunched her nose with disdain, but she sipped the cool beverage regardless.

“Nothing happened per se.” he continued. “Shipping problems that could have been handled...” He exhaled heavily, halting his narrative.

The whole trip had been a waste of time in his opinion. On top of that, Ressler had called with a new victim. The pictures were the same as the first. Bloody and gruesome. And they still were nowhere near to closing in on Carver.

Red hadn’t known the victim, but there was something about her that spoke volumes to him. It was frustrating as hell because she was trying to say something that he simply could not hear at this point. But he would soon, hopefully.

“It doesn’t matter.” Red dismissed all else, leaning into the woman’s sphere. “I want to hear all about what you’ve been doing.”

“You’re looking at it.” she waved her hands expressively about. “They wouldn’t let me do much of anything. The guards or nursing staff... they’ve been bossy, but very attentive.”

“Were they unkind to you?” Red’s scowl deepened.

“No, not at all.” she laughed musically. “Red, I was just grabbing my water from the side table and they came running. It was ridiculous.” she pulled a cute grimace. “Oh, they started me on some minor exercises. Just keeping the arm and leg flexible, mainly. But it’s important, I guess.”

He had left instructions for the staff to watch her, make sure she didn’t fall. Maybe they had gone a little overboard with their attentions. But, she was well and there had been no accidents, so really, he wasn’t going to actually complain.

“You’ll be thankful later.” it was prophesied. “Did the Post Office make contact?”

“Yes.” she brightened. “Aram wanted to send a card, but I told him you’d pick it up when you came
“It’s fine.” Red dreaded the fact. “I have to go in shortly anyway.”

“Can’t it wait? You look exhausted.” Liz noticed the dark circles under the man’s eyes.

“I want to get it out of the way and come home.”

“Is there a problem?” she was suddenly on alert. “News on Carver?”

“I have their next Blacklist name.”

“The next... but what about Carver?” she asked anxiously.

“Don’t concern yourself with him. Everything that can be done...” he dismissed airily. “This next case should be cut and dry. A couple days out at most.”

“Who are you going to give it to?”

“Who do you think?” Already knowing the answer himself, he was curious if she thought the same.

“Ressler?” she practically giggled her glee.

Red smiled his amusement.

Later that day, Silas came through, after Red had left. An easy camaraderie had developed between he and Elizabeth Keen.

They often chatted frequently of late, the woman finding the man interesting, articulate and amusing.

“Any problems today?” Elizabeth had noticed a particular twinkle in the grey eyes this afternoon.

“Just that annoying neighbor kid tossing his ball into the yard again.” Silas checked a window lock.

“Joe’s gonna pop it one of these days.”

Liz held her smile, “What is it with you guys and that kid? Why does he bug you so much?”

“Every time he throws that ball over, he tries to scale the fence, which sets off the alarm, which someone has to go check out.”

The radio on the man’s belt started chiming an alert. Silas sighed heavily.

“This makes three times today.” He raised the radio to his mouth, clicking the button. “Anyone got that? I’m with...” the grey eyes filled with mirth as he glanced at the other occupant of the room. “Her.”

“Copy.” He received a reply, absentely hooking the radio back to his belt.

“Why don’t you guys ever say my name?” she was curious.

“Truthfully?” he asked innocently.

Elizabeth spread her hands slightly. “Of course.”

“Most of the guards forget your name.”
She gasped her shock. “But I know their names.”

“Those aren’t their real names.” he managed very straight faced. “If we told you that, we’d have to kill you.”

The beautiful mouth fell agape. Silas burst out chuckling.

Elizabeth’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, getting the jest. “Oh, very amusing, you big oaf.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know if Red’s picked up my mail, would you?” she continued, her tone less acerbic “I ordered stuff and I’m sure it’s being delivered and my bills...”

“I saw a box in the foy– ” Silas’ reply was interrupted by Joe’s deep voice bitching morosely. The radio sounded crystal clear, almost as if the man was in the same room.

“I don’t wanna do it, but I have to take this kid out.” Joe grumbled belligerently.

Liz held her fingers to her ears, grimacing slightly as the berating continued at a slightly higher magnitude.

“Hey, you little bastard!” the man screeched at his new adversary. “You want this ball stuck up your ass!”

“How many times has he set off the perimeter alarm in one day?” Liz chuckled her appreciation of the situation.

“Twelve.” Silas tried to hold his own amusement.

“Pop the ball.” She shrugged casually.

Silas laughed, but she continued, “I’m serious. He’s just jacking with you now. He knows it’s pissing you off.” The guard was directed. “Tell Joe, I said to pop it and toss it back over.”

“You’re serious?” Silas was happy.

“Yes, he’s going to keep doing it just to spite you.”

Silas shrugged, keying the mike. “She says to pop the ball.”

“Really!” Joe came back excitedly. “She said that?”

Liz waved him forward, taking the radio. “Yep, and throw it back over the fence.”

“Your orders will be followed to the letter, Ma’am.” she could hear the glee in the hardened ex-military man’s retort.

Liz smiled, when they heard a loud pop and what could possibly be misconstrued as maniacal laughter over the radio.

“That man enjoys his job too much sometimes.” Silas smiled warmly at her.

She held up the radio, thumbing the button. “If he throws anything else over, keep it. And if he tries to climb over again, call the cops on him. His parents need to step up and corral that kid.”

A round of the Security ‘copying’ her orders came in quick succession. She grinned, returning the communication device to it’s rightful owner.
“You just made everyone unbelievably happy. I’ll go check that mail for you.” the man nodded his approval, the action meaning much to the woman. “By the way... my name is Silas.”

“Your real name?” she queried.

He pulled a face, shrugging apologetically. “We can’t go there, Ma’am... remember?”

“Oh, get out.” she exclaimed, exasperated.

He came back a minute later, carrying a large basket.

“Is that all mine?” She asked aghast, clapping her hands together gleefully.

“No, I think some of Red’s is in here.” he glanced down to his burden. “You want me to sort it real quick?”

“Just bring it to me each day and I’ll do it.” she waved him over. “It might help Red out.”

“All right. I’m gonna go check on the guys, especially Joe.” he threw out a careless thumb over his shoulder. “See that he hasn’t aerated the kid.”

Liz’s shoulders shook with amusement as she sorted the stack of mail. Seeing as there were so many different aliases for Red, it took a few minutes to organize it all.

She opened an early festive birthday card from her Aunt, smiling. As expected, the inevitable gift card she knew would be inside slid from the hidden folds.

A hundred dollars for Victoria’s Secret. Not bad. Much better then whatever Gypsy outfitter her Aunt had picked last year.

Liz didn’t know what the woman had been thinking. Not once in her entire life had Liz ever dressed like a hippie/gypsy. But she had purchased some nice candles and funky jewelry, so it wasn’t a complete loss.

Elizabeth read the inside, smiling at the birthday wishes, which also included a quick update on the family. The woman was pleased to hear that everyone seemed to be doing so well.

She sat the card aside, reaching for the next letter, her thoughts still with the lovely sentiments expressed.

Absently sliding the single sheet of paper free, she automatically perused the neatly typed script.

_For someone who claims to care for you so much, I find that bastard Reddington has left you injured and alone. I’m sure he’s given you no chance to escape or even call for help. Probably surrounding you with armed guards who watch your every move. Putting you under lock and key, like the prisoner you are.

I’ve been searching, but still haven’t found you. But I will, have faith

And when I do, I will purge you of his lies. You will be pure once again, no longer sinful. We will cleanse you, redeem you, bleed his evil from you_ 

Scowling darkly, Liz examined both sides of the letter and envelope yet again, looking for clues as to who might have sent such a disturbing letter.
There was no address or name aside from hers.

Picking up her phone, her decision made, she dialed with trembling fingers.

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Chapter End Notes

Is it Baz... is it Silas? Who the hell knows. If we did know, he’d kill us.
Red and Dembe waited patiently as the elevator did its thing.

Red glanced at his friend. “I miss elevator music.”

“No, you do not.” Dembe was relatively sure.

Red held his smile with difficulty, appreciative of the other man’s amazing delivery. The doors slid open, both men exiting in unison.

“My dear Agent Navabi.” Red removed his hat, smiling as the beautiful woman approached. “How are you this fine day?” The man literally oozed charm and sophistication.

The dark haired woman nodded a hello, more to Red’s associate than himself, Reddington noted... his amusement returning two fold. “I’m well.” she reluctantly gave her attention over. “You?”

“Glad to be home.”

“I’m sure you are.” She chuckled at the happy man.

Ever since Liz had been staying with Red Reddington, he seemed more relaxed and cheerful. Not that he wasn’t normally, but this was genuine. No façade in place.

Red’s smile widened, his thoughts turning introspective for a beat, thinking about who was waiting at home until he noticed Navabi’s lips quirking slightly.

Red smiled back, his eyes twinkling mischievously.

Dembe ducked his head, hiding his smile. Obviously, he wasn’t the only one who noticed the change in Raymond since Elizabeth had been staying with them.

“What are you doing here, Reddington?” Ressler enquired, having entered the Pen. It was odd to hear Donald actually sound pleasant for once, or as pleasant as he could. Red didn’t believe it came natural to the Agent.

“I have a new name.” Red glanced around expectantly, frowning. “Where’s Aram?”

Samar pointed at the second floor landing.

Aram glanced over the metal railing having noted the attention suddenly directed at himself. He offered a quick wave, picking up his pace, the man beside him doing the same.

As he reached the bottom floor, Aram fidgeted with his tie and straightened his hair. Red assumed he was preening himself for the beautiful ex-Mossad agent. And who could fault the man?

“Mr. Reddington, you’re back.” Aram clumsily shuffled a pile of folders from one arm to the other, holding out his hand in greeting.

Red took the offering, smiling kindly at the man. He liked this young man who didn’t put on airs. Aram was truly a kind, caring person. As genuine as they came. It didn’t hurt that the computer
expert could be offhandedly amusing and was more often than not, Red’s inside man.

Red took great pains not to take advantage, or get Aram reprimanded, seeing as he often went out of his way to help or call Red when Lizzy was in trouble.

Aram put down the files, taking his seat, hands hovering over the keyboard as he awaited instructions.

A man about Ressler’s age and build, hovered in the background. Reddington had noticed of course. And now, the guy slowly approached the group.

Samar’s lovely eyes chilled, shifting her position closer to Red.

Red turned staring at the woman, wondering if there was a problem.

“Shouldn’t he be in the box?” The tall brunet man asked brusquely, eyeing Reddington belligerently.


The man couldn’t have been here for more then a couple of days and there was already tension among the troops. Red checked his theory once again, glancing at Samar whose lovely face harbored an unsociable scowl.

Aram’s eyes avoided the other man altogether, which to Red, signified a great lack of respect. Ressler had his head in his notebook, clueless, as usual.

“What do you mean, one of Lizzy’s replacements?” Red asked.

“They honored us with two new shiny fill-ins. We got him,” she stared peevishly at Moore, “and Andrew Wilson.” she glanced around furtively, “He’s somewhere around here. You can thank Liz for me when you see her next, by the way. It’s been such a joy having them around.”

“And what’s this about the Box?” Red asked innocently.

“It’s a secure location, one of which, you should be in while here.” Moore made his feelings known.

“Mr. Reddington comes in voluntarily,” Samar snapped right back, putting her lovely frame between the two would-be combatants.

“I think that as long as he’s on government property, he should be placed in custody.” Moore did not back down.

“I have an idea, Moore,” Samar countered, smiling. The woman backed up slightly, waving an imperious hand. “If you can put him in the box, I’m sure Reddington will stay there for you.”

“Or... I could just leave.” Red picked up his hat, setting it on his head. “I do have other things to do today.”

*Like sleep, see Lizzy, talk to Lizzy, be with Lizzy.*

“Or, you could leave when we allow it.” Moore stated sarcastically.

Red halted his steps slowly, giving over his attention. His eyes easily held the other man’s until Moore finally shifted, losing the battle of wills.
“When you lose the shrub, let me know.” Red spoke directly to Samar, resuming his steps.

Dembe cast Agent Moore a steely glare before following his friend toward the exit.

“Agents, secure that man!” Moore ordered, as two passing agents glanced dubiously to a reticent Red Reddington, obviously confused, then back at the new agent, their confusion deepening.

Dembe stepped forward, the two agents backed off slightly, still holding their open files, as they continually checked with their counterparts as to... why is this asshole causing problems.

“You said he had to put me in the box.” Red laughed his growing amusement. “No one said anything about having any sort of assistance. But still...” Red once again turned a challenging stare to Agent Moore, “I believe that’s cheating.”

“It is, yes.” Samar agreed cheerfully.

He turned to the woman, ignoring Moore completely, his hands spreading in a puzzled manner, “What the hell is going on?” he demanded. “Did no one bother to explain the rules to Agent 86, here?”

Dembe’s brow lifted slightly and Red’s hand lifted instantly. “I will explain the obscure cultural reference later, my friend.”

Harold Cooper approached, feeling the tension emanating from the group. He held out his hand in greeting, as he neared Red. “Reddington, you’re back earlier than I expected.” he smiled warmly. “I assume you have new information–”

Red took the man’s hand, “Has something changed in my absence? Agent Krycek here,” he nodded in the appropriate direction, “wants me in custody.”

Cooper shook his head no, silently asking for an explanation, his brow arching quizzically.

Dembe stepped forward fluidly, leaning slightly. “Another obscure cultural reference... The X-Files.” he explained readily before resuming his vigilant stance behind his friend.

Red’s mouth pulled at the corners in open amusement.

“He’s new.” Cooper smoothed over the incident, motioning to Agent Moore who stood fuming inwardly.

“He’s an idiot.” Red corrected matter-of-factly.

Harold shrugged, “He’s new.” he repeated, as if it was explanation enough. “Now, what’s going on?”

Red tilted his head, shrugging. “As I was about to say, I have a new name.” he finally got down to business. “Nathaniel Gage.

“What about Carver?” Ressler chimed in.

“When I hear something...” Red left it hanging. “We’ll find him, eventually.”

Trust me...

“Wait... you’re giving us a new name?” Ressler said. “What’s the catch?”
Red laid it all out for them. Normally, he’d add a little flourish to the narrative, but in this instance, he really just wanted to get this over with and go home.

Twenty minutes later, the task was done, and he was ready to go. But the team evidently, had countless questions to address.

_I miss Lizzy_

If he had any trust in these people, he’d just call it in, but they needed to be walked through it sometimes.

Only Samar and Aram seemed to be on the ball. Donald still didn’t quite trust him, and the new guy kept throwing daggers at him the whole time, probably not having heard a word said.

The dynamics were all off and someone would pay for it, sooner or later.

Yet another Agent approached, this one younger than the rest, about Lizzy’s age, actually. Red exchanged enigmatical glances with Dembe.

“They’re coming out of the woodwork, these days.” Red quipped.

“Like cockroaches.” the large black man transferred a willful stare directly at the young Agent as he passed.

“Director Cooper, here’s the information you requested.” the guy handed over a file, clearly intimidated by Dembe’s undue interest.

“Thank you, Wilson.” Cooper glanced at the file absently. “Red, have you met Agent Wilson yet?”

Red ignored the kid all together, before returning his interest to Cooper. “Wet behind the ears and an idiot. This is the best you have?” Red’s eyes shifted lazily to Moore.

Ressler lowered his head quickly, for some reason finding that particular remark funny.

“In their Specialty.” Cooper smiled slightly, secretly amused by Red’s disgust as well.

“And those would be, what? Finger painting and playing ‘doormat’?” Red was losing patience fast. “My God, Harold. Ressler looks like a genius next to these two.”

Ressler rolled his eyes then returned to his report. It was nothing he hadn’t heard before.

“Moore is Foreign Counter Intelligence.” Red barked in laughter at that remark, “And...” Cooper ignored the man’s disrespectful ways, “Wilson, Organized Crime, Domestic Threats and one of our best Linguists.”

Red huffed his annoyance, his jaw tensing. “Have they been vetted?”

“They have, and passed.”

“Forgive me if I don’t find comfort in that.” He pulled the quietly buzzing phone from his pocket, answering, “Yes?” he practically snapped.

“Red...”

“Sweetheart,” his tone changed instantly, “did you need something?”
“When will you be back?” Elizabeth asked quietly.

“Is there a problem?” He asked, instantly alert. Her voice told him, something was wrong. Grabbing his hat, he started for the elevator, Dembe falling into step beside him.

He ignored the calls for him from her contemporaries, continuing on his way. Their questions only irritated him now. He had other priorities.

“I...” she began uncertainly, then altered to a more sedate, “well, there is something I wish to show you... but it’s not all that urgent.”

“Fifteen minutes.” Red advised, checking with Dembe. “We’ll be home then.”

They reached the car in minutes and were on their way. “Is Silas there with you?”

“He’s making his rounds.”

“Call him.”

“It’s just that...” she took a shaky breath, “I got this letter.”

“Who gave you the mail?” it was demanded heatedly.

“Silas brought it to me before he went out.”

Damn it! He hadn’t told anyone not to give her the mail. It hadn’t occurred to him that she’d even ask for it.

“I ordered things, I was wondering if they had arrived.” she explained, not really knowing why. “Silas only knew about the paper mail he had seen in the foyer.” she babbled, which was her way when nervous. “And my birthday is coming up, I thought my Aunt may have sent a card.” she looked at the door as if the man would walk through any second.

“What did the letter say?”

“She said the family was good and wished me a happy birthday, sent a gift card.”

He had meant the other letter, but she was distracted for the moment, which was good. Not that he wasn’t dying to know what it said.

“What did she say about the family?” he patiently enquired.

Liz read the letter aloud, filling in the needed info when a family member was mentioned, as she went along.

Red vaguely remembered a few of the names mentioned, but not all of them. It didn’t really matter, as long as she was distracted until he got there.

When she finished, he filled the silence immediately. “What kind of gift card?”

“Victoria’s Secret.” she held a smile.

“That was nice of her. What will you buy?”

“Oh there’s so many...” Liz had been browsing the catalogues.
He leaned on the arm rest. “A new blouse, maybe?” he suggested lightly.

“You really hate that olive shirt, don’t you?”

“I do, yes.” he confirmed readily. “Fine then, a new dress.”

“I would have figured you’d say lingerie next.” He could hear her smile over the phone, which was great.

“What kind of lingerie?” He had lowered his voice suggestively, smiling when he heard her giggle.

“Maybe I’ll buy some pajamas.” she tried to match his mood.

“Well, now I’m disappointed. You got my hopes up for nothing,” he truly sounded disappointed.

“We’re pulling up. I’ll be inside in a minute.”

Setting his hat down on the foyer table, he headed back for the pool, holding out his hand for the letter as he walked through the archway. He sat beside her, while she curled her leg under her, turning to face him while he read it.

Anger crossed his features as his eyes scanned the note, his jaw ticking feverishly.

When he was finished, he sat it down beside them. “Why didn’t you tell me you had been getting these?”

“What do you mean?” she was genuinely surprised.

“I got the others Lizzy. He’s obviously been sending them for a while.”

“There are more?” she was stunned.

“You’ve never received one of these before?” he held it aloft.

“No, I think I would have mentioned it if I had.” she was adamant and a little offended.

“You would have told me?” he needed clarification.

“You think I wouldn’t?” she was definitely offended.

“I hope you would trust me enough to, but no, I didn’t think you would.”

“I would have, just on the off chance you knew who it might be.” she took umbrage. “Do you? Know anyone that sends letters like that?” she motioned to the disturbing object he still held aloft.

“I just assumed it was Tom.” He tilted his head, as she took the envelope from his hand, rereading it.

“It doesn’t sound like something Tom would say.” she shook her head in denial, the long dark hair swishing gently about her face.

“You really don’t think so?” Red’s tone said it all.

“If I had to, I would say it isn’t Tom, actually.” She handed the envelope to him, rubbing her fingertips, as if wiping away the bad feeling holding it had given her. “But don’t take my word for it, I didn’t know him at all, apparently.”

Red looked down at the letter in his hand, frowning. If it wasn’t Tom, who the hell could it be? He
Bleed his evil from you

Bleed her. It couldn’t be from Carver? Or could it?

It wasn’t his usual style. Red had never heard Carver sending letters before, ever.

But then, he’d never had a “client” get away from him before, either. Lizzy could literally be, the ‘one who got away’. A fixation now.

If Carver had been targeting her, it wasn’t impossible for him to have been following her.

Who ever it was, the letters would be stopping soon when the house sold. With no new address, what then?

The letters needed to continue if any chance of finding the creep was to be had.

Whoever was writing this shit, probably would escalate sooner or later.

Red had an idea how to solve the problem, but right now, he needed to deal with Elizabeth.

“We should talk about the letter.”

“What’s there to talk about?” Liz glanced at the white sheet of paper fretfully.

“Do you feel like a prisoner here?”

“No! Why would you even ask that?”

“Do you believe the guards would allow you leave, if you truly wished?”

“Not only that, they’d drive me where I want to go.” she lifted knowing brows.

“Do you feel like I’m neglecting you, leaving like I did.”

“I feel very cared for here.” the woman’s voice softened, as did her eyes. “And I remember... some of what happened that night.”

“You do?” Red’s own thoughts wandered back. So much had happened that night that she might deem, inappropriate, for that time and place. But his only priority at that moment, had been the woman’s welfare.

“I remember you telling me it would be all right.” she smiled. “That you were sorry you had to hurt me.” she hesitated for the man’s face allowed, that he too, was remembering that time.

Liz reached over, her hand covering his, grasping consolingly. “It’s all right, it’s over.” she smiled just for him. “I remember being cold and then I wasn’t, and you were talking to me.”

When he had laid against her. Well, that was going to be interesting when she fully remembered that little tidbit.

“Was there anything else?”

“Some little things, I get snippets in the middle of the night. They’re slowly piecing together, but not full pictures yet.” she struggled even now to recall the events. “Why?”
“Just wondering.” He shrugged. “Most of it’s a blur for me as well.”

Which wasn’t a lie. He’d only recently started playing back that night, wondering if he saw Carver’s face when he kicked in that door. He may have seen a glimpse of him going around the corner, but it wasn’t clear yet.

When he had heard his name being screamed like that, he clicked to auto-pilot. His only goal was finding and securing Lizzy.

“Don’t worry about these.” he nodded toward the envelope between them. “He doesn’t know where you are.”

“Are you sure?” she needed reassurance.

“If he did, he’d be sending them here, not to your house.” Red reminded.

“Of course.”

“Have I let anything happen to you here?” he reassured.

“No.” she was already calming.

“Has Silas been there when you’ve needed him.” it was a statement, not a question.

“Yes.” a soft smile graced her lips.

“Do you think I’d let any harm come to you?” his voice softened.

“No, but...”

“There are no buts, Lizzy. You are safe here. And will continue to be safe.” his tone brooked no argument. “Don’t worry,” he patted her hand, then lightened. “Are you hungry?”

“Getting there, yes.” She found she was adapting to Red’s constant change of topic better than she had before coming to stay with him. She knew it was his way of distracting her, and sometimes she appreciated it. Sometimes she wanted to throttle him. She wasn’t quite sure what she felt right now.

Red contacted Dembe, asking the man if he would mind picking up dinner tonight. The restaurant had an obscure sounding name which Liz instantly dismissed from her thoughts. She slid over to her cart, lifting her books into the basket preparing to take her leave.

“Stop.” Red said, his head tilting comically.

“What?” She looked around cautiously, afraid she was near an expensive vase or something.

“What are these?” He asked, tapping the back of her seat.

“Bumper stickers.” she held her giggle. “Every time I come back to the chair, there’s a new one stuck on there.”

Red perused a few, laughing as he did.

Lost your cat? Try looking under my tires
“And this?” He fingered the pole and flag sticking out high above the seat.

“It was sticking straight out, like I was a knight ready to joust someone.” She too, joined in the laughter.

Red had a pretty good guess why, but he asked anyway. “And they did this, why?”

“So they could see me coming. An early warning system.”

“Did it work?”


Red winced, thinking of where it could have gone. “Go ahead, I’ll be along in a minute.”

He went to the bar, refreshing his drink. Seconds later, a male grunt almost made him spill the contents of his mouth, for he had taken a huge sip.

Lizzy’s apologetic tone, sounded most sincere. “Sorry, Silas.”

Red raised the glass, laughing into it, finishing his drink before following his speed racer to the dining room.
Spring Chicken

April 11

After a delightful dinner, Dembe went out to do his usual laps in the pool. Lizzy’s dog sat at the edge, following the man back and forth as he swam, perfectly content to do so.

Red walked leisurely through the area, laying a fresh towel on the lounge chair, waving a ‘goodnight’ as he passed.

He headed for their room. More specifically, he headed for Lizzy.

“Who was at the door?” She had heard the bell earlier, but stayed out of sight, as directed by Silas.

“I met the neighbors.” Red smiled his greeting. “Seems their little darling was inconsolable after his ball was thrown back over the wall, deflated.” his hands went to his sides as gave his complete attention over.

Liz hid her smile, her eyes innocently following along as he continued. Red was not fooled for one second.

“The kid claimed he heard a woman’s voice telling someone to maim his toys and keep anything else that was thrown over the fence.” he exclaimed, pulling his tie free. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

He looked at her expectantly. “Does that sound like something I would do?” she asked intently.

“Pop the kid’s ball?” Red hung his tie over a nearby chair. “The old Lizzy, no... this new and improved one, I would hope so.”

“Well, I didn’t say it exactly like that.” she lied through her teeth. “Were the parents a problem?”

“For me? No.” Red told the truth. “As a matter of fact, I don’t think they’ll be a problem at all any longer for anyone.”

“What did you do?” she was momentarily waylaid.

“Told them you were a child psychologist that said junior was troubled.” he was proud of his inventiveness. “They’re so worried about the bad seed over there, I suspect he’ll be enrolled in some private academy by tomorrow.”

“And here I thought you didn’t lie.”

“I don’t lie to you.” he clarified. “Everyone else is fair game. Well, except for Dembe and Kate Kaplan...” he quirked his brow, “especially Kaplan.”

“Why don’t you lie to me?” she asked, rubbing her hand and arm, which had been aching for an hour.

“Don’t you think you have had enough lies in your life?” he sat down beside her, lifting her arm onto his lap, massaging the sore muscle.

Liz stiffened slightly at his touch, his behavior surprising her, all of which Red ignored.
“I may not be able to tell you everything that’s happening, but I can promise to never lie to you when you need questions answered.”

She didn’t want to think about it anymore. It had been a good night and she was tired of dwelling. “What did Ress say about the Blacklist name?”

“You mean after he was convinced it wasn’t a joke?” Red took hold of her hand, massaging each individual finger in turn.

Elizabeth felt the ache ease, the man’s administrations feeling wonderful.

“Aram put the info on the screens,” Red continued, “but Ressler kept giving me sidelong glances until Samar smacked him.”

“You’re kidding?” she chortled shortly.

“No, whacked him right across the back of the head.” Red remembered fondly. “Told him to get with the program.”

“Who was it?” she probed artfully, hoping to catch him off guard.

“Who was who?” He pushed his thumb into the palm of her hand, working on the tension there from handling the crutch. “Does this hurt?”

“The Blacklist name.” she snapped, annoyed her subterfuge clearly hadn’t worked. “And no, it doesn’t hurt.” she softened her tone as Red kneaded the sore area expertly.

“No one you need to worry about.” Red sat her arm aside, before scooting down the bed. “Let it go.” He advised. “You’re on medical leave. You should concentrate only on resting.” he tapped his finger against her cast as a reminder. “Let Ressler have his moment... even if it is freaking him out.”

“How are they doing?”


“Why, what’s going on?” she perked up instantly, always ready and willing to hear any juicy tidbit of gossip.

“They brought in some replacements, Richard Moore and Andrew Wilson, to fill in while you’re gone.” he fed her the tidbit. “And I get the feeling Samar and Aram dislike Moore intensely.”

“What about Ress?” Liz watched the man opposite her, lift her leg carefully.

She balked, preventing the move. “What are you doing?” she was suddenly a little awkward having sensed his intent.

“I thought you were college educated...” he motioned accordingly. “Isn’t it self explanatory?”

The woman stared at him blankly.

“This is helping with your injuries, correct?” he smiled benignly. “Should I stop?”

Liz gave the question due process. Within in seconds, she offered her leg tentatively laying it onto his lap.

Red patted the cast approvingly, continuing his efforts.
“Ressler is focused on the job, as always.” Red had long sense accepted the other man’s foibles. “Blind and deaf to what’s happening around him.”

“What’s wrong with this Moore guy?”

“Well, he wanted me in the box, for starters.”

“If he’s new, he probably wouldn’t know—”

“He still wanted me in the box after Samar explained our arrangement.”

“What did you do?” she questioned, moaning slightly as Red had hit a particularly troubling spot, “...Yes, right there.” she was grateful.

The man dropped his head, pleased she was so easily accepting his assistance. He pushed his fingers into the area indicated, working his magic.

“Are you asking if I did something to warrant being placed in the box?” he lifted a steady gaze.

“No, I’m not asking that?” she sat forward, her expression sincere for all of two seconds. “No, wait a minute, of course I’m asking that.”

“I did nothing, was saying hello to Aram as a matter of fact, shook his hand and everything.” Red remembered things his own way. “Don’t worry Lizzy, I can handle Moore without putting a bullet in him.” he pulled a sad face, then brightened. “Samar on the other hand...”

“She really doesn’t like him?” Liz clarified to herself, then shifted about anxiously... “Right here, it aches.” she pointed to her calf area.

Red obediently kneaded the tight muscle harder until she visibly relaxed.

“I’m getting a vibe that Moore doesn’t think much of her either, or maybe women, in general.” Red disdained. “Which makes him a bigger idiot than I thought.”

“What about the other one? Wilson?”

“Young, wet behind the ears.” he had all ready dismissed the man. “Probably lives in his mother’s basement... just like Glen.”

“How young is he?” she relaxed totally into the pillows, her eyes fluttering shut. The man rubbed at her aching foot. The damned cast prevented him reaching vital areas, but what he was doing felt amazing.

“Well, he’s around your age, actually.” Red grinned, her little toes fascinating him. He had always found women’s feet sensual. He cupped her entire foot in his palms, rubbing the coolness and in seconds, the flesh was warmed.

His thoughts turned introspective for a beat, his mood altering.

How that fucker, Carver, could hurt her... could cause her so much pain... Red steamed at the reality. He sat here wishing fervently to kiss the cute little toes. How could any man wish harm of any sort to something so precious, so valued a thing?

Red clenched his jaw, pushing out the anger, instead focusing on the activity he pursued. He marveled how easily her entire foot fit into his hands.
“You think I’m wet behind the ears?”

“No...” he drawled lazily, refusing a smile. “Not anymore.”

“You thought I was!” she was more than incensed.

She pulled her leg away, the man shifting a scolding glance.

Elizabeth considered her options, settling instantly. Red smiled happily as she slowly but surely gave over into his keeping... her other leg.

He eased the sock off her foot, Liz finding the task oddly sensual in nature.

She watched warily for the man’s lips had quivered slightly, but he sat now simply looking at her appendage. She impatiently wiggled her toes, shaking her foot about, loathed to remind him... that he had a job to do.

“Well, yes, you were.” he reminded needlessly. “You had never dealt with my level of criminal activity.”

Well, she couldn’t argue with that. And really, she wasn’t supposed to, being a profiler. “And now, what do you think?”

“I think you’re still very young.”

“In other words, inexperienced.” she took for granted.

“In some things, yes. But you’re learning.” he was quick to mollify. “Lizzy, there’s nothing wrong with not knowing everything.” he motioned to himself. “Even I don’t know all there is to know.”

“Yeah well, you wouldn’t know it.” Liz muttered. “Anyway, aside from them being young and gung ho, how are they working together, do you think?”

“Someone’s going to get killed.” Red prophesied.

“That’s not funny!” she pouted, moving her foot into Red’s warm hand, curling her toes when he pushed into her aching arch.

“It wasn’t meant to be. The dynamics are all off.” he could sense as much. “Samar and Aram listen, they’re on top of their game. Donald, is getting his shit together.” Red mused to himself. “I have to see the other guys in action, but as of right now, they’re a hot mess.”

“It’s that bad?” she grimaced.

“It’s that bad.” Red confirmed. “But don’t worry, I’ll be there, watching.”

He bent his head, kissing the tip of her toe as he rubbed his thumbs along the length of her foot. The woman’s head fell back, a long purr of delight escaping her throat.
April 12

When had Red Reddington’s world turned around? The man certainly could not have answered that question.

When had his priorities shifted? He could remember waking nights, his senses tuned into his personal safety. He had become adept at surviving dangerous situations.

These days, he rarely if ever, thought in such terms.

The man turned over in bed, waking slightly as he did. It wasn’t unusual for him to wake frequently during the night; listening, aware. But since sharing his bed with Lizzy, he had been intently focused and conscious only, of the woman. If he was needed, he would know instantly.

Tonight, all was quiet.

Opening his tired eyes, seeing her slight outline in the darkened room, he assured himself of Lizzy’s comfort. Her deep steady breathing alerted him that they had finally found the correct dosage of pain meds, allowing her a deep, restful sleep.

The past few nights had been rough for her. A slight movement, a natural turn in sleep, would wake her instantly. The cast had greatly impeded her comfort. It seemed no position was the correct one, her pain level was just too great.

Each time she issued apologies for waking him almost on the hour, but no matter how he reassured her, she seemed to feel worse. In Red’s mind however, whatever he could do to make her more comfortable, to make the pain less... was his purpose.

He stared at her profile, snuggled into the softness of her pillow. She mewed softly, making his eyes soften at the sound. It was moments like this that made him miss having a full time bed partner. Those little noises only a female could make, her light scent in the bed clothes, sexy innocence cuddled in the softness.

Reaching out, he adjusted the blanket up over her bared shoulder...her body warming the cool set of sheets.

His mouth turned upward, remembering each and every night he crawled into bed with her, what he had said to Ressler when they were stuck in that box.

*Have you ever sailed across the ocean Donald, on a sailboat surrounded by sea...*

*I want to be at the Piazza del Campo in Siena...*

*To feel the surge of ten race horses go thundering by...*
I want another meal in Paris at the L’Ambroisie in the Place de Vosges...

I want another bottle of wine, and then another...

I want the warmth of a woman in a cool set of sheets...

One more night of jazz at the Vanguard...

The warmth of a woman in a cool set of sheets.

A slight trembling of the bed, distracted his thoughts. Sliding his hand closer to her body, he felt the vibration intensify just seconds before she released a shaky breath.

Damn, the pain pill must be wearing off.

Sitting up, he reached for the bed side table, feeling for the pills. His fingertips had just grazed the bottle when she awoke fully.


“I’m awake.” He shook the pill bottle, “I think I’ve become attuned to you.” He broke off when she hissed in pain. His smile dissipated at the woman’s hiss of pain.

Red flipped the low light switch, taking in her pinched face and trembling hand, clenched into a fist.

“Tell me.” Whipping off the sheet, he moved closer, his hand curving to her spine.

She pulled up further into herself, stopping, pushing her abdomen. “Oh, no.” she moaned her realization.

“Lizzy...”

The woman lay perfectly still, mortified. How was she going to get out of this one graciously.

Throwing back her side of the blankets, Red pulled up short, shocked when he saw blood covering the lower side of her bed. Quite a lot of blood actually. Enough that it worried him a little.

“God.” Liz hung her head dejectedly. “I’m so sorry.” she sighed bleakly.

“This is fine, Lizzy.” Red’s deep voice soothed. “Nothing to worry about.” He ran his hand over her abdomen gently. “It happens.”

She covered her eyes, embarrassed beyond belief. “Of all the things...” she was still mortified.

He interrupted, “Don’t worry about it.”

The man rolled off the bed, heading to the bathroom, coming out with a change of sheets.

“You know, this happened to my wife all the time. Not to mention the time her water broke.” he remembered fondly. “Now that, that was memorable.” He glanced at the woman who had not moved, still wrapped up in her misery.

“And since then, it’s happened more often than you’d think. In our line of work, I suppose they get
mixed up on dates and forget.” He stated in a blasé manner. “I blame it on jet lag.”

He purposely didn’t mention that when the incident occurred, it wasn’t while his partners were sleeping, but more often, while he was buried between their thighs. Even then, especially then... it never bothered him.

Coming to the head of the bed, he smiled warmly when she grimaced her distaste. “Ugh. I can’t believe this doesn’t gross you out.” she moved out of the sticky mess as best she could, dismayed to see his beautiful sheets in such a state.

He chuckled under his breath. “I find nothing about the female body or it’s workings gross, as you so articulately stated. It’s natural.” Bending to loop her arm around his neck, she backed off.

“Well, it grosses me out.” she pulled the garments away from her flesh, disgusted. “My crutches are right over...”

Rolling his eyes, he bent to his original position, silencing her protests. “And I am right here.”

Walking her to the bathroom, she finally balked. “I can get this from here on... if you stay close.” She wrinkled her nose. “Sorry.”

“Stop saying that, Lizzy.” the man turned abruptly, waving his hand about, breaking into one of his colorful speeches. “I was telling you about when my wife’s water broke.” his eyes met hers for a brief second, filled with mirth.

“Oh, Lizzy. If only you could have seen me then.” he chuckled appreciatively. “You think this is something?” he alluded to her state of being. “I could have sworn that I literally shit my pants. Literally... I mean, I was running around, grabbing bags and her purse and the car keys, all the while truly believing, I had soiled myself. Didn’t know how I was going to break it to her or the doctor.” he glanced over, relieved to see the woman’s mouth quirking gently, her eyes soft and totally vulnerable in a good way.

“Well, you get my drift, my point being,” he motioned curtly with his head, “when life gets dirty, sometimes it’s all right just to get down in the mud and roll around and enjoy the moment, in a manner of speaking.”

Liz glanced to her blood stained garments. “Not really enjoying this Red.” she tried to hold her smile, feeling infinitely better now.

“We’ll all look back on it and have a good laugh.” he assured.

“At my expense.” she laughed, gingerly removing the soiled panties, her hand steadied by his shoulder. Red glanced away, allowing the woman a measure of privacy.

Liz had difficulty removing the clothing, but she was rather proud of herself once the task had been completed. She knew held the tails of her shirt, tucked modestly between her legs.

Red bent retrieving the discarded clothing, crossing to the sink, running water before depositing the clothes into the lukewarm basin.

“Oh my God, just throw them away.” She had realized his intent.

The man rinsed the blood from the dark fabric absently. “It’ll come out.” he worked the silk between his fingers. “Believe me, if it’s one thing I know about, it’s how to get blood out of clothes.”
“Jesus...” She squeezed her eyes shut, groaning her embarrassment.

“Lizzy. Stop.” He turned to her, leaning against the sink. “I’m not embarrassed. I’m not put out. I’m not anything.” Pulling the stopper, he let the sink refill, soaking the shorts. “I find nothing about this revolting or disgusting. It’s nothing to be ashamed of and I’m certainly not bothered by the sight of blood, obviously. As a matter of fact...” He broke off abruptly.

The silence was deafening.

“What were you going to say?” she was intrigued.

“Nothing.” he waved it off, continuing his task, totally focused.

“No, please.” the woman held the shirt tighter between her legs. “You were going to say something?” she entreated. “I am interested.”

Crossing his arms, he leaned back against the sink, this time, more comfortably. “I was going to say that I was never bothered by it because I find a woman, during that time, well any time really... arousing.”

“You do?” the surprise was in her voice.

He nodded, “It seems to be the only time a woman lets herself be truly feminine.” He shrugged casually, warming to the topic. “They’re so concentrated on what’s going on with their body that normally strong and capable women could care less about their weight, what they’re wearing or what anyone thinks.”

His smile was genuine. “They want to eat chocolate, cry, and read romance novels. For a week, they tell everyone to go to hell and just be. I find the simplicity of it rather refreshing.”

“You find bloated, crying, bitchy women arousing?”

“Well, there’s more to it than that. But yes, I do.” he chuckled softly.

“Oh, there’s more to it?” Liz teased, but found herself very curious.

“I’m not sure you’re ready for this conversation.” Red forewarned.

“Come on, Red. I’ve bled all over the bed. You’ve washed my panties.” She waved her hands out sideways, “I’d say we’ve reached a highlight, dare I say, milestone, in our relationship.”

“Fine,” he accepted the inevitable. “While most men would steer clear of women at this time of the month, I’d say that they’re missing an opportunity.”

Liz’s brow scowled slightly.

“They’re more open to affection and cuddling. It’s really the only time that you can baby them and they sit back and enjoy it.” he lifted his head defiantly. “Personally, I’ve always enjoyed the mood swings. One minute they’re angry as hell, the next, crying and vulnerable. There’s nothing sexier.”

“You really believe that?” Liz tilted her head, studying him.

“I do. Maybe it’s just that I enjoy women.” he turned introspective for a beat. “I saw my wife give birth to my child or I don’t like seeing women I care for in pain but... it was one of the most beautiful, moving experiences of my entire life.”
He tilted his head, then smiled. “Of course she thought she was at her worst... first thing she asked for was her makeup, then a cheeseburger.” his smile grew. “In my opinion, and I will probably be stoned for this, women should be pampered and cared for and protected... and loved.”

Silence filled the room as Liz contemplated his mood and words. “Well, I don’t feel like stoning you, Red.” she was stunned. “Most men run from the tears and the cramps, but you face it head on. That is something to be admired.”

He rolled his eyes, returning to the basin.

“So, you find it arousing?” she did not want to drop the subject just yet. “That they cuddle? Let down their barriers?”

“Well, that is a big part of it.” he conceded holding up the now cleaned linen examining it closely for flaws. “But mostly it’s because they feel different when you make love.”

“Excuse me?” Liz wasn’t sure if that was too much information.

The man turned his head to seek her out, the knowledgeable eyes resting easily on her face. “Has no one discussed this with you before?”

She was speechless for a spell.

“When you had sex with Tom, didn’t it feel different?” Red’s own curiosity was stirred. He wasn’t about to call what they did, making love, because it wasn’t. “I mean when you were menstruating.”

“We never... I didn’t... the mess...” Liz stumbled through the confession. “I didn’t think he would want to and he never asked or pushed.”

“I see...” Red said quietly, feeling his ire rise a notch. Job or not, that bastard had not been worthy of Lizzy. The man hadn’t been bothered by the mess, rather bothered by the personal aspect of it. “Did he never pleasure you, help you, in any other way besides sex?”

“He never came right out and asked to or hinted towards...” She felt her face flaming, “I just assumed he was being a guy, had an aversion to...”

Why was she even supplying this personal information? She knew why! Because she had asked the same of Red and he had answered.

“Did you ever masturbate during your period?”

“Red!” her mouth fell agape.

“I thought we could discuss personal things.” his eyes made her feel like a school girl suddenly.

“Well, I didn’t. Okay,” she was a little resentful that she was not half as sophisticated as he. “Mostly because I felt like hell.” she admitted. “Who would want to do such a thing?”

“I can think of a million reasons why you might.” he had a very difficult time not laughing at the expression on her face. “An orgasm or two would have helped with the cramping.” Grabbing a cloth, he wet it under the hot water, handing it to her.

The woman accepted the offering, reeling, trying desperately to regain her balance.

“When a woman is aroused, she warms. Her inner core heats and secretes fluid, as you well know.” He waved an artistic hand. “During her period, she’s steaming. Hot. On top of her arousal, she has
the blood flow, allowing for a well lubricated ride. And inside...” He closed his eyes, envisioning the warm place. “It’s more swollen, cushioned. The clitoris more sensitive. Orgasms are normally more intense.”

He opened his eyes, staring at her, “There’s nothing like sex on a regular basis. But when a woman has her period... the experience is amplified tremendously. For both partners.” Holding out his hand, he waited for her to give over the washcloth.

“I suppose on some level, I knew that.” Folding the cloth as best she could, she reluctantly gave it back. “I guess we’re taught growing up that it’s a private thing.” she was being tutored by the master and she knew it. “I didn’t know men thought about it that way though.”

“I can only speak for myself. Most men are scared by it. I am not.” He rummaged through the cabinets, humming in victory. He found what he had been searching for. “Here, take these.” He handed over two white pills and a glass of water.

She popped the pills in her mouth, swallowing. “What are they?” she asked.

“Anti-inflammatory and pain relief.” he muttered, rummaging around in the cupboards. “Mr. Kaplan didn’t bring any supplies that I can find...” he was disappointed.

“I may not have had any.” she picked up on his meaning. “I’m short on ideas here, you?”

“I have some thick bandages that may suffice, so you have something to use until I get back from the store tomorrow.” he waved the bandages about. “I always have these on hand in case I get shot. Why are people always shooting at me?”

He tossed the bandages back inside the cabinet. “You know if anything, why don’t you just go with out anything tonight? It might be better for you right now.”

“What?” Naked from the waist down, sharing a bed, with Red Reddington. She could feel her blood pressure rising. “We’ll... uh... be right back where we started if I don’t...”

“Just trust me.” he helped her to the bathroom bench. “Do you mind if I...?” He gestured to the toilet.

“Seems only fair if you ask me. I’ve had to go in front of you.” She was proud of herself, steadying her voice like that. Because inside, she was nervous as hell.

“Sweetheart, I’ve been stripped naked by total strangers...” Liz’s expression fell drastically as she tried to assimilate such a concept. The man shook his head, grimacing slightly. “You don’t want to know. I’ve showered and pissed in front of a hundred men.” He turned to the toilet, “Nothing bothers me anymore.” With that, he did just as he had been speaking of, happily relived by the sound of it.

She hopped to the sink, searching desperately for her toothbrush, anything to distract herself. She fought the urge to glance up to the mirror for all she was worth, acutely aware that she herself... stood there in nothing but Red’s shirt.

“Nothing?” she muttered her rising panic.

“Humm?” he finished his business, turning slightly.

“Nothing bothers you?” her mind came to the rescue for once. “Not one thing?”
He flushed the toilet, coming to the sink. She rinsed her mouth, placing the brush back in it’s holder, turning her eyes to his averted profile.

“I’m thinking.” He washed his hands then snatched his own toothbrush. After a few seconds, he said, “I’m not too fond of people vomiting on me.”

“Eww.” she had not liked the turn of events. “Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not.” He said around his toothbrush.

He thought about the last time it had happened. An acquaintance’s daughter had been kidnaped over an arms deal gone wrong. In the process of torturing some bad guy for the whereabouts of the girl... apparently, electricity and exposed live nerve endings did not go well together. But he had retrieved the girl, so it ended well, considering.

A win-win situation.

Finishing up, he turned to her. “Ready?”

She nodded, holding her arm aloft, ready for his steadying aide. They hobbled out slowly, he matching his steps to her’s.

It took only a moment to change the sheets because the woman assisted. She figured it was the least she could do.

“Can I ask you something?” She had gathered the nerve. “It’s actually kind of personal. I probably shouldn’t...” she crinkled her nose, “...never mind.”

“Lizzy, you can ask me anything you like.” he threw the last remaining pillow onto the bed. “I can’t promise I’ll always have the answer or the correct one, but I will answer, no matter how personal.”

Twisting the throw blanket in her hands nervously, she hesitated, “Do a lot of the women you know really like to do that?” Her curiosity won out over her embarrassment.

“Specify?” He sat on the bed, facing her.

“Have sex during their period?”

He laughed, “I’ve had some demand it.”

“And you didn’t mind, at all?” she was fascinated.

“It was my pleasure to serve.” He grinned, having retrieved a heavy towel from the bathroom. “Now I’m going to ask you something personal. I’m pretty sure of the answer, but my curious nature demands I ask.” He folded the towel in half, placing it on the bed.

She nodded, readying herself. “All right. It’s only fair.”

“How many lovers have you had?” he pierced her with knowledgeable eyes.

She hesitated visibly, then forged courageously ahead. “Two in college... then Tom.”

“That’s what I thought and it explains so much.” he fluffed a nearby pillow.

“Well, you try having Sam as your dad and see how well you make out.” She defended herself.
Red’s lips twisted slightly for the unintentional pun. She tried to keep the irritation from her voice, but it was damned hard.

The older man smiled, knowing full well how watchful Sam had been, especially since he had Red in his corner. Lizzy had been as pure as snow until both men had agreed to back off and let her have breathing room in college.

They would have been complete hypocrites if they didn’t let her spread her wings, as it were, during a time of experimentation.

Which didn’t mean Red hadn’t vetted her dates. He had rid her of two losers before letting the one that had apparently slept with her stick around, if only because he had been good enough to actually woo the girl over a slew of dates before trying anything.

“No need to get upset. I just...” he soothed her ruffled feathers, “I have a hard time wrapping my mind around a beautiful thirty year old woman being so sexually neglected. Now I understand why.”

“What’s to understand?” she demanded, still smarting from his smug tone.

“Two of them were boys who could have found a hole in a wall and received the same gratification. And the other was hired to infiltrate your life.” He shook his head, disgusted. “Any affection or attention to your needs from any of them was minimal, I’m sure.”

“Why does it bother you so much?” she was intrigued because it clearly did.

“Because you deserve better. All women deserve better.” he snapped, instantly regretting the retort. “We can talk about this later, you need to rest.”

She settled on the bed, pulling her shirt down. Holding her breath when a cramp ripped through her mid-section, she pushed hard into her abdomen.

“I feel like hell.”

Red rubbed her hip, then leaned over, feeling beside the bed, pulling out a heating pad. “This will help.” Lifting the blankets, he placed it against her stomach, raising her knee, setting a pillow beneath it. “The pills will kick in shortly, just try and relax.”

He turned out the light, then climbed in the bed behind her, scooting forward.

Reaching out in the dark, he rubbed long strokes over her back until he reached the bottom of her spine, pushing into the tight muscle with his thumb, repeating the action even after the spasms lessened.

Slowly but surely, the combined heat and soothing massage allowed her to relax. She yawned sleepily after a time. “That feels so good.” she murmured contentedly.

He absently scratched his fingers over her back, wondering, fantasizing, what it would feel like to touch her bare skin... intimately. Or more to the point, would she ever want his for something other than that of a care taker.

And if it ever happened, how would it come about? Would she be just coming out of the pool, the one she had been staring at impatiently, wanting so desperately to dive in to the inviting depths.

He had a few depths he wanted to dive into as well.
Or maybe, he could aid her in the removal of a certain red dress after they had returned home from a party.

Just once, he would love to bed her. To touch her bare skin then kiss it, taste it. Would it ever happen for them? Would his greatest wish ever come true?

“Hey?” she mumbled sleepily.

“Uh hmm?”

“Where’s your cat?”

He chuckled under his breath, amused by her wit. A few moments later, her breath evened out into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

If there were any typos or anything of that nature in this, it's all on me. Not Miss Beta.
April 12

Elizabeth found her cart missing and her crutches no where in sight. *Great... I need to pee.*

She remembered she had left the crutches in the sitting room. Silas had taken her cart to change the battery. But it was right beside her bedside when she went to sleep.

“Red?” She called out. “Anybody... somebody?”

“Coming.” She heard the deep resonate voice answer from another nearby room.

The man came in, dressed in dark jeans and long sleeved black vee neck shirt. She hadn’t realized his arms were that defined. The sleeves stretched across the muscled foreclosure and biceps in a rather nice manner. As did his jeans, showing off his defined thighs.

And chest hair... Red had chest hair.

The men she’d been with and Tom, had been smooth, with just a dusting of fine hair. But Red appeared to have a wealth of the downy thickness.

She wondered what it would feel like brushing against her skin? Was it itchy? Or was it as soft as it appeared to be? Would it tickle or tantalize?

*Stop it, Lizzy.*

“Are you slumming it today... I mean as much as you can in two hundred dollar jeans?” her eyes flicked the objects once more, attempting to appear indifferent.

He helped her out of the bed. “You don’t like it?” he glanced down his torso.

“No, I like it. You always look great.” She caught the enthusiasm in her voice, having hoped to sound sophisticated. She witnessed the slow smile spread across his mouth, deflating somewhat.

Why was she always opening her big mouth around him. “Where’s my scooter?” she looked around aimlessly, desperately trying for a change of topic.

“Dembe and Silas have it.” the steady gaze still held his amusement.

“Why?”

“I’m assuming they’re doing something to it.”

“What are they doing now?” she instantly was wary. “You make them stop.”

“I figured they were just adding new stickers to it.” Red licked his lips absently. “Did you need something?”

“Well I have to... uh...” she motioned accordingly, the man picking up on the ‘hint’.
“Piss...” he supplied readily.

“Well, crudely put, but yes.” she tsked her disapproval.

Red crouched slightly so she could loop her arm around his neck. They made their way slowly forward.

“I hate to bother you, I know you’re busy.” she began her campaign.

“Everybody has to piss Lizzy.”

“Not that.” she sighed heavily. “I need a few things. I know it’s a hassle...”

“I already went shopping.” he halted her narrative, nodding to the bags still laying on the counter across the way.

She hopped to the counter, rummaging through the loot. “You bought all of this?”

“Why does everybody find it odd when I do normal every day activities?” Red was stumped.

“I can picture you doing a lot of things, but buying tampons in bulk is not one of them.” she smiled secretively.

“The guards may love you, but enough to make a tampon run?” he grinned at the thought. “I also got you some new books. They’re on your bedside table.”

She finished up business, returning to the sink, starting her morning routine. “Anything happening today?”

“As far as I know,” he called from the closet, “barring any unexpected crisis, I’ll be here today.”

She washed up, dressing quickly. “All done.”

Red entered, “Where do you want to go?” he waved his hands, asking her preference.

“The bed’s fine.”

She rounded the corner of the doorway, pulling up short. Her brow furrowed quizzically.

“Why is there a cat on the bed.”

Red sighed, “No, the joke goes... a cat walked into a bar.”

The woman quizzical stare transferred to the man, she lifted her brows meaningfully, crooking her head in the needed direction.

The man followed her line of vision, his expression altering drastically. “Oh my God.” he made to leave her side, but she halted the action.

“No, no.” Liz gently approached with his assistance, her expression softening. “Oh, hey...” she climbed up on the mattress, holding her hand out to the furry animal, “that’s your cat.”

“You asked where it was last night.” Red sat down beside Liz, watching the animal rub lovingly up against the woman. “Probably out whoring, if I know her.”

Liz giggled as the cat rubbed it’s face against hers. “That’s a mean thing to say. What’s its name?”
“Keres.” Red shook his head woefully for the cat’s unusual behavior.

“What a pretty name.” Liz made little kissing noises at Keres, and the furry creature licked her nose, making her giggle again. “What does it mean?”

“Evil spirit.” Red supplied, his eyes narrowing at the feline.

Liz chuckled quietly, then rubbed the cat’s belly, eliciting a loud purring sound. “Well, she doesn’t seem evil at all to me.”

Red cocked his brow, “Really?” he lifted his arm and held his palm out towards the cat.

The cat sprang from it’s relaxed position charging forward before Liz could blink. It attacked Red, wrapping itself around his arm, kicking it’s hind legs ferociously against the man’s forearm, biting the web of his hand, growling a satisfied gnawing sound.

“You little shit…” Red grumbled, grimacing slightly. Liz tried very hard to hold her amusement, her mouth tightening, biting the inner part of her lip to stave the laughter.

“Yes…” Red sighed, “she’s such a joy. So loving. Not the least bit evil.” he rolled his eyes, then pinched the cat’s neck and it stopped instantly, like he’d flipped the cat switch to ‘off’.

“Behave…” he rumbled to the animal, “and don’t you do that with her.” he scolded, pointing at Liz.

“You think she understands you?” Liz enquired.

“I know she does.” Red evil-eyed the cat. “Put your hand out.”

Liz lifted her arm like Red had done, watching the cat’s bottom start to shake in anticipation of it’s attack.

“Don’t you dare, you little bitch.” Red hissed, making the cat hunker down. “Lizzy may very well be the only friend you have.” he warned.

The man reached out, petting Liz’s hand and wrist. “You love on Lizzy.”

The cat stood up and stretched, then yawned big before pushing it’s head into her hand, accepting the fingers rubbing into it’s fur, making Red relax.

“I blame Dembe for that.” he pronounced knowingly. “He thought she needed to know how to fight, should she come up against a bigger enemy in an alley way.” Red scoffed. “But I believe she was just born evil and feel deeply for whatever she encounters.”

Liz chuckled, lazily stroking the cat then leaned into her pillows, finding the heating pad still warm.

“Hey, where did you find one that doesn’t shut off? She pointed to the warm pad. “Mine always shuts off after an hour, where did you get this?”

“That one shuts off, too.” he stretched his forearm more comfortably, settling it close beside her thigh, leaning into her. “I woke up during the night and turned it back on.”

“You did?” she was touched by the gesture.

“It helped, didn’t it?”

It had actually, though she was the one who normally had to wake up to switch it back on. For her to
have slept through the night, he had to have kept waking frequently to make sure it stayed warm. Come to think of it, he did a lot that was abnormal, to her way of thinking. In a good way...

He could hit the hamper, cooked, cleaned up after himself, he even put the toilet seat down.

“Are you always like this?” she tried to keep the amazement from her voice.

“Like what?” he was genuinely puzzled.

She reiterated her thoughts to him. His smile growing as she went.

“Sweetheart, do you forget that I was in the Navy and also married.”

“Yeah well, I was married and Tom couldn’t hit the hamper even if he was standing next to it.”

“Unlike Tom, I wanted to keep the peace with my wife.” He cocked his head, furrowing his brow.

“Though now that I think about it, it rarely ever worked. That woman was always incredibly high strung.”

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Red ordered a substantial breakfast to be sent to Liz then got down to the affairs of the day. He set up a new business deal with the people from the South, arranged a meeting and outlined a detailed plan for the execution of what he had in mind.

Two hours later, he glanced at his watch then went to check on his Ward and was rather shocked to find Elizabeth sitting on the couch, book in hand, cheeks wet with tears.

“What’s this all about?” He sat next to her, genuinely concerned. He reached, wiping her face with his thumbs.

“Nothing...” Her bottom lip quivered, more tears leaking from her eyes.

“Why are you crying?” He asked, handing her a tissue.

“Because a fictional character in a romance novel has a better love life than I do.” she sniffled, taking the offered tissue “And I may be a bit hormonal.” she added needlessly.

Red was having the hardest time holding his grin. This is why he loved women.

She came willingly when he pulled her into his arms, “You will find a man worthy of being with you one day, Lizzy.” he soothed expertly. “Someone who loves you more than life itself. You’re beautiful and smart, and more men then you realize, do notice.” it was assured. “You just haven’t been ready to see it yourself.”

“You’re just saying that to make me feel better.” She sniffled into his chest.

“Ressler and Aram both have a crush on you. Hell, even your Barista likes you.” he raked the stray strand of dark hair behind her ear. “You weren’t ready and put off vibes to them that you didn’t have any interest in a romantic life, whether you were aware of doing so or not.”

“I did?” She did recall thinking that she didn’t want to love again, didn’t want a man smothering her. But she didn’t think she had consciously sent out any warnings to the men she encountered. “I never said or did anything...”

“Men are completely useless when it comes to remembering a shopping list, but they do know when
they shouldn’t approach a woman they really like.”

“Guys approach women in bars all the time.” She laid her head on his shoulder, talking into his chest.

“For sex, not a relationship.” he corrected. “Aram and Donald are the type of men to want more than a quick fling, especially with a woman like you.” she fiddled with his trouser leg, just above his knee, her nail drawing a zigzag figure back and forth, over and over. “If you don’t believe me, ask them out on a date.”

“I’m not interested in them like that. They’re my...” she searched for the word. “They’re like family to me now.”

Red felt a flood of relief. Not that she wouldn’t or couldn’t be interested in someone else, but to see her with either man would be difficult.

“They’ll both be very disappointed to hear that.” he patted her arm consolingly. “He’ll come, Lizzy. The man you’re looking for could be staring you right in the face and you don’t want to see it yet.”

he generalized. “Maybe now, with your eyes wide open and hopeful, he’ll come to you.”

She pulled back, wiping off his jacket. “Sorry. I messed up your coat.”

“It’s fine.” He wiped the last of the tears off her face, smiling at her. “You want some chocolate now?” He snickered when she nodded morosely.

Liz had heard Dembe and Red return over an hour ago after a quick trip to the Post Office. While the man did not make a habit of coming to her directly, it was odd when he didn’t show his face within the first twenty minutes.

Something must be wrong.

Easing from the bed, she grabbed her crutch, starting off slowly but confidently as she moved out of their room and down the hallway. She hoped like hell Red was in his office because this, walking with one leg on the left side and broken arm on the right, was tiring.

She eased the door open, sticking her head in slowly. “Are you in here?” she called out softly.

She pushed the door open, finding the man sitting at his desk, his head laying on his folded arms. “You okay?” She asked, nearing him cautiously.

When he didn’t answer, she hobbled closer still, finding him fast asleep. She glanced at the pictures and paperwork beneath his reclined form.

“Red?” She touched the back of his head, stroking down the soft slope to his neck.

He jerked awake, raising his head out of the cradle of his arms. His eyes cleared instantly, something clicking behind the intelligent gaze. He stared at her silently for a long beat.

“What’s fine.” He smiled up at her. “Just resting a minute.”

“You okay?” It was unlike him to sleep in the middle of the day.

“I’m fine.” He glanced about his desk, “I have to look these over. I promised Samar to call her back.”
“Samar can wait an couple of hours.” she was certain. “And anyway, I may need help getting back.”

He stood quickly, pushing his chair out of the way. Instantly concerned like she knew he would be, which is why she lied about needing help. Now, all she had to do was get him in the bedroom and get him to stay.

“You shouldn’t have walked this far.” he scolded.

“I was worried when you didn’t come in and hover like a mother hen.” She teased, enjoying his low chuckle.

They had only taken a couple of steps, when Liz stepped wrong, sending a hot lancing pain shooting up her leg.

She gasped painfully, her hand grasping his arm, her nails biting into the warm flesh.

“What the fuck?” He ducked his head, seeing her scrunched face, full of pain, instantly alarmed. “What happened?” he searched her person religiously for any sign of distress.

The woman gritted her teeth, her hand still locked in a death grip around his forearm. She tried releasing her nails from the bare skin, but couldn’t get her hand to function, fighting the searing pain for all she was worth.

It literally took her breath from her body. She was trying to articulate some sort of response, but none materialized.

The next thing she knew, she was cradled in his arms and they were headed down the hallway.

He turned sideways, maneuvering her easily through the door. He placed her on the bed, several things happening in succession. He placed a pillow under her foot, reached for her pills and a bottle of water, handing them both to her... all the while, his face etched with stress.

The deep ache started to fade, her world focusing into clarity.

Red, his arms braced on either side of her, was staring down at her, concern in the troubled eyes. “Is it easing off now?”

She nodded, as he stroked her temple. “You lay still. I’m going to get some...”

She grabbed his tie as he made to take his leave, “Stay.” she whispered the request.

“Lizzy...” He sighed, “We really should–”

“Stay.”

His tired eyes softened, as he remembered his promise to another woman. He found himself nodding his acquiescence, however.

He found he could deny this woman nothing.

Stripping himself of his tie and vest, he kicked off his shoe, sitting down on his side of the bed.

“You’ve been pretty tired lately.” She said, inching closer to him, rolling to her side.

“We had two back to back trips, and Ressler keeps calling me on the hour. No one has had much sleep.” He faced her. “I’m not positive, but I think Dembe fell asleep against the foyer wall when we
walked through the door... he still may be there.”

“Well, come on then.” She reached up, flicking the lights off. “Let’s take a nap.”

“You don’t have to stop reading on my account.” He picked up the book that was laying between them, handing it to her. “I can, and have, slept surrounded by a barrage of bombs... and my ex-mother-in-law’s grating voice.”

She took the book, laying it behind her. “You’ve led such an interesting life. Now, shh.” She laid her hand over his arm, stroking the thick muscle.

Red smiled sleepily, closing his eyes.

Within seconds, the man’s deep breathing eased the woman’s troubled mind. She lay her head against his shoulder, her eyes closing as well.

The low vibration woke Red. Reaching under the pillows, he grabbed the offending phone, just barely holding back from throwing it against the wall when he realized it was Lizzy’s.

He stabbed the answer button, growling into the phone, “What?”

“I need to speak to Elizabeth.” A faint voice answered back, muffled by background noise.

Red became fully alert, recognizing the voice. “You know, when I told you to not see her again, that did not mean phone calls were an acceptable form of communication.”

“Why do you have her phone?”

“It’s none of your business why.” Red kept his tone even and calm. “You gave up any rights to her.”

“I want to talk to her.” Tom’s tone was adamant.

“Red, who is it?” Liz awakened, stirring slightly.

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart.” Red held the phone away, his tone completely altered.

“Was that her?” Tom demanded. “Put her on the damn phone.”

Liz looked at the man, then the phone.

“You are not talking to her.” Red stated quietly.

“Is it Tom?” Liz lifted to her elbow, her expression unreadable.

Red held out the phone, giving Liz the chance to make the decision, wondering what she would do.

He didn’t want her to speak to the younger man, but that was not his decision.

He was inordinately pleased when she shook her head negatively, laying back into the pillow.

“Obviously, you have nothing to say that could be of any interest to her.” Red felt a surge of pride.

“So what? You two are sleeping together now?” it was disdain. “I should have seen that coming. I knew you’d try and get between her legs at some point, I just didn’t realize she’d be such a—”
“Finish that sentence and I won’t hesitate to put a fucking bullet in you next time I see you.” Red stated all too quietly. “And rest assured, it will be in a most vital area.”

“If you had really wanted to, why didn’t you last time?” Tom stated sarcastically.

“I thought it might upset Lizzy, but I’m finding that perhaps, that isn’t the case anymore.” he smiled pleasantly, relaxing his head onto the crook of his arm.

“Does she know? Have you told her?” Tom asked.

“Have I told her that I hired you to protect her and that you went behind my back and started working for Berlin and then married her because you’re a heartless prick?” Red glanced over at the woman whose large blue eyes stared back at him blankly. “Yes, I just did... haven’t had the chance to before now. Thank you for reminding me.”

“You’re a bastard.” Tom spat.

“I’m a bastard?” Red nodded slightly. “I’m not the one that beat the hell out of his wife. And let’s not forget the charming moment you held a gun to her head.”

“She broke my fucking thumb!” Tom defended his actions peevishly.

“That’s not all she should have done to you.” the older man assured. “Now, what have you gotten into, from which you need her help extracting yourself.” Red held up a warning finger. “Which isn’t going to happen, by the way.”

“Damn Reddington,” Tom seethed, “put her on the fucking phone.”

“She doesn’t want to speak with you.” Red’s voice held a finality Tom disliked intensely. “And before you ask, I did offer the phone to her.” he pushed off the bed, sitting up.

“She’s done, J...” the man taunted. “Or perhaps, do you prefer Christopher?”

“What?” Tom was visibly thrown.

“I suggest you don’t contact her again.” he reached to his side, helping Lizzy into a sitting position beside himself. “And just so I’m perfectly clear. You are not to call, text, see, write or try any other forms of communication from here on out.” Red warmed to his task.

“If you so much as walk on the same side of the street as her... I will kill you.” There was something chilling about the casually stated warning. “Do you understand me?”

The sound of the dial tone in Red’s ear was the only reply given. “I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.” He set the phone aside, waiting for the explosion.

“What did he say?”

Red knew to what she alluded, be he evaded the enquiry. “You heard most of what was said Elizabeth.”

“What did he say that made you so angry.”

“Just the sound of his voice pisses me off.”

“Red...”
“He was about to make an unkind remark about you, and I didn’t want to hear it.”

“What kind of—”

“Elizabeth, let it go.” Red fumed.

Liz replayed the conversation in her mind. She could pretty well guess what Tom had said.

“Oh, that’s rich! Coming from him!” Liz laughed sarcastically. “Especially given he was screwing around when...” She clenched her fists, reigning in her temper.

“He’s an asshole. He was just trying to get a rise out of me because I wouldn’t give him what he wanted.” he cupped her head consolingly. “Don’t let it bother you, all right.”

She took a deep breath, then released it slowly, nodding.

“Why did you hire Tom?”

“To protect you.”

“Did you tell him to get close to me?”

“Absolutely not.” Red’s voice was firm. “I hired him through a mutual acquaintance, got him into the college and paid for his education.” he turned to her, his expression an earnest one. “Aside from getting an education, he was supposed to watch out for you from a distance. Not to interfere.”

“So what happened?”

“I was in Hong Kong for a couple of weeks getting regular updates that you were safe. Then he changed, was evasive.” Red told the truth. “I came back immediately and found the two of you cozy on a coffee shop couch.”

“Why didn’t you do something?”

“Well, I did fire him.”

“But that was it?”

“At first, his infatuation with you seemed genuine.” Red remembered it as a conflicted time. “It wouldn’t be the first time a bodyguard has fallen for a client.” the man shrugged. “I watched from afar, you seemed happy. I backed off.” it was succinctly stated. “Who better for you to have fallen in love with than the man I hired to protect you.”

“When did you...”

“I heard information about you that could have only been obtained in... intimate circumstances.” Red glanced away, wondering how much more to say on the matter. “I knew he had to be working for someone else. I watched him, people he met, and gained information. Finally found who he was contracted through.”

“I still don’t see why you didn’t step in.”

“I did. I stopped a lot of plans they had for you. I also stopped different groups from getting hold of you.” Red set the record straight. “Oddly, leaving you with Tom at that moment, was safer because if there was anything he had to do, it was keep you alive.”
“What changed?”

“I came into the picture.” he stated simplistically. “After I gained more allies, I knew I was in a place to go directly for who had hired Tom.” he held her eyes. “It wasn’t until I showed up that Tom got nervous. I was hoping he would foul up and go to his boss.” he cocked a brow. “And in a way, he did.”

“I want your word that you didn’t tell him at any point to get involved with me.”

“Then have it. I would never do something as distasteful as that.”

“Since you’ve given me no other reason to date, I’m going to trust what you say.” she decided.

“Please don’t make me regret it.” Liz said softly, her hand smoothed the blanket near his, then she hooked her fingers over his thicker one.

Red gently rubbed her skin with his thumb. She flipped her hand over, lacing her fingers through his. Having always been the one to initiate the contact, it meant a great deal to him that she had taken the initiative this time.

“I won’t.” his eyes softened, lifting their laced hands to his mouth, kissing the small fingers. “I promise.”

Later that night, after dinner, a lively debate ensued, over the pros and cons of whether Ressler would score with this latest conquest. Everyone at the Blacksite was gossiping about the issue.

Samar had let it slip, purposely, that the young agent was yet again, trying out his luck in the crap shoot of life laughingly referred to as ‘love’.

The camaraderie was interrupted by a communique from Silas.

Dembe shielded the radio, his bulky frame making a hasty retreat to a nearby corner of the large room.

Red watched his friend closely, his senses alert and active.

“It is nothing.” Dembe assured, smiling, as he returned to the small group. “I shall return shortly.”

Red folded his arms stretching out his legs underneath the table, his eyes trained carefully on the large man’s back as Dembe exited the room.

“Ressler will make it to second base.” the black man called over his shoulder.

Red shifted his eyes to Lizzy. “Which means something entirely different in his world than ours. Second base in Dembe’s world, is a bit further along... so good for Donald.”

The woman was suddenly tense, her present situation always called to mind. Lurking, just under the surface.

“Relax, Lizzy.” Red had noticed the change in her demeanor.

“You think something’s wrong?” she asked anxiously.

“I don’t, no.” Red reassured. “And if there is, you’ll be fine.”
“I want my weapon back.” she had been thinking along those lines for days now. “I would just feel more comfortable.”

“Don’t you think Diane and Helen will find it odd to see you strapped?”

“If they work for you, they shouldn’t.”

“I’ll get it for you before we go to bed.” he lifted his glass in mock salute.

Red tensed as a sound approached, growing louder as it neared. The man relaxed totally, the trilling of a bell bringing a smile to his lips.

Dembe came into view, grinning madly, astride the infamously missing cart.

Red shook his head woefully seeing the end product of the guards’ handy work.

Gone was the factory black and gray plastic. Instead it was replaced by flames running along the sides and seat. A bell you could thumb was on the handle bar. And of course, new bumper stickers.

*Keep honking, I’m reloading*
*Where am I going, and why am I in this HANDBASKET?*
*Drive it like you stole it*

“Very funny.” Liz stuck her tongue out at Dembe as she took in all the new artwork.

Chapter End Notes

My Beta mentioned that the timeline had not been established for this fic.

I’m sure you, being the intelligent people you are, have picked up that this is an AU. But maybe aren’t aware when I went AU in the series.

In my fic - this all happens during season 2 around the episodes ‘T. Earl King’ and ‘Vanessa Cruz’.

Red hasn’t been shot. Liz hasn’t killed Connolly. And Liz had never been to Red’s flat and saw his cat. In the first couple chapters, I took care of that. When Red was in Italy, he asked her to feed his cat. She didn’t know he had a cat, and out of that hopefully, came some cute dialogue.

Guess who edited it out accidentally? I did. I didn’t notice until the other night I had not pasted the entire chapter correctly.

I am now double checking everything I do to make sure what is supposed to be there, is there. Let’s hope I do it right, from now on. (Yeah, don’t hold your breath. I will most likely screw up again)
April 13-16

Liz awoke the following morning to find a note on her bedside table informing her that Red had received a late night call and had taken off for Boston.

Looking back to her book, she stared at the sentence she’d been attempting to read for a little over twenty minutes now, still not comprehending any of it.

She worried about Red and Dembe. When that had begun she had no idea. She had never really thought about it until she found Red asleep at his desk. But now she realized, that while he attended to his own business, he also worked the Blacklist.

A Blacklist she was no longer privy to, given that a call to Samar and Ressler had proven pointless. Everyone seemed especially evasive these days. Only Aram had been talkative, delivering the latest Post Office gossip before he had been called away. But even he had seemed to guard his words carefully.

She felt especially restless today. Either Cooper or Red was making sure that she was purposely kept out of the loop.

When she got back, she was going to give them a piece of her mind. Or, if anything, let them know that if they had been in her position, she wouldn’t have left them completely in the dark about every little thing.

Red’s voice startled her out of her revelry. “Did you get my messa...” He hesitated, frowning at her hard. “What’s wrong?”

“What makes you think anything is wrong?” She frowned right back, stubbornly crossing her arms over her chest.

“Restless?” He asked, sitting beside her, laying his hat on her side table.

“I don’t know what’s going on at the Post Office. Everybody is shutting me out. And–” She inhaled, opening her mouth once again ready to spout off her grievances, when Red gently placed his fingers over her lips.

“Why won’t you show me anything you’re working on?” she managed around the thick objects, much to his amusement.

“Because Harold forbid you to work.” Red informed her, knowing very well what she was thinking. He casually removed his fingers.

“You are so lyin–” she sighed, then her shoulders slumped. “Cooper really won’t let me work?”

“No, he said you are to take time. And you should. You haven’t taken a vacation since this started.” Red reminded her of her own thoughts. “And while it isn’t an exotic beach locale, it is still down
time, which you need.”

Liz rubbed the tension from her neck and shoulders.

“No one is shutting you out on purpose or to spite you.” He pushed her hair behind her ear, smiling when she leaned into the touch. “Why don’t you call in a little bit and invite your team out for dinner?”

“You think?” she perked up instantly. “They’ll be too busy, won’t they?” she asked uncertainly.

“I think they’ll enjoy the break.” Red knew his words to be true. “Besides, it will be good for you to get out for a while.”

She studied the man’s face religiously for a long beat. The lines around his eyes seemed more pronounced and there was a grim set to his mouth that had not been there earlier.

“You’re working too hard.”

“I never work too hard.” he scoffed.

“You are. You’re gonna crash, Red.” she forewarned. “You were so heavily asleep at your desk, that when I called your name, you didn’t hear it.” the fact troubled the woman. “I walked into the room and it didn’t alert you? That’s not like you.” she knew for a fact.

“I don’t sense danger when you walk into a room.”

“Maybe you should. There were sharp objects on the desk.” she quipped, then sobered. “Take a break, before you collapse out of exhaustion.”

“I will take a break soon, Mark’s party is–”

“Is more than a month away!” she persisted. “I’m worried for both you and Dembe. You guys can’t keep up this pace.”

Red brushed the hair from her shoulder. “I’ll try, Lizzy.” he explained patiently. “But you have to understand, there is a lot I have to do before we go to Mark’s.” he smiled gently at her. “To get the time off, to keep the interruptions to a minimum, certain things must be accomplished.”

“Will you at least try to get more sleep?” she suggested. “Just give the names to me and I’ll pass them off to the team.”

“And this is you resting, correct?”

“I’m broken in a couple of places, not incapacitated.” she reasoned logically. “My mind is rested and functioning now. Let me help.”

“I’ll think about it.” he placated.

The team was just as excited about the dinner as she, herself. It took the woman longer to get ready than she had anticipated for her anxiously awaited night out.

“Do I look okay?” She surveyed herself in the mirror, checking the wounds on her neck and head. They were mostly faded, but to Elizabeth, they stood out like a neon sign, a constant reminder of a night she would just as soon forget.
“You look beautiful. Would you stop worrying.” Red chuckled appreciatively. “It’s time to go anyway. You don’t want to be late.”

As they reached the front door, she realized that she couldn’t even remember coming through it. What an odd sensation. She had only seen a select few rooms of this magnificent home. She suddenly felt out of her depth, discombobulated... apprehensive...afraid. Scared to death, actually.

Red halted his steps, feeling her hesitation.

“I’m okay, I just realized I haven’t stepped out this door since I’ve been here. I guess I’m a little nervous.” she shook her head slightly, the silken strands of her hair swishing gently this way and that. “Silly, huh?”

“Everybody feels a little out of place after a simple vacation, let alone a traumatic experience such as the one you experienced.” he said. “You’ll be fine once we get in the car.”

She leaned into him, needing the added support. Dembe stood at the car, his smile a welcoming one. She managed the steps, then glanced back at the house.

“Wow... it’s gorgeous!” She observed her surroundings, noting a six foot tall decorative iron fence and a gate blocking the drive. The two story house was lit top to bottom, light streaming from gigantic picture windows.

A cobblestone driveway stretched in either direction from the south side of the palatial residence to the north. A brightly lit entranceway welcomed any fortunate visitor.

There was a decorative wall lined by neatly trimmed shrubs, which ran the entire length of the home. Two gigantic urns overflowed with lush ivy on either end of the structure.

The house literally took her breath away. “Red, this house is simply amazing.”

Her words pleased him immensely.

Once through the gate, she gripped Red’s hand in hers, her agitation resurfacing. Squeezing her hand back, he let her fidget and fiddle with his all she needed.

He watched her in silent contemplation. He hadn’t realized until just now, as she worked out her anxiety, that he was her worry stone.

With each passing block, he felt that tension bleed from her, the grip loosened. Until they hit a populated strip, indicating the were nearing their destination, where as the slender fingers reaffirmed their hold.

He leaned closer, inhaling, his eyes closing. “You smell fantastic.”

Liz suddenly actually felt beautiful, seeing herself mirrored in the man’s gaze, her anxiety melting into oblivion.

He had bolstered her mood with one simple gesture. She took a steadying breath, smiling brightly for him as they pulled up to a intimately lit, posh restaurant.

Red went around to her side, waving away the valet, before helping her out. Leaning back into the vehicle, he grabbed her crutch, mumbling something to Dembe before closing the door.

He helped her inside, bypassing the hostess all together. Liz looked around, searching aimlessly for
her friends. Her mood lowered when she could not locate them anywhere. 

“I don’t see them.” She frowned. 

“That’s because I got you a private room.” Red replied, guiding her through the main dining area. “I assumed that you would want to talk freely about work and what not, and you couldn’t really do that out here.”

They reached a door, which Red opened without hesitation to find her team sitting stiffly inside. 

“Hi guys.” She smiled warmly, which put them at ease instantly.

The gang returned the welcoming gesture, questions concerning her health flooding the room. All moved aside, offering space as Reddington seated her at the front of the table.

A waiter came in taking orders for drinks and appetizers. Liz craned her head, a puzzled look on her face when she realized that Red had yet to sit.

“Did I take your seat?” She questioned pointedly.

Red leaned forward, speaking for her alone. “I’m going to give you some time alone with your friends, they’ll feel more comfortable if I’m not here, I think.” he smiled at the room in general.

“We’ll pick you up when you’re ready to go.”

Reddington felt comfortable leaving the woman, knowing Silas and his men were stationed in and around the restaurant.

“There’s a bar across the street if you should desire. They have some entertainment, pool tables and the like.” Red was the consummate host. “Good drinks, if you should wish to lengthen your evening. And don’t worry, you will have a designated driver to see you home, should you imbibe.”

He spoke again to her directly, “Your tab is already taken care of both here and at the bar, for you all, so don’t worry about that.” He squeezed her shoulder reassuringly, leaning in, murmuring warmly in her ear, “Happy birthday, Lizzy.”

Standing, he reset his hat and bid the rest of them a pleasant dinner before taking his leave.

Liz watched after him the entire time, feeling a little dispirited, truth told.

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The hours flew by and unfortunately time to go was fast approaching. Liz reluctantly made the call for the car, then sat back to enjoy the remaining moments with her friends.

Sitting at the bar, sipping their last drinks laughing over some office gossip was her idea of an relaxing evening. Liz leaned to Samar, speaking quietly over the din. 

“So, why didn’t the new guys come with you?”

“They are not part of our team.” Samar informed her abruptly. “Besides, Moore is a son of a bitch and I don’t think Wilson is old enough to drink.”

“You really don’t like Moore huh?”

“What gave it away?” Samar blinked innocently “I would have snapped his neck by now if Red would stop getting in my way.” she pulled a cute grimace. “I can’t wait for you to come back and for
him to disappear. Which may actually happen if Dembe gets his way.” Samar clapped her hands happily, smiling widely.

So what Red had been saying was true. Liz had never seen Samar react in such a manner.

“And Wilson?”

“He’s all right, I suppose. Or maybe he’s less annoying then Moore, so I don’t notice him all that much.” Samar sipped her drink casually. “He gets along with Ress, but maybe that isn’t saying much, since Ress seems to get along with most pricks.”

Samar held her drink aloft, her intelligent brow furrowing slightly. “You already know Wilson,” she seemed perplexed, “he was one of the new guys that came in a couple of weeks before your accident... this drink brings out the best in me.”


“Wilson had that hideous blue and yellow tie?” Samar reminded.

“Oh! Right.” she brightened, nodding. “That thing was blinding.”

“That’s putting it mildly.” Samar snorted. “Damn thing burned into my corneas.”

Liz sniggered quietly, “Well, hopefully it won’t be long now. I’m hoping I won’t have these things on but a couple more weeks.” she held one cast aloft.

“Yeah well, don’t forget your PT and Requalification.” Samar held up a finger. “Why did Reddington leave?” She probed casually, having meant to ask hours ago.

Liz blinked at the change in conversation. Samar really had been hanging around Red too much, to have picked up his trait. The man could put one at ease so quickly then turn it around to his advantage in the blink of an eye.

“He thought you guys would relax if he wasn’t there. I’m assuming he meant Ress more than anyone.” Liz supplied. “And I guess he thought I would have more fun, if he wasn’t there to intrude.” She morosely stirred her drink.

“Did you? Have a good time?” Samar asked innocently.

“I did. I’ve missed you guys. But that doesn’t mean I couldn’t have had just as good a time had he stayed.” She punctuated, jabbing her straw at the fruit floating in the glass.

Samar shrugged, before wrapping her lips around the tiny straw sticking out of her glass, admirably hiding her need to smile.

“What? Did he say somethin...”

She felt a tap on her shoulder and spun on her stool to find Silas, not Dembe, waiting with keys in hand. “Liz...”

“You aren’t Dembe.” the woman voiced her puzzlement.

The man smiled at her, “I have a better build and much better hair.”

Liz rolled her eyes smiling in spite of herself.
“Are you all ready to go?” Silas asked amiably, including the group in his inquiry.

Aram fell forwards, hastily catching himself before sliding clumsily off the stool he had occupied.

Silas held his amusement for the man’s condition. “The car is this way.” He offered flashy gesture to the stumbling group, gripping Aram’s arm as the man passed, directing him towards the door. “This way.”

“Who’s he?” Samar asked pseudo-quietly, totally interested.

“Silas…” Liz answered, confused as to why the large guard had shown up instead of Dembe. “My bodyguard.”

“He could guard my body.” Samar whispered seductively, her eyes never once having left Silas.

Ressler looked stunned, before speaking up. “You have a personal bodyguard?”

“Red insisted I have one. Demanded, really,” Liz sighed. “With Carver still out there, he wanted someone since I can’t really do much in the way of protecting myself right now.” she glanced at her condition. “Especially for when he’s gone out of town…” She stopped talking, realizing the real reason Silas was there.

Ressler helped her into the car, squeezing her in between Samar and Aram in the back, while he took the front seat.

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After an uneventful drive home, except for that one small incident which involved a hastily rolled down window for Aram to empty the contents of his stomach and that stumbling comically inept episode where Ressler tried to help the younger man to his door... finally Elizabeth was alone with her guardian.

“When did he leave?” She asked the silent man.

“About forty five minutes before you called.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

“No, he didn’t.” Silas answered dutifully.

“And he took Dembe with him?”

“He did.” Silas confirmed.

“Did he seem... okay?” She didn’t know how to ask if Red seemed upset, especially when talking to one of his employees. He may not appreciate that she had asked about a vulnerability.

“He was pissed.” the man’s eyes never left the road or the rearview mirror. “I also think he wanted to be there to pick you up himself.” Silas threw her a bone, seeing as the woman seemed upset. And he believed Reddington truly did want to be there to retrieve her after dinner.

Not that Reddington had left, exactly. He had joined Silas, silently scouring the surrounding buildings himself, until the call had come in... one he had been waiting upon.

Elizabeth fell silent, staring out at the darkened streets passing by, uninterested in the scenery.
Four days of silence.

Aram had sent a ‘thank you’ email, explaining the team had been hit with a case and that they would contact her at the first opportunity presented.

Liz felt the walls closing in around her. Not even Silas’s good humor could bring her out of the funk.

She wondered, had Red supplied another Blacklister, or had they caught a break on Carver’s location.

It peeved her that Reddington checked in with Silas instead of her directly.

Granted, all calls had come at three in the morning each day... but she hadn’t slept well since Red left. So in reality, she had actually been awake when those calls had come in and could have taken them herself.

She needed to hear his voice.

It frightened her that she seemed to be forgetting the sound of it. She was accustomed to daily calls from him, of being in his company the last two years, and not to hear his voice for some reason or other, seemed extremely odd.

She had so many questions in her mind to ask the man. What was he doing? How much longer was he going to be away? Had he been upset with her for having dinner with her team? Why wasn’t he really calling her?

But it seemed, all those questions would have to wait until his return.

With nothing else to do and her mind too occupied, she crawled into bed at eight, hoping that she’d pass out from sheer boredom. She punched her pillow into submission, sighing, heavily dropping her head into it. Liz waited restlessly for sleep to come.

Later that night the woman awoke to a totally darkened room. She bolted upright in the bed, gasping for air. Liz put a hand to her chest, willing the oxygen back into her lungs.

She gulped frantically for air, momentarily panicked, her thoughts racing a mile a minute.

Could there be a problem with her meds? She wiped the sweaty hair from her face, trying to assemble her thoughts...

No wait... she had not taken any medication this night.

Liz instinctively reached for the bedside table, pushing the panic button, alerting Silas she needed help.

With trembling hands, she grabbed a notepad and pen, scratching out a message in messy scrawl.

Silas burst through the door, weapon drawn.

“Elizabeth!” He hurried forward, hastily shifting the gun to his side, scanning the room as he neared her.
She repeatedly hit the mattress, drawing his attention, shoving the paper in his hands.

Silas was already taking out his phone and dialing as he read the one word, RED!

“What’s wrong?” He asked as he heard the line click, indicating that someone had answered. “Are you choking?”

She continued to catch her breath, her blue eyes frantically searching Silas’s uncomprehending expression.

She clutched her chest, unable to breathe.

Silas understood enough. “Tap your hand once for yes, twice for no.”

Red’s voice crackled over the phone Silas held aloft. “Talk to me.” he commanded, listening intently. Silas asked a slew of questions, receiving a negative response to each.

The woman’s face was ashen, her eyes showing her fear.

“What was she doing before?” Red needed to know.

“Sleeping.” Silas supplied.

“Put her on the phone.” his tone was quiet and calm.

“She can’t breathe, Red.”

“I know that, put her on the damn phone.”

Silas was momentarily waylaid, his instincts telling him to phone for emergency help. He found himself handing the phone to the woman, his body tense, his mind troubled.

Elizabeth’s hand shook visibly as she tried to place the phone to her ear.

“Lizzy, honey, I need you to listen to me.” Red’s voice served as a soothing balm but Liz still was trembling inside, the panic still very much prevalent. “Do exactly as I say...” the man instructed quietly, “inhale.”

She listened intently to his directions, doing as told until finally she was able to breathe in a goodly amount of pure oxygen which inflated her lungs to capacity. Relieved of the overwhelming suffocation she had just experienced, Liz found her voice.

“Red...” she croaked, her mouth and throat parched. “W-Wha...”

Silas handed her a glass of water which she took gratefully.

“Don’t talk.” Red instructed quietly. “Sip your water, don’t gulp it.”

_How did he know?_ Her eyes darting questioningly to the large guard.

“Hand Silas the phone.” Elizabeth did as he bid, concentrating hard on breathing slowly, in and out.

The man’s tone was crisp as he spoke. His instructions were short and to the point.

Silas questioned one thing. “I can stay.” he offered.
The reply came immediately. The bulky man glanced at the woman’s chalky features, his mind questioning the validity of his orders but... he obeyed them.

“He’s going to call you.” He slapped the phone closed, his own breathing a bit labored, having had to stand and watch her gasping so laboriously, both willing the damn phone to ring...which it did finally... seconds later.

Silas breathed easier then reluctantly took his leave with only one glance back to the blue eyes that followed his exit. He smiled gently at the woman before closing the door.

“Is he gone?” Red’s voice calmed her.

“Yes.”

“Breathe with me.” She pressed the phone to her ear, concentrating on his even and controlled breathing until she felt her’s even out.

“Feeling better now?” the mellowed tone held a slight hint of affection.

“What’s wrong with me?” She whispered, afraid of exerting herself.

“There’s nothing wrong with you, you just panicked.”

“Why now?” She asked brokenly.

“Why now and not a couple days ago or last week?

“Yes.”

“Because I was with you then.”

She started to roll her eyes, but stopped. *Could he be right? The first thing she asked for when Silas came through the door was not a doctor or an ambulance, but Red.*

“You’ve left before.” she stifled a yawn, her eyes growing heavy.

“Lie down now.” he instructed. “Put the phone under your ear. Just relax.”

“I was dreaming...couldn’t remember what you sounded like...” Liz mumbled sleepily.

Red had been there in her dream, but she couldn’t hear him. He had been talking, but she couldn’t hear that deep husky voice. The longer it had gone on, the more distorted the images had become. She had pleaded with him to speak to her. But he kept drifting farther and farther away.

“Did I ever tell you about the time...” Red began slowly, listening to the sound of the woman’s breathing, “I believe it was in Tijuana or it could have been Nepal...”

He continued on, talking about everything and nothing, even after he heard her deep breathing, indicating she had fallen asleep.

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The sound of metal jingling awoke Elizabeth. Lifting her head, she squinted at the clock, finding it was three in the morning. The last thing she remembered, was Red’s voice. She glanced about for her phone, feeling her way in the warm covers.

The object was nowhere to be found.
A slight sound behind her alerted the woman to someone else’s presence. Red sat down his watch and her phone on his bedside table.

“You didn’t tell me you were coming back.” She turned over, seeking the man out.

“You needed me, of course I would come back.” Red pulled on the blankets, grumbling. “Move your fast ass.”

“Excuse me?” Liz blinked, waking more.

“Not you, the damn cat.” He said, crawling in between the blankets.

Keres walked across the bed, flicking it’s tail at Red in open annoyance before literally climbing over the woman, settling down behind her back. The animal purred contentedly, feeling Liz’s warmth.

The brunette propped her cheek on her fist, watching Red settle into the bed.

“You left without saying goodbye.” Her eyes roamed the dark outline.

“I didn’t want to disturb your dinner.” He groaned, relaxing into the comfortable mattress.

“I wish you would have, I’ve been...” she hesitated. “Did I do something to upset you?” she asked the unusually silent man.

_Had this exacerbated the panic attack?_ Red turned his head, seeking out her silhouette.

“You could have stayed for dinner. No one would have minded.” she shifted, the feline moving even closer, before continuing her thought. “Were you upset that I wanted to spend time with them? Is that the real reason you didn’t say anything to me before you left?”

Red rolled up on his elbow, inching closer to her. “I just assumed that you would appreciate some alone time with your friends without me hovering.” he held her eyes easily. “And I wouldn’t leave like that, even if I was upset with you. But just to clarify, I wasn’t even the slightest bit angry with you.”

Elizabeth felt better.

“I got word that Xavier Zapato was back in the states, I needed to make contact with him before he vanished on me.” he explained his hasty departure. “I contacted your team about where they could find him after I secured a deal with him.”

“Xavier Zapato?”

“Drug smuggler who more than dabbles in human trafficking. Particularly in teenage girls.” Red’s disgust was evident. “I’ve been trying to nail his ass for a couple of years.”

“Why?” she asked. “I mean, I know why.” Red didn’t like people who messed with kids, but Zapato had to have been brought to his attention somehow.

“He took an associate’s daughter a couple years ago. We got the girl back, but not before some abuse had occurred.” Red’s tone was tight. “He slipped away moments before our team arrived. I’ve been waiting for him ever since.”

“You got him?”
“We did. Official records indicate that I was also captured, if anyone searched.”

“Who got to handcuff you this time?” she teased.

“Samar.” he smiled briefly. “Speaking of which, what she said makes so much more sense now.”

“What did she say?” Liz was curious.

“She said, “you should have stayed, idiot’.” The man’s brows lifted. “I’m sorry you thought I was angry with you, Lizzy. I just wanted you to have a good time.”

“Well, next time, stay for dinner if not a drink.” she scolded superficially. “And call me, even if it is three in the morning. And don’t leave without letting me know what’s going on at least.” She reached out, touching his arm.

Red took her hand, kissing the scarring on her wrist. “I’ll try, even if it makes Donald irritable. I’ll call and I won’t leave without saying goodbye again, I promise.”

She came the last distance, hugging him. “Thank you...”

Red was startled by the embrace. Though he was upset that she had a panic attack because of a miscommunication between them, he wasn’t upset by this new development.

He rolled to his back, taking her slender form as he went.

Laying there quietly, he stroked her back waiting to see what she would do next and was very surprised when she settled more comfortably against him.

“I have to apologize to Silas.”

“Why?” he asked, his smile hidden in the dark. She relaxed totally into the touch of his strong fingers as they massaged her back.

“I hit that panic button which was a really stupid thing to do.” she had been thinking about it for hours now.

“It was not stupid.” Red informed the woman in no uncertain terms. “You were panicked.”

“Well, not because of an intruder or anything.”

“It doesn’t matter, you needed help. He came, that’s his job.”

“I still don’t want him to think I was misusing it.”

“He wouldn’t think such a thing. But if it makes you feel better, talk to him.” his fingers stroked a gentle path back and forth over her spine. “But I’ll tell you, he’s going to say the same thing I did.”

“I scared ten years off the man because of a panic attack.” she was embarrassed yet again.

“You didn’t know that at the time. And neither did he.” Red pointed out. “When I got here, the first words out of his mouth were about you. He understands a lot more than you give him credit for.”

“He’s had one before?” she was stunned.

“We all have. Men think they’re dying.” he smiled, adjusting his pillow. “We’re always relieved when we realize it’s not a heart attack. So relieved in fact,” he remembered his own bout well, “we
blow off the emotional problem all together and live with the stress, then wonder why we have... a heart attack.”

Chapter End Notes

My Beta hated this chapter - said it made her start gasping for air. I gave her chocolate, she calmed down. So if you experience the same issues, a candy bar is good medicine.
April 16

Red had spent a goodly amount of time saying his farewells this morning. He wanted to gauge the woman’s emotional state, but she seemed bright and chipper, which allowed him to go about his business, his own mood greatly improved.

“Let’s get going. We have a few things to do before we go to the Post Office.” Dembe nodded and headed for the door, not wasting time today.

“Giovanni called?” Dembe asked from the front seat, hearing the excitement in Raymond’s voice.

“Yesterday. He said it was there for us to pick up.” Red grinned infectiously.

A short while later, they arrived at the Post Office.

“We should have given them to her at dinner.” Aram complained, waiting for Ressler to open the trunk on his car. “I had forgotten about it until we were at the restaurant.”

“Don’t feel bad, Aram. She had a wonderful time with you all, that was present enough.” Red glanced around the area, scanning the parking garage with the eyes of a trained observer.

“Still... she must think we forgot.” The young man was still upset.

Dembe pulled his eyes from the younger man’s nervous habits, slightly irritated for some odd reason. Being around a Type A personality such Aram Mojtabai, always made the bulky man fidgety inside himself.

“That you took the time to have dinner with her was the best gift she could have received.” Red patted the man on the shoulder. “What are we going to do with all this?” Red quickly changed the subject.

Aram craned his head around the gigantic basket he was carrying. “Ours’ should probably stay with us for the time being.”

“There’s chocolate.” Ressler exclaimed proudly.

“I see that.” Red looked over the enormous basket seeing a plethora of different gifts behind the gaily wrapped cellophane, chocolate being a focal point at every turn.

“You don’t think she’ll like it?” Donald asked, second guessing their idea now, his mood dropping slightly.

“No, I’m sure she’ll love it.” Red smiled at both men, “You know how she adores chocolate.”

Both men smiled, walking away, examining the basket’s contents happily.

“You really think she’ll like it?” Samar mumbled.

“I do.” the man smiled. “She doesn’t think anyone remembered anyway. She’ll be very pleased.”

Samar pointed at Aram, her expression bemused, “You just told him–”
“I lied.” Red admitted freely. “He seemed genuinely upset, now he’s not.”

Samar crooked her head, handing over a beautifully wrapped gift and a card, crossing her arms over her middle. “What did you get her?”

“What did you get her?” Red countered.

“A cashmere sweater.”

“She likes cashmere.” the man nodding approvingly.

“I’ve seen her check it out a couple of times online.” Samar shrugged. “Now, what did you get her?”

Red reached into his pocket as did Dembe. Both opening their gifts at the same time.

“Oh... wow.” Samar's eyes widened. “I wish I could see her face when she opens these.”

“You’re all welcome to have dinner with us.” Red offered magnanimously.

“I don’t know...” Samar whined her distress. “We have so much to go over tonight with the new Blacklister.”

“Well, if you change your mind.” He stuffed the box back in his pocket. “Give a call.”

Red and Samar went over the latest information he had to convey.

Aram approached the pair, gingerly, fidgeting, wondering if he should wait to be noticed or just speak up. If he waited, and he handed over what he had, Mr. Reddington would be extremely upset with him for not having spoken up, right away.

On the other hand... the man gave up the mental battle, forging ahead courageously.

“Oh, excuse me, Agent Navabi, Mr. Reddington?” The pair looked up, observing the nervous man, who held  a brown envelope to his chest protectively.

“Is there something amiss, Aram?” Red asked solicitously. It wasn’t odd to see the man nervous, but he seemed truly bothered on this occasion.

“This just came for us... or you, but I’m in them, so... us?” Aram stuttered, finally handing the envelope over.

Samar took the folder, pulling out it’s contents. “What the hell...”

Red peered over her shoulder, feeling his heart stop. There were pictures of Liz with her team from when they had dinner. All taken from different vantage points... on the street, in the bar.

All had markings on them of some sort, ‘X’s’ and targets were drawn over Liz’s body and head, the position changing per picture.

Red took out his phone, dialing from memory. “Silas, put someone on Lizzy until I get there. If she asks why, tell her I’ll explain when I get home.”

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A little under an hour later, the men arrived back at the house, arms loaded with packages.

“You’ll be on the look out for Joan?” Red indicated the ‘helper’ who would be arriving anytime now, he hoped.

“I will.” Dembe was the model of efficiency these days.

“I’m going to distract Lizzy.” Red headed back to their room, greeting the guard on duty outside the door.

The man entered the room, enjoying the domestic scene unfolding before him. The woman held her book aloft so as to not disturb the cat, who was draped across her middle.

“You like my new hot water bottle?” She smiled up at Red, laying her book aside.

“No better description has ever been made of that cat.” Red nodded. “All she does is lay around, doing nothing.”

Liz’s fingers stroked the fur absent. “Well, what else is she supposed to do?”

“Hunt for mice...” he poked the cat, receiving absolutely no response at all, “be a better companion.”

Liz chuckled quietly as Keres slumped further, molding more of itself to her body, much to the exasperation of the man beside her. “Speaking of companions, why is David lurking outside our door?”

“We were sent pictures of you from the night you went out to dinner.” he got right to the point. “You’re plainly targeted in them. I want someone standing by when I’m not here, just as a precaution.”

“Okay...” she practically whispered as to not disturb the feline. “Whatever you think best.”

Red was a bit taken back by her easy acceptance. “You’re not going to tell me I’m being overprotective?”

“No. You were right. Someone may as well be nearby in case I need help because I sure as hell can’t defend myself in the shape I’m in.” The fingers stroking the cat slowed noticeably. “Were there any of me... uh... here?” she allowed her concern.

“No, they stopped when you left the bar.”

“Do you think he followed us here?”

“If he sent pictures of you at dinner, he would have most certainly sent some of you here.” Red sat down beside her, tilting his head, smiling carelessly. “Regardless, I will be setting up extra patrols.” He braced his arm beside her, reaching back, “And you have this...” he said, pulling her gun out from beneath the pillow. “Stop thinking about it, don’t worry, you’ll be perfectly safe.”

“How did you know I put that there?” She asked, but he dismissed the question entirely as rhetorical. “May I ask you a question?” He inclined his head. “I’ve been a lot of trouble to those guys out there. Some must be starting to resent me... and your bodyguards... why would they protect me. I’m not anybody important.”

“You’re important to me.” he stated quietly.

“Still... to put their lives on the line like that, for someone so irrelevant–”
“You are not irrelevant.” Red emphasized. “Besides the fact they like you—”

“They like me?” Liz was touched.

“You aren’t high maintenance.” he readily explained. “You treat them like they matter, you talk to them like they’re friends, not the ‘Help’. They appreciate that.” his innate sense of humor came to the fore. “You let them destroy children’s toys,” he too, seemed to appreciate that fact. “And if it’s not you they’re protecting, it would be someone else.”

“Why do they do what they do?” she was intrigued.

The fact that these men seemed to value their life less than another, astonished her.

“Most of these men are ex-military or the like, trained to fight and protect.” Red stared off in a thoughtful manner. “They’re bored by everyday life, no excitement, no challenge. They try to live a normal life, and find it tedious.” he could relate. “They offer their services, see if anyone bites...”

“And you did.” she nodded thoughtfully.

“I understand them more than most people that employ them. Plus, I hire the unusual types.”

“I didn’t think any of them...” She circled a finger at her temple to indicate a certain ‘condition’, “had a blown fuse.”

“I don’t mean that they’re crazy.”

“Have you met Silas?” she smiled sweetly.

“Unfortunately, yes.” Red shifted into a more comfortable position. “I don’t care if they’re muscular, young or even clean cut. I hire men with experience. And most importantly, they are loyal.” the man stated his preferences. “And because I gave them a chance when no one else did, they’re incredibly loyal.”

“I’m sure the benefits don’t hurt either.” she assumed he was very generous in that area, because he was generous in most areas.

“I do offer amazing dental and retirement plans.” he answered seriously.

Liz actually believed him, even if he said it jokingly. She was beginning to know his ‘delivery’.

“I was wondering if you would like to get dressed and have dinner in the dining room tonight?”

“Is there someone coming...”

“I just thought you might enjoy a change of scenery, such as it were.”

“You know what, I think I would.” She smiled brightly.

“Move chubby.” Red tapped the cat but it only curled more tightly around Liz’s tummy, hiding it’s face. “You’re suffocating her, get off.” he thumped the cats bottom, genuinely annoyed when Keres flicked its tail in response as if dismissing the man entirely.

“You just don’t know how to talk to her.” Liz explained patiently. “Come on baby.” she cooed to the furry pet. The cat raised it’s head, yawning and stretching. She slithered off to the side, curling into a ball before falling asleep again.
“Damn lazy thing.” Red mumbled before helping Liz from the bed.

Dressing for dinner seemed like a special occasion tonight. Liz chose a floral print summer dress which accented her figure to perfection. She knew she had made the right choice, having exited the closet and Red’s eyes roamed the outfit appreciatively.

After helping her onto her scooter, they journeyed to the dining room where Dembe stood waiting at the doors.

Turning the corner into the room, Red was more than pleased at the woman’s reaction. Her eyes lit up, her mouth falling agape as she examined the detailed arrangements with gleeful enthusiasm.

“Did you guys do all this?” She waved at the simple, yet elegant decorations and table set up before her.

“Dembe had a little help.” Red said, taking the chair next to her. “Happy birthday, Lizzy.”

“Happy Birthday, Elizabeth.” Dembe repeated the sentiment, pouring their wine.

“You didn’t have to go to so much trouble...” she was delighted.

“It was no trouble. We both enjoyed planning it.” Red checked with Dembe who smiled in agreement.

“I thought the night out with the guys, was my birthday dinner?” Though no one besides Red had wished her a happy birthday, she just assumed that’s what it had been.

“It was, technically.” Red granted graciously. “Consider this your official dinner.”

After an amazing meal, Dembe went to the sideboard while Red kept her distracted until the lights lowered.

Liz swirled around watching Dembe approach holding the most beautiful cake she’d ever seen. Done in white icing and the most delicate flowers that flowed around the sides, stopping on the crystal platter which held it. A single lit candle sat in the center.

“It’s beautiful, you guys.” she clapped her hands together ecstatically. “This is such a surprise!”

“Make a wish.” Red’s smile was infectious.

Both men watched as Liz closed her eyes tightly, her face radiating in the soft glow of the low lights.

A few moments of silence stretched into a questionable length of time. Red looked at Dembe, then ostensibly glanced at his watch, amusement dancing in his eyes.

Finally the woman’s eyes popped open. She leaned forward, blowing the candle out, her face beaming happily.

Red really loved her innocence sometimes. It took a special type of person to maintain that quality, to think that hard on a birthday wish, after all she had seen in her work and life.

While most would wish for their mortgage payment to lower or to not pay taxes that year or not even wish at all. He’d bet that Lizzy actually wished for something totally out of character for a woman of her age, if the look on her face was any criteria by which to judge.
“Aren’t you going to cut it?” He asked, watching her hover over the cake with a knife.

“I can’t do it! It’s too pretty.” she grimaced painfully, handing it over to the man. “You do it. I can’t look.” she turned her face away.

Red chuckled, but took the offered knife, cutting into the decadent confection.

“Oh... it’s all white and milk chocolate?” she had instantly noted. “My favorites.” she sounded totally joyous.

The caterer suggested dark and German chocolate, but Red was aware of Liz’s preference.

And as he watched her devour the cake, he knew he had made the correct choice. “Would you like another slice.”

“If I do, I won’t be able to move.” she sat back sated. “That was a wonderful dinner Red.” she reached over, covering the large black man’s hand. “Dembe. Thank you so much... both of you.”

“Don’t thank us yet, you still have to open your presents.” Red pointed to the packages.

“Samar asked if we could record you opening your gifts.” he remembered the conversation.

“No, no. Don’t do that.” She chuckled then shrugged. “Oh... okay.” she motioned rapidly, indicating that the gifts should be handed over immediately. Dembe pulled out his phone, gesturing that he was ready to begin.

Red brought over the huge basket. “This is from Aram and Donald. They wished you a very happy birthday.”

She squealed happily, pulling on the enormous bow, the cellophane falling away to reveal lotion, bath products, a candle, funny books, chocolate and a bottle of wine. Pulling each item out, she read the labels or covers, smiling softly with each passing gift.

Turning to the camera, she thanked the guys for their thoughtfulness before rubbing the delicately scented lotion on her hands. Red’s eyes deepened with a strange light as he watched the process.

Dembe brought the man back to the present, his expression benign, as he saved the video clip.

Liz popped a piece of chocolate in her mouth.

“This one is from Samar.” Red collected himself dutifully.

Liz pulled at the bow before ripping the paper and opening the top of the box, gasping.

“Oh, Samar!” She pulled the v-neck cashmere sweater from it’s box, holding it up to herself then feeling the soft material between delicate fingertips. “I absolutely love it!”

“I really like the color.” Red stated his opinion.

She folded the deep red article of clothing carefully beside her, stroking it once more before moving the box. Her brow pulled into an attractive frown.

“What’s this?” Opening the lid, she peeled the tissue paper back, her cheeks turning the color of her sweater when she saw a beautiful matching set of bra and panties inside.

“What did you find?” Red inquired, having a pretty good idea what might still be in that box, if the
expression on her face was any indication.

Shooting an evil look to the camera, completely forgetting the man behind it, “Thanks, Samar.” She turned to Red, “It’s nothing.” She said quickly. “A girl thing.”

Red instantly sat another gift before her, giving her the reprieve needed. “This is from Dembe.”

She smiled warmly at the man, hesitating before opening it. “Dembe, you did not have to do this.” her sincerity was apparent. “But this is so nice.”

She pulled the bow, her fingers hovering above the beautiful paper.

“Rip it, Lizzy.” Red urged.

“I’m sorry, it’s pretty paper.” She giggled before doing as directed, finding a black velvet box underneath, her eyes lifting instantly in open awe. “What did you do?”

“Open it.” The man smiled.

She cracked the top open, gasping, placing her hand to her mouth before lifting the diamond and ruby tennis bracelet from the soft cushion. “Oh my God!” she exclaimed breathlessly. “It's simply exquisite.”

Red came to her, taking the bracelet from her shaking fingers, looping it around her wrist. Dembe had chosen something else originally, but having seen what Red had coveted, he had chosen this gift instead.

“Oh my God!” she waved Dembe to her, blotting her misting eyes.

He stopped the video and walked around the table bending when she pulled at his arm, wrapping her's around him, squeezing him tightly.

“Oh my God, I love it, Dembe. Thank you so much.” She kissed his cheek lightly before releasing him, then grabbed his hand, her eyes fixated on the handsome face. “Oh my God... thank you, really! Really!” she emphasized. “Really.”

He chuckled his amusement, “You are most welcome. I’m glad you enjoy it.”

“Enjoy doesn’t begin to describe it...” She laughed, wiping the tears of joy from her eyes. Moving her wrist back and forth, she watched the gems sparkle under the dim lighting.

Red sat another box in front of her, pleased with her reaction to his friend’s offering. “This is from me.” he said simply.

Removing the bow and paper with flourish, she again encountered a black velvet box. “You guys are terrible... but don’t ever change.” She slowly opened the lid, before her hand fluttered to her chest, her eyes widening.

“Red...” she drawled, wonderstruck. She traced the diamond and ruby Journey necklace and earrings with her fingertip, tears dropping to the plush velvet cushion upon which they lay.

“I’ve wanted one of these since I first saw...” She sniffled, accepting the handkerchief that came into view. She was literally speechless for a time, her eyes unable to look from the elegantly crafted jewels. “I love them, Red.” She said around quivering lips. “Oh my God...” the woman whispered sacredly.
Red had seen the sapphire bracelet Dembe had picked, and had to agree, it did match her eyes, but then he had seen the sparkling red jewels and couldn’t resist. Lizzy had been wearing more red clothing lately, and she looked so warm and beautiful in the items, surely the rubies would be just as beautiful.

But more importantly, he had seen Lizzy look at the necklace before. More so now, since Tom left.

Though, the significance of the necklace, the meaning behind it, had altered.

Red wondered if she had hoped Tom would buy one for her for a birthday, perhaps even an anniversary? A way to commemorate the journey they were taking as a married couple?

If so, that hope had been met with disappointment. And he wasn’t just talking about the jewelry.

Her hopes for her marriage, a family... had never materialized.

Hence the reason Red had bought it for her now. A way to mark an important moment, a turning point in her life that was going to be full of self discovery, challenges, ambitions and dreams.


Red was very pleased she liked his gift so much. Though, he had to admit, he was surprised she accepted it so easily.

Not that he was complaining in the least. He just assumed he’d have a fight on his hands.

Dembe shut down the video, quietly arose, heading for the door.

Liz pushed her chair back then stood awkwardly as she reached for Red Reddington.

She squeezed him in a tight hug, crying softly as he stroked her back. “Thank you for everything.” The woman whispered into his shoulder. “It’s been the best birthday ever.”

The man rocked her gently, rubbing his cheek against her soft hair. “I’m glad you enjoyed dinner and your gifts."

“It’s not just because of dinner and the gifts.” She squeezed him harder. “I’m glad I got to spend it with friends.”

Dembe smiled at the two embracing as he closed the door behind him, leaving them to their privacy.

The next morning, Red received a call he needed to attend to and was very pleased with the results that call had garnered. Now if Lizzy was as happy, all would be well.

Until then, he sat back in his chair, reaching for the envelope that had been staring back at him for the last hour. And only one sentence in, he wished Lizzy’s stalker would hire a ghost writer.

If the letters were going to keep arriving, the man could make them entertaining, or at the very least, less repetitious.

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I’m pleased you tried to get away from Reddington as planned. I tried to get your attention to make a getaway, but you were distracted by that woman. She is as bad as Reddington, taking your drink
away, like you were a child.

I thought your eyes had connected with mine, but if they had, you would have come to me.

I need you to know I was there, I was watching. I know you must be as disgusted as I am, with how Reddington touched you.

Know that it will not go on forever. Take comfort knowing that you won’t be subjected to him much longer. And when you are rid of him, you will be purged of his filth. I may have found a way to rid us of his presence, but you must be patient.

The man placed the letter in his pocket, shaking off the author’s insanity, pushing back from the large desk.

He went off in search of Lizzy.

As he stepped through the doorway, the woman looked up from the tv screen. “If I order this thing right now, on tv. I get a free one if I pay shipping and handling.”

Red glanced at the screen, “Do you really need a Hurricane Spin Scrubber?”

“Who doesn’t?” she held her smile. “And it’s only three payments of nineteen ninety-nine.”

“I’m glad you’re in such a good mood... because I have something to tell you that is going to piss you off, but I want you to hear me out before going ballistic.”

“Okay...” Liz drawled nervously. “But are you going to buy me the Hurricane Spinner?”

“I sold your house.” he stated bluntly.

Liz’s mouth dropped open, shocked. “You... I... what?”

“Now, before you start throwing things, I did it because too many people knew where to find you, obviously.” he held his hand out, stilling the woman. “Plus, they splashed your house across the news. Harold stopped them from showing your picture, but if anybody researched...” Reddington always thought three or four moves in advance. “You need better security, Lizzy. And you weren’t going to get it there.”

She had sat, sputtering, trying to form some sort of response, finally asking the first coherent thing to come to mind, “...How much?”

“If I told you that I got two hundred thousand more than what you paid for it, would it make you feel better?”

Her eyes bugged out, “Did you?”

“I did.”

She sat back heavily into the pillows, mentally drained for a second.

“I don’t know what to say...” she told the truth, a thought suddenly occurring, “Weird... I’m homeless.”

“No, you are not.” Red tsked, waving a hand above their heads. “I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but there is a roof on this house.”
“Uh, yeah. The roof of your house.” she made mention.

“A house that has your name on the deed.” her mouth fell agape once again, her senses reeling. “Actually, come to think of it, a lot of the properties I own have your name on the deed.” he stated conversationally.

“I need to lay down.” she was suddenly certain of the fact.

Red helped her adjusted the blankets and pillow behind her head. “You’re upset.” he took for granted.

“I think you mean, overwhelmed.” she corrected.

“Oh? Well... that’s not so bad.” he decided.

“Red, do you not realize how weird this is, putting my name on these houses?” she had to ask or die.

“Why would you say that?” he was perplexed. “I always figured that if something happened to me, you and Dembe would handle my estate, split the profits, maybe hand some over to my daughter if you ever found her.” he tilted his head, quirkily, his expression saying it all. “I know you two would do the right thing.”

“Isn’t that what a lawyer is for?”

“Oh, please.” Red scoffed. “I trust lawyers about as far as I can throw one.”

“Which isn’t saying much where you’re concerned if there’s a tall building around.” She muttered.

“No, this way is better.” he totally ignored her implication. “Don’t think about it right now. Just concentrate on what you would like to do.” the subject was closed in Red’s mind. “Shop around a bit, have fun with it, don’t settle for anything.” he forewarned. “Besides it’s not like you have to make any decisions at all, really, since technically, you’re home right now, remember?”

Elizabeth’s eyes glazed over. She could not wrap her mind around the fact that this amazing house was technically... hers.

“Did you see who bought the old house?” she enquired absently. “Was it a couple?”

“Oh, no.” Red laughed. “Francis bought it. Took my suggestion and will be making it a guest house for out of town business visitors.”

For which Red was thankful. With Francis owning the house, the letters would continue to come uninterrupted.

“I also need to know, did you see anyone odd when you were at dinner with your team.”

“What do you mean, odd?” she questioned.

“Was anyone trying to get your attention?” the man began slowly. “Did anyone approach you, brush past too close? Did you make eye contact with anyone?” his hands gestured slightly. “Anything of that nature?”

She thought the problem through slowly but thoroughly, coming up blank.

“You’re in the restaurant. Did you look at anyone, did someone look at you. Anyone other than the waitress come in?” Red watched her, fascinated as she visibly searched her memories of that
evening.

“No,” she regretfully sighed, coming up empty. “nothing.”

“All right. You went across the street to the bar.” he probed gently. “Did you pass anyone on the street.”

“A couple, college students.” her eyes had automatically re-closed as she focused. She smiled softly, “Too busy kissing to notice anyone else.”

Red continued. “Okay, you're at the bar. What next?”

“We sat near the bar, ordered drinks.” the woman said. “Aram and Ress played darts next to us.” She was quiet a few seconds, then shivered, her brow puckering.

“What? What did you see?” he picked up on the change instantly.

“What was that horrendous drink you bought?” She stuck her tongue out, as though ridding herself of the long gone taste.

“I'm sorry?” he queried.

“I had just finished my drink and the waitress came over, sitting a new drink in front of me.” she distinctly recalled. “I thought she had the wrong table, and she said, the gentleman bought it, then said, I'd know who it was from.” her brow furrowed attractively.

“I took a drink and about spewed it across the table, it was sickeningly sweet and sour.” she grimaced accordingly. “I just knew you were watching for my reaction.” the blue eyes opened accusingly. “What the hell was that Red?”

“Sweetheart, I didn’t buy you a drink.”

“You didn’t?” she was surprised.

“No...what did you do with it, the drink?”

“Samar took it. Made about the same face I did, but said it was free alcohol and who was she to complain.”

“Did you look around at all, make eye contact with anyone.”

“There was a scuffle.” she did recall. “The bouncers calmed them down quickly. Then I...” She moved her head to the left, hesitating, scrunching her face. “I caught eyes with a man when we both looked away from the fight.”

“What did he look like?”

“Brown hair, dark eyes, I think. The lights were low, I couldn’t see very well. Medium build I guess?”

“Like Aram?”

“No...” She drawled.

“Ressler?”
“Yeah, like Ress.” She nodded. “He was clean cut. Short hair, but curling at the ends a bit. He was in a suit.”

“How many times did you make eye contact with him?”

“I don’t know, two, three times? Why?” she irritated. “What’s with the questions?”

He reached into his pocket, pulling out the newest letter, handing it to her. Waiting quietly as she read it.

“He ordered the drink?” she looked up from the letter.

“Sounds like it, yes.”

“Maybe it was stage one in his goal of purging me.” she quipped.

Red could sympathize her revulsion. That must have been one bad drink. “Would you recognize him if you saw him again?”

“I don’t know, probably not, not really.” she admitted. “He was just a faceless man in a crowd, you know. I mean, maybe if there was a line up of five guys, it might be a possibility.” she shook her head negatively. “But on a crowded street,” she sighed in frustration, “I highly doubt it.”

“It’s all right.” He felt her frustration. “I think I was only trying to confirm it wasn’t Tom.”

“No, I think I would have known if he was there, watching me.”

“Senses starting to tingle?”

“I knew something wasn’t right when Carver was in my house. I just didn’t know what it was.” she refused to linger on that moment. “Now I know what I feel like when I’m creeped out.”

Red fell silent, watching her face as she absently fanned the pages of her book with her thumb, apparently lost in thought.

“What are you thinking?” he asked.

“How big is this house?”

Red chuckled under his breath at the very unexpected question. The way her mind wandered sometimes was just... captivating.

“Around two hundred thousand square feet, if not more.”

The woman’s mouth fell open, her eyes widening. She knew it was large, but...

“Lizzy, it has three stories.” Red pointed out.

“But...” she drew back, envisioning the house, “it’s only two stories tall.”

“No...” Red disagreed, “the third floor is beneath us.”

“Oh, you mean, like a basement.”

“I would not consider it exactly that.”

“What’s down there?”
“Let’s see... there’s a wine cellar. There are media, exercise and entertainment rooms.” the man stared off into the room, envisioning the downstairs.

“How about an apartment for staff. I believe there’s a couple bowling lanes. A library...” he shrugged. “I can’t really think of everything that’s down there. You haven’t explored?” he asked.

“Well, I couldn’t really get up the stairs...” she twisted her mouth, “or downstairs, for that matter.” she muttered. “Not that I knew it was there.”

“So, take the elevator.” Red’s brow scrunched.

“There’s an elevator!?”

Once Elizabeth learned there was more to explore of the house, she took off on her cart, looking for the hidden treasures to be found leaving Red to his office and his call with Francis. After agreeing on a time and place to give him the keys to the house, he went off again in search of Elizabeth to inform her he would be going out soon.

He found Silas, Dembe and Lizzy, performing their workout for the afternoon.

More specifically, yoga.

His eyes instantly fell on Elizabeth, in a tight sports bra and the tiniest shorts he’d ever seen... thank the Lord above. The man began to sweat. He pulled absently on his expensive vest, craning his neck, trying to cool off.

The woman was resting on her hands and knees, then she lifted slowly, her tight bottom lowering, pushing her hips into the floor. Her torso elongated, redirecting his line of sight to her full breasts which were pushed together.

She held the pose and his complete attention for a few moments, before a softly cleared throat made him blink, breaking his focus.

He glanced over, finding his head guard staring benignly at him. Silas’ mouth pulled into a jaunty grin.

Red subtly flipped the man off, heading for the bar. He poured himself a stiff drink. His eyes absently wandered back towards the silent woman.

Liz stretched out her body, feeling the pull, her mind cleared of all recent debris.

Dembe softly called out each position change.

Red wasn’t sure how long he stood there, time seemed to have slipped away. His eyes watched Elizabeth slide effortlessly into different poses, her body at once graceful and yet vital with youthful suppleness.

What he did know, what he was acutely aware of... was with each new movement and sip of the warming liquor, he found himself slipping further into a quandary.

As he watched the tension in her body release, he felt his own increase. While she released her stress, his grew exponentially. As she became limber and flexible, he stiffened... in the most inopportune place.
He stared openly at her firm bottom as it lifted high in the air, as though for his viewing pleasure, before her legs parted somewhat. Just enough to give him, the very avid voyeur, a tantalizing glimpse of her softly rounded mound pushing at the tight fabric.

He could almost visualize the hidden treasure beneath the clingy material.

Exhaling a calming breath, he finished his drink in one gulp before lowering the glass to the bar. So focused on her pert little ass was he that he sat the glass down too heavily, making a thick jarring sound as it met granite.

Silas peered over his shoulder at the distraction, releasing a knowing chuckle before returning to his pastime.

Red ignored the exchange, slowly making his way up behind Elizabeth. He watched her strain to stretch beyond her already extreme pose, further opening herself to his gaze.

“Lizzy...” Red enquired softly.

“Hmmm?” she purred, wiggling herself into position.

Any other time, that fucking sound she just made and that amazing ass writhing in the air would be considered an invitation to mount that luscious body, in his world. At least his body seemed to think so. His shaft twitched heavily in his pants.

But this wasn’t ‘any other time’, more was the fucking pity.

“I’m going to meet Francis shortly.” his voice roughened on it’s own accord as she dipped her chest to the floor, her heavy breasts threatening to spill from her minuscule top.

Red wiped at his brow, his thumbs pushing into his eye sockets, hiding the temptation from sight. His fist clenched into a tight sphere, his hand wanting to touch her breast so badly, it was the only way to physically halt the action.

“Did you need anything while I’m out?” the words sounded so hollow.

Shit. His voice sounded strained to his own ears, who the hell knew what that bastard Silas was hearing.

“Umm,” she hummed, pushing up on her toes, she raised that perfect ass towards him once again and the man suddenly knew how Adam felt when Eve offered him the apple. “I don’t think s—”

The woman lost her balance mid-sentence, a sharp intake of breath alerting the man to her predicament.

Red lunged forward quickly, catching Liz’s light weight before it toppled to the floor.

Their momentum pushed them forward until he threw out his free arm stopping their rapid descent. His form hunched over hers, his large palm wrapped around her bare waist, yanking her ass into his crotch as they came to a sudden halt.

He easily balanced both their weights.

“You all right?” he muttered against her nape, his warm breath stirring the damp strands of hair on her neck. “Did you hurt yourself?”
“No...” she panted, “no, I’m okay.”

Elizabeth opened her eyes, finding only her feet touching the floor. The rest of her form was held against Red’s body. Getting her bearings, she reached out, laying her good hand against the hardwood, followed by her knee as he slowly lowered her.

“Good?” he asked.

“Yeah...” she reassured, her limbs finally coming to rest on the floor. “The casts... they put me off center.” she apologized.

Red’s muscled forearm supported her abdomen, making her very aware of his proximity, more specifically, the buttons on his vest which tickled her spine. His belt buckle pressed into her bottom.

She drew a shaky breath, when his thick fingers skimmed along her flesh as he released his hold on her.

“Raymond, are you ready?” Dembe enquired, disengaging himself from his prone position.

“Twenty minutes.” Red practically snapped. “I need to grab something...”

Silas snorted under his breath, hastily averting his profile to hide his ever growing amusement.

“I need the keys to Lizzy’s house and my phone.” Red clarified, giving the man a steely glare of pure hatred which only increased the guards mirth.

“You need me to get them?” Liz asked politely.

Red looked back at the woman, finding her stretching away the last of her workout. Her breasts flexed under the tight shirt, and the man’s mouth suddenly felt like the Sahara desert.

“No...” he grunted moodily, “I know where they are.” he replied, quickly heading for the doorway, ignoring Liz’s parting remark.

“What are you laughing at weirdo?”

Silas’ evil laughter echoed in Red’s ears. So help him God... he was going to kill that man.

Reddington rushed though their doorway, making a beeline for the private toilet area, slamming the door closed behind him.

He yanked at his zipper, releasing his hardening shaft, pumping it once, easing the ache instantly.

Red exhaled harshly, teasing his fattening crown with his thick thumb, slicking the taut skin with the beaded moisture leaking from the tip.

Stroking the length, bringing the erection to full mast, Red pumped the rigid flesh. He closed his eyes, his mind’s eye, supplying the needed visions for his impromptu fantasy.

He had never understood the fascination with workout gear... until today. But then, he hadn’t seen Lizzy in them yet, either. They were so damned tight, showing him every single nuance of that delectable body.

God, that ass of hers was amazingly beautiful. The sculptured mounds would fit perfectly in the
palms of his hands.

And her breasts, he knew were full and soft, but he hadn’t paid attention until now how they might overfill his hands, and how tiny her nipples were as they strained against the tight top.

The rest of that wonderful little package; her thighs, arms, tummy... that back... he had fantasies about running his tongue along her spine until he could nibble on that gorgeous neck.

He focused on that vision, having no trouble what-so-ever picturing his large hands bracketing her tiny hips, before easing those tight shorts off, showing him that firm, warm flesh he wanted so desperately to see.

Hell, he’d have a damn hard time getting the shorts past her thighs, but then, that’s all he really needed. That was more than enough clearance to allow him to plunge himself into her hot, wet depths... the ones she had been so carelessly waving about earlier.

When she was cradled in his arms and her ass was pushing into his groin, the need to give her his arousal had been damned near impossible to contain. Especially when that warm bottom grazed his fattening length.

Shortening his stroke, Red increased his grip, pushing him closer to the relief he craved. Bracing an arm against the surface, he leaned into it, his fingers curling into the wall when he hit a particularly good spot.

“Oh, fuck...” he grunted, his hips unconsciously rocking, fucking his hand, spreading his fingers open with each thrust of his pelvis.

Damn, he bet she was tight. Those few seconds he had glimpsed the prize between her thighs, the outline of those succulent lips was so well defined, he thought he was going to cream right on the fucking yoga mat.

He tightened his grip further, a strangled breath escaping his throat. Pulling at his belt, he tugged it free, letting his pants drop heavily to the floor as his other hand cupped his balls, pulling them up against his body.

He wanted her so badly, it hurt. The need to touch her, to share the emotions she stirred within him.

If she’d only just fucking let him...

Tom Keen could never begin to match what Red knew he was more than capable of supplying.

While Tom wasn’t willing to give up, to stop his life of crime.

Red was.

He’d give everything he had for one moment to show Lizzy how much...

“You love her...” he breathed through his exertion, admitting out loud something he tried so hard to keep inside, hidden.

He wasn’t supposed to feel like this, wasn’t supposed to love her as much as he did. But he did and... his heart ached for want of her.
He felt tears prick his eyes at the pain, even as his balls tightened against his body. The conflict tore at his warring sides, deepening the ache, even as the sweet taste of relief neared.

“God, Lizzy, please...” he shook visibly, his orgasm upon him, “let me...”

He trembled with the release of his arousal, his emotions crashing in from all sides. They combined in an explosive force, that left him drained more mentally, than physically.

Red leaned his forehead into the wall, fighting back against the emotional release threatening, an outlet he needed more than anything.

His eyes slammed shut against the threat, feeling tears skirt down his cheeks until he tasted them at his mouth.

He drew in a shaky breath, exhaling the pent up torment in his soul. He leaned wearily back against the support offered, taking the time to compose his thoughts.

He absently put his person to rights, glancing down at the mess on his marble tile. He just didn’t have the energy at this moment.

Red groped for the stool, sitting heavily. He dropped his face into his hands, a deeply pained sound tearing at his throat before he could smother it.

“You fool.” he berated himself quietly. “Get your head out of the fucking clouds.” his jaw clenched tensely. “She’ll never see you as anything aside from Red Reddington. Face it.”

His palms pushed into his temples, staving off the looming headache he felt building behind his eyes.

If she only would believe him, believed his intentions were honorable. Would she see beyond who he had become?

Yes, he was Red Reddington. Now. He hadn’t always been this way.

Believe it or not, his end goal had been to bring those in power, those who had cheated and killed to get to their lofty position, to their knees.

But he was one man going against a virtual army, as it were. Not that the crooked politicians got their hands dirty. Oh, hell no. They hired their dirty work out. But it was still just him against a powerful establishment that had excessive funds to get what they wanted.

He wasn’t fighting fire with fire...

Which is where his fortune came into play. A fortune he could give a shit about. It was just a tool to get what he needed. Money bought silence, loyalty... people.

He had been much like Elizabeth at one point... the thought amused him in a sick, twisted way.

Trusting that justice would prevail. That the system would actually work.

What a load of shit.

That part of Raymond Reddington was gone. But the idea, that he would make those men pay for all they had done... that was alive and well.

But then, she wouldn’t see that. She would see that he had abandoned his family, left his life of military service... for money.
And why shouldn’t she. He had more money than he knew what to do with. He had houses, cars... a fucking jet.

She wouldn’t see that the man who he had been; the decorated officer, the loyal family man, the good man. He still existed somewhere. He was still in there, wanting to love her.

“Red?” Elizabeth tapped softly on the door, breaking his concentration and thought patterns. “You okay?”

Red reached forward, laying his palm flat against the door facing, and could swear he felt her warmth.

“Yes.” his answer was strained.

“You sure?” she questioned. “You took off rather fast.”

“I’m fine.” he nodded to himself. He arose, hastily cleaning the evidence of his activity, throwing the tissue into the toilet, flushing leisurely.

He straightened his tie then opened the door, smiling brightly. “Just got lost in thought.

Liz tilted her head, studying the man, her mouth drooping as he brushed hastily past her.

“I better get my shit together.” Red stared at his watch. “I’ll be late meeting Francis.” he explained his reasoning. “I have to make a quick drop by the Post Office as well.”

She stared after him, feeling somewhat at a loss. Something was not right but she could not put her finger on anything tangible.

The man bent, kissing her temple, hovering for a moment before pulling away, “If you need me...” he let it hang.

He gently stroked her arm, walking from the room.

She watched him disappear around the doorframe, her mood dropping. She could not have said why, but she could almost swear... that Red had just lied to her.

But then, he said he’d been lost in thought. Maybe what was wrong, and there was something wrong, was of a personal nature.

His thoughts were his own and none of her business, really. So maybe she had read his omission as more than what it was. But Liz found herself feeling... hurt. Hurt that he didn’t feel he could confide in her. To share some of his burden with her.

He had been a shoulder to lean on many times, allowing her to unload what troubled her. So why wouldn’t he allow her to return the favor?
April 18

In the following few days that had passed, there was an odd tension between Elizabeth and Red. Often she would find the man in quiet contemplation, his features troubled and unguarded. The minute he sensed her presence, a façade of forced cheerfulness dropped into place.

The woman did not understand Red’s state of mind. She worried that, whatever the problem was, it surely must involve her somehow. This evening, it seemed that the man had purposely been obtuse when she questioned normal everyday things.

Yes, something was wrong and she determined to find out what it was that was disturbing Red so much.

Elizabeth knew Red and Dembe were home. They had arrived over an hour ago, but after dinner, the house had fallen silent.

Where she normally was comforted by the silence, tonight, she felt unsettled. Something was in the air and it left her feeling anxious and nervous.

She reached instinctively, rubbing the necklace which had yet to be removed, since Red had gifted her with the precious stones. Worrying the gems with her fingers made her feel slightly calmer.

But nothing took away the strained atmosphere surrounding her.

What unsettled her the most, was the quality of the silence.

Something was definitely amiss.

Nearing Red’s office, Liz heard the slide of metal on metal, then a heavy click as the two pieces met. She saw Dembe first, dressed in what appeared to be all black combat gear. Aside from his black t-shirt, he wore tactical pants and a long sleeve shirt both lined in pockets. Heavy boots completed the outfit.

The man had just dropped a clip from the weapon into his hand, checking it’s contents before sliding it back into its proper place.

Coming further into the room, she saw Red dressed in the same manner, a little less put together than she was used to seeing him, granted.

His sleeves were casually rolled up and his pants scrunched down on top of his open and unlaced boots. He looked attractively lethal.

She had started noticing these little details about Red, about a month ago. It bothered her.

After a few inner psych sessions, she put it down to having a minor crush on his confidence and abilities. Now when it happened, she didn’t try to deny the attraction. It was pointless. The more she
tried to distract herself from doing so, the more she thought about him.

He turned in her direction, shotgun in hand, into which he loaded, shell after shell. The muscles in
his arms rippled with the action. Extra casings lined the barrel, side saddles filled to capacity.

“Isn’t that overkill for some late night squirrel hunting?” she enquired lightly.

Red raised his head, looking at her steadily. “Not if they’re also armed.”

He picked up a handful of clips, loading the pocket sitting on his thigh. He grabbed another handful,
doing the same to the other leg. “Dembe. How many do you have?”

“Ten clips, fully loaded.”

“Grab more. I’d rather be over prepared than not.”

“Oh, what the hell is going on?” Liz watched them load more clips into the front pockets on their
jackets. “And what’s with all the firepower?”

“We’re aiding Ressler and Navabi in their little operation tonight, apprehending their newest
Blacklist member.” Red bent, fastening a .45 to his outside thigh.

“It still doesn’t explain all the...” She indicated the men and the desk littered with weaponry.
“You’ve never gotten this involved.”

“I’ve grown fond of Navabi and Ressler, and wish to help if possible.”

“Uh huh, who is he?” she demanded, her arms folded across her chest, her expression no-nonsense.
“What does he do?”

Red looked at Dembe, motioning that he could go, lest he be caught in the crossfire.

“Ah, no you don’t. Get back in here Dembe.” The man hesitated mid-step, turning around slowly.
“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

Dembe looked at Red, then the woman, obviously lost.

“I know you both look hot just the way you are,” she lifted knowledgeable brows, “but if I were
you, I would put a bullet proof vest over that cool exterior.”

Red hid his grin, handing the quiet man the required vest. Dembe removed his jacket, slipping it on
over his black t-shirt. Red helped adjust the torso and shoulder straps to a comfortable tightness
before tapping the man on the neck, letting him know the job was finished.

Dembe slipped his jacket back on, buttoning it back to his desired height. “I’ll go load the car.”
Grabbing a few bags, he walked out.

“Red, don’t think I’ve forgotten what I asked.” she tapped her foot impatiently. “What the hell are
you doing?”

“Contrary to popular belief, I used to do this on a regular basis.” she was informed. “And a hell of a
sight more involved than what’s happening tonight.” the man sat in the chair, pushing his pant leg
out of the way, yanking the laces on his boots, tying them tight.

He stood, letting the long pant legs fall over the boot, glancing around, checking the room to see if
anything had been forgotten.
“If you don’t tell me, I’ll just call Aram. He’ll spill everything.” she came up beside him, looking up to his full height.

Red hesitated visibly, biting the inside of his cheek, his eyes trained steadily on the upturned face. “...Patrick O’Brian, an arms dealer with a very bad Irish temper, made even more so, when threatened with arrest.”

“How is this our case? The FBI?” she questioned. “An arms dealer? How did you even get involved in this?”

“This one is personal.” he nodded, his eyes staring off into the distance.

She digested that tidbit of information. “Personal?”

Could this in any way, have to do with her, she wondered.

“He shot Francis a few months back.” Red shifted his eyes back to his inquisitor. “That is something I simply do not abide.”

The woman opened her mouth to question yet again, but Red waved it aside, continuing.

“Samar thought Donald and Moore weren’t taking me seriously enough when I was explaining how dangerous O’Brian is, how well armed. She asked if I was going to be there.” He drew in a cleansing breath. “I took it to mean, she would appreciate the support.”

“Is he that dangerous?” Liz asked quietly, her head dipping slightly as she contemplated the implications.

“Yes.” He dipped his head, catching her eyes once again. “I can’t let her go into this alone. She needs someone she can trust.” He took off his button down flack shirt, leaving him in a similar black tee, one which matched Dembe’s. “The tip came from me... I’m responsible.”

“Why didn’t I know about any of this, you said that you’d let me help.” She turned around, pulling his vest, unable to pick up the heavy weight with one arm. Red came over, lifting it easily, shrugging into the confines.

“I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d worry, like you are right now.” Even though he could adjust the vest himself with his eyes closed, he stooped so she could attach his straps, giving her a feeling of control.

“Just... be careful.” She pulled the flap, tightening it. “And the minute you’re done, you’ll call me?” She asked, rubbing his shoulder to secure the velcro to her satisfaction. Her hand remained for several seconds on the warmth of his body.

The simple gesture somehow reassured her, that at least for the moment, he was safe and unharmed.

“Everything is going to be fine, Lizzy. We’ll get your team home safe and sound.” He put on his shirt and started to unroll his sleeve when Liz stopped him, straightening it herself before buttoning the cuff.

She rolled down his other sleeve, patting his arm when she finished.

His eyes softened, enjoying these little touches of intimacy that she had been bestowing on him lately such as holding his hand, a hug and now this, touching him without cause.
Touching him to feel a connection with him.

“It’s not just them I’m worried about, and you know it.”

Red smiled warmly, tracing the necklace he gave her with his finger, then grinned. “You think I look hot?” he deflected.

Her eyes filled with worry, saying more than any words could.

Red cupped her face with his large palm, smoothing her cheekbone with his thumb, “It’ll be fine.”

He leaned forward and kissed her forehead lingeringly. He nuzzled her once, then turned, walking from the room.

The man’s actions frightened her. He’d never done that before. He’d hugged her, held her hand, even kissed her temple.

But kissed her forehead... nuzzled her. Lingered like he had.

Why did he... she felt a overwhelming dread filter into her soul.

_He didn’t think he’d be coming back._

She hobbled down the long hall, hearing the man’s low voice. “Watch her.” Red stated as he passed a solemn looking Silas.

“Red...” She called breathlessly, balancing herself on a nearby table.

“Sweetheart, did they take your cart again?” he sent a scathing look to Silas who shook his head negatively, his expression annoyed.

Nodding to the two men who had fallen into step beside him, they grabbed the rest of the gear and headed out, closing the door behind them.

The man stepped, closing the gap between them, “What’s wrong?”


“Trust me, I’ll be more than alert when this begins.” he was certain. “You know Samar has a better chance with me there. Ressler has his head up his ass again.”

He purposely avoided remarking on the rest of what she’d said, since there was a good possibility that someone would get injured.

It made her angry that she couldn’t argue with him, especially since he was right. If he was this adamant about going, she knew, aside from Samar, no one was really taking Red’s warning seriously and the whole team would be in danger if Red wasn’t there.

Even still, someone was going to get hurt, somehow. _She felt it._

She took a couple of hobbling steps closer, then wrapped her arms around him, the crutch dropping forgotten to the floor as she hugged him tightly. “Please be careful.”

The moment lengthened, the woman loving the feel of his arms around her.
He squeezed her back, running his hand through her hair as he cupped her head.

No words passed between them.

She knew... he couldn’t promise anything. He wouldn’t give false hope. He wouldn’t lie to her.

She finally relaxed her hold, stepping back. She hugged herself tightly, her entire system attuned to the man’s presence.

She watched him walk away.

Red hesitated at the exit, turning, staring at her silently. Their eyes met and held, Liz’s heart turning over in her chest.

He closed the door behind him.

“Come on...” Liz growled into the phone. “Pick up.” One more ring and she finally heard the line click. “Samar!”

“Liz?”

“Is Red with you?”

“No, I’m behind him, we’re–”

“I know where you’re going. I want you to keep me on the line.”

“Gonna be a little busy in a minute.” the woman snapped her pique.

“If I can’t be there, I can at least hear what’s going on.” Liz pleaded.

The silence was uncomfortable for both parties.

“You have your vest on?”

“Of course, I do.” Samar answered impatiently.

“Just put the phone in the vest. Please, Samar.”

Samar sighed, “Fine. But if it gets in my way, I’m tossing it.”

“Thank you. I just... I can’t sit around here and not know what’s going on.”

“We’re pulling up.” Liz was advised.

“Samar, good luck.” she added hastily, as an after thought. “Don’t tell Red.”

She heard the dinging of Samar’s door as it opened, then the sound of the phone as it slid against stiff cloth.

And so it began...

“Samar...” Liz heard Red’s deep voice greeting the other woman, getting right down to business. “How many clips do you have?”
“Three.” there was puzzlement in the musical voice.

“Dembe...” Red’s own voice held his concern. Liz could hear the exchange of metal.

“You really think I’ll need all these?” Samar’s tone was tinged with surprise.

“I think you’ll need more.” Red assured glumly.

Liz heard velcro being pulled, probably on Samar’s vest as she put the clips Dembe had given her inside.

The phone was suddenly muffled and Liz knew it had been dropped inside a convenient pocket. “We’re carrying more ammo.” it was advised. “I want you to stay behind us and cover our backs.” Red directed.

“Should I remind you, that I’m the one that’s FBI, here.” Liz could hear the smile in Samar’s reply.

“I don’t care what acronym you attach to your name, as long as it isn’t DOA.”

Samar sighed, “Look, I really should go first.” she practically insisted, feeling rather foolish.

“No. You listen to me.” Red corrected sternly. “Considering there’s a very good chance we won’t walk away from this, you more than anyone else here, deserve a chance of surviving.”

“Why would say that?” the woman was both flattered and insulted. “I am no different than any man here.”

Red’s eyes raked the woman’s body. “You aren’t a man.” Reddington was not being sexist, just... Reddington.

“You’re serious...” Samar was flabbergasted.

“Very serious.” he indicated with his expression. “You stay behind us, Samar.”

They both fell silent, making Liz wonder what the hell was going on.

“We should get wired.” Samar popped the trunk on her car, then Liz heard her rattling around, obviously pulling out the radios and ear pieces.

There was a moments silence, as they adjusted their equipment.

A sharp squeal came through the speaker on Liz end, hurting her ears. She cringed, holding the phone away hastily.

“What the hell!” Red bitched.

“Just a minor interference.” Samar covered quickly. “It’s Ress.” the woman calmed her two companions at the arrival of a black SUV.

“What are you doing here?” Liz heard Ressler as he joined them.

“Now, what the hell do you think I’m doing here.” Red snapped impertinently.

“This is a FBI sanctioned—”

“Save the spiel, Ressler.” Red disdained. “You’re going to need all the help you can get.”
“Yeah, whatever. You just stay behind everyone.” Ressler instructed.

Liz vaguely heard Samar mumble something, “You stay with us, do you understand me.” She heard Red say in response to whatever she had remarked. “Dembe, get her another vest.”

“What’s wrong with what I have.”

“They have armor piercing bullets, that’s what’s wrong with it.” Red snapped. “Ressler, I hate to ask, but do you have an extra vest?”

“Reddington...”

“Damn it! Shut up and listen to me for once!” Red was at the end of his tolerance, his tone saying as much. “Tell the others if they have extra vests, to put them on.”

Liz strained to hear what was going on, “Team leader authorizes to wear extra vests if available.” She heard the team answering the call, then Dembe.

“Agent Navabi.” Dembe’s smooth voice was at it’s usual calm pitch.

Liz heard the sound of Velcro again, then the phone moved.

“No, leave that one on, wear this one over that.” Red directed.

Liz listened to the far off sounds of movement and Velcro being pulled apart and reattached.

“Can you move freely?” Red asked the female Agent.

“It’s a little heavy, but I’ll manage.” Samar seemed capable. “What about you? Do you have an extra one on?”

“We’re fine.”

“That didn’t exactly answer my question.” Samar pointed out.

“Our vests are different than yours.”

Liz’s brow furrowed. She could only hope he wasn’t bullshitting Samar. Surely not. He wouldn’t want Dembe to be caught without adequate protection. But that didn’t mean that Red took the same precautions.

“Don’t even think about it, Ressler.” Red advised curtly.

“What?”

“You won’t get two words out of that thing before they’ll start shooting.”

“I have to alert them that we’re here.”

Ressler was a stickler for rules if nothing else. In Liz’s opinion the result often was contradictory to good results.

“Do you want to get yourself killed, because I can just put a bullet in you right now.” Red suggested happily.

“Reddington, I have to alert our presence and tell them to come out, peacefully.”
“Well, that’s not what’s going to happen if you use that damn bullhorn.”

“Then what do you suggest I do.”

“I suggest you surround the building and start picking them off before they have an opportunity to do the same to you.” Reddington all too easily answered the question.

“And that is why you’re the felon and we’re the law.”

“That’s why I might survive and you won’t.” Red corrected.

“Ressler, maybe we should listen to him.” Samar was always the voice of reason.

“I can’t believe you said that Navabi.”

“I don’t mean we have to shoot up the place. I meant, maybe we should smoke the place out. Handicap them before–”

“We can handle this our own way.” Ressler’s voice was adamant.

“Fucking ‘Cowboy’.” Red murmured his derision.

“What did you say?” Liz could tell Ress was offended.

“You heard me, you little idiot.” Red was not about to back down. “You’re going to get these men killed out of some damn moral code, which none of those men inside have.” he pointed to the target building. “You know what. Do what ever you want...just stay out of my way.”

“Come on, Navabi.” Ressler grumbled.

“She stays with us.” Reddington held the woman back forcibly.

“I’m team lea–”

“She stays with us.” Red all but growled.

“What?”

“Navabi?”

“Get in position, Ressler.” Samar eased the situation in her own manner, her eyes softening for her partner.

Liz heard Ressler start organizing the teams to surround the building before he faded out, apparently having walked away.

“Damn imbecile!”

Liz could feel Red’s frustration and anger through the phone line, he wasn’t even here and she could feel him sucking the energy from the room.

“In position.” Ressler’s tinny voice came through the radio.

“We should go.” Samar said. The phone moved again, sliding into the new vest.

Liz listened to the soft sounds of them moving through the terrain. It felt like an eternity, but in reality, by her watch... it was only three minutes.

A three minutes that felt like a lifetime.
Then she heard the unmistakable sound of Ressler’s voice as it echoed loudly from the bullhorn.

“This is the FBI–”

And just as Red predicted, all hell broke loose.

The sound of muffled gunfire filled the night. Liz could make out the unmistakable reverb of M16’s being fired in continuous volleys. Red and Dembe returned fire immediately, she recognized the sound of the older man’s Browning Hi-Power .40 as it reverberated loudly out of the speaker.

The FBI’s weapon of choice answered the challenge issued. Confusion and chaos reigned, all transmitted through the chatter coming over Samar’s radio.

Liz heard the sharp intake of breath from the woman.


Liz clutched the pillow, holding her breath, the voices of the tactical team talking over one another grew louder as the already continuous shooting, grew more intense.

“Save your ammo.” Red had to be speaking to Samar.

“Is he...?” the former Mossad agent’s breathy voice allowed her concern.

“Unsure.” Red replied. “Need cover fire. Ressler is down.”

Liz was surprised Red seemed to be asking the team for assistance.

“Elizabeth?” Silas entered unexpectedly through the open door. “What the–”

“Shh!” She waved the man silent, turning up the volume on her phone.

She startled at the sound of an explosion which rocked the background, muffling the sound of the weapons fire for a moment.

“Oh my God...” her voice gasped.

It sounded like a fucking war zone. Not Washington DC.

Silas walked over, reaching for her phone. “You shouldn’t be–”

“No...” She held the phone out of his reach, her eyes pleading with him. “Please...”

Silas crossed his arms, frowning hard at her, but at length... he pulled a chair over to sit beside her, knowing a lost cause when he saw one.

“Idiots!” Red swore under his breath. “Ressler!” he barked into the comm-link. “Donald!” he tried again. “Fucking useless! He’s either not hearing me or he’s not listening, again. Come on.”

Liz lost the sound of what was happening because of all the intense snapping, cracking and popping of the fight, the spent casings tinkling to the ground, the constant barrage of gunfire shielded Red and Dembe’s movements.

The woman was lost for a goodly while. She looked desperately to her right for some sort of support, but Silas sat calmly, unaffected by what was going on around him.
“They’re checking the roof lines.” Silas muttered.

“Raymond, roof...corner left.” Dembe verified the large guard’s assumption.

“Got him.” She heard Red’s deep, calm reply, before a shot rang out.

“Stay where you are, Samar.” he directed. “Can you tell...is he breathing?” Red asked of someone.

“Yes.” Samar replied. “Just a leg wound.”

“Give me his weapon.” Red demanded of the woman. “Whoo...” he whistled.

Silas grinned retroactively.

Liz’s brow furled, wondering what had happened. It suddenly dawned on her, however... that high pitched whistling sound she’d heard before...when Carver fired at them. It had rushed past Red in quick succession, sharp bursts, as bullets cut through the air.

Which meant, he, Samar and Dembe were right in the thick of it all.

The woman clenched her fists, her entire body tense and on alert. Somewhere in the mix she had lost Red’s voice.

“Hey, dumb ass!” she was never so glad to hear the familiar sarcasm barked. “Ressl... umph...” a dull thud of muffled recoil halted the man’s remarks briefly... the a terse, “You little son of a bitch!”

Silas sat straight up in his chair, his body tensing as well.

“Raymond?” Dembe’s voice was laced with concern.

“Ressler, you stupid fuck!” Reddington’s ire was more than apparent. “If you get out of this alive... I’m going to kill your ass!” it sounded like a promise to Silas, who sat back slightly, but was still on edge, clearly.

“We fire, you run, you fucking idiot!” Red had no problem clarifying the directions in this instance.

“Ready!” Ress yelled in reply, his tone tight with determination.

“Now.”

She jerked visibly hearing the loud rapid report of what appeared to be an M4, an assault rifle the Swat used.

“They’re wasting ammo.” Silas commented quietly, then glanced over at her. “Red likes that weapon. And don’t worry, he’s good with it.”

*Red was firing that weapon?*

“Dembe?” Red’s voice had never once lost the calm exterior he exuded. Well except for when he was angry with Ressler.

“Covering.” the man replied. The sound of a shotgun blasted the woman’s ear drums.

“Where the hell did you pull that from!” Samar yelled out over the din.

“Dammit!” Red’s tone was finally tense. “He’s down.”
“I need to be there.” Silas stated succinctly.

“We need to get closer.” Liz heard Red fire the large tactical weapon again. “I’ll get him, you lay down cover fire.”

Silas sat up in his chair, his leg bouncing nervously. Liz noted the man’s fingers were white where he clutched the thickness of his thigh.

“I’ll go.” Samar yelled out over the sound of Dembe racking the shotgun again.

“Stay here!” Red commanded. “Give us a fucking distraction, dammit!” the man growled his impatience. “Your stupid ass team leader is down!”

Silas shifted his eyes, silently checking on the woman’s condition.

“Samar!” Red lashed out. “Get the fuck back here!”

Liz tried to squelch the panic rising in her chest. The gunfire grew louder and more fierce, sounding like it was closing in on them.

Silas reached over laying a calming hand on her tightly clenched fists. The blue eyes darted to the reassuring grey ones.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” Red disdained. “Shit!”

There was a rapid succession of Dembe firing the shotgun and the metallic ping of bullets hitting all around them.

“Keep your head down, dammit!” Red barked at some unseen individual.

Liz heard Samar squeak, then a male grunt followed by an even louder exclamation, “Fuck!”

“Reddington?” Samar’s voice was muffled, but clearly alive. “Red!”

“Fuck...” the man drawled softly.

Liz tensed, then heard him firing his weapon. His voice got louder, then she heard the slide as he dropped his clip, then the click as he loaded a new one.

“Is he breathing.” Red stifled a groan.

“Are you–” Samar questioned.

“Yeah...” he sighed begrudgingly.

Liz strained to hear what Samar was saying, but Red fired again. “Lizzy–” he rumbled deeply.

Elizabeth gripped the phone, drawing it closer, “Red!” she called out to the man, “I’m her–”

“Shit!” Red yelled. “Get down!” A loud explosion filtered glaringly through the phone before breaking off as the line disconnected, leaving only the sound of silence in the room.

Loud, stifling, silence.

“Red! Samar!” Liz yelled into the phone. “Red!” her nerve endings were alive and thrumming. She instinctively turned to her one avenue of hope. “Silas...” She looked at him, panicked. “We need to
go there.” She pleaded.

“We can’t.” he stated bleakly.

“I can’t just sit here.” She begged. “Please!”

“I want to go there as much as y–” he held his temper in check.

“Then let’s go!”

“I don’t know where they are. He wouldn’t tell me.”

“Silas...”

“I don’t know where they are.” he repeated stonily.

Chapter End Notes

I counted the pages for chapters: 31 and 32 and thought they would be INSANELY large chapters if I didn't break them up. Chapter 31 was a little over 25 pages long. And chapter 32 was a little over 50 pages long.

So that chapter 31 and 32 I've been excited about, will now be chapters 31-34. I'm hoping it's easier to read by doing that.

Don't kill me, please.

Back off to edit more!
An hour later and there had been nothing but radio silence. Elizabeth sat stiffly erect, not having moved an inch since last she heard from Red.

Turning the phone over in her hand, she stared at the useless screen. She had never felt so helpless in her life. And that included the night of Carver’s attack.

She couldn’t call them in case they were in the middle of something. Couldn’t even call Aram should he be delivering them Intel.

It was a terrible position to be in. It was the worst position in the entire Universe in which to ‘be’.

Her team mates and friends in danger and her unable to offer any sort of support what-so-ever.

Growling with the aggravation she felt, she threw the phone. The impact, lessened by the pillow it hit, did little to ease her frustration. She stared at the dark plastic, frowning, before snatching it up again, gripping it to her chest protectively. This was her only life-line to Red Reddington.

Steadying herself against the bed, she hobbled a pacing rhythm, willing the phone to ring.

“Please, let them be okay.” she whispered.

She stopped her fruitless path, leaning into the bed. She dropped her forehead into the palm of her hand, rubbing the mounting tension that grew with each passing second. So many silent prayers had been uttered, so many unanswered.

“Dammit Red!” she hissed softly. “Where are you?” her shoulders slumped as the depression descended.

“Lizzy...” the man’s deep voice washed over her like a soothing balm and for a moment, she thought she surely must be hallucinating.

Liz raised her head quickly, finding the man standing in the doorway, filthy, sweaty and...

She blinked at the sudden wash of wetness in her eyes, a flood of relief releasing itself in a shuddering breath as she pushed off the bed, hobbling for the man.

Red caught the door with his fingers, slamming it closed as he quickly walked towards her.

“Why didn’t you call?” She held back tears of relief and joy, before wrapping her arms around his neck. “You promised.” she whispered sacredly.

“Ressler’s a damn idiot.” Red grumbled irritably, tossing his broken phone to the table top beside them.

He sounded so pissed. So agitated. So vital. So alive.

She gripped him around his neck, hugging him harder. Happy that he was all those things and not... she didn’t even want to think it.
“If someone doesn’t tell me what the hell is going on...” She felt herself about to snap, not above voicing the fact to any and all.

“I plan to,” he dropped his nose further into her neckline, breathing in her delicate scent, “now be quiet for a minute.” His voice was slightly muffled, the warm breath fanning her skin.

He just needed a minute, to gather his thoughts. To feel her.

Red nestled his nose into the woman’s neck, his lips brushing her silky flesh. He relaxed into her soft warm curves, so very relieved to be home and with her again.

Red tightened his arms around her back, lifting her feet off the floor slightly before walking the short distance to the bed. Her toes caught the top of his boots, at one point, as she rested her weight on the gritty leather.

The man smiled, his lips momentarily caressing the shell of her ear.

Tonight had been... interesting. A fucking joke, truth told.

This was the first moment of sanity he had felt all night. He reluctantly gave her the opportunity needed to break the embrace, hoping like hell she would not take it. But fortunately, Liz seemed to need the closeness as much as he did.

She held tightly to his form, her soft breath fanning his neckline. Elizabeth breathed in the subtle masculine scent of cigars and the mellow spice of cologne, relaxing further against his solid mass. She nuzzled her nose into his jacket, cool from the crisp night, finding the man’s warmth hidden beneath, ever so comforting.

He swayed with her a minute before she finally relaxed, loosening her hold enough that he could set her down fully. She stepped down from her perch on the boots, her eyes raking the tension in his face anxiously.

When he stepped back, once from her influence, the memories of the evening resurfaced, leaving the man fuming...an acid taste in his mouth.

“Before you start spouting off a hundred questions, let me finish talking.” He put his hands on his hips, taking a few short steps, before turning around, just short of pacing.

Liz did not like his curt tone. He had never spoken to her in such a manner.

“I’m sorry.” He apologized instantly, realizing he was taking his mood out on the wrong person. “I’m just damned... pissed.”

“I noticed.” She clamped her mouth shut when the curt glance cut her way. Within seconds, the mood seemed to pass however and the softer gaze rested on her.

“First of all, Patrick and what’s left of his armed bandits are with your people.” he began, filling her in on the events of the night.

“We went down to the warehouse, surrounding on all sides, Samar was with us, luckily, on the South side.” he thanked the God’s That Be. “Ressler didn’t even get four words out of that damn bullhorn, which I insisted he not use, before all hell broke loose.”

Red walked to the end of the bed, scratching his jaw, gathering his thoughts. Calming down.
“Bullets were coming from all directions, just as I said they would.” the man’s jaw tightened in open annoyance. “I told Ressler we were on his six, and because he never listens, he didn’t hear the call.” he cricked his head this way and that.

“We got in position and Dembe started firing off cover fire,” Red regrouped his thoughts. “I stepped out to allow Ressler to see our position, when I guess he saw movement... turned and shot me.”

“He shot you!” Liz came out of her reclined position, instinctively reaching for him, but he held up a staving hand.

“It’s not over yet.” she was jovially instructed. “I yelled at the idiot... explained what we were going to do, then started firing everything we had and what does he do?” his hands spread out before him, his expression astonished. “He ran.”

“Ten foot out, he went down. Pretty hard, it knocked him senseless. More senseless then he already is, anyway.” it was a given. “But it was enough that I had to step out of position to grab him, the men inside were purposely aiming for him or that damn bullhorn, I couldn’t tell... and about that time I thought along similar lines to be truthful.” he stepped for a breath.

She opened her mouth, then closed it quickly.

“What?” He asked, having noticed. She started to ask her question then hesitated again. “Go ahead.” he bade.

“Are they... Ressler, Samar? Did anyone...”

“They got Ressler in the back, twice. But, I insisted that they double their vests, it probably saved his life.” he stopped pacing quickly to inform her stoutly. “No, it did save his life.”

He fell silent for a moment, “The rounds went through the first vest. He’ll have a painful bruise, but he’s alive. Samar might have some minor bruising from when I pushed her down, but otherwise she’s fine.” he stopped pacing, his head bowed for a moment.

“No one died.” he waited a second for her to assimilate. “Though, there were injuries.”

“I told the other teams to distract them, that we needed to grab Ressler. At which point the North team came up with the most idiotic plan in the history of Warfare as we know it.” again his hands motioned expressively. “They stormed the building.”

“Men came pouring out all three sides of the building, shooting at everything and anything. It was hell on earth Lizzy, I tell you.” he was on a roll. “I went out to grab Donald, with Samar’s help, when one of Patrick’s men got her in his sights. I blocked her and he got a shot in on me before Dembe put a bullet in him... The End.”

“Red, are you telling me you have been standing there, this whole time, knowing you’ve been shot... twice?” she was aghast.

“Don’t panic.” He pulled off his jacket, revealing his left arm slick with blood.

“Dembe!” Liz yelled out, her voice carrying through the closed door.

A few seconds later Dembe opened the door, carrying the first aid bag, heading directly for Red.

“Why aren’t you sitting?” She pushed at Reddington. “Make him sit.” She gestured at Dembe.
All the annoyance Red had felt in the last two hours started to fade, melting away to nothing as he watched the woman fidget and bully him. Liz crawled around on her knees, following him, pushing him towards a bench at the end of the bed.

“Did I just say not to panic?” Red looked at Dembe, “She’s doing exactly what I told her not to do.”

Dembe’s mouth lifted at the corner, pointing to the bench indicating Red should take a seat. But the man shook his head.

“I don’t want to get blood on it.” it was stated. “That’s a twelve hundred dollar bench.”

“Who the fuck cares about the bench!” Liz had mentally swept the man’s frame but the black material of his garments hindered her search. “Where else were you hit?”

“Did you just say fuck?” Red held his laughter.

Liz pulled at his shirt, bringing him back towards her after having just pushed him away.

She examined every part of the man available, all areas clear except for one enormous gash running across his arm. Running her hands quickly over his stomach, she grazed his hips to the top of his thigh.

The fabric was tacky with the man’s own blood.

“Take off your pants, Red.”

“Well I guess she did say fuck.” he chuckled at his own wit, allowing her every whim. His innate sense of humor came to the fore as he watched her hopelessly fumbling with his belt buckle.

“I’ll fuck you!” she blasted with a scathing look, but then Dembe’s muffled laugh, she realized with horror, what she had just said.

“But darling... now?” Red smiled tenderly, not stopping her actions, finding them oddly endearing, “Dembe is in the room.”

“Like that would matter.” Dembe voiced sotto voce.

“Shut up.” She muttered while pulling the buckle open.

“Sorry.” Dembe apologized.

Liz looked at him weirdly for she had not heard his quiet statement. Red’s grin widened... because he had.

“They’re only flesh wounds, Lizzy.” He placed a hand over her shaking ones, not to stop her, but to reassure her. “Nothing to worry about. Really. Calm down.”

“The arm can wait until you’re out of the shower.” Dembe had made that decision, dropping the short sleeve back over the wound.

“I think I’m going to need a towel, please.” Red glanced over at the large man.

Dembe returned with a dark towel, sitting it on the bench.

As Red sat, he sensed Elizabeth crawling closer, seating herself just behind him on the bed, hovering.
How long had it been since someone had given a damn about his welfare, besides Dembe? His wife, maybe? Certainly long enough he couldn’t remember exactly. It warmed him to be thought of again as a human being.

He felt bad that she was so concerned, but in time she would see it was nothing and he was fine. He needed to enjoy this moment in time, no matter how selfish.

“Jesus, Red.” Liz reached forward, tracing the hole in his vest, her probing releasing a stray spent bullet. The copper slug fell unceremoniously to the floor. “You took one in the back too.”

“Must have been when I blocked Samar.” he imagined. “It’s fine, Lizzy. I didn’t even feel it much.” He sing-songed his head, pulling the velcro at his shoulder while she undid the sides on his vest.

Dembe took the heavy weight. Red pulled at his laces, removing his boots, then grimaced when he felt the cool air hit his wet sock. Pulling the sock off, his hand and foot came away streaked with blood... Not good.

The woman noticed immediately, gripping the neck of his shirt, balling it in her fist.

“You’re choking me, sweetheart...” He soothed, patting her fist comfortably.

The woman gasped, releasing his clothes instantly. “I’m so sorry!”

“No worries, but I want to let you know...” He wiped off his foot before popping the buttons on his black pants, gingerly pulling them down his legs, “I actually tried that once in Bangladesh.”

Dembe rolled his eyes expressively, “It was not Bangladesh...” he exasperated.

Red grinned over at him. “It all begins to blur... the lack of oxygen, you know.”

The woman’s fist returned post haste to the man’s shirt collar, this time practically strangling him. Red coughed once, easing her fingers off the material.

“A flesh wound my ass!” Liz gasped, seeing the through and through on his outer thigh. “Ressler did that?”

“The little bastard.” Red poked at the wound, pushing a fresh flow of blood from the openings, catching it on the towel. “If he thinks shooting me is going to stop the ‘Donald is a Dumbass’ jokes, he is sorely mistaken.”

He walked into the bathroom holding the towel in place, followed closely by Elizabeth who was supported by Dembe. The large man placed his ward on the bathroom seat.

Red shrugged off their intrusion, stepping into the shower. He removed his t-shirt and boxers, then threw them out onto the floor. Stepping under the hot stream, he hissed when it hit his leg.

“Why didn’t the medics take care of that on scene?” Liz asked over the sound of the shower.

“Because he did not tell anyone.” Dembe said disapprovingly. “I only found out about it when we were several blocks away.” He grabbed a couple of towels, standing outside the stall.

“It’s not like I haven’t been shot before.” Red pressed heavily into the wound, producing a fresh flow. “And I’m positive it won’t be the last.” He rubbed the soap around his body, happy to get the grit of the evening off.
Shutting the water down, he stilled. How the hell was he going to get out of here tactfully? She was sitting just out there and now wasn’t the time to discuss the past... he wasn’t ready to discuss anything besides tonight’s events.

Wiping the water from his eyes, he was grateful when Dembe’s arm enter the stall, holding fresh towels.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

*Thank God for Dembe.*

Red grabbed one, sloughing the water, then wrapped the other towel around his shoulders. Coming to the edge of the shower stall, he saw Dembe blocking Liz’s view, allowing him a straight shot to the closet.

He grabbed some clothes slipping them on hastily, then left the sanctuary.

Dembe pointed to the side of the tub, indicating he should sit there. “Put your leg in.” He shook the disinfectant, waiting for Red to get in position.

Liz came up behind them, placing her hands on Red’s shoulders, craning over his head to see what was happening.

“Are you ready.” Dembe popped the cap on the bottle, tipping it towards him.

“I shiver with antici...” He turned his leg for better access, bracing himself. “…pation.”

Dembe pursed his lips slightly, “Not bad.” critiquing Red’s performance before pouring the burnt orange disinfectant directly on and around the hole without warning.

“Fuck...” Red tensed, groaning deeply in his chest before dropping his head. He breathed through the shock, finally deflating when the pain ebbed.

It didn’t hurt that little hands were rubbing his neck comfortingly.

“He performed in Rocky Horror once at Summer Stock.” Dembe explained, ignoring Red’s reaction all together. “He did Magenta... of course.”

Red nodded agreeably. “And I played the part of Riff Raff.”

“Are you okay?” Liz ran her hand over his head, settling her palm on his neck, her mood much improved. She knew the ‘performance’ they gave was for her benefit.

He exhaled, then nodded that he was. “I’m going to beat the hell out of Ressler.”

Dembe came back to his side, supplies ready. Working quickly, he had the leg and arm fixed and bandaged in no time.

“Just like the Chinodos Incident.” Red remembered fondly. “We only had the simplest of supplies, but somehow he got me patched up and out the door before the shit really hit the fan.” He gave the man a ‘thumbs up’. “Good work, Dembe.”

“What is it with you guys and incidents? Does anything ever turn out to be good?” Liz’s tone was more shrill than she could account for.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever really had anything go completely South on us. It’s just that none of them
have ever unfolded according to the original plan. There for, becoming the *incident.*” he ‘air quoted’ with his finger. “Thank you, Dembe. Why don’t you go get some rest now.”

“If you need me...” The dark man stated before wishing them a good night.

Red finished wiping off his leg and arm, then got off the tub before moving on to his nightly ritual as though nothing untoward had happened, his little shadow watching him the whole time.

“Are you all right?” He finally asked the silent woman.

“Not really, no.” She said, suddenly realizing as much.

“What’s wrong?”

They moved out of the room unto the bed, slowly but surely.

“I felt useless. I didn't know what was going on. If anything was wrong, I couldn't do a damn thing to help.” She replied in one breath.

“Everything turned out fine.” he reached, flipping the light off.

“I don’t know if you noticed or not, but you have a hole in your thigh.” She griped, turning out her own light.

“But, I’m still breathing, as is the rest of your team, which makes it a good night.” He listened to her deep breathing, almost wishing he had left his light on to read her face. She was either pissed or understood and was reconciling herself to the fact that even if he had a couple of wounds, the night had turned out okay in the end.

“I was listening.” Liz blurted.

“Excuse me?”

“I called Samar before she met you, I told her to keep the line open.” she confessed. “I could hear what was happening.”

“Elizabeth..”

“Don’t you scold me.” She warned.

“I wasn’t going to scold you.”

“You only call me Elizabeth when you want my attention, you’re annoyed or wanting to make a point.”

“I do not.” He smiled slightly, now glad it was dark in the room so she couldn’t see it.

“Well... most of the time.”

“I’m just worried for you. What if you heard someone literally go down.” he did not like to think about the psychological implications. “You couldn’t help them, you couldn’t do anything for them. It would have eaten away at you.”

“I just couldn’t sit here and not...” She sighed heavily. “Thank you... for helping them. Protecting Samar.”
“Umhmm.” He hummed his reply.

“The explosions?” she asked.

“Flash grenades.” Red shrugged. “Though, if I’m right, O’Brian’s men may have thrown a few pipe bombs into the mix.”

She groaned quietly. Red turned his head to seek her out. He could only see her silhouette, but enough that he could tell she was covering her face with her hands.

“I heard you get shot.” she stated her agony, reliving that moment in her mind. “I didn’t connect it at the time, but I just replayed it and...”

“Lizzy...” he sighed, “let it go. We’re all fine.” He lay silently, his arm supporting his head. He felt her move, the warmth of her body infiltrating the t-shirt he had donned as she snuggled close, her arm laying gently upon his chest.

“You said my name.” she whispered.

“Yes...” he remembered. “I said your name.”

“I’m really glad you’re okay.” She mumbled in his ear, before dropping a lingering kiss on his cheek.

He pulled his arm out from behind his head, wrapping it around her. “So am I...”

Because if she was like this and he was all right, what would she have been like had he died.

A question he had not asked himself since he’d been married. But like with his wife, he now had this person, this woman, Lizzy... relying on him to be here, with her.

She didn’t know and wouldn’t know, how close he came to catching a bullet, where that question would have been relevant.

It had been damn near impossible to walk away from her, not just once, but twice.

He didn’t know if he could deny her again, because he almost hadn’t tonight.
April 18

Liz sat in the gazebo, breathing in the fresh spring air, smiling at the passing guard. She kicked her feet up and cracked open her book.

Red had bought her the entire works of her favorite author and she couldn’t wait to dive into them. After reading the first, she was starting with the second in the trilogy that she’d been dying to read.

She hoped that the second part held glimpses of the characters from the first, just to know how they had progressed in their relationship.

And now, two chapters in, she was so glad she had fallen in love with this author, because the woman sure did deliver.

The characters had a baby on the way, the man showered his lady with affection and the humor Liz had gotten a glimpse of in the first novel, shined through, now that the man was overjoyed in his new life.

This was the woman’s idea of perfect holiday, these past few weeks had been a curative to the soul.

Liz raised her head from her fantasy world as Silas neared, screwing her face up and crossing her eyes as the man passed by.

“Your face will stick like that.” he quipped. “And that’s something you don’t need happening right now... gimp.”

Liz scowled harshly, making the man guffaw with amusement.

“Don’t you have a bridge to troll or something?” she sneered playfully.

Silas grinned at her, “You are becoming more entertaining.” he nodded his approval. “I didn’t expect that to happen.” he crossed his arms, leaning casually against the gazebo’s frame.

“What’s that supposed to mean!” she demanded defensively.

“You were as dull as a wooden knife.” he nodded sagely, obviously agreeing assessment.

She drew her head back, her expression most indignant. “What?!”

“You got your point across, but couldn’t cut the muster.”

“You’ve been hanging out with Red too long.” she advised.

“I’ve been watching you for a while.” the woman screwed up her face at his creepy deliverance of the statement. “While you could tell someone how to profile a killer, you couldn’t catch one.”

“I was supposed to be teaching, not catching.” she defended herself. “And was there a point to your observance, sage Jedi Master?”
“You’re growing grasshopper.” he appeared shocked. “And while you may never surpass me, I still enjoy the game.” he looked off into the distance, totally satisfied with himself.

“Yet, you’re the one who changed the subject.” she smiled inoffensively. “So maybe I did surpass you after all.” she crossed her arms under her breasts allowing her own confidence.

“Well, I didn’t think you’d take to me telling you, being the troll I am, that I’d eat you right up.” the man winked and swaggered away, leaving the woman shell shocked for a second.

Liz snapped her mouth shut, thinking quickly of a response, “Samar would enjoy it immensely though.” she yelled out after the man.

Silas turned his head, a wolfish grin overtaking his face.

Elizabeth held her smile, snorting her amusement after the man had disappeared around the corner of the house. She was so beginning to enjoy these exchanges.

The woman grimaced, slapping the book down on the seat, “Dammit!” she groused. “I should have told him to stay away from Ressler... who we all know, adores trolls.” she huffed her annoyance for the oversight, sighing. Though, on second thought, Ressler wouldn’t stand a chance against this troll.

Silas may be right, she may not always come out on top, but she did enjoy the verbal sparring.

If anything, she took to the challenge and felt herself growing with each passing duel. She had even taken to playing with Red when she felt on top of her game and he had seemed to enjoy the match of wills.

A highlight of her evenings was often when she would throw a good comeback out and Red would beam with pleasure and applaud her wit or valiant attempt, in some cases.

Even when Red, who seemed to have picked up why she was doing it, coached her on a good rejoinder. Instead of making her feel a failure, she instead felt more well informed or armed for her next battle of wits with the head guard.

Red supplied some juicy barbs to hurl at the man.

She couldn’t wait to see Red’s face when she told him of Silas’s latest comeback and it’s sexual laden innuendo.

Sometimes he would roll his eyes at the man’s vulgarity, and others, his face would wipe of expression.

Which was an expression in itself, she had come to learn.

The man had not appreciated the retort Silas had offered, and was holding himself in check.

She’d never tell anyone in a million years, that blank expression was one she most enjoyed.

She knew he was only thinking the guard had over stepped a boundary when talking to his ward.

But she liked to secretly fantasize that he was a little jealous.

She knew she probably shouldn’t daydream about the man, but couldn’t help it sometimes.

Especially when reading some of the books he had purchased her.
There was so much of Red in these characters, his face had taken shape in her imagination when the scenes unfolded in her mind.

And her little secret, didn’t hurt anyone, ‘right’?

Like this story now she was deep into, the girl was honor bound to marry an Earl who’d hired a thief-taker to find her.

The bounty hunter had found her, and in the midst of negotiating her return, he had offered a way out, which was for her to become his lover in return for his protection.

It wasn’t so much she thought Red would take the man’s path. She just thought the character’s demeanor, his outlook on life and society as a whole, reminded her very much of Red Reddington.

Even the very description of the character. His swaggering confidence, his charm, style and good looks, bespoke of Red. His vast wealth wasn’t his true aim in life. It just existed to give him the ability to focus on his goals. And his loyal underground contacts gave him information the local constabulary couldn’t begin to procure.

But most of all, he wasn’t just a bounty-hunter for hire living under an assumed name. He was heir to a title. Two different men, living in one body.

Red Reddington was a felon with an empire at his fingertips. But if what he suggested was true, Raymond Reddington, the ex-Naval Officer, was innocent of the crimes of which he was accused.

A hand curved around her mouth and rib cage tightly, stunning her from her daydream.

“Don’t make a sound.” a low voice hissed in her ear.

She fought against the assailant’s hold, struggling uselessly in the bruising grip. The man pulled her over the short wall of the wooden structure, dragging her towards a means of egress.

Elizabeth kicked out in vain attempt, wincing when her leg ached with the sudden jolting movement. She bit the hand covering her mouth, but it only caused her captor to hurry all the more.

He dropped his hand, yanking the door handle of a car, giving the woman her needed chance.

“She screamed, fighting the man’s pressuring hands which shoved her roughly into the automobile. “Silas! Help!”

Liz wheezed shakily, unceremoniously pushed hard into the framing of the car door, which knocked the wind from her.

“Shut up!” the man snapped. He jerked his head about, hearing a man’s voice repeatedly yelling out Elizabeth’s name.

Then suddenly, gunfire split the air.

Tom slammed the door shut, jamming his key into the ignition. He grabbed her, preventing her intended escape.

The young man pushed his foot to the floor, peeling away from the curb. The back window shattered in a spray of glass. Elizabeth ducked low in the seat, hoping the action would allow Silas a clear shot.

Tom spun, lifting his own weapon firing wildly. Liz hit his arm, jamming it into the car’s seat,
“Liz!” the man gritted. “Stop!”

“Let me go!” she grated in response, painfully biting into his arm.

“Damn it!” Tom grunted his growing fury, his arm swinging out automatically.

She saw the blur of his hand. The warm metal of his weapon connected with her temple and her world shifted into a black void.

Elizabeth blinked, wincing under the sudden light, the throbbing in her head eliciting a slight groan.

A voice came out of the hazy aura still clinging to her, “Are you awake?”

“I should have let Red kill you a long time ago...” she whispered adamantly.

“A simple, yes, would have sufficed.” Tom sighed, then brushed her bangs back.

She jerked away.

“Don’t touch me!” she spat.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“What did you think hitting me in the head with a gun would do?” her voice was tinged with hatred. “Oh, I guess that’s your version of a love tap, isn’t it?”

“Liz...” the man placated.

“What the hell do you want?” she interrupted heatedly.

“What the hell do you think!” he returned in the same manner. The man visibly tried to calm his responses, hoping to gain control of the situation and the woman. “I was saving you from–”

“The only saving I need is from you!” she stated disdainfully.

“Reddington w–”

“Would never hurt me!” she pushed into her throbbing temple, grimacing. “You on the other hand...”

“Reddington only wants the Fulcrum.” he advised coldly.

“And what the hell do you want. And don’t even think of saying, me.” she voiced her disgust. She had already heard all this before.

“But I do.” he sat down quickly, reaching for her hand, then frowned when she wrenched it away. “I love you Liz.”

“I’m not interested in your form of love, thanks.” her mouth twisted derisively. “The annulment should have been a dead give away.”

“If you’d just give me a chance to explain.” he soothed, moving closer to her.

“Well, go ahead.” she glared at the man, yanking on the chain holding her wrist to the bed. “It
doesn’t appear I’m going anywhere.”

“Have you asked Red why he wants it? Has he told you anything about your family? Has he–”

“These sound like questions to me,” she gritted. “Not explanations,” she scowled. “If you know so much, why don’t you just fucking tell me. Because...” she nodded knowingly, “I can tell you for a fact, Red will be here any minute now.”

“Why do you have this blind faith in him?” Tom shook his head piteously.

“Why do you always skirt the issue?” she countered expertly. “Admit it, you don’t know jack shit. You just want me to tell you what I know so you can try to fill in the blanks yourself,” she jerked on the chain irritably. “It’s not gonna happen, so don’t waste my time. I want to go home, now!”

“You sold our home,” he accused.

“Because it wasn’t a home! And never was a home! It was a lie!” she snapped. “That house was nothing but a noose around my neck, draining the life from me!”

She frowned slightly, the words being familiar, but she couldn’t place where she had heard them?

She shook it off, shooting daggers at the man staring sadly at her. She huffed in a flare of annoyance.

“Just like your untimely visits are draining!” She continued her tirade. It felt so good to get some of the loathing she felt for this man out of her system. “I want to go to my new home, with Red!”

“Lizzy...”

“Don’t call me that,” she growled coldly.

“Oh, that’s his little pet name for you,” the man snarled, “isn’t it?”

“Do you want to know his little pet name for you?” she sneered. “Fucker.” she replied readily.

“That’s all he could come up with?” he rolled his eyes.

“No, that was mine.” she announced proudly.

“Let’s go away,” the man smiled disarmingly, changing his tactics mid-stream, “just the two of us.”

She gritted her aggravation, her head falling back into the wall.

“We can start over. Get away from Reddington.” he continued.

The woman dropped her head into her hands, slumping in defeat. Her eyes welling in frustration.

“I want you to leave me alone...” Liz’s tone held her exasperation. “I just want to go home.” she wailed quietly.

“Where would you like home to be?” he was quick to respond. “We can go anywhere.”

“You’re like the plague.” she talked over him. “Or maybe a roach?” she had found a more apropos description. “Nothing will eradicate you, right?”

“There’s nothing holding us here, really.” he continued, as if she hadn’t spoken at all.
“You’ll outlive the atomic blast.” she nodded her belief. “Faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive. Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. It’s Superman. No... it’s Tom, the indestructible roach...” she curled toward the wall, closing her eyes tightly. 

She willed Red Reddington to come and take her out of this particular type of hell she now found herself within.

“We can break hold of him,” Tom leaned over her, warming to his narrative, “get out from under his thumb. Away from his lies. The filth he brings into our lives.”

“I don’t want to,” she mumbled, knowing he did not hear her words, “but thanks for asking.”

“Let me take care of you.” the man soothed, reaching out, stroking her hair.

The woman tensed, his touch making her cringe inside.

“What’s wrong, babe?” the man cooed tenderly.

“I hate... no, I loathe, when you call me that.” she had always hated that pet name.

Tom looked at her adoringly, making the woman’s skin crawl. The feeling intensified when he stroked her once again. “You always liked–”

“Stop touching me.” she shivered involuntarily, her voice a husky whisper.

“I don’t think you want me to,” he stated gently, “you shivered–”

“In revulsion.” she gritted hatefully.

The man sighed impatiently, jerking her away from the wall, turning her to face him. The chain snapped loudly, rattling across the concrete floor.

The sound of splintering wood, as a heavy door gave way to a force more powerful, filled Elizabeth’s heart with hope.

Liz’s head whipped about anxiously.

Tom yanked her off the bed, holding her in front of him, using her as a human shield.

The reality made the taste of bile rise in her throat.

“Let her go.” Red Reddington snarled, his weapon steady, the sights aimed directly at his target.

“Slide it.” Tom demanded from behind his shield. “Slide the gun, now.”

“No.” Red stated emphatically. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head slowly, her eyes focused on the man before her and nothing else.

“Tom, put the gun down before you do something you’ll deeply regret.” Red cocked his head, his tone rather soothing to Liz’s ears actually. “Make the right choice, Tom. But make it fast.”

Reddington shook his head, downing it for a second, his disgust more than apparent. The light eyes were devoid of any emotion except hatred when they lifted.

“We’ve been through this before.” Red narrowed his eyes dangerously. “Only this time, when I get
over there, I will take that gun away from you... and then...” he smiled pleasantly, “I will kill you.”

Tom leveled his weapon as the man stalked forward.

Elizabeth pushed her captor’s arm upward as he fired, the shot ricocheting off the cement ceiling.

The woman grappled with the man for control. Tom shoved her hard, landing her into the bed before turning back to the enemy.

An enemy which was already upon him.

Red grabbed Tom’s arm, twisting and bending his wrist, breaking the weapon free. The gun clattered to the floor. Red’s foot kicked it aside, sending it skittering out of sight under the bed.

The enraged man shoved his shoulder into the younger man’s chest, flipping Tom in the air. The man hit the floor, a resounding crack filling the room.

Tom grunted his pain, favoring his side but lunged for the loose weapon. He yelled out sharply when Red’s foot stomped his hand, halting any advancement.

Red thrust his gun into the man’s heaving chest, “I told you...” Red’s breath fanned his face, his eyes black coals of rage, “if you so much as looked in her direction again, I’d put a bullet in you.”

“But you haven’t yet...” Tom glared back, his expression wincing from the pain inflicted, as he sought out Elizabeth Keen, “and you won’t, because she’s watching.”

Red looked up at the woman, then back at Tom. “No, that was just a reminder...” he shrugged, “or warning in this case, that I always keep my promises.” the man rasped lowly, pulling back on the trigger.

Tom jerked as the bullet tore through his chest, driving into the concrete floor beneath him. He clawed at the wound, gasping and staring wild eyed at the man.

The young man instinctively sought out Elizabeth, reaching for her.

Red caught the man’s wrist, jerking it back and away. “No, you don’t get to touch her.” he shook his head. “She will not feel guilt for your transgressions.” The man shook his head once as he glared coldly, dragging the man towards the door.

Dembe waited patiently as he had through the entire episode.

“If you please?” Red asked politely.

Dembe took hold of Tom’s arm, dragging the wheezing man from sight.

Red blinked once, feeling a little of his soul melt away. Each time brought the same feeling, the same emptiness, the same apathy.

He watched the large man turn the corner down the way, disappearing from sight before redirecting his attention to the silent woman behind him.

“Lizzy...” he slowly approached, his eyes gentle on Elizabeth Keen who slumped dejectedly on the edge of the bed.

Her shoulders shook as she cried silently. Red’s wing tip shoes entered her watery field of vision.
“Sweetheart?” he frowned his concern, reaching out, stroking his hand over her small head. “I’m sorry, I had to do that, but he woul–”

She bolted from the bed, wrapping her arm tightly around his middle, weeping despondently into his jacket.

“I want to go home.” was all she knew for certain, her fingers tightening into a death grip about the expensive fabric of his coat. “Please take me home, Red.”

Red’s large hand smoothed her hair, his fingers filtering lovingly through her soft strands. He rocked her gently, his tone washing over her like warm honey, “It’s all right.”

She turned her ear into his chest, fixated on the deep comforting rumble of his voice. “Sit down sweetheart.”

She shook her head, clutching him tighter.

“I have to get the cuff off your wrist Lizzy.” he reminded patiently. “You want me to do that, don’t you?” he propitiated the woman. “So we can go home.”

She realized she was still chained to the bed, her arm stretched out tightly behind her. She nodded slowly, sniffing. She regained her seat on the bed dejectedly.

Red crouched down in front of her, making quick work of the lock, releasing the tight cuff.

His thumb caressed the abused, reddened skin. He bowed his head, tenderly peppering her wrist with soft kisses.

“Did he hurt you?” he enquired, his lips warm against her skin.

“Y-Yes.” she had come to terms with Tom Keen’s methods long ago but that did not mean she had to accept or like them.

Red tensed, slowly raising his eyes to meet hers, finding them cold and angered.

She turned her head quickly, showing the man where Tom had hit her. She wanted vengeance she found, and was not above such a petty emotion in this case.

Red reached up, gentling her hair back, wincing as he saw the raw, red welt. His concern was immediate and foremost. “Are you nauseous?”

“Yes,” she muttered, “but not because of that. I don’t think?”

He nodded in understanding. “Dizzy?”

“I don’t think so?” she edged to the side of the bed, intent on standing now.

Red stood quickly, holding his hand out for her. She clasped his hand, the strong fingers giving her strength. She pushed off the bed, trying to find her bearings.

“I think I’m okay.” she looked up at him, sighing deeply.

“Let’s try a few steps.” he encouraged.

She gained confidence with each moment spent in the man’s presence. “I’m good.”
Red looked as Dembe entered, the man’s face showing no emotion.

It was Red’s cue, that the problem had been resolved. He breathed easier, but there were still things to be handled.

Red wrapped his arm around her back and legs, lifting her effortlessly, holding her close against his chest.

“I can walk...” she muttered compliantly, all the same.

“It’s quite a walk.” she was informed. “And you’re exhausted.”

She took a deep breath, laying her head into his shoulder silently accepting his word. She relaxed totally into his comforting hold.

“Let’s go home, sweetheart.” Red soothed quietly.

Chapter End Notes

I used some dialogue from the actual show, as I’m sure you picked up on. I am giving credit, where credit is due to the writers of The Blacklist.

You'll know some of it when you see it. Hope no one takes offense. It’s my homage.
April 19

The ride home was quiet. Red allowed her to collect her thoughts, staying close to her the entire time, his arm around her protectively.

She sat silently basking in his closeness, leaned against the fragrant fabric of his outer jacket.

His touch, whether smoothing her hair, surreptitiously folding and refolding the pleats of the gauzy spring dress she wore, felt both reassuring and sensual.

It kept his mind sane. To touch her, to know she was tangible... with him again.

Liz was never so glad when they pulled into the driveway.

Red helped her into the house and back to their room, closing the door behind them... shutting out the rest of world.

“Why don’t you wash up?” he suggested, wishing to rid her of the other man’s touch.

She headed to the bathroom, leaving the door open, stripping her top and bottoms off as she cleared the room.

“Do you need help?” he asked quietly.

The woman hesitated, fighting modesty and a deathly tired sensation. The latter winning out in the end.

“Please...” she finally assented.

Red grabbed a towel and a wash cloth, wetting and soaping it before handing it to her. He turned away, offering privacy. She wiped herself down, ridding herself of the grit and grime of this horrible day.

“Your back?” he asked, his eyes sweeping the lovely plains as neutrally as possible in his present condition.

The man warmed the cloth, stepping behind her. He took his time with the task, enjoying the intimacy implied.

“Let me see your wrist again.” he held out his hand, gently twisting the arm in the light. “Let’s keep it uncovered for a while. If it starts to annoy you, then we’ll wrap it.”

He stretched his neck, craning it slightly, glancing at her temple, his eyes chilling.

“If I hurt you...” the unspoken command was heard before he brushed her hair back, careful to not pull on the dark tresses.

“The skin isn’t broken, but you do have bruising.” he sighed. “Would you like an ice pack?”
She shook her head negatively.

He smiled softly, then dipped his head, kissing her wrist again. “You’re bruised, but you’ll live.” he proclaimed, then stroked her cheek, and kissed her temple.

She leaned into his touch, not surprised to feel him cup her face and press his full lips against the bruising.

She turned slightly, her lips brushing his cheek line.

“Thank you...” she kissed him again, her lips lingering longer than necessary, “for coming for me.”

“I always will.” he mumbled against her skin, his mouth warm on her flesh.

She turned into the affection, the man pulling back, smiling gently. He brushed the strand of hair back into place that had caught on the shadowy coarseness of his beard.

As always, Red was gentle with her. He hadn’t hurt her during his treatment.

He never hurt her... ever.

And he never would. She knew as much now.

She leaned forward kissing his lips gently.

The man froze in place, his senses reeling.

She pressed into his soft lips, then reluctantly pulled back.

“What’s that for?” he needed the clarification himself but was loathe to break the spell.

His warm breath ghosted over her lips, calling her back to his full ones.

She slowly melded her mouth to his softly pliable one. At first, Red was stunned, simply allowing matters to progress as they might but soon enough his senses were pulled into the hesitant, guileless approach.

The man reached out, his hands braced on the bench, moving into her efforts. For one brief second he allowed himself to respond, his mouth increasing the pressure of the kiss, the warm moist lips causing his stomach to react chaotically.

He broke apart reluctantly, his eyes remaining closed for a long beat as he regained his equilibrium.

“Are you sure you don’t have a concussion?” he attempted a lightness he did not feel.

The blue eyes bore into his hypnotically for what seemed an eternity.

“Kiss me.” she whispered unsteadily.

The request clearly stunned the man and he took his time, his expression almost quizzical but then...

Red inched forward slowly, tracing her lips with his own, tormenting her teasingly for minutes on end, until she was breathing shakily.

“This is wrong.” he whispered against her lips. “So why don’t I give a shit?”

She leaned into him, her mouth more than impatient in this instance.
The man grunted his appreciation, sliding to his knees, increasing the pressure of his kiss. His hand slid beneath her dark hair, threading his fingers through the fine strands making her moan against his mouth.

He broke the lock, gasping against her mouth, his warm clean breath tingling her cheek line delicately.

She flicked her tongue, catching his top lip sensually, “I need you...”

“What do you need?” his voice was thick and raspy.

She slid closer to him, her mouth trembling under his expertise, “Touch me...”

His fingers traced her face gently, his arms drawing her closer. He grunted when he felt her little tongue begging for entrance into the warm opening of his mouth.

He flicked the very tip ever so slowly, enjoying her small whimper of delight.

She moaned into his mouth. The man deepened the kiss systematically, his tongue fighting hers for dominance. Liz relinquished control, allowing him to guide where her where he wanted.

*This man could kiss.*

She felt her body tingle in anticipation of what was to come.

Red stood, easing her along gently, his large hand spreading across lower back. A low growl escaped the man’s throat when he felt her nakedness pressing against the length of him.

A soft mewl escaped her throat when she felt the rich linen and the scrape of cold buttons brush her breasts. His large hands spanned her bare back, as his arms enclosed her securely.

She moaned her dissension, breaking free momentarily, squirming in his embrace.

“Wha–?” he breathed against her lips.

“No...” she grabbed the front of his jacket, pushing the fabric off his shoulders, or attempting the feat.

Red pulled at his sleeves, dropping the expensive garment to the floor while she worked on his tie and dress shirt. His eyes were gentle on her unskilled efforts, as he allowed her every whim.

His nose nudged her jaw line, his lips kissing her throat, his teeth nipping the fragrant flesh here and there.

His fingers grasped her hair in a firm but insistent hold, his hand guiding her gently. He groaned against her nape, his lips sending chills of delight down her spine.

Red slid his hand unhurriedly over the creamy heated flesh of her ample buttocks, his fingers curling to the supple curve. Her moans lengthened in duration as his thick fingers grazed her wet center from behind. He kneaded the tight flesh in his palm, their tongues battling in a fevered kiss.

His arm held her tightly in a prison she had no desire to escape. The woman’s fingers trailed up the muscled biceps of his arm as she tip-toed to ensure the kiss continued.

Elizabeth rocked back into his touch, opening her legs wider for his dexterous hand’s activity. “P-Please.” she found she was not above pleading at this stage.
Red skimmed her ass cheek delicately, his fingers spreading over her tingling, throbbing sex, drawing the growing wetness from her opening.

“That’s my girl...” he purred against her lips. The man cupped her ass in his palms, lifting, his jaw pulsing when her beautiful legs wrapped around his waist.

He supported her weight effortlessly making his way to the bedroom.

Stalking to the bed, readjusting his hold on her lithe body, they sank into the soft bedding.

His eyes locked with hers and for the first time she felt she was seeing the true Red Reddington.

Her stomach tightened in anticipation and she literally vibrated to his next words...

“What do you need?” he grunted against her mouth.

“You.” she gasped tremulously, boldly reaching for his belt, pulling the dark leather apart, their fingers meeting at his zipper. The sound of the metal sliding down was incredibly loud over their heavy breathing, but a most welcome sound.

“Please hurry.” she urged wantonly.

Red pushed her back, following her as their bodies melded together. He dropped kisses along the hollow of her throat, her chest bone, easing agonizingly lower until finally his hot mouth engulfed one straining, quivering nipple.

Elizabeth inhaled sharply, grasping his head, her fingers insistent on the flesh as she pressed his efforts deeper into his pastime.

She bit at her lip, arching into his wickedly talented tongue which flicked and suckled her nipples hungrily. Her mouth fell agape when she felt his clothed bulge brush against her clit.

She withered about happily, rocking up into his crotch.

Liz felt his smile around her nipple feeling the tip of his tongue lick her pale skin, tracing the heavy edge of her breast. He took his time breathing in the fragrant skin before moving downwards.

The man worshiped her tummy before settling comfortably above the mound of her sex.

Red slowed his descent, inhaling her scent in deeply, “You smell so good.” he hummed his approval. “And I bet you taste even better, don’t you?”

“Ohhh.” she gulped, tightening her thighs around his torso, making the man chuckle against her dark curls.

“Let me taste you Lizzy...” he grunted against her electrified skin.

Red grasped her knees, moving them slowly apart. He ran his hands down both thighs to the crease of her legs, his eyes taking in the beauty afforded him.

He savored, the moment causing the woman’s cheeks to flush prettily.

The man laid down, opening her further with is broad shoulders, laughing quietly, nuzzling the hand with which she had covered her sex. He boldly licked the edges of her fingers.

“Show me how beautiful you are.” he mumbled against her hand. “Let me see your pussy.”
His hot breath beat against her trembling hand. She shivered involuntarily, hearing that word from
his lips doing all sorts of delicious things to her nervous system. It sounded so... dirty, the way his
deep rumbling voice had purred the word.

His tongue broke her out of her revelry as it teased the edges of her folds and thighs. He nudged his
nose against her hand, laying wet kisses on her fingers.

“Let me...” he muttered.

She lifted her hand slowly, his mouth replacing the trembling fingers.

“Keep going...” he practically commanded, urging her onward. His tone was thick and husky.
“Want that little clit of yours in my mouth so badly.”

He nudged her once more, uncovering her completely. He drew back, staring heatedly at her
glistening center.

“You’re are so beautiful...” he hummed, then kissed the peak of her sex lovingly. “Such a pretty
little pussy.” he rumbled intimately.

And then she was in his hot, wet mouth. His tongue rolled along her clit, sliding between her swollen
lips, suckling the juices from her body. He grunted against her, vibrating her throbbing clit
mercilessly.

“S-Stop...” she arched, pushing into his mouth, giving him added incentive.

The man cupped her ass, lifting her to his desired height, making her legs fall open wider, which
pleased him immensely. His face rubbed into her wet skin, the five o’clock shadow feeling delicious
on sensitive flesh.

“You taste so fucking sweet.” he snarled then drew her against him. “Love how you feel in my
mouth.” he mumbled his contentment, continuing his playtime.

He wrapped his thick tongue around her rubbing and sucking on her throbbing clit. She reached
down grabbing his head, rocking against him, riding his face, nearing closer and closer to release.

Red hummed against her sensually, quickening her actions. He readjusted his hold on her ass,
slapping two fingers inside her dripping heat.

The sensation rocked the woman to the very core.

She cried out, rolling her hips with more determination. “D-Don’t stop.” she begged.

Red’s tongue widened, covering a broader area. His fingers pressed on a spongy hardness inside her,
enjoying the small exclamation of appreciation. His other resting on her breast, his fingers deftly
pulling on the hardened nipple.

She clamped her thighs around his head, arching off the bed, feeling a burst of heat rush through her
rapidly convulsing tunnel.

Red snarled deeply, sucking the wetness from her. She mewedled in disappointment when his fingers
slid free, only to cry out when his open mouth and tongue dove between her folds.

He slowed, easing her back to earth until she shuddered sharply in release, her thighs involuntarily
relaxing.
She felt the bed move and Red shift. The man crawled over her reclined form, licking a searing trail up her body, kissing her rosy, damp skin.

His hands pressed her breasts together, licking between the valley he had made then both nipples simultaneously, stiffening the pink tips. He smiled at the tiny peaks before branding them with his ownership.

He leaned closer, resting his weight on his forearms, purposely dragging his hairy chest across her sensitive breasts. She squirmed, nuzzling into the warm scratchy surface, loving the feel.

“Well, I feel infinitely better.” the soft scent of her climax was on his breath which brought a flush to her cheeks and a tingle to her core. “You?”

Her deep blue eyes lifted seductively, her hand reaching between them as she scratched her nails over his chest and stomach.

Red’s head dropped, his eyes fluttering shut, a prurient sound rumbling deep within his throat.

“Not yet...” she whispered, gently cupping his bulge. The man growled appreciatively, grinding lasciviously, pushing hard into her hand.

His eyes opened, focused intently on hers, “You need more?” He rasped hoarsely.

“Yes...” she meekly replied.

He palmed her hand, working it into his open pants and around the rigid and hot flesh of his cock. “You need this?” he corrected almost sternly.

“Shit...” she panted, wrapping her fingers around his wide girth.

“Say it...” he demanded. “You need me.”

“...Yes.” she had no problem agreeing or saying as much.

Red pushed off the bed, thumbing his pant waist, pushing the material of his clothes down his muscular thighs. His heavy erection bobbed in the cool air, drawing her attention immediately.

She licked her suddenly parched lips, her legs opening wider in response.

His erection was long and thick, the huge pink crown pulsing under her gaze, beading with wetness.

“Touch me.” he grunted, leaning into her. Taking her hand himself, he wrapped it around his hot shaft, slowly pumping her tiny fingers. She drew in a shaky breath as he pushed against her hand, spreading her fingers with his girth.

“Does my baby need to be fucked?” he purred, absently kicking his pants aside. “Because that’s what I’m going to do to you.”

Her mouth fell agape, her eyes slamming shut when he raked his thick crown slowly along her slit, the large shaft brushing her thighs.

“You’re so...” she mewed, “thick.”

“And you’re tiny as fuck.” he growled his anticipation, pushing his cock head between her folds, the heaviness feeling phenomenal against her drenched opening. “Shit...” he hummed in approval, “gonna love spreading you open, sweetheart.”
“Oh God...” she prayed fervently that he was a man of his word.

Red inched his way forward, opening her to the pressure of his entrance, “Relax.” he drawled.

He thumbed her clit, his mouth worshiping her nipple, assisting her in the effort.

Red shoved gently, breaching her, sliding silkily into the molten depths awaiting him.

He grunted his amazement.

Liz tilted her hips, taking more of the man inside. A long breathy gasp escaped her pouty mouth, tickling his ear.

“Yes...” he encouraged, his voice a shadow of its former vitality, “open for me.” he coaxed, muttering against her lips. “Let me fuck you.”

The man delivered on his promise, pushing down insistently, opening her wide with his huge mushroomed cock head.

The slow drag of his fat erection raked erotically along her engorged clit.

“Damn...” he breathed sharply, “you feel so warm... So deliciously wet.”

She hummed in open appreciation, rolling against him until he caught her hip, stilling her.

“No...” he strongly advised. “Oh, I’m going to give it to you,” she was assured, “trust me.”

He inched his shaft deeper, growling his arousal, his downy pubic hair brushing her bare skin, exciting the woman to new heights.

“Can you feel me?” he whispered. “Can you feel my cock buried deep inside you. Can you feel my balls pressed against your tiny ass?”

“Yes..” she hissed.

He slid out, keeping his head snugly trapped in the confines of her tight body, then slid back in ever so slowly until he nestled his heavy sack back against her bottom.

“You’re so damned tight.” he sighed his approval. “Love your pussy...” he praised her. “Look how well your little body is accepting of me.” he hummed his gratitude.

Knowing that she was making him feel as good, that he was enjoying her as much as she was him, was very fulfilling. His praise made her not only incredibly aroused, but sexy as hell, sensual. And to be honest, she had never felt that before.

Red stroked her, spreading her each time, bouncing his large sack against her. The man increased the strength and speed of his thrusts.

He grasped her hands, their fingers intertwining, his weight pressing them into the bedding. But she didn’t feel trapped or controlled surrounded by Red’s large frame and his weight. She felt safe and protected, like never before.

His erection scraped against her clit repeatedly, their rhythm gaining momentum. She panted continuously under him, trying to increase the pace of their lovemaking.

But Red stayed even and steady, refusing her the tempo she craved, making sure she felt each and
every nuance he had to offer.

“You know what makes this perfection?” he rumbled deeply, delicately thumbing her nipple.

“Humm...” she questioned not only the statement but the unnecessary interruption.

“I’m riding you bareback.” the mellow tone washed over her sensually.

Her eyes flew open wide as the realization hit her full force. He grinned down at her, increasing his speed, fucking her harder.

“Sto...” she gasped her shock. She knew she should push him away, but all she really wanted to do, was draw him closer. Her body craved his touch. And even though he was touching her at every possible advantage place imaginable...it wasn’t enough.

She wanted more.

Her legs wrapped tightly around him, her decision long since cast, as she willingly opened herself more to his powerful thrusts.

“It’s okay baby...” he soothed expertly.

“No it isn–” she cried out plaintively as he gripped her hip, rocking her up into his thrust, dragging her clit against his rigid shaft.

“Does that feel good?” he smiled knowingly. “Is my cock pleasing this eager little pussy of yours?” She moaned piteously in reply. “More...” she pleaded, “g-give me more.”

“I’ve wanted to come in you for so long.” he rasped unevenly. “Wanted to mark you as my own.” he moaned brokenly. “Tell me you want it baby. Tell me you want me to come.” Red’s voice shook slightly. “Tell me you need to feel my heat warm you.”

Red sat back on his heels, positioning her where he needed. His hands gripped the underside of her waist holding her steady.

“Tell me.” he commanded, thrusting hard into her opening, his eyes focused on his pastime.

He was torn, his attention shifting from the beautiful bounce of her breasts to his driving shaft.

He grasped her breast, his hips snapping the underside of her thighs hard, “Let me take care of my baby...let me give her what she needs.” he drove his shaft with short, concentrated strokes, pushing her towards the climax he needed to witness.

“Lizzy, I need to come.” he warned, his focus slightly wavering. “Tell me you want me, sweetheart.” he willed.

She fought in vain, her own orgasm just seconds away. He was in more control clearly and she resented the fact. She wanted him to be just as desperate as she.

“God baby... let me.” he leaned over her, kissing her deeply. “Let me give you what you want.”

The woman stiffened in his arms, a uniquely feminine sound torn from her throat. He felt her climax, shuddering beneath him.
“Yes! God, R-Red!” she cried out, her tunnel pulsing around him, squeezing the fuck out of his shaft.

She rippled in tight waves, rolling along his hot, wet cock. She felt her thick cream bathe his driving shaft, his large head pushing it around his length, coating her thighs and his groin in her cum.

“Fuck!” he gritted, pumping her hard, nailing her little ass to the bed, “Lizzy...” he drawled, filling her with his hot thickened streams of release, “baby...”

Red reached between them quickly, rubbing her clit hard and fast, “Come again...” he gritted. “Come on my cock.”

Red fucked her deep, bouncing her off his shaft until she clenched hard. She gripped the headboard, her back curving off the mattress, pushing her clit into his erection.

“Do it!” he snapped. “Lizzy....

Elizabeth jerked awake, her entire body humming in awareness of the sudden incessant need.

She dropped her hand between her thighs, pushing against herself to ease the ache, feeling a gush of wetness soak her panties. Gasping for air, she found herself surrounded by Red’s scent and his hand resting lightly on her thigh.

“Lizzy?” the man repeated her name, calling for her attention.

The woman’s eyes snapped open, the man’s deep voice in her ear, shocking her into awareness. She had just... Oh good Lord! And Red was...

Oh... shi–

Red Reddington had floated in light sleep state now for about an hour, something keeping him from dropping into a REM stage.

He had felt the bed moving, his subconscious alerting him to something amiss. He finally stirred, reluctant to leave the warmth of a rather pleasant dream. To find Elizabeth caught in her own dream, a rather active one at that. She was moaning and pushing back until she had ended up beside him.

A nightmare, perhaps?

“...A bad dream?” He was slightly concerned.

She shook with aftershocks, her hands trembling. “Uh...” she gasped, swallowing hard, trying to quickly acclimate herself. “No, no...” she stumbled over the words. “I’m–” she exhaled sharply, “I’ll be...” she completely lost her train of thought.

“Well something wrong?” Red frowned, lifting himself to his elbow, slightly concerned for her state.

“Nothing...” she breathed out shakily. “just because of what happened tonight.” she knew he would need a better explanation, supplying the only one that came to mind.

She threw back the blankets, unsteadily edging to the side of the bed.

“You need help?” he asked quietly, his eyes intent upon the darkened silhouette.

“I’m okay.” she whispered. “Just need a second.” she grabbed her crutch, hobbling quickly to the
bathroom.

The man dropped his head back into the pillow, sighing. He shifted in the bed, fluffing the blanket and was immediately assaulted by her scent.

Only, this was a new aroma.

*And one he knew well.*

He had never had the privilege to experience it to date from her though. He would have remembered such a delicate treat.

Each woman, had her own unique fragrance that changed with her moods, Red knew from his many years of investigation into the mystique surrounding the female persuasion.

When Lizzy was happy, her natural scent sweetened to the freshest of bouquets. When she was pissed, the air got musky, salty, reminding him of the wispy foam coming off turbulent waves of an angry ocean.

And when she was sad... he swore he could smell rain. Cold rain on a brisk autumn evening.

No matter her mood, he loved being near her just to bask in that which was Elizabeth Keen.

Because no one could make her scent more permeating than himself. He excelled at such things, especially the anger. The thought amused him. There was a fine line between love and hate they say, he did not mind treading the area what-so-ever.

But *this* scent... this was the passion of an aroused woman.

His Lizzy smelled of warmed butterscotch and brandy, with a tinge of salt, that was all too telling of it’s origins.

She had gotten aroused. And wet as hell.

Damned wet.

Damned aroused.

He didn’t even have to shove his nose in the blankets, but did anyway to really breathe her in.

And God.... did he wish he was so privileged to bury himself in it.

She was fucking intoxicating.

Seemed Lizzy had a pretty pleasant dream. A dream that had ended in orgasm.

She couldn’t have helped it though. Her nerve endings were all over the place. She was between that place where pain and pleasure collided.

She would have been incapable of distinguishing where one began and the other ended. In Red’s world such a thing usually ended up sending the body into shivers of gratification.

Add to that, her pain pills heightening her dream state...

She couldn’t have stopped it, even if she had awoken before her dream climax. Pain often substituted itself for pleasure in the subconscious mind.
He had been in her shoes so many times, he’d lost count.

He remembered the first wet dream he’d had after a huge dose of narcotic drugs and was blown away by the experience... until of course the pain in his arm and chest had made themselves known. Then he was wishing for the high of the orgasm once again, no matter how awkward the timing might have been.

But this was her first experience with real pain and she didn’t know how to handle it, as of yet. Or more to the point, didn’t know to not be embarrassed by the body’s natural response to pain stimuli.

She needed another pill, that was all. Her pain was making itself known, translating into a vivid drug induced dream.

He rolled from the bed, heading to the kitchen. He grabbed a couple bottles of water and a snack for them both before heading back.

After sitting the plate down, he crossed to her bedside table, tapping out a pill when the bathroom door opened.

“Hey...” she grimaced painfully, attempting a lightness she certainly did not feel at this point.

His eyes softened as he stepped to her. “I know sweetheart,” he soothed, “I know it hurts.”

He wrapped his arm around her waist, helping her to the table, easing her down in the seat. He uncapped the water, handing her a pill. The man held the slippery bottle until she got her fill.

He sat across from her, reaching for the neglected plate. “You need to eat, just a little so you won’t get nauseous.”

“Too late.” she pouted miserably, but popped a grape in her mouth, then a cracker.

He checked the digital readout on her side table. “Fifteen minutes.” he reminded. “It’ll be better.”

She nibbled her cheese and another grape, waiting for the relief he promised.

The ensuing silence wasn’t uncomfortable. But he could feel her awkwardness. But then, and he knew Lizzy.

He knew she was embarrassed. Whether or not she sensed he was aware of what had happened, he did not know.

“You want to talk about it?” he asked quietly, letting her take the question however she wanted to. Either she would talk about her dream, confide in him or...

“I’m okay, just aching.” she sighed shakily. “I can feel the pill working though.”

Too concentrated on her pain, of course that was her focus. The other issue... well, it really wasn’t any of his business.

It was just a dream, after all.

Red watched her intently, his tension easing with hers. The more food she ate and the more the pill took effect, the more the awkwardness dissipated.

“Come on sweetheart.” he helped her from the chair and into the bed. “You need to rest.” he eased her down, grabbing her body pillow, positioning it under her leg.
She snuggled into it, sighing in relief.

He pulled the blankets up around her, bent, kissing her temple. “Sleep, you’ll feel better in the morning.”

She nodded silently before he headed back to his side of the bed, settling in himself. By the time he was relaxed and near dozing, she was snuffling softly in her sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Oh... Liz and her dreams. They're fascinating little glimpses inside her head.

"What do you want Agent Keen? What do you really want?"

Well, it looks like she wants Red to me. How about you? What do you think?
Déjà Vu

April 19

Elizabeth glanced at the books stacked neatly beside her. After last night or more to the point, what happened last night... she was uncertain whether or not to delve into any romance novels as yet.

After breakfast this morning, Red had assisted her to the back garden after she had vehemently vetoed his suggestion of the front gazebo. He had provided tea and a radio before leaving to make a few calls.

She glanced around the scenery offered, enjoying the array of glorious flowers blossoming everywhere she looked.

In the silence of the beautiful surrounding it was much easier to stave off the unsettling events of her dream.

Shaking off the sense of déjà vu, she opened her new book, but it took four chapters before she could really immerse herself into the tawdry tale.

She barely noticed Dembe passing, truth told, but managed a smile of welcome before her eyes fell back to the pages.

She got lost in the story, listening to the soft wind and birds chirping overhead, connecting with the character who was also outside enjoying the spring afternoon.

She caught movement in the corner of her eye, glancing over. She immediately recognized the intruder into her domain, scrunching her nose adorably when Silas came waltzing around the hedge.

“Hey Trouble.” he smiled in greeting. “To the sex part yet?”

“Nope, but I’m closing in on it.” she grinned, then sipped her tea. “Are you?”

“Faster than you are.” he quipped, leaning into his clenched fist and squeezing it rhythmically. “Behind the hedge is my ideal meeting place.”

She pulled her face, “Self gratification doesn’t count.” she rolled her eyes. Her brows suddenly knitted together as she covertly glanced at the hedge in question.

“Says you.” he laughed quietly, noticing her interest in his former place of residency. “Jealous?” he leaned over, tapping her cast. Indicating even if she was of a mind... her injury would hamper any progress.

“No.” her mouth curved in a catlike manner. “I don’t have to do it myself. I can get someone to do it for me.” she batted her eyes coquettishly.

“And yet...” the man tsked, “you’re here every night.”

“Yeah,” she snorted, “in pain.”

Silas sighed woefully, leaning into the bench post, “Excuses, excuses.”
“Puhlease.” she scoffed. “Eating has been a challenge. Sex... that would be a miracle.”

“Because you got any at all?” the man laughed silently, his shoulders shaking.

“No, you dolt.” she snapped. “Just the thought makes me clench–”

“You’re actually **supposed** to do that, you know.” he informed her knowingly. “It’s the female bodies natural response when fuc–”

“...In pain” she interrupted, then sighed. “I didn’t realize what a–”

“Devilishly handsome man I am.”

“...Depraved floozy you are.” she finished, her mouth pulling at the corner.

“Was that a compliment,” he cocked his head in question, “because it sounded like one.”

“Well, you are good at it.” she had to agree.

“I’m amazing at **all** I attempt.”

“And yet,” the woman sat her chin in her palm, her brow knitting, “you’re here every morning.”

“But am I here every night? **No, I am not.**” he taunted. “Besides, I get paid handsomely to protect your scrawny ass, so I’m sure to be here for the shift change.”

“Need that large check for those high priced girls, do ya?” she smirked.

The guard smiled in pleasure at the unexpected quip coming from her. “You’re growing Grasshopper.”

Liz’s brows crinkled on her forehead, her head tilting, a chill running up her spine.

“I’d dare to say, you cut the muster...” he grinned, “for once.”

She jerked in place, her wide eyes falling on the man, before they darted quickly around the expanse of yard.

“What’s wrong?” Silas scowled, her manner alerting him to something amiss. His hand dropped to his weapon.

“N-Nothing...” she looked around nervously. “I don’t think?”

“This is no time for secrets.” the guard gritted his annoyance.

“I-I’m fine.” she scratched at the shivers coursing down her neck, her fingers fluttering along her nape.

Silas narrowed his eyes, looking around with the eyes of a trained observer. All seemed normal.

His scowl turned critical, his instincts kicking in. “I’m going to make my rounds.” he notified his charge, suddenly wanting to run a security check but also hoping to calm her by going on with his daily activities, but it didn’t seem to help.

“Don’t go far... okay?” she asked before he got a few feet away.

“You won’t leave my sight.” he assured. “I promise.”
She took a shaky breath, but did relax some. But not enough for his liking. Something was up with her, obviously.

Something had frightened her. As her guard, Silas needed to know what the threat was.

Damn right he was keeping an eye on her.

The burly man walked to a nearby hedge, pulling the walkie from his belt. He watched the girl fidget in her seat.

She sat her book aside, rubbing her palms against the blanket over her thighs, taking a couple of deep breaths. She glanced down at the blanket then tossed it aside along with a few other items around her, as if clearing space.

“I think your presence is required.” Silas spoke into the radio.

Red came out the back, watching Elizabeth as he neared. He could tell from thirty feet away, the woman was strung out.

Correction, she was wired. She jerked her head to the right when a guard made his usual pass by, jittery as hell.

Red couldn’t fathom what the hell had brought this on.

Even after her... eventful night, she seemed perfectly fine at breakfast.

A few times, she had been unable to meet his gaze directly, true, but basically all had seemed normal.

He caught a glimpse of Silas out the corner of his eye, weapon in hand. The guard was focused intently on Elizabeth, sparing Red a glance.

Red trusted the man implicitly to do his job and do it exceedingly well. But some sort of vibe had been transmitted for him to be on ‘high alert’.

Red walked up behind the woman, laying his hand on her shoulder.

The woman screamed, jerking out from under his touch. “No!” she scrambled away quickly, backing along the bench. “Silas!” she screeched loudly.

The man in question bolted around the large bush, running for her, gun raised, scanning the nearby fences and houses as he neared.

Red scrambled just as fast, grasping her arm seconds before she fell off the curve of the seat.

“I’m not going!” she struggled in his hands, her voice tinged with hysterics, “...Let go!” she pushed frantically on Red’s forearms, screaming again as loudly as she was able. “Help!”

“Elizabeth!” Red shouted above her terror, to get her attention.

Guards came barreling around corners, weapons drawn, advancing on their position.

“Lizzy!” Red snapped, shaking her once.

The blue eyes darted to his face, filled with panic. In seconds, the woman crumbled visibly, her hands grasping Red’s bare forearms in a death grip.
“Oh, thank God...” she exhaled in relief, her eyes closing. “It’s you.” she was never so glad to see anyone in her entire life.

“Sweetheart, what the hell is going on?” he drew her up, surprised as hell when she clutched him, grasping his shirt in her fingers.

“Sweetheart...” she repeated quietly, dropping her face into his chest. His familiar scent and hold, comforting her instantly.

Red held the woman tightly, bewilderment in his expression as he sought Silas out.

The older man shrugged his own confusion, returning to his duty. He lifted the walkie, both men listening to the chatter as one guard after another cleared each individual area.

Even neighboring properties security gave an all clear on their sides, finding nothing amiss in the entire area.

Which left Red more than baffled by Liz’s uncustomary reaction and quick vocal exclamation.

He cupped her chin, pulling her from her hiding place, forcing her to meet his eyes, “Lizzy, tell me what’s wrong.” She shook her head trying to duck back into hiding before Red stopped her. “Tell me, now.”

“I thought...” she replied shakily, “I thought you were Tom.”

“Tom?” Red scowled. “Did you see him?” he snarled, his look speaking volumes.

Silas checked his men methodically, but the radio only echoed back... ‘all clear’. The guard hovered, protecting his client.

“No.” she muttered dejectedly. “I...”

“What happened?” Red frowned, then narrowed his eyes slightly when he took in her embarrassed expression. “Was it your dream? Was he there? In your dream.”

She blinked up at him, her mouth agape, “Y-Yes...” she nodded slowly.

“He approached you, here.” Red pointed to the covered seating area.

“No,” she shook her head, “the front gazebo.”

Red snapped his eyes towards the head of security.

Silas gently shook his head negatively, signifying no intruders had breached his security.

Red waved him off with a curt gesture, “Tell them to stand down.” the guard lifted the radio, then hesitated. “She had a bad dream last night, and something set her off. Something she saw, heard...” Red rapidly explained the situation as it now stood.

“Like déjà vu.” Silas understood.

“Yes, tell them to stand down.”

Silas spoke into the radio, calling for his men to return to their posts.

Red sat the woman down on the long bench. “What happened, Lizzy?”
She repeated her dream from the beginning, even the part with Silas, eating her up.

“That does sound like something I’d say.” the guard nodded agreeably, then scowled darkly at Red’s subtle shift of eyes.

“What?” the man threw his hands out to the side. “I only meant, I can understand why she felt it was so real.”

Red’s jaw worked in agitation, but he held his tongue, focusing his attention back on the woman beside him.

“Then what happened?”

“Tom pulled me out of the gazebo,” she frowned, “then dragged me to his car and...”

Red listened intently to each detail. She had included how Silas had leaned against the gazebo when they’d had their repartee. Several questions came to mind concerning Tom and his actions.

Something about the narrative didn’t set right with him.

It was a goodly distance to the street. Even in her dream, how had one of the guards not noticed her abduction? Did she feel that unsafe here? Did she not trust them to protect her?

“How did he get you to his car?” he interrupted her narrative.

Liz tilted her head in confusion at the odd question, but pointed to the front. “The gap between the gate and the fence in front.”

She said it like it should have occurred to him, that he should have known what she was talking about.

“Show me.” Red slid her to the scooter before following behind her. Silas walked slowly beside the him, the man’s weapon hung loosely by his side.

“You think Tom knows where she is?” the guard frowned.

“No.” Red shook his head negatively. “But I do think that her subconscious has found a breach in her security and it was bothering her.”

“A gap...” Silas replied slowly, “in the fence.” the man’s tone allowed his skepticism.

“Just like you seeing a point of entry that needs to be guarded.” Red explained. “She believes there to be a gap big enough that Tom can take her away, yes.”

Silas’s brow furrowed darkly.

“Or at the very least, she needs to see that there is nothing there, and it was only in the dream.” Red continued. “She will find her safety and security again.”

They trailed after the woman, encountering two guards along the way. “Joe, David, I may need your assistance, if you please.” Red waved them to join the parade.

The two men fell in line, stopping when Liz hit a shaded part in the fence just a few feet away from the gazebo.

“Where is it sweetheart.” Red came alongside her, looking where the stone wall met the wrought
iron fence.

“There,” she pointed, “in the ivy.”

Red walked to where she indicated, lifting the lush greenery then felt his blood run cold.

She was correct.

There was a gap.

A big one, enough to fit two people. Especially when they were Tom and Lizzy’s size.

Silas’s tone was pure ice as he turned towards his men, “How the hell did you miss this?!” he demanded an immediate answer.

“How the hell did you?” Red’s tone was more than frigid.

Silas turned to Elizabeth, kneeling in front of her cart. The woman cocked her head, confused by the man’s formal stance, and even more, the words he said.

“Ms. Keen... this is entirely my fault.” his eyes and face were sincere, his expression grave. “I will see that this oversight is corrected...”

“And you will see to that, today.” Red gritted. “I don’t care what you have to do. I want it locked up tight.”

Silas glanced at the man before returning his attention. “This is inexcusable.” he shook his head slowly. “I have no explanation to give you. Hell...”

“Yes, sir.” Joe replied seriously halting any further words for the moment. “Mr. Reddington, we will see to that immediately.”

Liz looked between the men, startled by the seriousness of their tones and how they addressed Red.

“I want the rest of the grounds checked as well.” Red looked at all three men. “And I mean, all of it.”

David and Joe set off, alerting security to check their sections for breach in the property fence, leaving the three alone.

“This will be fixed Lizzy, I promise.” Red assured her and was pleased to find some ease in her shoulders. “You will be safe here.”

“You’re all freaking me out.” she frowned. “Stop it.” she stressed. “It was just an oversight. Big deal.”

Red gestured to the gazebo but hesitated in his steps. He glanced back, but the woman had not moved one iota. “Not a big deal?” he repeated her lie.

“I will not have you afraid while you are staying here. Most especially in a spot you enjoy.” Red lifted expectant brows. “Come here,” he pointed, “sit with me.”

“Get back in the saddle cowgirl.” Silas nudged her forward.

“What the hell is it with you and all these idioms, metaphors and shit?” Liz screwed her face up at the guard but rolled her cart towards Red without thought.
“I find them to be wonderful distractions.” Silas grinned finally as they edged in under the large gazebo. “A red herring, if you will.”

Liz scoffed disgustedly, rolling her eyes. Red bit the inside of cheek to keep the smile from his lips. He was in no mood to be amused at present.

“Make him stop.”

“Why?” he asked almost sullenly, having well noted the fact Silas had gotten her in a better mood faster than he himself could. “It worked, didn’t it?” he waved at the roof of the gazebo over their head.

“Oh...” she shrugged, glancing about her surrounding only now realizing exactly where she sat, “I guess it did.”

She took Red’s hand, sliding to the bench, though she did inch closer to him.

*One step at a time.* He thought.

“Now, what happened after you left the property?”

She told him the gory details as best she remembered. How Silas had shot out the window, how she deflected Tom’s return fire, hesitating before admitting that Tom had hit her temple with his weapon.

The man’s eye twitched.

Where Lizzy sometimes blurred the lines where Tom Keen was concerned, it seemed that her subconscious mind was well aware of what a bastard Tom could be.

“Then what happened?”

She told them of their dream conversation, or more to the point, Tom’s incessant babbling and ability to leave more questions than answers.

If she only listened to her inner voice more often, she’d be rid of the man. Red realized.

But then, maybe she was? She had screamed for help. She had said she wouldn’t leave with Tom.

Maybe she had finally seen the man’s true colors? Saw him for the asshole he was?

But it didn’t explain why she had an orgasm?

Unless...

This could go a couple of different ways.

Tom had hurt her, badly, in the dream. And because she was already hurting, it had manifested itself in her body, releasing in the only way available.

Or...

Tom had fucked her in the dream.

And he was gathering by her earlier response and attempt to flee, that maybe it wasn’t consensual.
It would also explain why she could not hold Red’s gaze for a very long period of time.

It was a strong possibility that she felt guilty because she’d climaxed due to what had essentially been rape, and felt betrayed by her own body.

*Or perhaps she had climaxed for a whole other reason...*

Which was, that she had wanted it. Had wanted to be with Tom intimately. Regardless that he’d hurt her.

How confusing it must be for a woman to feel such conflicting emotions.

He knew Liz was young and confused by everything happening around her. She was searching for a foundation, for solidity. How cold and empty it must be to accept that sort of comfort, from a man like Tom Keen.

But Tom was familiar, something she knew... when the rest of her world was falling apart.

They would never agree or see eye to eye on such a man.

Ever.

Unless of course, she wrote the prick off completely. Would they ever be on the same page, he wondered?

But first things, first.

Making her feel secure again.

“Did he hurt you in your dream?”

“He hit me across the face wit—”

“Besides that.” Red interrupted. “Did he harm you after that?”

“No...”

Red held her eyes, and wasn’t the least bit surprised when she dropped them to her lap, fidgeting with her bracelet.

She was either upset by what had happened or she was lying, and Tom had done more in that dream than she was telling him.

Elizabeth wished he would stop the questions because she did not want to go beyond a certain point. Her dream had taken such an unusual path...it was something personal she simply could not share at this time... if ever.

“Then what happened?”

“You came.” Liz hesitated visibly, the connotation implied brought back vivid memories.

Silas shifted his bulky frame turning his head quickly to hide a knowing smile.

“I mean, that is to say...” she hastily corrected, flushing before lifting those blue eyes, to a patiently waiting Red Reddington. “You arrived on the scene,” she nodded, finding the statement more acceptable, “you shot Tom.” her thoughts wandered momentarily. “Dembe dragged him away before
he... he was gasping...” she remembered.

“And then...?” he prompted.

“You got the cuffs off.”

She rubbed at the phantom feeling until Red placed his hand over hers. He frowned hard at the now chafed skin, rubbing it gently, before bowing his head, placing his lips over the imaginary injury.

Elizabeth seemed suddenly unsettled which the man did not miss.

He had triggered something, but what?

“Can you continue?”

“Y-You brought me home...” she stuttered, watching his fingers dance gently over her wrist, “you helped me.”

“I always will...”

She blinked rapidly, the words stunning her because they were the exact ones he used in the dream. She vacantly nodded, watching as he kissed her wrist yet again.

This had happened in her dream as well. He wished he knew what the hell happened after the fact. Because her reaction to his touch, the intimacy, was most telling.

Had this been Tom’s way of ‘apologizing’ for his earlier indiscretion? Most abusive males tended towards such actions.

“What made you startle awake?” he gently rubbed his thumb along her wrist, focusing on her reaction.

“W-What?” she stammered.

“Did something else happen? You woke rather abruptly.”

“You... I...” She darted her eyes away, “I-I don’t remember...”

“Focus.” Red sat forward slowly, lifting her wrist to his mouth, directly in the line of her sight. “Did I hurt you in some way?” he asked.

“You didn’t hurt me, you...” she stressed, then blushed.

“What?” he kissed the scarring again, drawing her attention back to his action. “Let me help you, sweetheart.” he genuinely urged, her cooperation needed in this instance.

Elizabeth’s mouth fell agape, her eyes large and vacant.

“Tell me what you need...” the silky proclamation shook her to her core.

_He must know! He was saying the same words! How could he not know?_

Red felt a slight change in the aura about the woman. Whether it was good or bad, he had no clue as yet. “Tell me what you need to feel safe again. Tell me how I can help you.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it rapidly. The lovely eyes held a measure of hope that had not
been there before. He was on the right track. Footsteps behind them, broke the spell.

Damn it! Red dropped his head in frustration. He had been so close.

The cook was announcing lunch and Elizabeth was never so pleased to be given a reprieve.

Red watched her disappear into the house, his thoughts private.

“You know she’s not telling you everything, right?” Silas asked in the most innocent manner this man could ever muster.

“I picked up on that, yes.” Red disdained. “Leave me alone.”

“I thought you’d be a little pleased..” the burly man ignored the directive completely.

“About her having a nightmare...” Red snapped his head to the man, surprised to find amusement dancing in the grayish blue eyes.

“No, about the part where you rescued her.” the man air quoted with his beefy fingers.

“Excuse me?” Red dared him to say one more word.

Silas smiled sweetly, “You got her out. You saved her from Tom.” he explained patiently, eyeing his employer expectantly. He indicated his own person... her own personal guard as it were, with a sweep of his hands up and down his bulky frame.

“And...” Red’s tone was chilly.

“And what do you think happened after that?” Silas rolled his hand in the air, like it would help Red’s thought process.

Red’s expression was completely blank, on purpose. Of course he was following the line of thought and with any other woman... but this was Lizzy.

The guard seemed well and truly miffed that Red Reddington was not following his train of thought.

“She had a sex dream about you, you idiot.” Silas blurted, then corrected his tone, “I mean... boss.”

Red stopped in his tracks, his shoe scuffing loudly on the pavement due to his abrupt stop, his head whipping around jerkily.

“Besides the fact that it’s obvious.” Silas screwed his face up, looking at Red like he was an idiot. “She can remember everything up until that point? Yeah, right.” the man scoffed. “Plus, I read it.”

Having said his piece, the guard was ready to make a discrete exit.

Red reached out, snagging Silas’s arm, stopping him in his tracks.

Silas looked at the tight grasp Red had on him and laughed. “I can multi-task, can’t you?”

“You read what? Asshole.” Red added for emphasis.

“It’s in one of her novels.” Silas took no offense, leaning against the stone pillar behind him, crossing his legs at the ankles. “Aside from the hole in the fence, which I agree was tickling at her subconscious mind, acting as a trigger.” he agreed with Red’s initial assessment.
“Everything that happened, occurred in one of her books.” Silas crossed his arms over his chest, smiling knowingly.

“A bad man takes the woman,” he continued, “the man she trusts saves her, he cares for her, he fucks her.” the guard bobbed his head happily. “I like that part.” he confided.

“If you want to know what you did to her in that dream, it’s the book with the bright yellow cover.” the man chuckled quietly when Red unconsciously looked towards the house, the want to see that book, very prevalent in his eyes.

“I think it’s around page, two hundred sixty-nine.” the man smirked. “Which is perfect if you ask me since you, I mean, the character, eats pussy.” Silas nodded knowingly. “Yeah, I really like that part.”

The guard laughed then walked off, heading for the fence line leaving Red to his own devices.

Reddington pulled himself from his jumbled thoughts, heading inside, unsure what to say, do, or even, feel at this point.

He would prefer to believe Silas’s version of the tale. But he also knew the reality of the situation.

Liz was caught between the two most prominent men in her life. In her drugged state, her subconscious mind had taken a scene from a book and adapted it to her current predicament.

It was understandable that she had transferred himself and Tom into the roles of the characters in the novel.

The woman was embarrassed and who wouldn’t be? It would explain her reluctance to make eye contact, certainly.

She was young and inexperienced in all things, let alone life. But her reluctance to face the situation as it now stood, hampered him in his efforts to help her get through it.

No matter her feelings on it, he didn’t know how to make it better.

She obviously wasn’t ready to talk about it, and he wasn’t sure if he should approach the subject.

Red sauntered into the dining room, taking his place at the head of the table beside her. He shot her a reassuring smile.

Right now all he could do is pay attention and be available to her, should she need to unload her burden.

And be supportive, no matter the outcome.
“Lizzy?” there was no easy way to say this, so the man just said it as was his way. “I got a call that Carver was in Chicago. I’m taking the team and we’ll be flying out within the hour.”

“Red, it’s getting late...” She looked at the clock to confirm, “and do I have to remind you that you were just shot... yesterday.”

The cat, having obviously picked up on her irritation, hissed at Red when he crouched next to Liz.

“Oh hush,” he reached over, closing the cat’s mouth mid-hiss, “you pissy thing.”

He released the cat’s head and the animal smacked its chomps before licking its paw and straightening the fur Red had mussed. Liz smiled affectionately at them both, then stroked Keres’ head, helping her flatten the fluffy hair.

He placed his hand on her knee, steadying himself. “I don’t have to do much. Just hit up a few contacts and direct your team.”

“Then why do you have to go now? You should get some rest.”

“Since your team and Moore is coming with me, it’s better to arrive at night. Less eyes.”

“You really don’t like Moore, do you?”

“Not particularly, no.” he admitted freely. “How did you know, just out of curiosity?”

“You call him by his last name all the time.”

“Would you rather I call him, Dick?” he cocked his head at her, pleased with himself. “Please, say yes, because I all ready do.” he took on an innocent air. “What? It’s better than calling him asshole.”

“Is he really that bad?” Liz half chuckled.

“I expect any day now, either Dembe or Samar will slip past me and break the man’s nose.” the thought warmed the man’s heart. “At least it keeps me awake while I’m there. They’re wily.”

“Not you?” Liz was surprised. “You don’t want to break his nose?”

“No, I’m much like you, Lizzy.” He patted her knee, standing. “I go for the throat.”

He headed for his bag, which Dembe had already packed. Red glanced around absently finally finding the object in question.

He grabbed the book satchel then looked at the woman, finding Elizabeth fiddling with the cat, otherwise occupied.

Red quickly scanned the stacked books on her shelf, zeroing on a bright yellow jacket. His fingers curved to it then shoved it in his bag, heading for the door.

“I’ll check on you later sweetheart.” he threw back to the woman.
“Be safe!” she responded, wishing he did not have to go.

Red called later that night as promised. A ton of background noise making it difficult to hear him.

“Sweetheart, how are you?” his tone sounded normal enough, almost jovial.

She pressed the phone to her ear, speaking over the loud din. “I’m okay, but what’s going on there?”

“Oh, just having a few drinks with an old associate of mine, catching up.” He dropped his voice, “Can you hear me?”

“Just barely.” she admitted.

“Nothing happening on this end, just weeding out info. Donald and Samar are rabbit hunting. Just a minute.” Red muffled the phone, speaking with someone. “Baby, I have to go. I’ll call back shortly.”

“Oh, okay?” She said before hearing the dial tone.

Baby?

He had called her a lot of things; sweetheart, honey, even darling jokingly, after he had been shot. But never... that.

She would never tell anyone, let alone Red, but it was one of her favorite endearments. Well, that and sweetheart.

At first it had grated on her when he had called her that, but now, she found comfort in it. The odd thing was that she didn’t think she would like it coming from anyone else but Red Reddington. He made it fit her. Like it was a part of her, an extension of who she was.

But really, whatever endearment passed his lips, it seemed natural. Like she actually was those things to him. As much as her name was Elizabeth, she was as much Lizzy, sweetheart and now, baby.

The thought brought a warm feeling into her entire system, she found she enjoyed the feeling immensely.

An hour later the phone rang which brought a smile to Elizabeth’s lips. The caller ID indicated it was Red.

“Hello?” her tone was soft.

“Lizzy, sorry for ending our call so abruptly, I had to get back to Louis. He can be quite the pouting brat when he thinks the attention isn’t on him.” he offered an explanation for his rudeness. “I truly thought I had enough time to just check in with you but he ended his call before I anticipated.”

“No worries. I’m fine... baby.” She smiled into the phone when she heard his deep laughter.

“I thought I’d get yelled at for that one.” He relaxed in his chair, grinning.

“I’m not yelling.” She replied instantly. Regretting her quick response a moment later when it sounded like she was almost flirting with the man. “I-I mean, I understand.” she tried for sophistication. “I didn’t mind.” She squeezed her eyes shut. Could she, just once, shut up while she
was ahead.

Red’s deep chuckle filtered through the phone, tickling her ear. “I’ll remember that.” he promised. “I think I may have a lead on Carver. I sent it over to Ressler and Samar, they’re checking it out now.”

“Moore didn’t go with you guys?”

“He’s here.” the man’s tone said it all.

“You mean, physically, right now, with you?”

“No, in general.” he replied. “He may be a complete idiot, but he knows better than to push, right now anyway.”

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say it was mentioned in passing, that the temptation to throw open the door at fifteen thousand feet and unload a passenger was a growing passion of mine.”

“It was that bad?” she crinkled her nose.

“Would you presume to tell someone where to sit on their own jet? That they couldn’t drink?” The absurdity boggled the man’s mind. “The tipping point came when he tried to take the phone out of my hand when I was going to call and check on you.”

“He didn’t...” Liz breathed in a stunned breath.

“Oh, yes he did.”

“And that’s what you said? That you’d throw him out of the plane.”

“Well, first I said that I was going to shove the phone up his ass.” Red picked an imaginary piece of lint off his impeccable trousers. “Then he said he didn’t appreciate me doing business with federal agents on board, at which point I said that could be rectified ... and it went on from there.”

“You didn’t tell him you were calling me?”

“Should it matter, it’s my damn plane.”

“So what stopped you?” she held back her smile.

“Ressler said that perhaps he should stop harassing me, seeing as I was so kind to give them a ride... on my plane.” Red stressed.

Liz chuckled, “Are you going to fly them back... on your plane?”

“Samar, definitely. Donald, he’s always up in the air, no pun intended.” he rubbed his temple absently. “Moore, I could give a flying fuck... again, no pun intended.”

Liz smiled, “When do you think you’ll be home?”

“As soon as they finish, I suppose.” a thought occurred to him. “Why, do you miss me?” His husky voice lowered intimately.

“I was just wondering who was going to make my waffle in the morning?” she teased.
He pulled his tie, loosening the knot. “I knew it, you only appreciate me for my cooking.” He pulled the silk fabric from his neck, setting it aside.

“Today, I did. The vegan nurse from hell, Mindy, was here again trying to shove eggplant down my throat.”

“You hate egg plant.”

“Uhh, exactly.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“Yes, the first day she was here. Keeps blathering on about how good it is for me.”

“Then fire her.”

“I’m sure she’s just trying to be helpful, Red.”

“By preparing something you’ve told her you hate.” Red slowly replied.

He’d have to teach her how to handle these things, to stand up for herself. If only to save her from being force fed a vegetable she once described as having the consistency of a rubber sole.

“How goes the house search. Find anything interesting?”

“Oh, I did find one.” she replied ecstatically. “I can’t wait to show you!”

“Tell me about it.” Popping the button on his neck, he loosened the next two then closed his eyes, listening to her voice, relaxing after a few moments into a stress free state.

“It’s three bedrooms, two and a half baths, hardwood throughout. It’s got the cutest little outdoor space for entertaining. Not that I really do much of that, but I thought when you guys came over, we’d have a place to grill and stuff.”

His mouth lifted at the corner, trying to remember the last time he actually grilled anything.

“The kitchen is beautiful, just redone. Though, I didn’t think to check if the plumbing and everything was okay?” she fretted.

“We’ll get it checked out.” He assured, then kicked his feet up on the ottoman, while his arm fell lazily over the arm rest, his tumbler dangling from his fingertips. “What else.”

“I’ll have to redo one of the bathrooms. It’s blue.” she shivered at the remembrance, totally repulsed. “Red? Who does an entire bathroom in blue? And not just any blue, aqua blue.”

She sounded so disgusted, he had to laugh. “Well, then. What color would you prefer?”

“Oh, I don’t know? Maybe a soft white or tan, have the accent pieces be the color. That way I can change it any time I want.” she had really thought this through. “What do you think?”

“I think that sounds like a very good idea.”

“Are you even listening to me?” she chided.

“Of course I am. Change the hideous blue bathroom to soft white or tan, with your accent pieces being the splash of color. Redone kitchen, cute deck where we can grill. Three bedrooms, two and a
“You’re really interested?” she was mildly shocked.

“I am. Were there anymore homes that interested you?”

“Yes, but I can wait until you get home to show you.”

“If you want to talk about…” A subtle beeping in his ear made him look at the screen, “Damn it. Sweetheart, it’s Ressler. I’ll get back to you when I can.”

“All right, all of you be careful.”

Red ended his call with Ressler. He was never so glad to get off the phone and even though they would be leaving in an hour, it gave him a few minutes of private time.

He picked up the paperback, tapping it lightly against his lips, lost in thought.

He thumbed the pages rapidly. Lizzy often earmarked the corners of pages. He opened the book to one such page scanning it slowly.

It was mostly dialogue, but in that dialogue was one specific component.

In the course of his investigation, Red discovered that how the man spoke to or touched the woman, was important. Not that he did not know that himself, but to see it in print organized his thoughts better.

Certain endearments seemed to melt the heroine’s heart. He glanced up, his mind wandering.

Red had called Lizzy, baby, earlier to get a reading on her. This guy in the book had used the same term of affection.

Red had been surprised, keeping in mind nothing surprised him these days... that Lizzy had accepted the term so readily and indeed did not seem to mind if he used that endearment again.

In this day and age, most females did not like to be objectified. Reddington never thought of it like that. He admired and respected most women, truth told. Those with which he used such terms of affection, he highly esteemed.

He was so pleased that Elizabeth was woman enough to sense such a thing about him.

He turned the page reading automatically for a few sentences. A dark scowl appeared on his forehead. Within the book, two males had actually come to blows in a brutal scene that, in Red’s opinion was nothing more than gratuitous violence.

It was almost as if Lizzy’s dream played out in black and white print. Had she truly pictured him and Tom in these roles?

From the moment Tom had taken her until Red himself, had arrived on scene... everything was almost verbatim.

Reading more, he could see glimpses of that son of a bitch Tom in the secondary player and could truly understand Elizabeth’s frustration and fear.
Red had instantly put the book aside, checking on Liz’s welfare, getting lost in her talking about her house search, finding her content where she was, before returning to his pastime.

It took only a few moments for the man to fall back into the world the author had so meticulously created.

He kicked back, propping his legs on a pillow in the bed, absently sipping from the fine wine he had ordered roughly an hour before.

The story continued...

And then he came on the scene...

As Red continued the narrative, he could actually see the similarity between the guy in the story and himself.

It was him for all intents and purposes.

Worried for the girls welfare, intent on hurting the man who harmed her and acting on it with cold and merciless deliverance.

The hero had released the girl from her restraints, then carried his precious cargo from the room. What he cherished most in this world, safe in his arms.

He took her to his home, dressed her wounds and kissed the bruising on her wrist...

Red turned the page quickly, reading through the following passages and more than understood the cause of Lizzy’s wet dream and even more interestingly, her reaction to him this afternoon.

He had done so much, said so much, of what this man in the novel had, and wasn’t even aware of having done so.

He turned the page, settling more into his comfort zone, reading the first few lines of what was to come and had never loved a romance novel so much.

It was no wonder Liz couldn’t look him in the eye.

The man in the novel talked with his partner, communicated with her. He clearly worshiped the woman. He fed off her pleasure, hers became his own.

If this was her idea of a fantasy man, she really need look no further than across the dining room table, or better yet, roll over in bed and look at the man sharing it with her.

Red’s eyes lifted, a thought suddenly solidifying in his mind.

Lizzy had placed him in the role of hero.

Not Tom.

Him...

Raymond ‘Red’ Reddington.

Red pushed off the bed making a beeline for the bathroom, slamming the door closed, locking it behind him.
He pulled his zipper open, reaching in for his cock, pulling the thickening length free, stroking himself slowly, methodically. Rereading the last part, he fell into the role, thumbing his slit when the man pressed against dark curls, his face getting wet against her folds.

With as good as Lizzy smelled, he knew she had to taste good, she had to have a sweet pussy, *he just knew it.*

And she’d cream hard and fill his mouth, no matter what he had to do to make it happen. Damn, he would love if she came hard like that. To feel his mouth fill with her arousal, to taste her... he’d give that tiny clit of hers all the attention it needed.

But that wasn’t all she needed, apparently. Red could literally feel the small hand grasping his erection.

He tightened his own grasp around his shaft, stroking himself harder.

When his stiffness brushed not only her pussy lips, but her thighs, Red growled low in his throat.

Lizzy was a tiny little thing in comparison to him. He could envision his shaft brushing her milky white thighs without issue before breaching that pretty little slit.

Damn right she’d be wet, her pussy would be soaked with not only her arousal but the saliva from his mouth, and of course, the copious amount of pre-cum leaking from his cock head as it teased that quivering little hole.

*Shit...*

To spread her open with his thick width, he would tear her little body apart, and she’d fucking love it. He’d make sure to drag that clit just right, making her body accept him.

She’d take the whole damn thing, she’d want all of him to open her up, to fuck her just right. He’d nudge her cervix with his cock head when his heavy ball sack nestled nice and tight against her ass, making her pussy quiver around him in want of more.

He’d love nothing more than to take her bottom in his hands and pump her little hole, maybe even tease her ass. He bet she would love that, she’d clench hard around him, fluttering that tight tunnel around his shaft. And if he should tongue it before hand, soften her up a bit, maybe he could fuck her tiny pussy and finger her ass, giving his baby every bit of his attention.

He’d give Lizzy the fucking she so richly deserved.

To give her what only he could.

He would hold her hands, not only because it was intimate, just as much as kissing. But it was another connection between them. A connection that required trust. She would have to trust him to give up the freedom of movement.

And he would ride *her* bare. Not only would she feel fucking amazing. But no one since his wife had the privilege of being taken by him that way.

He didn’t love them. He didn’t want that intimacy with them. He didn’t wanted to mark them as his territory.

But he did Elizabeth.
Men could sniff at her heels all they wanted, but all they would find was his scent. He’d drench her pussy in his cum daily to ward off bastards thinking they could take his place.

They could try, but they’d fucking fail. Not only would he make love to her so damned often, she wouldn’t have the strength or want to look elsewhere.

No one would ever take care of her, spoil her, dote on her... love Lizzy, like he did.

*No one...*

Red tightened his hand around his hard cock and cupped his balls as she neared release, just waiting for that pussy to come, until that beautiful body arched up off the bed and bathed his thighs and balls in her arousal.

“Shit...” Red panted, pumping his shaft harder. Teasing his thick crown, he urged her to let go once more, to come around his cock again, and she fulfilled his need for her, coming hard.

“*Fuck...* Red drawled, shooting stream after stream of his own load. “Lizzy...” he gasped.

He fell into the cabinet, shaking with the powerful release. His hand trembled, shaking thick white drops of cum to the marble floor and his shoes, the sight bringing him down quickly.

He hadn’t just warmed her with his affection, and she sure as fuck wasn’t here.

But the idea...

The want to have her by his side in every way available to him, grew impossibly strong.

Stronger than it had ever been before.

Stronger than it was just a couple day ago.

He felt a flicker of hope, that hadn’t been there before.

Now, he just wondered if he could make it happen.

What could he do to make her see, he could give her everything and anything she could ever want or need?

He wasn’t sure...

But he sure as fuck was going to find out.
Red inched the door open quietly, catching a glimpse of Elizabeth in the soft light of the hall.

Lizzy was laying almost in the middle of the bed and Keres was stretched flat on it’s belly, it’s paws touching the edge of the mattress with her hind feet against Lizzy’s stomach.

The man rolled his eyes expressively. One day very soon, he was going to have Dembe take that cat for a one way ride. ‘Cement shoes’ was becoming a fast favorite phrase in his mind.

After he readied himself for bed, he pulled at the blankets then laughed softly when Elizabeth fought his efforts, tugging them back into place. The cold air had disturbed her sleep state.

She must have heard his amusement because she turned her head towards him in the darkened room.

“Is holding the blankets hostage your subtle way of telling me to go away, I’m in the doghouse and to go sleep on the back porch?”

She sat up slightly in bed, responding sleepily, having released the blankets and turned over to see him inching under the cover. “I didn’t expect you back tonight.”

“Well, I had to be here to make you a waffle and chase off the eggplant lady.” Releasing the latch, he removed the heavy watch from his wrist, placing it on the night stand.

“What time is it?” she stifled a yawn.

“A little before one.” he stretched out comfortably.

She moved closer to him, stroking the white bandage, “How’s your arm?” She propped her chin on her hand, looking down at him. “Leg?”

“They’re itching. But fine otherwise.” He smiled when she said nothing, just quirked her eyebrow. “Really. You want to see?” He pulled the tape holding the gauze, turning back a corner.

“I’m just checking.” she backed off diplomatically.

Red stared at her, his brow creasing. She seemed to want to say something, but was hesitating. Then she was letting the words spill out, quickly.

“I got a new letter.” She said softly.

He tensed inwardly, but to her eyes, he seemed as relaxed as he was a second ago. “What did it say?”

“I didn’t read it.”

“Where is it?” he demanded.

She rolled over, avoiding disturbing the cat, then grabbed the letter off her night stand before handing it to him.
“Shield your eyes.” He said as he flipped the light on.

Tearing the envelope open, he read, almost feeling the letter writers elation jumping off the page.

We were almost rid of Reddington
I held my breath with anticipation, excited
There was so much chaos, everyone so focused on the shoot out
I was given the perfect opportunity to take him out
When I saw him go down, I felt a burst of joy
A joy that grew to pure exhilaration when I saw him fall into and wrap himself around that woman,
the thought of them both dying at the same time...
Well, you know it was a breathtaking moment
Just as the one man shot at him, I shot, but I was too low, hitting him in the back
We would have prevailed had it not been for Reddington’s man, taking down my scapegoat
I’m sure I don’t have to explain to you the utter disappointment I feel

Red rolled from the bed, going to the end, searching.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for the bullet that fell out of my vest.” He ran his hand under the bench, sweeping the floor with his hand when he felt it. Pinching it between his fingers, he sat back, staring at the bent copper.

The man looked up, finding her holding the letter. “Don’t read it, Lizzy.”

“He shot you...” She gasped. “Red, he shot you because of me.”

Red sat the bullet on his side table, then crawled back in the bed. “I get the feeling he would have taken a shot at me regardless.”

“I should go. I shouldn’t be here.”

“This is exactly where you should be.”

“You’re in danger because of me.”

Red chortled under his breath, making her frown. “Who am I?” He asked.

“He shot–”

“Who am I?” He interrupted, asking the question again.

She sighed, “Red Reddington. Number four on the most wanted list.”

“I’m always in danger, Lizzy.” He raised his hand, brushing her hair out of her eyes. “At least this time, there’s a damn good reason for it.” He smiled softly, tracing her brow with his fingertip. “You’re not leaving.” He said with a finality.

When he lowered his hand, she lay down on her side next to him. Red rolled over, staring at her back, a pleased smile on his face.
She didn’t argue. Didn’t leave.

And now, she was laying a foot away when she had been at an arms’ length. He liked to think she wanted to be closer to him, but it was probably because of the damn cat. Whatever the reason, he wasn’t going to complain.

“Night, Red.”

He unbent his arm, stroking his fingers through her soft hair. “Goodnight, Elizabeth.”

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Red awoke from a sound sleep, hearing the heavy patter of rain on the window, then the gentle movement of the bed as he felt his bed partner inching closer to him. He watched her slithering back inch by inch until she abruptly halted.

He waited to see if she came closer when a flash of light lit the room. It highlighted Lizzy scooting back a hair more as thunder rumbled in the near distance.

He quietly watched her, listening patiently. She was awake, her breathing too fast for a normal sleep pattern. And by the set of her shoulders and back, she was tense.

Perhaps she had another bad dream?

Another bolt of lightning glowed brightly in the room, showing her rigid form.

Was she afraid of storms? He had always thought she liked them, or at least, to hear Sam tell. He had the hardest time getting her to come in out of the rain.

She flinched again with the bright light, inching back a hair more.

Maybe the rain was okay, but not the sounds with it?

He sighed softly, then reached out, wrapping his arm around her waist, pulling her into the cradle of his body.

She tensed, then completely relaxed when Red pulled the blankets in around them, cocooning them in warmth, and more importantly, security.

He felt the woman go lax against him before he settled in, laying his cheek against the shiny brown silk of her hair. He closed his eyes.

She soon matched his calm breathing, falling asleep a minute later. While he wondered what was wrong, he relaxed himself, after making a mental note to ask her later, then drifted off shortly after snuggling into her.

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A low rumble of thunder awoke Liz from a restful sleep. Slitting her eyes open, she watched the gentle sway of the trees blowing in the brisk wind through the rain spotted window. Stretching away the last of her sleep, she realized that she was on Red’s side of the bed. She then remembered her late night wanderings, seeking comfort.
Rising from the bed, she grabbed the robe Red had given her, well, his robe, snuggling into it’s plush warmth. Using the facilities and straightening her appearance, she stuck her phone under the strap of her shirt and left the confines of the room to seek out the man.

Her injuries were feeling better these days and she automatically found herself forgoing her cart as she regained her strength. With the aid of her crutch, she hobbled down the hallway, calling out to both Red and Dembe.

No one answered. Perhaps they had gone on an errand?

She had awakened later than her norm. Both men kept odd hours, it wasn’t inconceivable that they had started their day early.

Her footsteps took her on a meandering path through the countless rooms of the house. Toward the back, she finally heard Red’s muffled laughter.

She couldn’t blame him for picking the pool atrium to relax, in the short time she had been there it had become her favorite spot as well.

The indoor garden was beautiful, covered in hundreds of leafy green plants and lightly scented flora, leaving the area serene and tranquil. She had spent a lot of her time in that room while Red and Dembe had been gone, reading the plethora of material Red bought her.

She couldn’t remember the last time she had felt so rested.

She did not like to admit even to herself, that now Red was home, that feeling was once again prevalent in her life.

When he was gone, she found herself unsettled and at odds. She no longer questioned the why of it... it just was.

And last night... Red had held her.

The storm had unnerved her, and she admittedly had gotten closer to the man to feel connected. She did not feel so alone if he was near.

He had pulled her into his body, lulling her into a deep, untroubled sleep. She wondered if it had been a natural instinct on his part? Had he felt her nearing and reached out to her in his sleep or had he awoken, offering silent comfort?

What ever had happened, even in his sleep he had felt her need, and delivered.

Even then, she was sure Red would crack about it at some point in the day. She would either down play it, saying it wasn’t her fault what she did in her sleep and he would let it go. Or he would ask if she was all right and want to discuss what had bothered her.

Time would only tell.

Entering the arch way, she saw the man in question, reclined comfortably on the high backed couch, swirling his ever present liquor. The man was truly in a time zone of his own making.

“Re...” Liz trailed off, when a man sitting with his back to her and hidden by the tall chair, turned in her direction.

It was Edward.
She forced a smile, falling into character. “I’m sorry, honey. I didn’t know you had guests.”

Red rose from the couch quickly going to her side. “It’s all right, baby.”

He held his smile when she ducked her head, hiding the quick smile that passed over her own face.

The man instantly knew by her attitude, that she really was not adverse to that particular endearment. The knowledge amused him greatly.

He had tested his theory and was very pleased with the results.

“What are you doing walking?” he had noticed her unsteady gate as she approached. “Why didn’t you use your cart or call?” He complained, tapping the phone sitting against her chest.

“My butt was falling asleep, I had to move.” She gestured to the door, indicating she should go. “I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You aren’t.” Taking the crutch, Red wrapped an arm around her, bringing her towards the couch, “You shouldn’t be up like that without someone there to help you.” He scolded. “Come and sit down.”

Reaching the divan, he took her weight, easing her onto the seat. The woman gripped his forearm when her ankle jostled, her vision swimming for a moment.

He stared at her in open concern until her grasp loosened, her equilibrium returning. She nodded, indicating she was okay.

“You remember Edward?” Raymond gestured to the man.

Liz turned her gaze to the pensive man. “I do, it’s a pleasure to see you again.” She smiled brightly, thinking he was one creepy bastard in her mind.

“Elizabeth.” The man inclined his head in greeting. “I do hope you’re feeling better. Red told me of your accident.”

Having no idea what Red had told the man, she replied generically. “I’m better, thank you. It’s good to get around... some anyway.” She smiled impishly.

She leaned into Red’s side as if she had done it a hundred times, hoping she was acting the part expected of her.

She relaxed quickly when his arm came around her waist, helping her adjust to a more comfortable position.

When she settled, his hand fell naturally to the curve of her hip, his thumb stroking her side soothingly, “Did you sleep well?”

He knew, that when he had stopped thinking and allowed himself to just let her sleep and not ask questions, he had slept well. Very well, in fact.

Dembe’s early morning call had broken the spell. The fact that this man, Edward Costa was the last person he wanted to see... did little to improve his mood.

He would have preferred to stay with Elizabeth.

Liz smiled, nodding. “I did...” She placed a hand against his chest, feeling the gentle rise and fall of
his breathing, “but you know I always do when you’re home.” She replied honestly.

Red’s sharp green eyes focused intently on her, his strong arm tightening around her waist. “As do I, sweetheart.”

After a beat of silence, Dembe came with a low stool upon which to prop her leg, “Thank you, Dembe.”

“Do forgive me, Edward.” Red turned his attention back to his guest, “As you can imagine, I miss her terribly while I’m away.”

“Understandable. She’s a very beautiful woman.” The dark haired man eyed her suggestively. “She must get very lonely while you are away.” Edward’s gaze openly traveled her form, hesitating over certain areas.

The man’s scrutiny unnerved her.

Elizabeth suddenly realized that she sat there in only her boxers and a tank top, an outfit Red had seen numerous times. She instantly pulled the robe closed, a coldness gripping her stomach. She found herself sweating under it’s warmth, the reptilian aspect of Edward Costa’s stare making her stomach churn.

Leaning further into Red’s solid chest, she felt the ripple of muscles tensing under her fingers.

Edward continued as if nothing was amiss. “A wise man would take her along on their journeys, lest someone snatch her away.” He grinned amiably before casually tipping his glass, as though he hadn’t just tread into very dangerous territory.

The man was either a consummate idiot or just that damned sure of himself... either fact, could get him killed very quickly where Red Reddington was concerned.

A fact he proved a moment later.

The atmosphere in the room changed so suddenly, a power radiating off Red so potent, his dominance and rage left her rigid with the intensity.

Dembe stood behind them, an alertness permeating the room, clearly sensing what the woman had sensed.

Red’s fury-filled eyes hardened at the blatant challenge. Pulling his arm from behind her, he sat forward, making to rise.

Grabbing his arm quickly, Elizabeth tried to get things back on track, shifting the focus elsewhere. “Uh...” she damned her shaking voice, “so, what were you two discussing before I interrupted?” she asked idly.

Red’s cold, unblinking eyes never wavered from the Italian across the way. The enraged man’s arm tensed further as he pulled it but she tightened her hold leaning into his field of vision.

“Edward is going to run an errand for me, that is all.” The older man’s jaw tightened, his eyes sheets of crystal glass. “Isn’t that right, Edward?” Red’s tone dripped with ice.

She had to calm him down. It wouldn’t be good to kill the man when they needed him to find Carver.
Stroking her finger over his tense jaw line, ignoring the volatile aura surrounding them, she fought to gain his attention. “I thought maybe you were talking about our plans. Is he attending Francis’ dinner?” She asked airily, tracing his neck, down to where his tie sat.

Red broke his angered gaze from the inconsequential man, focusing on the woman at his side, his eyes softening. He wrapped his arm back around her, settling it on her hip. “I’m sure Edward will be far too busy for such frivolity, baby.”

Liz nuzzled the freshly shaved skin on his jaw line and neck, inhaling the familiar and very pleasant scent.

The man drew in a breath, relaxing slightly under the unexpected touch. He sensed her ploy, reluctantly allowing her tactic.

Imagine his surprise when the woman went a step further, nuzzling his nape.

All thoughts of the other man evaporated to Red’s chagrin. He didn’t know what she was up to, but he had to admit, he was enjoying the hell out of it while it lasted.

“Dembe will supply the pick up address within the hour.” Red rumbled, his voice deepening further when he felt her full lips graze his skin.

From her hiding place, she felt the rich bass in his throat vibrate against her nose and lips as the rigid man exhaled slowly, calming further.

“That is all, for now.” That came out a bit hostile and brittle, but it was to be expected. He was Red Reddington, after all.

Red nodded to Dembe to show their ‘guest’ out. Hearing their footsteps retreating from the room, Liz exhaled and slumped visibly, relief flooding her body.

“He’s gone.” Red soothed. “It’s not like you to let someone like Edward get to you.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t hold it against me. I’m still stoned on those pain pills of yours so I’m not on top of my game.” Liz quivered in revulsion, “Plus, he’s creepy. I hate when people stare at me like they’re stealing my soul.”

“It wasn’t your soul he was interested in, trust me.” Red finished off his glass, then poured another.

“And you were about to snap his damn neck, which would secure him in one location, yes?” she reminded tactfully. “But if he is in the morgue, it wouldn’t lead us to Carver. You do remember he is the key to finding Carver.”

“He’s one of the ways to get to Carver. Not the only one.”

“But he is the one closest to us, right now.” she stated. “Speaking of which, I thought we agreed to have him at dinner so we could watch him?” She asked, her voice slightly muffled.

He suddenly realized that Lizzy was still resting against him, her head crooked under his chin while she lazily played with a button on his vest. It was a shame that the position would change in a minute.

“I don’t want him anywhere near you.” he proclaimed. “Not after how he looked at you...” there was something deadly about the easily stated observation but what came next caused a chill to traverse
“...I didn’t like it.”

“Red!” Liz sputtered in embarrassment. “First of all, how he looks at me shouldn’t be of any consequence...” She pulled back, matching his frown.

He missed her warmth instantly. Then his attention was directed to her hand braced on his thigh.

“No, if he’s going to talk about my fiancée like that, so brazenly to my face and be that forward, twice now, who knows what the hell he’s doing behind my back.”

“Okay...” she was confused. “How are we supposed to keep tabs on him and find Carver if you don’t want him at the dinner?”

“I’m not even sure I want him for the job, to be frank.”

“... And now you’re not wanting him to do this job.” she pointed out, exasperated.

“I can have my people track him regardless.” Red’s anger was resurfacing. “I only really brought him in so we would have his actual locations. We could just as easily slip a tracker on him.”

“This is just silly, Red.” she placated. “Just because he made some backhanded remarks and freaky eye contact, does not make him a real threat. We--”

Red interrupted, “He’s a very real threat.”

Liz rolled her eyes, and in this instance it annoyed the hell out of the man. “Lizzy, you understand that this man is a criminal, correct?”

“Yes, I know that!” She replied patiently. “But, not to point out the obvious, so are you.”

“I would never hurt you. He will.” he stressed. “So believe me when I say, he was very serious in his comments.”

“You’re kidding?” Liz scoffed.

“No, I’m not.” he grated. “Do not let him get you alone.”

“What, you think I’ll cave to his charm?” Liz asked in disgust.

“No, I’m thinking of what he’ll do when you don’t give into what he wants!” He snapped as a clap of thunder shook the room.

The combination of the thunder and having never heard Red raise his voice like that, startled her. Her entire body jerked in place, as she blinked rapidly.

Red’s brow creased. Had he frightened her? The thought left him more than unsettled.

He knew very well, Edward’s reputation. Or the rumors, at the very least. That the man had an obvious interest in Elizabeth, bothered Red greatly. Sickened him, actually. He reached for her, his hand dropping away at Dembe’s entrance into the room.

“Is he gone?” Raymond barked.

“Yes. I dislike that man, intensely.” The dark man sat at the bar, eyeing his friend’s tense back. “I’ll send him the required info later.”
“Not yet, Dembe.” Red shook his head defiantly. “I may see if the Stuart brothers are available.”

“I know it’s obvious as to why,” Dembe hated to remind, “but I thought you weren’t going to use the Stuarts’ after what happened the last time...”

“Red, just have him do the job. Let’s stick to some sort of plan, if only so Ress and Samar have an easy go of it, all right.”

“Fine.” Red nodded to Dembe, “Send it.” the man arose, turning his back not only to the room but its two occupants. “But he’s fair game after... and I’m gonna kill him.”
Red Reddington felt odd, like the world was sitting off it’s axis.

When he had breakfasted with Elizabeth about an hour ago, the tension was still very much prevalent between them. Afterwards, he found it difficult to concentrate on anything. He could not forget her face after he had shouted at her.

Perhaps he had been too hard on her but he felt he had just cause. Elizabeth hardly ever listened or heeded his warnings. Much like Donald Ressler. He knew he should not have raised his voice, some said he could be rather overpowering at times.

He had a second sense about these things however and the feeling about Edward had intensified since the man’s departure and with Carver on the scene, matters were looking bleak.

He arose, too agitated to sit any longer, heading off in the direction of the woman’s favorite room.

He approached slowly testing the waters, starting off with small talk. Something he personally hated.

“Good book?” He tilted his head, glancing at the cover. It was one of the many tawdry romance novels he had bought her.

“I’m enjoying it. It’s about a Bow Street Runner.... and a whore.” She snickered. “Well, she’s a Courtesan, actually.”

He felt a bit of the stress slip off his shoulders, when she smiled and laughed. More importantly, she moved over on the couch to make room for him to sit.

Red snatched the book from her hand, turning it on it’s side as though looking at a nude centerfold. “I want this book after you’re done with it.”

Liz giggled into her tea glass. “I never took you for a Playboy type of man, Red.”

“Well, I’m not, not really.” He casually leafed through the book, noticing she marked some of the pages. “If only because my subscription keeps getting lost in the mail.”

Glancing quickly at one page she’d mark, he found it to be a romantic scene.

Well now, this was interesting. It appeared that he would never have to search for these things again. Red found that he was suddenly, one happy individual.

Everything marked and mapped out all for his pleasure and hers...

“Our out of curiosity, what kind of man did you take me for?” he queried quietly. “If not the Playboy type.”

“I don’t know, I guess I saw you maybe being into burlesque.” She shrugged.

“I do enjoy a good burlesque show, but I have also been known to appreciate a very good lap dance.” He chortled low in his chest when her eyes showed her shock.
“You’ve gotten a lap dance?!”
“You sound shocked.”
“I guess I am.” she admitted. “You seem so refined and gentlemanly.”
“Lizzy, I do business all around the world with all types of people.” he warmed to his tale. “Often that work has taken place in Clubs. If a service is offered, sometimes you have to partake, to avoid insulting your host.”
“But, you’ve never touched?”
“I didn’t say that.” he corrected. “If it makes you feel better, I have never touched a woman with out her first placing my hands somewhere on her body.”
“What does that mean?” she was a little put out.
“In some Clubs, there are no touch policies. In others, there aren’t.” he explained. “Regardless of their rules, I don’t touch dancers unless I’m directed to do so.”
“And what? You just keep your hands on her breasts until the dance is over?” She asked, clearly annoyed.
“No, if I’m there on business, I’ll drop my hands to her hips or stroke her back.”
“So you visit strip clubs for pleasure too?”
“No, not really.” he was having a difficult time keeping a straight face, for the woman was clearly jealous. “Again, even when it’s supposed to be personal time, it’s still business.”
“I don’t understand.” she said peevishly.
“I was invited to an associate’s bachelor party at a Strip Club.” Red waved his hands, explaining. “It may have been off hours, but it’s still business.”
“Oh, I see. So you and Dembe don’t hit the circuit on your own.”

The tip of Red’s tongue played with the inside of his jaw, his eyes sparkling mischievously. “Dembe and I prefer to play cards or read.”

“Do you enjoy going?” she snipped.

Red tilted his head and quirked his brow. “Sometimes,” he sighed, “once in a while, you’ll get a dancer who is having fun and enjoys what she does.” he lifted impressed brows, one particular ‘dancer’ coming to mind. “She’s always nice to watch.”

Red leaned back more comfortably, continuing. “The others are there to pay off student loans or to make ends meet. They don’t really want to be there, but then, they don’t want to be flipping burgers either.”

“Do you have a type?”

Red laughed, “Are you asking what type of woman I prefer to look at? Or what type of show I prefer watching?”

“I-I don’t know what I’m asking.” She blushed.
“I prefer women with natural breasts, however there are some beautiful fakes out there.” he nodded thoughtfully. “Though, I’ve always been a firm believer that all women are beautiful, no matter their breast size.”

Red smiled, amused when Liz unconsciously looked at her chest, then reddened when she realized what she had just done.

“As for what show I prefer, I’d have to say the lap dance.” he decided. “The dancers have a very bad habit of spilling house secrets while they dance and don’t even know they’re doing it half the time.”

“You’re getting inside info on their boss?” she couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“Of course. A lot of the girls know the inside track because the men don’t think to keep their mouths shut around them.” he shifted more comfortably. “They’re just dancing girls after all.” he lifted one hand slightly. “Never underestimate a woman, they know all the good gossip.”

“Have any of them been hurt because of the info you pry from them.”

“No, because the bosses never think it comes from them. They’re always convinced one of their men has turned on them.” he smiled pleasantly. “Now, tell me about this book you’re reading.”

Liz looked at the man and for a moment, it was touch and go whether or not she would allow the evasive maneuver. She relented, deciding it really wasn’t any of her business... besides, for some reason the topic pissed her off.

She picked up one of the novels, sighing mentally as she moved on.

“Oh, I noticed that this is the first in a series of three. I’ll have to get the other two, because what I’ve read so far it’s bound to get mysterious and steamy.” she smiled happily again. “Out of all the books you gave me, I’d have to say this has been my favorite author.”

Red made note of the author's name, intent on buying all of her books by the afternoon. Anything that put steamy thoughts into Lizzy’s head had a ‘thumbs up’ from him.

“I’ve read one of her other books and now I’m into this one and I just realized that her men remind me of you.”

“Really?” he was stunned at the admission. “I don’t recall the last time I was in the company of a Courtesan.” he hesitated, a far off look suddenly appearing on his face... “No, wait–”

“I think.” She interrupted, “I meant more along the lines of them being over protective, dominant, sometimes conceited, pompous maybe?” Her eyes lit with amusement.

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.” He scowled slightly. “May I ask a question?”

She nodded, taking another drink from her glass.

“If you dislike the men, why read the books?”

“I didn’t say I disliked them.” she stated. “Who wants a man that kowtows to you all the time?” she defended her stance.

“When the conversation and activities are always what the woman wants, it gets damned boring and tedious always making the decisions.” she recalled her evenings with Tom when the subject of dinner would come up and the man invariably always answered the same...
“Even when you ask seriously, you always get the same answer in return...whatever you want babe’.” she warmed to the diatribe.

There was no doubt in Red’s mind to whom she referred.

She shook her head piteously. “You can’t get a good argument out of them, so there goes any make up sex. Too much sweet makes my tooth ache. I...” She halted abruptly, realizing she had said too much. “…I’m sorry, I don’t know where that came from.

“No, please. Continue.” Red replied seriously. “I’m finding this most enlightening.”

The man was spellbound.

He watched her tilt her head, deep in thought. Somewhere in her vilification, she had gone from talking in the third person to the first. This was personal. She was describing the man she wanted.

He was more than interested in hearing what she had to say.

“I don’t dislike strong men. Alpha males are challenging, exciting... opinionated. Keeps you on your toes.” she had given it much thought of late. “A dominant male can be incredibly affectionate, caring... sensual. They understand that fighting and making up is good for a healthy relationship.”

She hesitated, forming her words carefully now, “And a little over protectiveness never hurt anyone. I may have taken a defense course but that doesn’t mean I can always take on a two hundred pound maniacal killer about to boil me in acid.” she smiled at Red. “It’s nice to know someone’s coming for you.” she inclined her head slightly toward him. “They’re not all bad.”

“And the men in all these books you’ve read are...?”

“Opinionated, bull headed, and strong willed. But on the other side, they have been gentle, affectionate and caring. The perfect male.” she shifted her eyes playfully. “That was of course, written by a woman, so they’re fictional.” she sighed heavily. “No one can be perfect, but there are traits, characteristics that she has written,” the woman admitted, “that some men do have in real life, that women find attractive.”

“And you are one of these women?”

“Yes. I like a good argument, a man that doesn’t back down in a fight.” she rationalized. “But can apologize if he’s wrong. A man who has an opinion and isn’t afraid to share it.” She hesitated, reddening slightly.

Whatever she was thinking, was even more personal to her than what she had shared. He couldn’t think of what it might be... and then it came to him.

Her own personal fantasies.

What she had shared was telling of what kind of man she needed. But how she envisioned him treating her, touching her and even how he looked, was a deep personal secret.

All women had fantasies.

Sex, well, good sex anyway, probably wouldn’t happen without the help of romance novels filling women’s heads with perfect fictional men rescuing them and romantic love scenes.

Red appreciated the help.
But he had always been a firm believer that women weren’t completely focused on their clit like men, their dicks. You had to arouse the mind as well as the body.

Oh, she’d climax with out the mental stimulation eventually, but she’d have a better time with the added effort. And to be honest, he enjoyed playing with them. He liked filling their heads with all sorts of things he wanted to do with them. He liked fulfilling their fantasies.

After running a raid in Afghanistan, he finally met a female associate, who up until that point, had been a long distance contact. He and his men had come in, dressed in desert fatigues. She eyed him all evening like he was a walking dick.

Turned out she had a thing for men in uniform.

The raid had been a bitch and needing to blowing off some steam, he had enjoyed immensely, playing the man in uniform to the hilt. She had eaten it up and he had the claw marks on his ass to prove it.

It had been a hell of an evening.

Red Reddington never shied away from a challenge... especially if it made his partner horny as hell. Throw any sort of sexual fantasy his way and he’d do his best to deliver.

It had to have been difficult for her being married to Tom. She had tried to be vulnerable, but it had always backfired on her. Trust had to be an issue with her.

There was something about Liz that wanted to be able to let go at night, to trust her partner to take care of her in any circumstance.

She needed a man she could run to, that would hold and comfort her. As essential as it was for her to be strong, the need to cuddle, to be weak and not be taken advantage of, was just as necessary.

And he knew without doubt, that she had been neglected in the bedroom. Just a loose description of her past lovers had told him that much.

Hell, for the simple fact alone that she’d never had sex during her period, said a lot to him. She may have wanted to, but didn’t trust her partners enough to ask for it.

While most women in their thirties knew what they wanted and how they wanted it, Lizzy was still wondering what it was all about. He’d bet she’d never had one toe-curling, mind bending orgasm in her life.

She needed someone with which she could explore possibilities. She was a curious sort, always wanting to learn and try new things.

She was slowly finding her voice, asking questions, wondering about relationships and the world in general. Her appetite was voracious. There was so much she needed, some of it she wasn’t even aware of just yet.

“You don’t have to tell me, Lizzy. Some things are too personal to share.” he brought the conversation back to the present. “I didn’t mean to pry.’”

“I’ve never really voiced any of that before. I guess I was just caught up in the question and got carried away.” she was still fighting her blush. “Did I say something... too personal?”

Shit! What had she said!?
The woman felt a flash of anxiety, replaying the conversation in her head. Aside from thanking him for helping her when the Stewmaker had taken her, what else had she said?

After a moment, she breathed a little easier recalling how generic everything sounded.

It had been, right?

No, no it had not been generic. Not at all.

For God’s sake, she had essentially described Red Reddington. At least to her own way of thinking.

But maybe it was only noticeable to her? He couldn’t know what she was thinking, right?

Or could he?

He seemed to know about her dream.

Oh God...

Did he know how she felt? More importantly, did he know what she thought about him?

“No, you didn’t.” he broke her train of thought. “Fantasies are meant to be kept secret until you can share them with someone you trust and who might just fulfill them.” he crooked his head slightly his eyes resting quietly on her face. “But for future reference, you can discuss anything you wish with me. I doubt I’d be shocked by what you reveal.”

She breathed a little easier. He had brought the conversation to a finish, himself. Or at least, to the point, where she didn’t have to say another damned thing, lest she incriminate herself.

“Thank you...” Liz said quietly.

The statement puzzled the man. “For?”

“For last night.” she continued. The least she could do was thank the man for not only being a gentleman, but for not making fun of her.

Red smiled softly, inclining his head. “I just wanted some of the blankets back.” he jested, making her smile, which had been his intended goal.

“I am not a blanket hog.” she protested.

“I am perfectly capable of walking up those stairs by myself.” Elizabeth was both embarrassed and frustrated as she scowled at Reddington.

While he enjoyed her petulant face, he did have a point to make. “I am not taking the chance you’ll fall.”

Liz eyed the steps dubiously. “I am not going to fall.” she hoped she sounded more certain than she felt.

“Why can’t you just accept my help and be quiet about it.” he tightened his jaw, keeping the smile at bay. “It’s obvious you’ve been injured. What’s the problem here?”

“I just think that if I’m playing your fiancée,” she eyed the magnificent mansion critically, “I should be able to handle myself in any situation.”

“Considering most people would have rescheduled, I’d say you’re doing better than expected.” he dismissed her concerns. “Now stop worrying. It’ll be just like the first time we were here, everything will be fine.”

Dembe waited patiently, as was his way. “Just pick her up and carry her.”

“Dembe!” Liz gasped her disgruntlement. “I would never have expected that from you.”

“I missed lunch.” the man frowned over and a frown from Dembe, spoke volumes. Even Red was slightly taken aback. “I am hungry.”

The woman bounced to the bottom of the stairs, shooing Red off then sighed more than heavily when the man inched in beside her, bracketing her.

She tightened her lips, shooting daggers at him before gripping the banister determinedly. She took the first step, just tightening her grasp on the wrought iron railing, when the entrance to palatial building swung open unceremoniously.

“What in the hell happened to you?” Francis asked as he came to the top step, hands on hips, an incredulous look on his face as he examined the scene.

Liz scrunched her nose, smiling slightly. “I had an accident.”

“I’d say.” Francis folded his arms, watching her gingerly set her foot down on the third step. “Well, aren’t you being patient...” he smiled at the man hovering over the woman, “for once.”

“Stubborn little...” Red muttered, then reached out quickly to keep her steady.

“What did you say?” she frowned at him, reaffirming her grip which had slipped slightly.

“I called you a stubborn little shit.” Red stated succinctly.

She gripped the banister with both hands, her mind setting stubbornly. “I am not!” she hissed.
“Yes.” Red disagreed. “You are.”

“I can do it...” she breathed, exertion slowly but surely overtaking her, truth told.

“Look back Lizzy.” Red instructed. She looked down at the five steps she’d taken, feeling a surge of pride.

“Now, look up.”

She glanced up at the enormous climb ahead of her and Francis leaning against the stone pillar, grinning down at her in open amusement.

It had already taken her at least four minutes do take five steps. Dinner would be over by the time she got to the top.

She resigned herself to the inevitable, slightly depressed over the fact, her face showing as much.

Red stepped once, his intention clear. Liz balked instantly, turning, her hand slapping at the man’s expensive jacket. “Not you!” she proclaimed defiantly.

The man offered a mocking laugh in his throat, lifting the woman in his arms, walking easily up the stairs with his bundle in tow. Elizabeth’s face pouted prettily.

Francis chuckled, opening the door wide for Red. Dembe came up the stairs two at a time, catching up to them easily.

“Would you put me down...” she hissed, wiggling in his grasp.

The man complied, keeping a firm hold on her waist to aid if need arose. “Where are we gathered?”

Liz’s small fist balled into a frustrated smack against his chest. Red ignored the action, hard pressed to keep the smile from his lips. “You know how I love that, baby,” the man teased, “but not now... later.”

“Huh?” she was totally lost unlike their host, who laughed right in her face...

“We don’t get kinky here until after dinner.” Francis grinned at the vexed woman. “We’re all in the dining room.” he offered a hand in greeting, “Dembe, good to see you again.” Francis smiled for the man.

They headed for the dining room.

Elizabeth was stunned by all the people present as the young man threw open the heavy doors, introducing the new arrivals.

“Everyone knows Red and Dembe?” Francis waved a dismissing hand. “And the beauty on Red’s arm, is his lovely fiancée, Elizabeth.”

She waved wanly, a little embarrassed that the attention immediately became focused on her.

After they were seated, dinner was brought out shortly thereafter. Easy conversation fell around the table, some discussing travel plans or new items they had bought.

A woman across from Elizabeth admired her jewelry. She hadn’t worn the earrings tonight because it was supposed to be an informal setting. But Liz hadn’t taken the necklace or bracelet off except to bathe.
These were gifts for my birthday.” She showed them off proudly, swiveling them under the light. She reflectively placed her hand over Red’s, her small fingers intertwining with the strong, artistic ones.

The man halted his narrative mid-sentence, his eyes dropping to the contact, before lifting to the lovely profile. He enjoyed the feel of the warm flesh pressed so intimately to his hand.

Liz relaxed more after that, feeling like she fit in again. She even forgot momentarily, about the heavy casts she wore.

After dinner was cleared, those around the table started talking business. Elizabeth busied herself with her dessert. Red slid his over, hiding a grin, having noticed how delectable the woman found the treat.

She could not really follow any of the technical aspects being discussed, so she lost herself in the delicious cake and wine she sipped. She was not even aware of any dissension, until the raised voices startled her.

“Good God! Stop bickering!” Red’s powerful voice resonated over the others, instantly quieting the table. “Anne, if you want to take your business through there, that’s fine. But don’t expect us to follow suit, not at this time.” he was emphatic.

There was a chorus of consensual agreement on the debate. “It’s not only a good way to loose your shipment, but more importantly, your men.” Red censored. “I, for one, am not going to risk my men over a few dollars. And you shouldn’t either.”

The woman fell silent, frowning.

“I have to agree with Red in this.” Francis leaned on the table, his hands linked under his chin. “Some of my men have been with me for years. Their continued loyalty and their lives are more important... you go in,” he advised the woman, “you go alone.”

Talks continued on to other matters, nothing having really been decided in Liz’s opinion. Into the next hour, new business coming out of Japan was discussed.

Red felt Liz lean into him, absently wrapping his arm around her. He smiled softly realizing that she wasn’t leaning against him out of affection, but because she had fallen asleep.

Adjusting his arm, he shared a small smile with Francis when she settled more comfortably against him.

“I didn’t realize how boring we were.” Francis frowned his concern.

“You were the one who was talking.” Red reminded.

A little while later, they finished their discussions. Usually Red would stay and socialize, but he had more important matters to attend to, one of which was leaning against him, fast asleep.

Red gently touched Liz’s cheek, rousing her. She opened her eyes, raising her head off his shoulder, looking around with bleary eyes. She made contact with the man’s gaze, finding him grinning at her... as was the rest of those seated at the table.

“I am so sorry.” She whispered her mortification.

“It’s all right, Elizabeth.” Francis smiled gently. “Those pain pills throw you for a loop. I broke my
leg skiing a couple years back and fell asleep before a speech I had to give at a charity dinner.” he remembered fondly. “Red had to slap me awake.”

“I didn’t have to, but I enjoyed the experience all the same.” Red stood. “Well, ladies and gentlemen. It’s time I get Sleeping Beauty back to the castle.”

“I’ll see you out.” Francis arose, following the trio close behind.

“Dinner was amazing, Francis. Thank you for inviting me...” Liz reddened, “even if I did miss half of it.”

“To be honest, I wish I could have taken a nap myself.” the man shook his head woefully. “That last hour was dreadfully painful.”

“I think more than a few of us would have liked to have drifted off.” Red nodded in agreement. “I don’t envy the rest of your evening, Francis. You’re welcome to come with us.” he grinned.

“Who’s to say they wouldn’t be here, bitching at each other in the morning when I came back for clothes.” Francis opened the door, guiding them down the stairs.

“I thought you had the new guest house?” Liz asked of her old house, the one Francis bought.

“Oh, I’m still working on it. I’ll have it done in a few days time, of course, too late to be of any use now.” he whined miserably. “I’ll tell you what though, if I don’t get them out within the next half hour, expect a knock on your door.”

Francis opened the back door of the car, stepping out of their way as Red got Liz situated before shutting the door and walking to the other side.

Looking over the roof of the car, “My door is always open.” Red replied, quite seriously.

Once Elizabeth was done with her nightly ritual, Red helped her settle into the mattress. As he reached for her laptop, she grabbed his wrist, alarmed, “You’re bleeding, Red.”

He glanced down at his once pristine white shirt, watching the blood seep through the rich cotton fabric. “Well, damn. I liked this shirt.” he grumbled.

“Go get some supplies and I’ll change it for you.”

“I can do it.” He craned his head, looking to see how far the blood ran down his sleeve.

“I want to see it, check that it isn’t infected.” she argued. “Don’t make me get up and do it myself.”

“Fine, I’ll get it.” He went into the bathroom, returning with the needed supplies a minute later, handing them to her, unbuttoning his shirt.

“Just soak it when we’re done,” she eyed the material critically, “it’s still wet, maybe it’ll come out.”

“Maybe.” But he doubted it. For a man, he knew a lot about when he could and couldn’t get blood out of fabrics.

“Sit down.” She moved her leg over, making room for him. “Roll up your sleeve.”

Red pulled up the sleeve of his t-shirt, holding it out of her way while she worked the soiled bandage
off. “You can just yank it off.” he reminded.

“I could, but then that would hurt.”

“I would not classify that as pain.”

“If I can do it without making it hurt...” She left it hanging, letting him fill in the blanks. “I’m starting to wonder if you’re a masochist. The way you don’t shy away from pain.”

“I expect pain, so when it happens, I’m able to keep going.” he watched the proceedings calmly. “If you go into a gun battle expecting to get hit, it’s not as shocking to you when it happens. While it hurts like hell, you’re able to feed off the adrenaline and survive.” he had cultivated the art over the years. “There are no time outs when you get a wound.”

“Try yelling out, Uncle.” She muttered, making him smile. She pulled back the last bit of bandage, exposing the gash. It was seeping, but still closed, for the most part. “I knew you strained your arm carrying me.”

“I did not. I felt a pull before we even went to Francis’.” he informed her. “I just didn’t have time to deal with it then.”

“You don’t think maybe you aggravated it by toting me around like a sack of potatoes?”

“Haven’t we established that I do not lie?”

She dabbed the area with disinfectant, not surprised that Red didn’t react to the sting. She blew on the area, drying it while she ripped off pieces of tape, sticking them to Red’s fingers.

“Oh, I forgot.” She touched her lips underneath the cut, feeling for heat. The area was cool and dry. She finally pulled back, glancing up at Red, realizing what she had done, finding him grinning at her.

“I was checking for fever.”

“There is this wonderful new invention... a thermometer.” he glanced upward. “But on second thought, I like your way better.”

She dabbed the area again, cleaning off her germs then added some ointment and clean gauze. “See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“Didn’t hurt one bit. When I get wounded again, you can do the bandaging.”

“I hate when you’re so blasé about that.” She patted the tape to secure the ends to his skin.

“When you’ve been wounded as many times as I have, you can’t think of it any other way.” He wadded up the trash, and pushed off the bed. “If I started dreading where or when the next hit would happen, I’d never leave the damn house. You can’t live your life in fear.”

“How many times have you been hurt?”

“Pick a weapon.” he quipped.

“There’s been more than one weapon...”

“Knife, gun, electricity—”

“You’ve been tortured?”
He shrugged it off. “Are you getting on with the guards now?” he asked.

Liz’s brow furrowed at the change of subject, sighing. “Obviously.” she screwed up her face. “Silas and his innuendo is evidence of that.” she chuckled quietly. “Why?”

“Well, I wanted to make sure you were comfortable with them and getting around better before I got out of your hair.” he explained.

Liz sat up straighter, a frown overtaking her smile. “What?”

“I wanted to make sure you were settled before going to the safe house.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she scowled.

“I have overstayed my welcome, don’t you think?” Red chuckled lightly, then sighed. “Sweetheart, three days is an acceptable houseguest, five days is pushing it. I’m going on almost twenty days.” he advised. “I am the terrible, dreaded houseguest that never leaves. Sort of like Francis.”

“But... it’s your house.” she reasoned. “I’m the intruder.”

“No, remember, your name is on the deed.” he joked. “I don’t want to...” Red turned serious for a moment, “I’ve enjoyed this truce, for lack of better word, we have maintained.”

He had dreaded this conversation all day. “Perhaps I should not push my luck.”

Liz pulled at the pillow in her lap, twisting the fringe. “You’re not in my way.” she managed. “And I... you’re not annoying me at all, as a matter of fact, you’ve been very helpful.” she smiled brightly. “I could not have managed without you.”

*Did he want to go because he wanted away from her?*

“I...” she hesitated, “have I given you the impression I want you to leave?”

“Well, no.” Red tilted his head questioningly. “I just thought since you are better now and your doing well with Security, you didn’t really need me around anymore.”

Liz got lost in thought, wondering what she should do. She had enjoyed Red’s company, but maybe she had been too needy? Was this his way to get some distance? To get away from her?

“This is a huge house, Red.” she tried again. “It’s not like we’re right on top of one another.” she fiddled with her ring, her mouth falling open when she realized what she’d said... her dream instantly coming to the forefront.

“I-I mean...” she stuttered, “it seems silly to bounce from one safe house to another, when there’s a perfectly good place, right here.”

Red fell silent, drumming his fingers against the bed.

“Besides, I still do need your help sometimes.” she reminded. “You know, like when the guys have my cart and stuff.”

She bit the inside of her lip, knowing that was a lame excuse the minute she voiced it. She could get around pretty well now and he knew it.

“You can’t leave!” she reminded quickly. “If Francis comes by...”
Red lifted his head nobly, watching the woman attentively. If he didn’t know better, he would think she didn’t _want_ him to leave.

Not that he wanted to go. He had been thinking how he could possibly extend his stay, but had come up empty in his search for a legitimate excuse.

But it seemed, Lizzy had an abundance of them.

“All right...” he quietly agreed, holding his joy. “But when you’re ready for me t–”

“Oh course, yes.” She nodded happily, smiling. “I’ll let you know.”

After breakfast the next morning, Red left Liz in the capable care of her nurses before heading to his office.

He’d been checking on his investments, pleased when he saw all of them doing well. So pleased in fact, seeing Ressler’s name splash across his phone screen did little to damper his good mood.

“Reddington, we’ve had another one.” Ressler informed the man without preamble. “If you could come down and take a look at the pictures...”

“Can’t you just send them?” Red sighed into the phone.

“Aram said they were running some systems update for another hour or something. I wasn’t really listening, to be honest.” Donald confessed.

“I’ll be there soon.” Red closed the phone, his head falling back into his chair, his mood dampening somewhat. He forced himself up, heading down the hall. “Lizzy?”

“Yeah?” She called out from the closet.

He followed her voice entering the area after a few steps, focusing on her activity. “What are you doing?”

He stared at her, half hidden in the clothes hanging on the rack... well part of her, at least.

His eyes immediately fell to the rather fetching sight revealed. The only portion visible of the woman was her bottom. Her ever present companion, the demon cat, sat there beside her, lazily batting at a string attached to a pair of Liz’s pants.

“How do you get up if no one came in here?” He glanced about, confirming they were alone. “Where are the nurses?”

“Helen ran to the store.” she said from inside her makeshift fortress. “And Diane is getting something from her car.”

She backed out of the clothes, brushing her hair out of her face before sitting on the floor. “I was going to eat a candy bar before Vegan Mindy got here.” She held up the candy bar, pointing to the clothes. “Dembe gave me a secret stash.”

She rolled to the chair, pushing with her arm trying to get off the floor unsuccessfully while Keres rubbed herself against Liz’s thigh. “I guess I didn’t think that far ahead. Silas usually gets it for me.”

“I see.” He bent over, helping her off the floor. “You don’t have to worry about Vegan Mindy, I
fired her yesterday.”

“You did?” Her voice rose shrilly. The man crooked his head, eyeing her quizzically.

“I did. She didn’t make you happy.” he walked her slowly back to the bedroom. “They’re sending over an older Southern woman, that I’m sure, will fill you with chicken and dumplings and cherry cobbler.”

“No more eggplant or weeds?” Liz’s voice bubbled with joy.

“No, and since their employees have trouble following vocal warnings, I’ve given them a complete list of things that are off limits around you.” Red further stated. “Eggplant being at the very top.”

She smiled, giddily. “Thank you, Red.” a thought occurred to her. “Oh, why were you looking for me?”

The man explained the situation to her. “But didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.” He smiled absently at nothing in particular.

“All right, I’ll save you some cobbler.”

“No dumplings?” He asked, heading to the door.

“I make no promises!” She called out to him.

Red and Dembe entered the main area of the Blacksite, stopping slowly in their tracks. Computer techs bounced from one station to another, their expressions bleak, their actions harried. Agents littered the floor as usual, but it appeared several more had joined the fray.

“Samar?” Red took off his hat, having finally reached the woman.

“Reddington, good timing.” She pointed to the new photos taped to the boards. “We just got these printed a couple minutes ago.”

He neared the offensive items, his eye ticking slightly at the vivid pictures. This victim was worse than the previous two. She was literally torn to shreds. Only hunks of skin were left hanging haphazardly on her poor, mangled body.

“Do we have a name as of yet?” the man enquired quietly.

“I just pulled this before you came in.” She handed over a driver’s license photo to him of what the woman originally looked like with her face intact.

Taping it up beside the other normal photos of the two previous victims, Red Reddington scrutinized them intensely. He filtered back through people he knew from associates to the occasional Barista he may have encountered. No one came to mind, none resembled any of these women.

“I don’t know her.” His jaw tightened slightly. He wasn’t being of much help to the team or any of these women... or future victims.

“I didn’t think you would but it never hurts to check.” Samar’s tone was grim. “The thing is, I’ve
researched these women and they were normal. I mean, completely every day boring, normal. Why anyone would want to harm them…”

“Did you know her.” Ressler interrupted.

“He didn’t.” Samar answered. “I was just explaining to him that they had good work records, steady relationships, no debt, not even so much as a traffic ticket.” the woman was at a loss. “Who would want these women dead, is a complete mystery.’”

Donald and Samar turned to look at Reddington who had fallen silent. An oddity where the man was concerned. He was standing in front of the three pictures, scanning them repeatedly.

His eyes moved slowly, his stare focused and intent and then... he stiffened. Turning on his heel he made for the door, Dembe following closely behind.

“Reddington!” Donald yelled at the retreating man.

“Reddington? What did you see!” Samar hurried after the man, skidding to the elevator. She just caught it as the door was closing. “What?” she demanded.

“They all look like Lizzy.”

The door closed with a finality on the man’s foreboding countenance.
April 21

Red sat tensely throughout the drive home. He knew that Elizabeth was safe, but that didn’t stop the anxiety he felt.

His footsteps hastened up the stairs to the front entrance, as he searched the house methodically, finally locating Elizabeth in their bedroom.

He breathed a sigh of relief, grinning as he watched Lizzy poke a pen under her leg cast.

“I didn’t hear you come in.” She poked her tongue out the corner of her mouth, jabbing the pen in further.

“Itch?” He walked slowly through the room, heading for the closet.

“I swear ants are under this thing.” She jabbed the pen in further.

The man came out carrying a long handle back scratcher, holding it aloft, “Try this.”

She snatched it out of his hand, jamming it under the cast, groaning with relief.

“Thank you.” She moved it back and forth under the heavy plaster, sighing. “So are Ress and Samar following Edward again?”

“Yes, they started tailing him at the pick up point.” He trailed his finger over the top of the cast, surprised when she jerked away. “Is it hurting? Tender?”

“No. It’s fine.” She placed her hand over the area he had felt, rubbing the pale skin, crinkling her nose in open distaste.

He went to touch her other leg but she pulled that one away as well.

“Oh, hello Mr. Reddington.” the nurse placed the freshly laundered towels she carried to the other side of her hip. “I didn’t know you were back.”

“Okay, what’s going on?” he sighed his annoyance, his body tensing instantly alert. Out of the corner of his eye, he had caught a movement, his hand instinctively reaching for the weapon on his gun holster hidden beneath the back of his jacket.

“Red!” Liz sat up quickly, sensing his intentions. “You remember Helen.” she smiled brightly, hopefully covering the faux pas.

“Oh, hello Mr. Reddington.” the nurse placed the freshly laundered towels she carried to the other side of her hip. “I didn’t know you were back.”

Red stared at Liz for a few seconds before transferring his now composed features to the newest occupant in the room. “I only arrived a minute ago. Just checking on our girl.”

“Well, we were getting ready for her bath.” the woman seemed genuinely fond of her patient.

“Then, I’ll let you get to it.” Red patted Liz’s knee, very aware when she pulled the leg out from
under his touch.

Something was amiss. Something was up with the woman.

But evidently his questions would have to wait. “I’ll be in my office if you need me.”

Minutes later in the quiet of his office, Red ruminated on the now existing problem. It now appeared he was not allowed to touch her, in any way shape or form.

He relived the day’s activities in his mind, searching for some feasible reason the woman might have changed so drastically in such a short amount of time.

Nothing seemed out of the norm upon consideration. He had sensed a sort of cloud hanging over Elizabeth. But for the life of him, he couldn’t think what had brought about the change.

He was stymied.

“Mr. Reddington?” Helen tapped lightly on the other side of the door.

“Yes, come in.” He said, straightening in his seat. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re having a little trouble with Elizabeth, sir.”

“I’m shocked.” He said mockingly, pushing away from his desk, standing erect. “What’s wrong now?”

“She’s insisting on a bath, which is fine...”

“But...” he urged gently.

“She’s impatient. She wants in now. We haven’t wrapped her casts—”

“Go get some bags.” Red gestured for the woman to go. “I’ll handle her.”

As he entered the room he could already make out the heated argument emanating from behind the closed bathroom doors.

Swinging the doors open wide, he was assaulted with the steamy fragrant air. His eyes instantly swept Elizabeth Keen’s scantily clad form.

“Red!” She gasped indignantly, clutching the towel to her breasts with age old maiden modesty.

Red ignored the modest chagrin, addressing Diane directly, “Give us a minute. Helen is in the kitchen.”

The woman retreated quickly, pulling the doors closed behind her, leaving the two in silence.

“I’m getting in that tub.” Liz muttered.

“After you get your casts wrapped.”

“I’m more than capable of keeping them out of the water.” She grated, annoyed.

“Maybe,” He walked behind her, shutting off the water, “but you’re still getting them wrapped.”

She huffed angrily, moving past him when he caught her.
“You’re going to sit down, get wrapped like a good little girl or–”

“Or what!” Liz fumed, her eyes flashing fire.

Red stepped in closer, until she had to tilt her head to look up at him. “Or I’ll put you in that tub and dunk you under the water until you stop being a brat and tell me what the real problem is.”

“Well, that would get my casts wet.” Elizabeth gloated.

“Sit down.” He said sternly.

The woman found herself sitting quickly, gripping her towel in place, her eyes still defiant.

A tentative knock on the door interrupted what might have been.

“Come in.” Red almost barked.

The nurses came in, armed with the supplies needed.

“Proceed ladies.” he cast Elizabeth a warning glance as he passed. “Watch out... she bites.” it was silkily advised.

Red rolled up his sleeves, cooling slightly in the steamy room, watching the nurses make quick work of the casts.

A philosophical discussion commenced on the best way to get Elizabeth into the tub. Neither woman noted their charge inching closer to the water.

“Stop, right there.” Red’s tone brooked no argument. “Ladies...” his tone brooked no argument his hands going to his hips, “go take a lunch break”

Both women quickly did his bidding, leaving him alone with Liz again.

She backed up, uneasy under Red’s unwavering scrutiny.

“You’ve been difficult all day. Why?”

“Is it a crime to just want to shave my damn legs!”

“No, but that’s not what’s wrong.” he stepped once. “Tell me.”

“I’m tired of feeling dirty.” she blurted. “I need to wash... I need...” she floundered.

“Need what?”

“I need to get that night off me.” her voice held a note of hysteria. “I can still feel the blood. I feel the tackiness, the itch... the stench.” her hands clutched the towel in a death grip. “I need to feel clean.”

He finally knew what she meant.

He still felt it, even after the numerous showers he’d taken himself. When he was away from her for more than a day, the feeling of her warm blood on his flesh was just as real as the night in question... just as overpowering as when it had been fresh and real.

He was scalding himself under hot water continually, trying to wash the hurt away.

It hadn’t worked.
He didn’t think he’d ever truly wash her blood off his hands.

Red walked the last few feet to her, whipping the towel away, ignoring her shocked protest. He picked her up, moving over the tub, lowering her slowly.

As she hit the bubble covered hot water, she tensed, gripping him tightly.

“I understand completely.” She still held his arms in her grasp, her manner hesitant, uncertain. “Let’s get that bastard’s filth off you, Lizzy.”

She relaxed in his hold, unclenching her fingers around his arm, allowing him to gently sit her in the steamy water.

Reaching behind him, he grabbed a towel, rolling it as a prop for her leg.

“Would you like something to drink?”

“Wine.” she mellowed little by little, the fragrant water melting her acerbic mood. “Lots of wine.”

“When was you’re last pill?”

“This morning.”

Red looked down at her, relaxed into the contours of the tub, eyes closed, practically purring with delight.

Bracing his hands on the tub, he bent, nuzzling her brow with his nose, his lips lightly kissing the soft skin. Pushing off, he was stopped by a soapy hand gripping his tie.

Red looked at the contact. “And another tie bites the dust.”

“You can afford it…” She let go of his tie, blowing the suds off the tip. “And Red,” she halted his intended retreat, her voice more than sincere, “thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” he lifted noble brows. “Now, don’t drown before I get back.”

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“And you can get here in the next thirty minutes?” Red enquired, nodding minutely with the answer given. “Yes, that’s fine. We’ll see you then.”

Red closed the phone, entering the bathroom with a half full bottle and a glass. “You still awake?”

“Barely.” She left her eyes shut, still melted into the warm porcelain. “Was that the Post Office?”

“No, I have a surprise for you. It will be arriving in,” he looked at his watch, “twenty nine minutes now.” Uncorking the bottle, he poured a generous amount into the glass, handing it to her.

Smiling, her bubble covered arm came up out of the water, taking the glass. “A surprise, for me?”

“Yes, so soak away. I’ll be back when it arrives.”

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The numbers in the ledger blurred for the umpteenth time.

Red Reddington rubbed his eyes, trying to focus again. It was times like these that he missed Luli
most. It wasn’t that he couldn’t run the numbers, it was that he didn’t want to. Well, most of the time, anyway. Sometimes he enjoyed watching everything ticking along. He had this morning...

But not right now.

The sound of the doorbell ringing saved him from pursuing the task further. Pushing the ledger away, he headed for the door.

Dembe came out of the South wing just about the time Red hit the main foyer as well. He acquiesced to the man who subsequently opened the door.

Two women waited patiently on the other side, arms loaded down with supplies.

“Good afternoon ladies. You’ve certainly come prepared.” After acquainting themselves, he gestured toward the back. “If you’ll follow me, she will be very pleased to see you, I think.”

“You mentioned that she has a broken arm and leg, sir?” the smaller in stature ventured after a few steps. Dembe had taken most of their burden, walking slowly alongside.

“Left ankle, right arm. Very unhappy with her limited mobility.” Red’s supplied evenly. “If you’d like to set up anything... I’ll alert her that you’re here.”

The man did just that, entering the bathroom unannounced.

“Lizzy?” he clapped his hands together once, his eyes gentle on the submerged woman. “Your surprise has arrived.”

“Is it someone to take off this ten pound weight?” she shifted awkwardly, the cast on her foot hampering her intent.

“No, but I think you’ll enjoy it all the same.” Red handed her the baby lotion she had desperately sought a few seconds before. “I’ve brought in some ladies to help you in your cleansing process” She shook her head, his meaning lost on her.

Red caught Dembe out of his peripheral vision. He nodded slightly, stepping aside. “Ladies, she’s ready for you.”

The two walked in, carrying their bags and a table.

Liz sat up as best she could, sensing what those bags held, brightening with excitement.

“This is Elizabeth.” Red made the introductions. “Lizzy, this is Hannah and Katie.” he stepped further out of the way, motioning theatrically. “Do to her what you will. She needs a good pampering.”

Red felt a warmth seeing her so happy, especially over something so simplistic.

“Once you ladies have worked your magic, you’ll need assistance getting her out.”

Dembe waited patiently. Red acknowledged the man. “Call me when my services are needed. And you,” he pointed at Liz, “everything you want done... do it.”

Liz nodded joyously. She eyed the women expectantly, grinning widely.

The last he heard on his way out was a plaintive but heart felt, “Oh, please. Someone wash my hair.”
Red returned to the journal, better able to concentrate now. The ruckus in the bathroom did not break his concentration even though the two beauticians made multiple trips in and out, carrying various female accouterments... and talking a mile a minute about every subject under the sun, including the dubious validity of the male species.

Red hid his amusement, continuing his pastime until finally his services were needed. Rising from his chair, he pushed up his sleeves, walking the distance needed.

“You ready to get out now?” He asked, seeing the bench padded with sheet towels and a couple folding tables set up in a line.

“Yes, we’re moving on to step two of twenty.” Liz sounded almost giddy.

Bending down, he ran his hands under the water, finding the wet outline of her body. He courageously controlled his instincts to crawl in with her, clothes and all.

The man gathered her in his arms, breaking the surface of the water, holding her out and over the tub. The water cascaded off the lithe body, before he brought her to his chest.

“I guess we didn’t think of the logistics of this.” Liz touched his wet shirt, apologetically. “I’m sorry about that.”

She didn’t seem all that sorry to his way of thinking, which amused him... only anxious to be on to ‘step number two’.

“It’s all right.” he smiled over at the patiently waiting beauticians. “I’ve always enjoyed a ‘wet’ woman.”

The older of the two grinned for his audacity. The younger blushed. And Liz threw him a ‘behave’ scowl.

Setting her on the padded bench, he was unceremoniously pushed aside as Katie swooped in, swaddling Liz from head to toe in warmed towels.

“I’ll be making a few calls, if you need anything, just let me know.” he made a discreet exit.

Settling back into his chair, he pulled the wet shirt and tie away from his body. He let go of the fabric, grimacing as it slapped back into his chest.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he hesitated, hearing a muffled moan from the bathroom. He shook his head slightly bemused, then focused on the call he had just put through.

“Michael.” his voice held a genuine warmth. “How are things in Milan?” he waited patiently for the news. “No, no. I didn’t hear anything, I’m just checking in. Making sure...” he held his smile, the conversation amusing him. He chuckled appreciatively, answering the question asked. “Yes...”

“Damn!”

Red glanced at the bathroom doors impassively, his mind wandering for a beat, “No, I’m here. You were saying?” he apologized sincerely. “And they’ll be picking up the shipment tonight?”

“Shit!”

“Yes, that’s good, Michael.” the man fought the distractions around him, trying to concentrate on the
matter at hand. “No, continue, I’m very interested.”

The door swung unceremoniously open, Hannah exiting hurriedly.

“Everything okay in there?” Red asked pleasantly.

“Oh, yes.” the woman chuckled. “Waxing.” She shrugged, grabbing a bag, disappearing back into the sanctuary.

“No, I was talking to the beautician.” Red explained his lapse, grinning retroactively. “No, she’s not here for me.” he listened for a beat. “Funny, asshole. My fiancée broke her ankle and arm and they’re here helping her.”

Red rubbed his neck absently, then snapped, “No, I didn’t drug her, get her drunk or ply her with money to get her acceptance. Which is more than we can say about your wife. The poor woman.”

“Ow! No, I’m fine. Ow!”

Red scowled darkly at the closed barrier.

“Yes, she’ll be at Mark’s.” Red settled back in to the conversation. “I wasn’t sure you were attending this year. Good, then I’ll see you there.”

“Holy... did that take skin?”

Red chuckled, dialing the next number.

He finished his phone calls having finally figured a way to phase out Lizzy’s low cussing in the background.

After what seemed an eternity, Hannah finally emerged from the bathroom.

“I think she’s ready to come out now, Mr. Reddington.” the woman was all smiles.

“It sounded like she was ready an hour ago.” Red quipped, following the woman into the bathroom. He sought out Elizabeth, who sat on the bench beside the huge tub. “Feel better, sweetheart?”

“I would give a years pay to have that experience again.” she nodded amiably.

Katie stepped back, allowing him the first real glimpse of Elizabeth.

She looked rosy, coifed and extremely content.

“Did you cut your hair?” he stepped slowly, filtering his fingers through the dark strands. His eyes admiring the end product. Lizzy smiled widely, pleased he noticed the slight change. “It’s very soft.” He crooked his head towards one side, his fingers continuing the excruciatingly pleasurable past-time.

“We just trimmed it. Maybe a few layers.” Liz shook her head this way and that, swinging the softness around. “You like it?”

“I do, very much. You look very pretty and more importantly, relaxed.” He dropped his hands to his sides, turning his attention elsewhere. “Ladies, she looks very happy now.”
The women started packing up their gear. They instructed Elizabeth, giving pointers on what products to use and more importantly, which ones not. The woman demanded their card for future use.

“Thank you, really. I feel so much better.” She gushed, touching her hair and checking her makeup every few seconds. “I didn’t know my eyes could look like this. You did an amazing job.”

Dembe came in to help them with all the equipment, then escorted the two women from the room.

Hannah eyed Dembe appreciatively, then blushed when her friend hit her arm smartly, sending a warning with her eyes... all of which Hannah ignored.

She smiled brightly up at the dark man. Reddington caught his friends eye, gesturing to the cute beautician, with a knowing smile.

Dembe exchanged an enigmatic glance, grinning his appreciation.

Red smiled widely, feeling Elizabeth’s eyes on him.

The women exchanged farewells. Elizabeth was one big smile.

“Thank you for making her feel better.” Red pulled his wallet out, tipping both women a few hundred each. “I do hope we can call on you again?”

“Anytime!” Both replied in unison, more than happy with such generosity.

It was rare to see a man fawn over his girlfriend in such a manner. Plus he had made it well worth their while.

Red had followed silently, as the women made their way to the foyer. At one point, he discreetly nudged Dembe in open camaraderie.

The black man pulled his eyes from the saucy swish of Hannah’s backside, dimpling a response.

The two men exchanged a universal contemplative look.

Patting the large man on the back, Red smiled happily. “Good man.” Turning, he bowed slightly. “Ladies, have a pleasant evening.”

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“Do you feel better now?” Red sat beside the woman, his weight indenting the bed slightly.

“Yes...” Liz hesitated, faltering over the words. “I’m sorry I–”

“All of that could have been avoided, if you had just told me what was wrong.” he linked his fingers together across his thighs. “Did you think I wouldn’t understand wanting to feel clean again?”

She honestly found herself wondering, if the man could feel any specific way after all he had experienced in life. But perhaps there had been a time that he would have felt like she had.

“Just talk to me.” his hands gestured aimlessly, his eyes on her averted profile.

She nodded dejectedly, then pulled a Reddington, changing subjects. “What was up with you and Dembe a few minutes ago?” her curiosity was piqued.
“Hannah was looking at him like he was a piece of Godiva... he should be asking her for a date, even ask we speak.”

“So you played Wingman?” Liz hid her amusement well. “And we’ll be flying solo tonight?”

“You think she’ll say yes?” Red was allowing the diversion.

“Ahh, yeah.” She scoffed. “Dembe’s hot.”

“Remind me not to leave you alone with him.” he clapped his hands on his thighs. “I’m going to rinse off now, if you don’t need anything?”

“I’m good. Take your time.” a playfulness overcame the woman. “If I do need anything, I’ll just call Dembe.”

“You leave that innocent man alone.” Red pulled at his tie. “I don’t want you corrupting him.”

“Oh wow...” she beamed, having absently ran her hand over her newly waxed skin. “It’s so soft.” she grabbed his hand, running it up her leg. “Isn’t that amazing! I don’t think my legs have ever felt so good.”

Red felt the velvety flesh under his palm, the warmth delighting his senses. He fought the urge to further the exploration.

This felt just like he had imagined a few days ago.

His heart was suddenly thumping hard in his chest, a fine sheen of sweat collected on his upper lip as his finger tips grazed her short shorts.

She lifted her hand hastily, suddenly realizing the intimacy implied.

“I-I’m sorry!” she apologized profusely, stammering... “I–”

Red’s lips twitched with amusement, his free hand hiding the fact. She was so fucking adorable when she was mortified.

Liz’s cheeks were tinted a pretty pink, the blue eyes completely lost and vacant.

“Well, I guess you’re comfortable with me now.” the man chuckled.

Inwardly, he felt a surge of adrenaline pump through his body. He had never felt so close to her. That meant a great deal to him.

“Well, I guess I am.” she winced painfully. How gauche could one person be.

“We’re making progress.” he grinned, patting her thigh soothingly, oddly pleased when she didn’t start at the unexpected touch.

He stood, heading for the bathroom, then stopped mid-stride, sniffing at the air. “What is that amazing smell?” he enjoyed the fragrant aroma, then remembered his manners. “Besides you, of course.”

“Oh, that?” Liz grinned, thankful the moment had passed. “I asked Nora, the new cook, to make chicken and dumplings and cherry cobbler for dinner.”

Red placed his hand on his chest, his face, blissful. “Lizzy, I could kiss you.” He shook his head
Once, tilting it to the left before shutting the door behind him.

The woman found herself suddenly breathless, uncertain as to the cause. Her eyes stared transfixed at the closed door, her mind wandering freely. Within seconds another blush colored her already heightened cheeks.

Red shut the door, leaving the outside world behind. He let his head fall back into the thick wood, his eyes closing to the lascivious visions dancing in his head.

He had to pull her naked, out of the tub. Lizzy, herself had run his hand up her silky thigh.

And not just her thigh, but her inner thigh. Just inches from...

He stripped clear of his shirt and pants, tossing them carelessly before stalking into the shower. The man automatically reached, turning on the jets, stepping under their pounding spray.

The steamy air felt delicious, his eyes closing tightly as he freely allowed the images to come.

He remembered the feel of her heat increasing the further she moved his fingers up her leg. He had been just a hair away from touching her crotch and could have sworn he had felt the damp humidity of the secret place between her beautiful thighs.

How would it feel to have her smooth thighs wrapped around him? Would she spread her legs wide, or would she hug them around his body?

Red leaned unto his forearm, balancing against the warm stone of the shower wall, drawing in a deep breath, breathing in the scent of Elizabeth which permeated the entire room. Her scent invading his senses, blocking all else.

“Son of a bitch.” he muttered tightly, willing his growing erection to recede.

What the hell was going on with him? More to the point, what the fuck was his problem!

He snatched the soap from the ledge, washing himself off quickly, bypassing the stiff length of his erection.

“Talk about fucking objectifying...” he sneered. “She’s not like the others and I’ll be damned if you think of her in that manner.” he chided himself severely.

Red rinsed off, yanking his towel off the bar, “Fucking asshole.” he wiped away the water and agitation. “Stop acting like Silas with a centerfold.”

He needed to stop pussy footing around. He needed to grow a set of balls, more like it.

Just ask her to dinner, maybe dancin–

No, she couldn’t go dancing yet. Maybe a movie? Which was the biggest cliché of all time...

He should know what the hell to do. He had done this a few times in his day. Besides that, he was Red Reddington.

If his associates knew the trouble he was experiencing over this situation, his reputation would be
He knew what he would like to do, but it was like the old adage, at least buy her dinner first.

A date...

Jesus.

He hadn’t gone out of his way to actually meet anyone... to date in years.

The women he had encountered since becoming the Concierge of Crime, he had met in a bar or it’s equivalent. He had of course, been a gentlemen, buying their drinks and what not.

But most usually, they approached him. They had a plan in mind for the evening, one of which included himself.

They would have a few drinks, maybe a dance or two... then fuck.

Even Josephine had started that way. But there had been something about her that kept calling out to him. She was beautiful, unassuming, gentle, a wonderful lover.

Why she hadn’t trusted him to help her... to get her to safety. Damn her family!

Red slammed his eyes shut, shaking off the rising anger. He took a deep breath and then another until his rage settled. He would have to take care of that matter soon, until that time...

Perhaps Lizzy would enjoy a play?

“You don’t even know if she’ll say, yes.” he muttered quietly to himself.

Yes, that’s what he would do. Ask first. Plan, later.

The man wrapped the towel around his waist, heading to the closet, closing the door behind him. He leaned into the dresser, breathing out his vexation and anxiety before yanking down a suit.

He’d put his armor on and feel focused again. That was all he needed to do.

Once that was in place, he’d be normal.

He reached for a shirt, then hesitated when he heard the doorbell ring.

He set to work dressing, pushing aside all else. He’d have to just deal with everything later.

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Chapter End Notes

Beta says the part where Red runs his fingers through Liz’s hair, makes her head tingle.
A Welcome Visitor

Chapter Notes

I meant to attach this to the last chapter.

I just wanted to take a moment to give a big THANK YOU to all the readers for leaving reviews and kudos. Also, thank you for following and subscribing to my story.

And to the ladies who mentioned my story on the Lizzington page. You not only made my day, it shocked me to see a thread for my fic. I thought Beta was lying to me when she told me about it. I was so sure you were talking about another 'Focal Point' fanfic. So you can imagine how amazing it felt when I finally got to see the comments.

Thank you all for making this a hell of an experience.

April 21

Liz had vacated the bedroom heading for the living area.

She sat now, staring sightlessly at the book in her hand, her thoughts ruminating on her previous actions. She did not know what had possessed her, but ever since she had dreamed that damned dream... more specifically, of how it had felt when Red had gone down on her, she felt confused and disoriented.

In that dream, Red’s hands had felt phenomenal but how they felt in real life... paled in comparison.

His lightly callused hand was so hot, and much larger than she had expected. The touch against her leg was electrifying.

She had felt his fingers instinctively curve against her inner thigh. His touch was feather light and gentle but she had felt the power in his hand.

He had dragged his fingers slowly across her heightened, sensitive skin. She had heated to her very core.

She knew she had a crush on the man, but the emotional onslaught had staggered her.

The chiming of the doorbell interrupted her train of thought.

*Odd?* It was very rare that anyone made it to the door without being sidelined by Security. Even UPS and the occasional pizza delivery boy was stopped in their tracks.

Picking up her walkie, she keyed it, “Silas?”

“It’s only Mr. Holbrook.” you could hear the boredom in the man’s voice.

“*Only.*” ‘Mr. Holbrook’ questioned haughtily.
Minutes later, Silas and Francis walked through the door. Liz beamed a sincere smile, “Francis. I’m sorry I couldn’t come greet you properly.” she motioned to a seat nearby. “Won’t you sit down?”

“I hope I’m not disturbing you?” the young man enquired, doing her bidding.

“No, not at all. Just waiting for Red to get finished.” She asked, raising from her seat. “Would you like a drink?”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” He waved her back down, “No, no. I can get it.” He walked to the bar, pointing at her. “Would you like something?”

She sighed softly, smiling. “No, thank you. I’m fine.”

Francis nodded, grabbing his drink, bringing it back, sitting down beside her.

“Aren’t I the best hostess ever.” she quipped.

“I’m just so put out by the stress of it all.” Francis shook his head woefully, taking a drink from his tumbler. “You must know I’ll spread this vicious gossip in our entire circle, you’ll never be able to show your face in public again.” He forewarned, straightening his tie arrogantly.

“Hell, I would have thought there was enough ammunition against me all ready, for falling asleep at a dinner.” She said.

“Yes, well... true enough.” he allowed amiably. “Don’t feel too badly, given that I did the same thing about forty minutes after you left.”

“You didn’t!”

“It was either that or drown myself in the gravy boat.”

“That bad, huh?” She laughed.

“It was terrible. With Red there, they tend to stay on their best behavior, or at the very least, civil.” he shrugged. “Well, as civil as our type will ever be... after you guys left, it was nothing but bitching and moaning, and worse yet, groveling.” he whined. “Keeping in mind, I was the one doing the most of that... but what the hell, it’s my damn house.” he reminded himself.

“You should have come over here.” she reminded the invitation had been extended by Reddington himself.

“I know what Red said, but he’s such a liar.” the man teased. “Besides, I didn’t want to intrude.”

“You would most certainly not be intruding!” the woman insisted. “You are welcome here, anytime.” And she meant it. This man was the first one to make her feel welcome and comfortable, she’d be a complete bitch to not return the favor. “If he didn’t mean it, he wouldn’t have offered. You know that.”

She honestly believed that.

Red didn’t seem the type to just offer his home to anyone, so for him to have extended an open invitation to Francis had to mean something.

The man in question merely shrugged, then smiled. “Are you feeling better?”
"I am, thank you. I’m down to a lower dose of pain pill today, so I’m a bit more lucid.” she was pleased to report. “Which Silas assures me, is a novelty in itself.”

The conversation was interrupted with Reddington’s arrival on the scene. He extended his hand, “Francis? What are you doing here?”

“That matter we were discussing at dinner…” Red nodded, understanding to what the young man alluded. “Well, it happened. Anne didn’t listen and lost the entire shipment.”

“And how many men?” Red asked, pulling down a clean glass, pouring himself a drink. He automatically refilled his guest’s tumbler.

“Six.” Francis reported gravely.

“I told her…” Red shook his head in open consternation, sitting next to Liz. “She never fucking listens! Why don’t people listen to me?” he snapped.

“What do you want to do?”

“I’m going to do what I should have done in the first place.” Red sat his tumbler aside, pulling out his phone. “I’m going to block all business coming to her for a while until she pulls her damn head out of her ass.”

“Won’t that upset the status quo?” Francis scratched his head aimlessly.

“Francis, this is the fourth time she’s put her men at risk, and by my total, that puts her death toll up around twenty one men.” he punched the send button on his phone, putting it to his ear, waiting. “I’m tired of this shit.”

He directed his attention to the voice on the phone, “Yes, it’s Reddington. I’m sure you heard about the dust up… yes. That one.” Red snarled. He listened momentarily, his face masking over.

“What do I want to do?” he lifted noble brows. “I want you to give me all the shipments she has lined up within the next hour.” he consulted his watch.

“No, I’m going to fill every order and deliver them myself before hers has a chance to arrive. Which shouldn’t be too difficult, seeing she doesn’t have a fucking team anymore.” the man fell silent, listening politely then replied curtly.

“No, I’m quite serious and perfectly aware how many toes I’ll be stepping on.” he cut the reply off. “Just do it, I’ll call back shortly.”

Francis sat back having watched the Master work. Red had turned the table on someone half a world away with a simple phone call. Very impressive indeed.

“I would say, I’m warning you that this is going to get dirty,” Francis made mention, sipping his drink casually, “but I’ve always thought you appreciated a challenge.”

“Those were good men, Francis.” Red’s hand held his drink tightly, his knuckles white from the exertion. “What’s worse, I’m betting they told her of the dangers, and she didn’t listen to them either. They didn’t deserve that shit, and you know it.”

“Oh, I completely agree. And I’m totally on your side…” Francis shifted comfortably. “But that doesn’t mean it still won’t stir things up a bit.”
“Maybe that’s what we need. Besides her killing perfectly good teams off right and left, she’s cutting into the supply, and demand is rising,” the man made a cutting slice with his hand in the air. “Enough is enough. Maybe with a few less dollars going to her tacky shoe supply, she might damn well get the point.”

“Whispering on the wind is that Conte isn’t happy with her lack of delivery, again.”

“Any other time, I might bail her out, but not this time. Let her be the hunted for a while. See how she likes it.” he lifted a cold stare. “And don’t even think of going in and fixing it for her, Francis.”

Francis held up his hands in the universal sign of peace. “I think she needs to be taken down a notch. She thinks she’s too pretty, too...” he cast a quick glance at the woman sitting beside Red.

“Desirable?” Liz aided.

“Yes, that, exactly.” Francis pointed excitedly. Liz had hit upon it. “She relies on her charms and the men fall for it. I’ve had enough of it, personally.” He crossed his legs at the ankles, his arm draping the back of the chair. “Either you can do the job, or you can’t. And so far, I’m not impressed.”

Liz looked at Francis with a little more respect than she had a few minutes ago. Granted, they were both speaking about the possible death of a woman they associated with, but they had a point.

If this woman was going to play with the big boys, she had to step up to the plate. It was that way for any woman, regardless of her occupation.

Red was annoyed with the woman true, but Liz didn’t think he’d let anything happen to this Anne person. He may let the woman fall on her face for the next couple of weeks, but if she knew Red, when the crap hit the fan, he would smooth the situation over.

The discussion would have to wait for another time. The new cook had discreetly entered searching for the correct moment...

“Miss Elizabeth?” Nora smiled, speaking directly to the other woman. “I’m sorry to interrupt...” her eyes had fallen on the new guest. “I didn’t realize you had company.”

“It’s all right, Nora.” Liz held her smile, waving him off, as though “the guest” wasn’t really all that important. “It’s just Francis.”

“Hey...” Francis instantly protested. “They don’t get more “important” than me.”

“Uh huh.” Elizabeth mollified. “Is it ready Nora?”

“Whenever you are.” the older woman’s smiled returned.

“You’re welcome to stay, Francis.” Red offered.

“Shall I fix an extra setting?” Nora asked.

“Nah, he can get it himself.” Liz teased. Francis feigned injury. “We want him to feel at home after all.”

Nora smiled, “Well, then, it is ready and waiting.”

Francis arose hastily, practically pushing Red out of the way, making a beeline for the new employee. He caught up to the older woman easily, hooking his arm around her’s, his hand patting Nora’s arm with open affection.
“Where have you been all my life?” the young man charmed. “Are they paying you enough here?”

Red chuckled as he watched the other man work his magic.

“If you’re as good as I think you are...” Francis’s eyes roamed the still attractive figure unobtrusively, “you would be much happier working for me.”

“You want to wait until I get out of earshot?” Red asked pleasantly, helping Liz arise.

“No...” Francis called back over his shoulder. “Let me take you away from all of this.”

“I’m so glad you made him feel at home.” Red teased Elizabeth.

“He’s trying to steal our cook.” she pointed out. “Blatantly.”

“It’s just his way.” he assisted the woman to the dining room.

“Well, you better put a stop to that.” Liz frowned superficially.

Francis had stopped in the kitchen to assist Nora and was even now, unashamedly flirting with the woman.

“Tell him to stop that!” Liz demanded. “Red, you do something...”

The man only chuckled sensually, continuing on their way.

After an amazing lunch, Red and Francis adjourned to another room.

At dusk the men re-entered the sitting room Liz had found to be very comforting and quiet. She found herself in a very contemplative mood today.

“Invite me to dinner.” Francis approached the woman gingerly.

Liz cut her eyes up and under, her expression totally annoyed. “Why? So you can continue your efforts to steal our cook?” she accused.

“Where ever did you find her?” the young man took no offense. “I think I’m in love.”

“What, again?” Red stood by patiently as Elizabeth arose on her own as she apt to do these days. “Remember that agency I recommended for your dinner.”

“All I got was a bunch of new wave, vegan freaks.” Francis complained, as they headed for the dining room.

“Let me guess,” Liz asked, laughing, “one was named Mindy?”

“How did you know that?” Francis was puzzled, watching Red seat the woman.

“She’s the one Red got rid of for force feeding me eggplant. He got Nora for me instead.”

“I hate eggplant.” Francis shivered voluntarily, finding his own seat across from Liz.

“Dinner was perfectly fine, Francis.” the older man’s hand rested comfortably along Liz’s chair, his fingers stroking her shoulder. “Why are you complaining?”

“I’m not complaining per se.” Francis complained. “Dinner only turned out as well as it did because I threatened to take their tofu and shove it up their ass. I ordered them, specifically, to make what we
had. And it was like pulling teeth.”

“I’ve never had a problem with them.” Red shrugged.

“Well, no shit.” Francis was mystified. “Are you going to argue with Red Reddington when he says he wants a steak?”

Liz was amused by how put out Francis seemed to be. No one it seemed, would ever be on par with Red.

After dinner a relaxed atmosphere infused the room. Both men seemed totally at ease, immersed in their brandies.

“Who do I have to hit before I get access to this little black book of yours?” Francis grinned. “Because, consider it done.”

“Commit an act of treason, throw in a couple of felonies and get me an invite to Papa Guido’s pizzeria in Jersey... and you’ll get your wish.” Red mumbled around his cigar. “But only do it if you’re serious. I do have a reputation to uphold. If I start letting every little two bit hustler on my list, my street cred will be shit.” He rolled the cherry off his cigar.

“Well, we wouldn’t want that!” Francis was mockingly appalled, before beginning to clear the dinnerware.

“Francis, I can do that.” Liz protested, even as Red started gathering theirs.

“You told me to make myself at home.” Francis smiled, picking up the stack, following Red into the kitchen.

Liz made her way slowly to the door facing. She was fascinated at the domestic scene which unfolded before her very eyes.

Francis rolled up his sleeves, rinsing the plates before handing them off to Red, who put them in the dishwasher.

“Now, aren’t you two efficient.” Liz shook her head, totally impressed by the men's performance.

“You should see me iron.” Francis preened.

“You don’t iron.” Red countered. “You send it out to Manny just like I do.” he rolled his eyes.

“Regardless, I can iron a pleat that could slit a throat wide open.”

“It’s the Italian in him.” Red explained helpfully. “Always going for the throat. Much like someone else I know.” the man smiled, stroking Liz’s neck in the approximate location where she had stabbed him.

She ducked her head, blushing. That moment had certainly not been one of her finest, although he seemed to remember it fondly, which just confused the hell out of her.

For heaven’s sake... she had jabbed a pen into his carotid.

Most normal people would have filed a restraining order. Red saw it as a shared moment of fond remembrance.

Oddly, she would have to accept that they had grown closer since then. They had become a team.
The clock in the hall chimed, drawing their attention. “Damn, is that the time?” Francis glanced at his watch. “I better get the show on the road.” he said. “What is our plan of action?”

Red stood as well, “We need to stay on top of this and fill the cracks. Anne will try to wrangle something up, and I intend to block her every which way I can.”

“So when the shit hits the fan, somebody has pulled their head out of their ass.” Francis put it in a nutshell.

Red’s brow furrowed slightly, “My God... that actually makes a perverse kind of sense.”

“Well of course it does.” Francis was understandably confused. “Thank you both for a wonderful time. I really enjoyed it, especially the company.” he smiled at them both then frowned hard at Red for some unknown reason of which the man was aware.

“You’re welcome,” Liz smiled, sincerely, “come back soon Francis.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Always the consummate host, Reddington motioned his guest to the outer sanction of his domain. “I’ll be back shortly, sweetheart.”

The man sauntered back a few minutes later, loosening his tie. “I have a feeling sleep will be transitory tonight... do you mind if I try to get in a few hours before it all starts?”

Liz got up out of her seat. “I’m coming.”

“You don’t have to go to bed on my account, it’s still a little early for you.”

“I can help.” she offered. “There must be something I can do?”

“Or... I can sleep in another room tonight, so you’re not disturbed.” the man iterated. “You need to rest.”

“Or... you can shut up,” she suggested sweetly, “and sleep in our own bed tonight where you will be most comfortable. And I want to help.”

Red had stopped listening after the statement, our bed.

He had never heard her refer to it as such before. It threw him completely. Not that he objected to the phrase, as a matter of record, he liked the sound of it.

“You okay?” the woman’s voice brought him from his reverie.

“Just thinking.” he smiled down at her, then took her arm, helping her along. “Well, my little secretary, would you like to use my Dictaphone?”

“What the hell is a Dictaphone?”

Red suddenly felt his age, but smiled, chuckling sensually.

“Was that a metaphor, Red Reddington?” she chided.

It wasn’t long afterwards, the woman came waltzing, well, hopping out of the closet, just finishing buttoning the last button on the shirt she wore.
Red noted with some interest, that the garment just happened to be the same shirt he had discarded minutes before. His brow furrowed slightly, but she looked so damn cute in the oversize fabric.

Red stared at his shirt, hanging to her thighs, hiding what she may or may not be wearing underneath it, which captivated the man.

He had never enjoyed the sight of a woman wearing his shirt as much as he did, right now. He stared at her shapely legs and that one little foot not wearing the cast, smiling softly. She looked damned sexy.

“What?” she asked, hesitating herself. She looked down, then bit her lip, “Do you mind?”

“No... no, I don’t mind.” he shook his head, “Would you rather have a fresh one?”

“No...” she answered simply, then grabbed her lotion, smoothing it over her hands. “So, how do we proceed?”

“Uhm.” Red cleared his throat, watching her gingerly hop on one leg, before seeking his assistance which was instantly given. “I’m sorry?”

Liz giggled having looked up, finding the cat sitting prominently and proudly on Red’s pillow, staring back at him defiantly.

Red grunted in annoyance. “I hate fucking cats...”

“You do not.” she corrected.

After settling in the bed, Elizabeth tapped her left side and the cat ambled it’s way to her, staring at Red the whole time. The man shook his head, his jaw clenching and unclenching. He flipped his pillow, grumbling something about the smell of, cat ass, much to her amusement.

The woman settled back, notepad in hand, “Where do we start?” she asked, pen ready.

“First, are you sure you want to do this?” he checked. “Technically, this is contraband we’re dealing with.”

“Is it drugs?”

“No. Not tonight, anyway.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t particularly enjoy working with dealers, they’re too high strung. Their paranoia is annoying.” his features showed as much. “Most dealers, unless it’s a specific order, normally deal with it themselves because of the bad vibes.”

“What does that mean? Specific orders?” she questioned.

“Well, if a client asked if I could get him cocaine, opium or pot for a private party. I could send it with what ever else he ordered.” it was elucidated. “But, a lot of my counterparts, myself included, have a max volume sent.”

“Which means?”

“Only a certain amount of kilos are supplied. You want more than that, get it yourself.”
“And you’ve supplied for private parties?”

“I’ve not only supplied, I’ve attended.”

“You’ve really done drugs?”

“Yes.”

“L-like what?” She stuttered.

“Opium, cocaine, marijuana...”

“What are they like?” she was more than curious suddenly.

“It depends on the drug.” he shrugged nonchalantly. “Pot, is a relaxant. Opium, a pain killer. And cocaine, a stimulant.”

“That’s very clinical.”

“You asked what they were like, not what I felt.”

“What did you feel?”

“On pot, I felt very relaxed. Contemplative. Hungry. But still able to function.” he ruminated. “It didn’t impair me, just relaxed me. I could protect myself while high.”

“And the others?”

“In the early days, when I was so exhausted, I thought I’d drop where I stood,” he remembered back, his brow deeply furrowed, “a couple bumps of coke kept me going but the downside of course, was I couldn’t stop.”

“Instant caffeine?”

“Instant adrenaline, more like it.” he rubbed jaw thoughtfully. “I can honestly say, if it wasn’t for the safe havens I hit along the way, where I could actually rest, that one would have killed me.”

“And the opium?”

“The best and worst of them all.” he sighed heavily. “Total pain relief in body and mind, but the most incapacitating. You have to have an extreme trust in who cares for your well being while under such a spell.”

“Then why did you take it?”

“I was in pain.”

“Who cared for you?”

“It depended on where I was.”

“How many times have you taken it?”

“Enough that it became a problem at one point.” he confessed. “It’s the drug of choice for those wanting to be pain free.”

“What happened to—"
“Lizzy...”

She closed her mouth, frowning. It really was none of her business. But she couldn’t help but be intrigued. The most she had ever done was smoke one of Sam’s cigarettes, until he caught her red handed.

She would have never pegged Red for having used drugs. But she wasn’t sure why, exactly. Since he never seemed to be opposed to doing much of anything at all.

Elizabeth remembered one woman in particular. Lawrence Dechambou.

Red had mentioned to Ressler one time, and she quoted in her mind... “bend over any available piece of furniture and let her slap you on the ass.”

There had been such reverence in his voice, such genuine fondness.

Who was this woman to Red? Had he been messing with Ress?

Had Red really allowed her to do... that? And if so... had he enjoyed it? And what was that like?

He was like a puzzle within a puzzle that she knew she could never solve.

Shaking away the thoughts, she got back in the game. “Weapons.”

“Yes.” he answered quietly.

“Who receives them?”

“Oddly, most of all weapon orders end up in the Constabularies' hands.”

“Because of a bust?”

“No, because ordering new weapons underground is cheaper then factory direct.” Her face must have shown her confusion. “To arm a police department is expensive, especially if it’s in a small township.” he supplied. “To order say, three guns, from the factory. It would cost, two thousand dollars. To buy from us, would cost maybe fifteen hundred, if not less.”

“Why so cheap?”

“Because they’re stolen property. And I don’t mean off the back of a truck, per se. Let me see if I can make this simplistic?” he shifted more comfortably into the pillow. “Say I took down a group of my enemies, I would clean out their cache, taking all their arms and other goods.” to the man, it wasn’t brain surgery. “I take those weapons and sell them off, most usually, to cops. Gaining profit from something I received for free.”

“You steal guns from bad guys, then sell them to cops?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do they know they’re buying from you?”

“Yes, they know.”

Liz blinked, trying to wrap her mind around that logic. It was weird how it almost made sense.

Where the cops couldn’t touch these bad guys, because of lack of inside intelligence or man power...
Red could, and did. Ridding some underworld terrorists of the arms they needed for the war they were waging, on the surface seemed almost good and decent.

It was brilliant idea in fact, she had to admit begrudgingly.

She nodded that she understood, jotting notes quickly. She made columns of his requirements then set the pad aside.

“Now what?” She asked.

“Now, we rest before the calls start coming in.”

It was two hours later when the phone began to ring. Information on each shipment was detailed, precise and complicated. How the man managed to do all this alone, boggled Elizabeth’s mind.

She was struggling to keep abreast of the man’s rapid speech patterns. The shipments moved across the globe and boundaries with such simplicity... one headed for Hong Kong, one Brisbane.

“Good girl.” Red had noticed the woman’s efforts, complimenting her for her diligence.

She reddened a bit at the pat on the head, but was pleased in spite of herself, a little proud truth told.

Out of the forty some shipments going out, they filled twenty five of the double or triple loads quickly.

As the single shipments were handled with such speed, it flabbergasted Elizabeth. But she kept up, not stumbling once in repeating the info she had been given.

He finally shut the phone, laying back into the pillow.

“Now what do we do?” she was wired.

“We get a little more rest and wait for the receiving end to get their shit in order.”

“You have product coming in as well?” she was a little winded to say the least while the man seemed perfectly at ease.

“Yes, I do.”

“Then what happens?”

“I’m hoping that there will be another break before what I’ve done to Anne starts taking effect.” he put his hands behind his head, linking his fingers. “There’s going to be a lot of angry people out there, looking for her and quite possibly, me.”

“What does that mean!” she was alarmed.

“It means, I’ve just stolen a lot of business from competitors,” he rubbed his eyes absently, “and then the game begins to see who the receivers want to do their business with in the end. Me or her.”

“What does that mean!” she was alarmed.

“It means, I’ve just stolen a lot of business from competitors,” he rubbed his eyes absently, “and then the game begins to see who the receivers want to do their business with in the end. Me or her.”

“Do you really want to take her business away?”

“Right now, yes. Francis was telling the truth that she’s become sloppy.”

“What is it about these men’s death that troubles you so?” she realized how that sounded, trying again. “I mean, of course any death is...”
“They’re like Silas. Retired soldiers making a living.” he took no offence. “I’ve worked with a lot of these guys in the past and while she’s sipping champagne on a yacht, these guys are doing as she ordered and dying for it.”

Liz had grown quite fond of Silas and Joe and a lot of the other men walking the property. To think that their counterparts were facing such a difficult situation without someone like Red backing them, pissed her off too.

“Let’s nail the bitch.”

“That’s my girl.” Red said, relaxing into the pillow, turning out the light.

The shipments started coming in around three in the morning.

Francis kept Red apprised of each and every delivery that was accepted.

Lines were moving faster trying to beat Red’s cargo but with his head start, they were all going to fail miserably.

Red seemed pleased by the end results. And as the totals of payment received started coming in, he brightened considerably in the waning night.

Especially after Francis called, informing Red that he had just hung up with a very pissed off Anne. The woman had been seething, trying to figure out who was cutting into her business.

“She knows it’s me.” Red laughed quietly, laying relaxed in his bed. “She’s going to use her feminine wiles, which have always worked in the past granted... and there still might be some idiots out there who will fall for such shit.” he conceded. “But she made one mistake all ready.” he smiled briefly. “She called you.”

“But Red,” the younger man’s tone was sincere enough, “everyone knows, I am the very sole of discretion.”

Red chuckled appreciatively, “Get some rest while you can. The next wave should hit in a couple of hours... and Francis,” the man had no trouble with the next words, “thank you.” He hung up the phone then turned to Elizabeth. “You all right?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“Because I care.”

“I’m okay,” she smiled warmly up at him. “This was actually a lot more fun then I thought it would be. And oddly, fulfilling.”

Red turned his head, looking at her oddly. His eyes asking for an explanation.

“I’m just happy to do my part in remembering the guys who lost their lives in this farce.” She shrugged. “And I’m glad that you treat your guys, so well and with respect.”

“They damn well deserve it more than anybody.”

“What did that mean?” she thought back. “What you said to Francis? About Anne making a mistake in calling him?”

“We go back a long way.” the man stifled a yawn. “Lizzy, I will tell you more, but right now, you need to rest.”
She slowly nodded, then laid back down, snuggling into the covers. Smiling. She had learned a lot about Red tonight, and while she didn’t know him as well as she would like, she felt the playing fields somewhat evened up this evening.
April 22

Dembe artfully dodged a four year old little boy who was scampering around the desks playing hide and go seek with a little blonde headed girl about the same age.

The large man held a toddler in his arms out of harm’s way, his smile for the children at his feet.

Red Reddington could not hear himself think above the din but he found in this instance, he did not mind the noise at all.

“Aram.” Red stood quietly behind the man, looking over his shoulder, amused when the dark haired man tensed, nearly spilling his coffee.

“Yes, sir, uh,” Aram cleared his throat nervously as he straightened his tie, “Mr. Reddington.”

“I need you to give this to ballistics and find out where it came from.” Red presented the bullet, the plastic bag dangling from his finger.

“May I ask where you...?” the computer specialist took the small bag, looking at it curiously. He lifted questioning eyes.

Reddington remained silent, his gaze a steady, unrelenting one.

“I mean, to maybe help narrow down the uh...” Aram closed his mouth, lamely pointing behind him, “I’ll just take it to ballistics.”

“Aram, someone shot me.” Red explained. “I want to know who.”

“You were shot!” the lanky man looked Red up and down, searching for unseen holes.

Red smiled, warmed by the obvious concern. “I’m fine. But I would like to know where that came from. Discreetly, of course.”

“Yes, sir. I understand.” Aram sprang up like wind up toy. “I’ll get on it right away.”

“It can wait until we’re finished here.” Red put a reassuring hand on the man’s arm. “Just if you have some time in the next day or so.”

It had waited this long, another day wouldn’t make much difference. And with the full schedule they had today...

“I think we should call Liz,” Samar came up beside him, “she can help out.”
“Absolutely not.” Red countered. “She gets one whiff of this state of affairs, she won’t stop. And I’ll have a house full of the little demons running around, finger painting on my priceless art collection.”

Not that he would really mind. He looked over the forty some odd children dotting the floor across the way.

“Then, when she has to give them back...” Red shook his head woefully. “Is another kettle of fish all together. Do not call her under any circumstances.”

He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, what was on the horizon, if Elizabeth ever made contact with any of these children. Sooner or later, inevitably, she would be upset.

The matter, as it would stand, would be a no-win situation. The woman would get attached then, be forced to return the child, to it’s rightful parental units. Then the tears would come, the heartbreak.

And he hated when she cried because she had cried enough for a lifetime. Perhaps, in this one instance, he could avert such a catastrophe.

Thankfully, processing the kids was moving along like a well oiled machine.

The older children, handed over their names and other info to the waiting agents. The smaller ones were being photographed for facial recognition.

Red did not know where these children... how any children maintained the level of energy they exuded.

Considering these were scared, tired and most likely, getting hungry. The children seemed to be fairing well. But then, having been rescued from being sold to the highest bidder... this must seem like a cake walk.

Having secured a few precious hours sleep, Aram had called in the early morning hours to update Red. Agents Ressler and Navabi had lead a team to secure these children, and in the process, had taken down their newest member of the Blacklist.

Not one child or agent had been hurt in the scrimmage. So both Agents had not only done their job, they had done it exceedingly well.

All the agents on the floor had been up for hours, running on the adrenaline rush of having taken down a despicable man. Sooner rather than later, they would start crashing. One by one as the excitement tapered off, the reality that they were only human would sink in.

But until the other teams arrived, they had to keep going.

Red himself, had been on site for a while now, assisting where he could. Even before he had arrived, his people were working on identifying the children as well. They had done eight to the Bureaus four, so far.

So, all in all, the day was shaping up well.

“Dembe...” The dark man looked up from the sleeping toddler in his arms, as Red continued. He walked over, glancing over the tiny face, his smile a genuine one.

“We should start ordering pizza. It’s going to get ugly otherwise.” Red glanced around the blank faces of the young children present. He momentarily wondered what could be in their heads after such a harrowing experience.
He found it impossible to empathize or understand such a situation. He sighed mentally. “It’s been a long damn day.”

The insistent ringing of the phone awakened Elizabeth from a deep sleep. She searched the linen for Red’s warmth, but the man had already left. She reached for the annoying phone groggily.

“Yeah?” She muttered.

“Liz, hey.” Samar’s warm voice eased the irritation. “Sorry, did I wake you?”

“It’s okay.” Liz propped herself on her elbow, forcing her eyes to focus. “What’s going on?”

“We have a little situation here...” Samar’s voice was muffled for a moment. It sounded as if lovely woman was shushing someone.

“What’s wrong?” Liz sat quickly, fully alert and functioning now. “Is it Red?”

“No, not exactly.” Samar scratched her head aimlessly. “We followed the lead he put us on to and made the bust, but now we’re stuck with a little problem.”

“Well, you know. He’s not telling me much about the Blacklisters,” Liz grumbled, “so I’m kind of in the dark. I don’t know if I’d be any help. Isn’t Red answering his phone?”

“No, he’s here actually. He’s doing all he can...” Samar glanced at the man in question, turning her back slightly. “Look, he didn’t want us to call you. He didn’t want to upset you. But we really could use the help right now.”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

“Off the info Red gave us, we raided an operation late last night and found a little over forty displaced kids.” the Agent got right to the point.

“Oh, God. That’s awful.” Liz felt the words and emotion. “Are they okay?”

“They’re in mint condition. Seeing as they were being sold out to the highest bidder.” Samar glanced hastily back over her shoulder. Red Reddington was otherwise occupied. “Based on descriptions of missing kids, we’ve confirmed quite a few of them so far and we’re readying them for transport.”

“You need help finding the other parents?”

“Well, the problem is, we have an infant here.” Samar smiled gently down at the baby in her arms. “I’m guessing it’s around six months old, and the descriptions are so vague for a child this young...” she dangled her necklace for the greedy little hands that reached up.

“So, you need me to look at the database?”

“No, we need someone to watch him.” Samar corrected.

“I don’t understand. Isn’t someone watching the other kids?”

“We have a handful of volunteers and child welfare sent down two that are watching the others, but they’re older.” Samar pursed her lips, sending the baby an air kiss. “Forty kids plus... they’ve got their hands full.”
“I’ll take him.” Elizabeth did not hesitate one second, attempting to keep the elation from her tone.

“Are you sure?” Samar drawled.

“I’m assuming we’ll need supplies?” the woman was already planning.

“We only have one bottle for him here and a couple diapers.”

“Give me an hour and I’ll be there.”

Agent Navabi hung up her phone, smiling. “You do know Mr. Reddington will most likely kill us both.” Aram wrung his hands nervously. “You know that, right?” he looked around for the dangerous felon, totally on edge.

“No he won’t.” Samar smiled at the sleeping infant, stroking it’s small head. “He’s gonna have his hands full for the next couple days, at least.”

“And after that?” the computer expert needed specifics. “Then what?”

“He’ll have moved on to the next distraction.” Samar shrugged, unconcerned.

“Yeah, sure. His next distraction.” he nodded sagely, the man’s face a mask of pure unadulterated terror. “Which will most likely be where he can hide our bodies.”

“Oh, Aram,” the woman laughed musically, raising the baby to her shoulder, patting it’s little back lovingly, “he doesn’t do that menial stuff.” It was scoffed.

Aram’s tension eased a little and he exhaled, thankfully.

“He hires it out.”

“Absolutely not.” the large security guard stood, arms folded over his burly chest, his head shaking negatively, his expression set. “No way in hell... not gonna happen.”

Liz moved closer, standing toe to toe with her adversary. “How can you be so mean?”

“Practice.” Silas shifted a lazy stare.

“This is a tiny little baby... helpless, alone, terrified, starving, did I mention, he’s totally alone in this world?” Liz presented her side of the issue.

“The kid’s smelly, loud, whiney... much like you.” the guard shook his head, his features set. “And I have no desire to die so young, simply because I allowed you to talk me into something for which my boss and your boyfriend, is going to kill me quite dead for.”

“Young?” she could not help herself. But at Silas’ flinty look, she hurried onward. “And he’s not my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, sure... whatever.” Silas was unmoved. “There’s no way in hell you are leaving this place except... over my dead body.”

An hour later, Liz had finished up the shopping needed, steering her motorized cart down one last aisle. Her eyes softened, her fingers gently rubbing over the incredibly soft fabric of the baby
blanket.

She showed off the tiny baby giraffes to her companion.

“That’s exactly how my neck is going to look after the boss gets finished with me.” Silas predicted gloomily.

“Oh look...” Liz’s eyes brightened as another object caught her attention. She steered the cart in the direction needed. Silas sighed, pushing the heavy laden shopping cart down the appropriate aisle.

The woman searched the hundreds of stuffed animals lining the shelves, indecisively.

“How about the beaver?” Silas offered helpfully, then grinned at Liz’s expression.

She continued her search.

“If you pick Barney,” Silas had seen her hesitate over the hideous purple thing, “I’ll use it for target practice.”

Liz retracted her hand quickly, scowling slightly then came up with something that made her coo lovingly.

“I’m going to blow chunks.” he sighed heavily, tucking the enormous cat under his free arm as there was no more room in the cart. Silas halted his steps, staring quizzically at the animal for a few seconds, “Hey, I’ve seen this cat before.”

“No, you haven’t.” Liz quickly denied, moving hastily to the check out line.

Silas stepped in front of her, loading the line with her treasures then halted her attempts at the card machine. He slid one of the several credit cards allotted him by Reddington.

“Oh, I don’t want to do that.” Liz grimaced slightly. “He’s going to be upset with me as is.”

“No, he won’t.” Silas predicted philosophically. “He’ll take it out on me... as well he should.” the man cast her a grumpy glance. “Why do I let you talk me into this shit?”

“It’s a defenseless baby.” Liz reminded. “I can pay him back. And did I mention–”

“...The baby is all alone in the world.” the man finished up for her, sneering his discontent. “Red will get his revenge, one way or another.” the guard mumbled dejectedly. “I’m just trying to decide which of my nuts I can live without.”

Twenty minutes later, found them parked outside the Post Office. Liz with phone in hand, “Samar? I’m here. Can you bring him out?” she smiled. “Okay, I’ll be waiting.” the woman fidgeted about anxiously, the wait interminable.

“You do realize Red will probably kill us both for this.” Silas grumbled, wringing his hands on the steering wheel. “Why do I let you talk me into this shit?”

“Don’t swear around the baby.” Liz snapped. “Just tell him I coerced you, I’ll take all the blame.” she did not see Silas’s expression which was foreboding at most. “It’s just for a couple days.”

She craned her head, glancing this way and that. Finally Aram emerged, followed by Samar who was holding a small wrapped bundle in her arms. Aram carefully guided his charges down each step.
Silas had come around the vehicle, holding the door open, “Where’s Reddington?” he questioned Aram Mojtabai.

Liz took the baby in welcoming arms, Samar leaning half in, half out of the car.

“He’s still inside, with Ressler.” the female Agent answered absently.

“Does he know?” Silas asked tightly.

“No. Like I said, he didn’t want us to call.” Samar watched Liz struggle with the buckle on the car seat, trying to open it unsuccessfully. Silas opened it for her, his features grim. “Maybe he was right. Are you sure you can do this?”

Liz took the sleeping child, steadying him with her right arm as she laid him in the car seat. “I can do this.”

With Silas’s help, they secured the boy, locking him in place. “When do you think Red might be home?” Liz asked.

“I’m not sure what his plans are.” Samar told the truth. “He’s made his plane available to transport the kids safely back home. Whether or not he was going with it...”

“I’ll talk to him later.” Liz shrugged the matter aside.

“Thanks for helping us out, really.” Samar smiled warmly, the gesture still apparent as she included the large guard in the compliment. “It’ll take a load off everyone.”

Aram noticed the exchange, for the guard had smiled back. The tall thin man, suddenly felt uncomfortable.

Liz watched the baby snuffle in his sleep, shifting more comfortably in his seat. “It’s no problem, really.”

“Where do you want... it?” Silas asked, holding the car seat. He had engaged the assistance of several of his men, who stood loaded down and waiting instructions.

“In our room, of course.” Elizabeth directed which bags went where, organizing the situation within moments.

She hobbled back to their room, the crutch starting to irritate and annoy. Silas stood by the baby, gently rocking the car seat back and forth on the bed.

“You need help getting him out?” he reluctantly relented, his manner still very much disapproving.

“Maybe unlocking the buckle.” He popped it effortlessly, then stood back. He studied the woman meticulously for a long beat.

“You don’t have a clue, do you?” he enquired amiably.

The woman’s eyes almost misted over as she looked from the baby to the man, “No...” she confessed.

“Wait, I may have an idea.” Silas left the room. “I’ll be right back.”
Liz sat down, looking over the sleeping baby, adjusting the thin blanket over him. His little hands felt cold. She stretched across the bed, grabbing the new plush blanket she had purchased, before placing it over him.

Keres hopped up on the bed, sniffing the carrier.

“Be good Keres.” she warned and the cat backed off, sniffing at the baby with interest before laying down next to the carrier.

“I bring food and baby booze.” Silas said as he returned, carrying the bags from the kitchen and other supplies. “I found the electric kettle and some jugs of water.” Joe came in, carrying four gallons of water, sitting them beside the marble top bureau.

“Won’t it be too hot for him?” Silas sighed ever so heavily. “Okay,” he instructed, “see this line?” he showed her a low point on the bottle. “Fill it to here, then mix it with cold water.”

“How do you know all this stuff?” Liz was mystified.

“I am the oldest of four.” the man filled the kettle with water, letting it heat. “This thing only needs a few minutes to heat, so when you aren’t using it…” he unplugged it from the socket. “Okay, you’re set up. When you run low on water, give a yell.”

“Thank you, Silas,” she smiled warmly over at the man as well, “Joe.”

“Okay, we’re going to go make our rounds, if you need anything…” Silas left the sentence unfinished. “Oh yeah, and one more thing… I want roses for my funeral, you know the one I’m going to have as soon as your boyfriend kills me?”

Liz smiled. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, sure… whatever.”

Liz shifted her eyes, scowling slightly. It had not been Silas who had made the remark, but Joe. Silas hit the man’s shoulder roughly, both sharing in the private joke.

“Get out… both of you.” she pointed towards the door. “Buttheads.” she murmured her belief.

Which again, seemed to amuse both men greatly.

The silence of the room after the guards departure was deafening. Liz stared at the infant at once both beguiled, and yet terrified.

Taking Silas’s suggestion, she got up, unloading her bounty where she thought it would best serve her. After a little rearranging, she lined up the bottles, formula and baby food on the bureau.

On her night stand, she laid out a thick towel, some diapers, baby wipes and as an after thought, some powder she had seen in the bathroom.

Sitting down, she turned the car seat toward her, pulling the warm slumbering body from it’s nest.

“Hey there, little guy. You gonna wake up for me?” She sat back against the pillows, settling the baby on her bent legs. The dark blue eyes slowly opened. “Hi, there…” She smiled at the sleepy blueness.
His little face scrunched up unhappily as he fusses, but she was ready, stroking his lips with the bottle. He latched on, suckling hungrily.

“Wow, look at you go.” she made an impressed sound. “You were hungry.”

Perhaps she should have made another? She second guessed herself as she watched the bottle emptying pretty rapidly. But as he got down to the last bit of it, the baby slowed, then stopped, sighing.

“All done?” She crooned. Turning him on her legs, she supported him with her right arm, while tapping his back gently, gaining a hearty burp.

She chuckled at the sound, stroking his back soothingly. After a spell, she felt warmth on her stomach where his bottom was settled.

“Somebody needs a diaper change, I think?” She lowered her legs, working him over to the edge of the bed then lay him on her makeshift changing table, pulling the snaps between his legs.

As she removed the tabs on his diaper, she vaguely remembered that you should be ready to cover a boy in case he peed again, so she readied herself. And with good reason... suddenly a strong stream filled the air and Liz found herself giggling with delight.

“And Silas thought I wouldn’t be prepared.” she quipped.

Making quick work of drying and changing the little one, she snapped his onesie back in place. She laid the baby back into the soft covers of the bed, perusing the new outfits she had... well, Silas had bought this afternoon.

She decided on the one she liked best, struggling with the now wide awake baby to fit the squirming little bundle into sleeves and legs that just did not want to cooperate. The baby was cooing, gurgling and trying so hard to say... something.

Once dressed, she beamed happily, not only that the fit was perfect, but that he looked so damned adorable.

“Red’s gonna have to let me take care of you, he can’t possibly turn you away when you look so sharp.” She giggled at the little sailor suit he was wearing.

The baby kicked his legs, smiling. “Give me your feet, don’t want your little toes getting cold.” She kissed the bottom of the pudgy foot before slipping on the white sock. “There, now, would you like to play?”

She sat with the baby for the next two hours, playing with him, talking to him.

“I have to call you something.” she finally decided. “The baby just isn’t going to cut it.” She cocked her head, looking down at the little guy. He was making a good effort in his attempts to scale the huge stuffed cat purchased today.

All at once the little head jerked around, the blue eyes making contact with hers, a big gaping smile was offered then rather unceremoniously, a loud poot echoed in the silent room.

Elizabeth laughed out loud, rubbing the little guy’s back. “If your name isn’t Sam, it should be.”
Sam used to do the same thing, grinning big before letting one rip. She had always taken it as a warning to run from the room when she saw that mischievous grin.

Sometimes she made it, sometimes she didn’t.

After the baby fell asleep to her soft crooning lullaby.

She sat reading her book, rubbing the tiny back absently. All of a sudden, just out of nowhere, he started fussing.

Liz looked around instinctively for help then dismissed the notion. She hopped from the bed, plugging in the kettle. Just about then, all hell broke loose.

That baby had a set of lungs on him. She stuck a pacifier in his mouth, which held him for all of thirty seconds before he pushed it out with his tongue.

She checked his diaper, finding him dry, but the kettle had finally warmed up.

Mixing a quick bottle, Liz brought it back, sticking it in the wide open mouth. Lifting the baby with difficulty, she swiveled him about, shifting comfortably into the pillows.

“You can be pretty loud when you want to be, huh?”

Sam sucked the bottle ferociously, clenching his hands into tiny fists. “Now was there really a need for all that noise?” Liz stroked the small hands then his furrowed brow. “No need to be so upset. I don’t know your schedule yet, but I’ll figure it out.”

He finished off his bottle, letting out a satisfying belch. Seconds later, he got fussy again. Liz cocked her head, staring at him. “You can’t be hungry still, can you?”

A thought occurred to her. “Oh, hey, how about some dessert?”

She laid him down, a little upset when he started crying harder.

“How about some bananas?” She grabbed a spoon, a soft cloth and went back to him, opening the jar when she got them both situated.

Spooning up some of the creamy mush, she stuck it in the wailing mouth, stopping his crying. “You like that?” He smacked his rosebud mouth, which opened wider when the small spoon came back into view. “It’s pretty yummy.”

They had made it through half the jar when he turned his head. “Full tummy, gotcha.”

The baby settled against her stomach, kicking his feet oddly, his little face grimaced in a pout. Seconds later the baby began crying in earnest.

“Well, you’ve got a full stomach, you’re dry, I’m cuddling you. What’s wrong?” She asked as he let out a wail. The woman held the baby closer, rocking him soothingly. “I don’t know what’s wrong.” she admitted her failings, feeling miserable for the little one. “I wish you could tell me.”

She shifted over to the edge of the bed, holding him more upright, letting his feet kick freely as she bounced him. Feeling his diaper again and finding it dry, she was at a loss.

“Sam, I don’t know what you want.” She rubbed her cheek on his warm head, frowning.

“Lizzy, what have you done?” a male voice startled her for a second, so focused her efforts had been
elsewhere. But it was unmistakable, that low silky accusation.

Red Reddington stood at the doorway, his head shaking back and forth, his tone more than exasperated.

“I don’t know?” she bounced the baby, frowning at the man across the room, “I fed him, changed him, cuddled him. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong!”

Red came further into the room, his manner clearly perturbed. “That is not what I meant and you know perfectly well.”

Liz sat up straighter as he got closer, holding the baby out for him to take. Red took the squalling infant, looking it over objectively, his brow furrowed deeply.

He patted it on the back, only garnering a small burp. Nothing to cause this much ado.

She gripped Red’s arm, looking down at the upset child. “What’s wrong with him? Is he sick?” She frowned, kissing the baby’s temple.

Red laid the small head in his hand, cupping it’s bottom in the other. He bent over, feeling Sam’s forehead with his lips. “He’s warm, but not too bad.”

He readjusted the baby, setting him against his chest, walking away. Liz hopped after him as he entered the bathroom.

Red washed his hand, then reset Sam’s head in the palm of his hand, resting the tiny bottom on his stomach.

Sticking his finger in the wide open mouth, Red pressed on one part and Sam bit down. “No wonder you’re pissed.” Red chuckled. “He’s teething.” The baby grabbed Red’s finger, biting down on the thick digit.

He gummed it like a dog with his favorite bone.

Liz craned her head over Red’s arm watching the baby chomp down on the man’s finger, “Doesn’t that hurt?”

“Him, yes.” he curled his finger, letting the kid bite to it’s heart’s content. “Go sit down, I’ll be right back.”

She went back to the bed, waiting anxiously for the man to return. She could hear him speaking softly to Sam.

“There,” the soothing tone calmed her nerves as well, “now does that feel better?”

The child had quieted, the room silent again.

“What did you do?” she demanded as Red came into view, baby in tow.

“Gave him some crushed ice in a damp cloth.” he swayed the kid gently, then looked at her. “Now, you want to tell me how you got your hands on him?”

“Samar called...”

“I explicitly told her not to involve you.”
“Why would you do that? He’s just a baby, Red!”

“A baby that’s going to need to depend on you for everything, that you’re going to get very attached to,” his face darkened somewhat, “then have to give back to the parents.”

She dropped her head, frowning. “Even so, they needed help.”

“I was going to hire someone, Lizzy.”

“That’s so impersonal.”

“Exactly.”

“How can you say that? He’s so alone, so defenseless...”

“Yeah, Silas told me.” he halted her tirade. “One thing is for certain, he won’t remember this time, but you will.”

She looked away, folding the baby blanket. “Did you find his parents yet?”

“No, there are more missing babies than you realize.” he looked down at the content infant. “And at this age, they’re hard to distinguish, especially when they’ve disappeared from the Post Office and you can’t stare at the kid to match them up with the descriptions.”

“When did you figure it out?”

“Ressler and I went off in search of him. One of the sitters said that an Agent had taken him.” Red’s brow crooked upward. “Which explains why Samar suddenly vanished... the little coward.”

“Why were you looking for him? Did he match a description?”

“I don’t know, since he wasn’t there.” Red set the kid down, about to pull the snaps on his outfit when he stopped, really looking at the baby but more so, it’s outfit. “Well, ahoy there, Sailor.”

The baby kicked his legs, grinning wide, showing his pink gums as if he knew how adorable he was.

Liz smiled, straightening the necktie on the baby’s chest. “We thought you might like this outfit best.”

*Endearing the kid to me, no doubt.* Red pulled the snaps, unveiling the diaper.

“What are you doing?” she questioned, totally confused.

“The baby that matched his description wasn’t circumcised.”

“I didn’t even notice, to be honest.” She lamely admitted, then defended herself. “I was trying not to get peed on.”

He pulled the tabs on the diaper, uncovering then hastily re-covering the area. “New diaper.” he instructed.

Liz held her grin, “I have a changing table set up.” she offered.

Red placed his thumb over the top of the diaper, cradling the baby in his large hands as he moved Sam. Lifting the diaper cautiously, he pulled it back completely. “Damn.”
“It’s not him?”

“No, he’s been snipped.”

He pulled the soiled covering away, drying the tiny bottom, then diapered the baby. Closing the snaps, he handed the little boy back to Liz. “Here, I’m going to change.”

“You’re not going back out are you?” she panicked.

“No, they were going to finish feeding the kids then put them down for the night before we start transporting them tomorrow.” He pulled the tie at his neck, heading for the bathroom. “I’m going to try and get some sleep…” He glanced at the baby, “I hope.”

A few minutes later, he reentered the room quietly, stopping in his tracks. He watched her for a long moment, cradling the boy.

She looked natural with a baby in her arms. He listened while she talked quietly to the infant, all the while damning Samar.

“I told you he’d like this outfit, Sam.”

“Sam?” His low voice rumbled.

“I couldn’t keep calling him ‘the baby.”

“Why, Sam?”

She stroked the downy hair on the tiny skull, smiling, “He’s got a gas problem.”

Red chortled, well remembering grown Sam’s ‘gas problem’.

“Did you have dinner?” she asked, sparing him a glance. “I could heat up some–”

“We ate at the Blacksite.”

“I’ll pay you back, Red.”

“For what?”

“Silas put all the equipment today on your account, I’ll pay you back for your trouble.”

“Like hell you will.” He held up a silencing hand. “We’re not going to discuss this.” Pulling back the blankets, he climbed inside, then stared at the pair. “Lizzy, let me hire someone.”

“No…”

“You’ll have to give him back at some point.”

“I know…” She kissed the tiny forehead, nuzzling the baby with her nose.

He knew she did, and it didn’t really matter now, the damage was all ready done.

He inched closer to them, wrapping his arm around the hurting woman. Liz rested her head on his shoulder, playing with the small fingers.

Red stroked his finger over hers, hesitating when he saw how large his finger was against hers and Sam’s. He felt her smile against his shoulder, even as she sniffled.
The woman grabbed his finger, slipping it under the baby’s hand, the small fingers instinctively curling over the large thick one.

She chuckled wetly, “His fingers can’t wrap around yours.”

He squeezed her, kissing the top of her head. For the time being, he would leave her be.

If she needed to cry and just spend this moment with the baby, he would allow it. He silently prepared himself for the fallout that he knew was coming.
My father is having surgery on Monday the 30th, so I may be a little spotty on the updates next week.

I'll try to get some more editing done this weekend, so all I'll really have to do is post.

April 23

A movement on the bed and a small cry awoke Red instantly. In the low light, he could make out Lizzy’s silhouette. Her back was turned and she was sleeping peacefully.

Red looked at the baby who was squirming about, face scrunched up, fists waving frantically about like a samurai warrior fighting off an invisible foe. Red’s eyes shifted back to the peacefully sleeping woman then again to the tiny ninja.

He nodded knowingly, his gaze trained steadily on the enemy. “So this is how it’s gonna be, is it?”

The baby mewed irritably, the tiny ninja feet kicking viciously about in the air. “Careful kid... I know people.”

The man reluctantly arose, stifling a groan. He had seen the object needed upon his entrance hours ago. He picked up the baby, heading for the bureau.

Red worked the pacifier into the quivering pout of the mouth. “Stop with the face, I am totally unaffected.” he measured the formula absently. “I could tell you stories... what the hell is this?” he studied Silas’s make shift “stove”, quickly figuring the ins and outs of the situation.

The baby pushed the pacifier from it’s mouth. Red deftly caught the object, reinserting it determinably.

“We’re going to have to come to an understanding.” he poured the warm water into the bottle, absently bouncing the baby with his free arm. “Let’s pretend for everyone’s sake, that I’m the boss here.” he glanced down at the baby then frowned hard for the child had stopped squirming and fidgeting, staring at him expectantly. “I’ve got more money, I’ve got more power, I’m taller, I’ve got more... well, no, you’ve got more hair, actually.”

Red shrugged the moment away. “The point is,” he pushed the nipple through the unresisting lips at which point the kid suckled noisily, the large blues eyes trained and steady on the man’s face, “if we do things my way, we’re all going to be happier in the end.”

The man found a comfortable chair, settling back with his charge. He watched the baby suckle for a long moment. “This reminds me of a story...”

The baby let out a long exaggerated sigh when the warm liquid hit his empty tummy.

“Have you heard this one before?” Red could take criticism well. “That’s okay, I’ll relate it to
Dembe in the morning. He gets paid to listen.”

He moved the infant closer to his warmth, gently caressing the tiny back in circular motions. He listened intently to the tiny mouth working so diligently on the bottle. In the quiet of the room, with this miniature human being in his care, Red suddenly felt a surge of total contentment.

He could not remember how long it had been since he had felt such emotions. He thought back many, many years ago. He had spent so much time with his baby daughter in the same setting.

The man glanced down at the little boy in his arms, marveling when the tiny fingers curled tightly about the heel of his hand. The blue eyes sleepily watched his every move. An unbidden smile curved Red’s lips.

Red tapped the baby’s bottom, bouncing it soothingly and in doing so, found a measure of comfort himself. The baby finished the bottle, and was subsequently lifted unto a convenient shoulder.

Red’s massive hand dwarfed the pint-sized body as he gently patted, coaxing the excess air from the little tummy. What came out, however, was anything but diminutive.

The man crooked his head away from the sweet smelling little face. “Now that was more like a beer burp, to me.”

The woman stirred instantly at the exaggerated sound, awakened fully from her peaceful slumber. She sat up hastily, blurting the first thing to come to mind.

“I’ve got this.” she struggled to a sitting position, pushing her hair from her face, frantically searching about the empty bed.

“Now, see what you’ve done?” Red lifted the baby, crossing to the bed, laying the infant into the comforting coverlet. “You’ve awakened the dragon.” he teased. “Let’s hope she doesn’t eat you alive.”

“That’s a fine thing to say to a baby.” the woman was flabbergasted, until she glanced down to the peacefully sleeping child. She lifted amazed eyes. “What are you... the baby whisperer?”

“We have come to an understanding, and it’s private.” Red headed for the door. “Just suffice to say, I am and always shall be, a master manipulator.”

Liz looked at him sideways, “He just likes your voice.” she stated shrewdly.

The man stopped in his tracks, cocking his head sideways. “How about you? Do you like my voice?”

“Where are you going?” she side-tracked hastily.

“I’m anticipating round two, be right back.”

He came back a minute later with an ice bucket in tow, complete with a bottle of Merlot.

“What are we celebrating?” she was stumped.

“It’s for the kid’s gums.” he disdained, pulling the tabs on the diaper having already taken care of the snaps on Sam’s onesie.

After a successful operation, Red poured himself a glass of wine, motioning to her.
“It’s three o’clock in the morning,” she pointed out, refusing his kind offer.

The man shrugged, finishing off the wine in one gulp. “There’s no time set for a good glass of Merlot.”

Red made himself comfortable beside the warm little bundle, crossing his arms, and his feet at the ankles. He stared at the ceiling, his thoughts private.

“Thank you.” the woman ventured lowly so as to not to disturb his private moment. “But please, next time,” she asked more than told, “you can wake me up.”

She moved closer to the baby, her arms enfolding Sam lovingly. Liz closed her eyes, drinking in the scent surrounding her. This was rapidly becoming her most favorite fragrance in the universe... besides Red Reddington’s cologne.

The man shifted his head in the pillow, taking in the scene for quite a while. He finally closed his eyes, drifting into a deep, restful sleep.

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The soft light filtering behind the curtain awoke Liz. She found Sam sleeping peacefully. Red looked as if he had not moved a muscle since coming to bed.

She smiled gently at the picture presented. The baby had shifted sometime in the night and now lay crumpled happily against the man’s lower waist.

This man seemed such a natural with children. Liz felt a momentary lump in her heart, thinking about what it must have been like when his daughter was the same age.

“Somebody better start making a bottle because the demon seed is going to be pissed when I move.” Red stated lazily, startling her. The clear aquamarine eyes opened slowly, his head turning towards her.

“How long have you been awake?” she accused.

“About thirty minutes, I guess?” He shooed her with his free hand, pointing to the bottles.

“I’m going.” She grumbled, rolling out of the bed. “What is on your agenda today?” she stared back at him as the water heated.

Red propped his head on his arm, watching her movements, his fingers massaging the baby’s feet. “My agenda today involves a feisty little con-artist,” he glanced down at the peacefully, undisturbed child, “and a masochistic FBI Agent who sees herself as Mother Teresa in her spare time.”

“Oh, you are so amusing.” the woman crossed the space, bottle in hand. “I am not masochistic.” she grinned at him. “Just for that, you feed the kid.”

“I’m going to get dressed.” he corrected in a rather superior tone.

“Coward.” she accused playfully, the baby boy stirring unhappily halted the repartee. When Red had moved, Sam’s comfortable world had been disturbed.

The man reached, lifting the tiny bundle into capable arms. “All right, Petty Officer Sam Whatever... this is not how we behave aboard the USS Reddington.”

Liz’s mouth quirked threateningly but she managed to hide her amusement, just.
Red wiggled his fingers and the woman slapped the bottle into the outstretched palm. The man found his favorite chair, settling back.

“I thought we had this settled last night.” he chided gently.

The baby ignored him completely, concentrating on the food placed before him. Red’s mouth worked back and forth the indentures along the side, dimpling deeply.

“What it is, I don’t understand, see... is why I do not get the respect afforded me?”

Elizabeth turned away hastily to hide her grin. The baby gurgled happily around the nipple, sucking noisily, the large eyes watching the man’s every move. At one point, Sam reached grasping his foot, waving it about haphazardly.

Red watched the action benignly. “I’m not really the bad guy they make me out to be. I mean, you will learn in this life, Petty Officer,” the man broke for a dramatic pause, “that things are never black or white.” he glanced down at the baby, who waved his foot in a wider arc. “I’m one of those gray areas you will hear so much about.” he nodded sagely.

“Oh my God...” she tried to keep the giggle from her voice, “you have a captive audience. Isn’t there something about this in the Geneva Convention bylaws?”

Red drew in an even breath, choosing to ignore her completely, his expression almost but not quite, annoyed. “Where was I?” he asked the baby.

Sam babbled off a long stream of unintelligible gibberish, “Yes, I know.” it was conceded.

“Something else you will learn in life. Women must always have the last word.”

“We do not.”

“See...” Red gestured accordingly.

The phone on the bed side table interrupted the pleasant camaraderie. Red transferred a put out look to the object in question.

Elizabeth reached over the bed, answering the call. She gestured but he indicated she should take the initiative.

The woman listened attentively then grimaced slightly, seeking him out. “They need you at the Post Office.”

“The hell you say?” he drawled, arising. He reluctantly handed over the baby. “Tell them I’m on my way.”

Red nuzzled the small neck as he placed Sam in Lizzy’s arms. “You got him?” he asked, adjusting the pillow supporting her arm and the small weight.

“Yes, I’m good.” She cuddled the warm bundle in open affection.

“I’ll send in breakfast after I dress.” he chucked the baby’s chin, “Petty Officer Whatever,” the man put on his most staunch face, “you will obey orders given from Lieutenant Keen in my absence.”

Liz lifted impressed brows, “Oh, I just got a raise in rank.”

Reddington shifted indulgent eyes. “Careful, Lieutenant... those ranks come and go so quickly around here.”
She stuck her tongue out, pulling an endearing face.

“Pee on her, kid.” Red left the room with a confident swagger.

The man left for the Post Office thirty minutes later, but around lunch time, he was back and headed to the kitchen.

“Good afternoon Nora.” he threw his hat on the kitchen counter. “Has Lizzy and the drool machine had lunch yet?”

The woman frowned slightly, her eyes remaining on the offending object just thrown on her freshly cleaned cooking area.

Red glanced at his hat, sighing deeply before lifting it in capable hands. Suddenly Nora was all smiles. She went back to stirring something on the stove.

“I checked on them about ten minutes ago but they were still napping.” she chuckled. “Playtime was hectic this morning, I think.”

“Was there any trouble after I left?” Red leaned over the pot, humming appreciatively.

“We had one or two meltdowns...” the woman had hesitated to rat out her new found friend.

“Him or Lizzy?” Red smiled.

Nora chuckled, then gathered some bowls. “He needed ice for his gums.”

“I’ll get them up and about.” the man was a decision maker of the finest quality.

“Bring Sam with you, and I’ll feed him lunch.”

“I can do that Nor–”

“I don’t mind.” she smiled warmly. “He’s such a darling little thing.”

Red headed back to the bedroom, finding the two napping. Or at least one of them was.

The baby was quietly biting on his teddy bear while Keres laid next to him, licking the kid’s bald head.

“Cleaning it before you eat it, Keres?” Red muttered, then turned his attention to Sam. “You’re a good man Petty Officer, letting Lizzy nap.” he reached for the baby, settling him against his hip. “Come here, you little bundle of catnip.”

Red pinched the chubby little cheeks ever so gently, he could see just poking out of the pink swollen area, a minuscule white nub.

“What in God’s name...” Red’s nostrils rebelled, “is that horrendous stench?” he glanced at the baby accusingly. “As if I didn’t know.”

He laid Sam on the table, pulling back the diaper, grimacing. “Okay kid, bath time for you.” He pulled the diaper off, wiping away the mess. “You could certainly use one.”

He finished undressing the boy and took him into the bathroom, his hand cupped over a very vital
area. The baby sucked on his fist, glad to be rid of the yucky stuff.

Red filled the large sink, testing the water before settling the child into the welcoming liquid. He glanced about, his hand supporting the bald head, finally spotting the baby soap.

Sam slapped the water, soaking the front of his shirt and vest through and through, all of which Red ignored. He lathered the baby from head to toe, rinsing with slow mellow streams.

“Sam?” Liz’s frantic voice beckoned from the bedroom.

“You think he’ll answer you?” Red found the thought amusing.

She came stumbling into the room, holding her chest. “You scared me to death.” she accused, her eyes falling instantly on Sam.

“Calm down and be careful.” He scolded, then smiled when the baby babbled, slapping the water harder. “Someone smelled of putrid bananas... what are you feeding this child?”

“Not that I’m complaining,” she watched him soap Sam’s head, the large hand carefully blocking the huge blue eyes as he rinsed, “but what are you doing home?”

“We placed all but five of the children.” he supplied the answer to her question. “I was redundant, so I left.”

“And Sam?”

He blotted the baby’s face, then lifted him into a warm fluffy towel, wrapping the small body snugly.

“Nothing yet.” he replied quietly.

“Wait a minute..” Liz had noted something peculiar. “Is that a birthmark?” she pointed when the man seemed puzzled. “There... on his bottom.”

Red draped the baby on his forearm, tummy down. Sam kicked his legs in his new position, chortling, perfectly content to be upside down and dangling.

Red smiled, stroking his little head, before glancing at what the woman had indicated.

“It is, yes.” He pulled his phone out of his pocket, hesitating.

Her eyes beseeched him, but he shook his head firmly. “I have to, Lizzy.”

“I know.” She held the baby still while Red snapped a picture of the small mark. Liz took over drying duties while Red placed the call to Ressler.

When he was finished, he took the child, carrying it to the changing table. Liz took over the duties from there.

Red sat on the bed, trying to read her face, but she kept her attention focused on Sam, her expression carefully neutral.

“Can you hand me that red onesie and the overalls please.”

Red handed over the small garments, “I’m sorry, Lizzy.” he stated simply.

She sniffled silently, keeping her eyes averted. “No, it’s okay, he needs his mom and dad, it’s good
he’ll get to go home.” she swallowed the lump in her throat, her eyes filling with unshed tears as she slid the suspender in place.

The man watched the scene unfold, his mood plummeting. He had foreseen this very moment, having thought he was fully prepared for it, but in the end the woman’s pain hurt like hell.

He closed his eyes instinctively reaching out, his arm gently surrounding her waist. He pulled Liz closer, enfolding her into his arms.

She sat on his lap, sobbing heartfelt gulps of sorrow, her face hidden in his neckline. The baby played with his tie, unaware of the pain around him.

The phones incessant ring tone jarred the moment, the woman tensing visibly, staring transfixed at the offense communication device.

Red knew she was preparing herself mentally for the news, good or bad.

The man listened intently for some time before offering a curt goodbye.

“Did they find his parents?” she blurted shakily.

“No, but they’re narrowing it down now.” he relayed. “But they’ve placed the other kids.”

“When will you be back, do you think?” she lifted a tear stained face.

“I’m not going.” he wiped the tracks gently from her cheeks. “They don’t need me, you on the other hand...”

“We’ll be okay.” she tried to sound optimistic.

“I’d rather not find out if that’s true from a couple hundred miles away.”

Liz fell silent, nodding into his neck, relief flooding her entire being.

The baby laughed heartily as he pulled the tie from behind Red’s vest. She could not prevent a chuckle, watching the chubby hand grip the expensive fabric, then chew on the end.

“Stop it.” She scolded, gently pulling on the tie.

Red took the tie, shaking the drool off, his expression surly. “Really?” he questioned offhandedly. “It’s not like this is Italian silk, kid.”

Liz did not think she would be smiling today but in spite of herself, she found her spirits slightly lifting.

“Nora has lunch ready for us.” the man stood, taking his lap companions along with him. After getting her settled on her cart, Red adjusted Sam on his arm, letting the infant look after Liz as she rolled along.

After lunch, Red took Sam and Lizzy to the sitting room for a change in scenery.

Dembe came in the sunny room, the look on his face alerting Red. The man nodded, turning to his charges.

“Will you be all right here?” he asked as he stood.
“Sam likes it here.” the woman smiled up, from her position on the floor. “And so do I.”

“Don’t forget to do his ice soon.” it was reminded.

Red stood looking down at the scene. Before he knew what he was doing, he had bent, kissing Liz’s pert nose.

He raised, his features carefully masked. He then joined Dembe, the two exiting in unison.

Red rounded the arch way, running a hand over his head, an odd emotion churning inside himself.

That little moment had felt so... domesticated. He found he missed moments like that in his life.

The baby, playing on the floor. Kissing the girl good bye.

It felt so familiar, but yet so strange. Mostly because Sam was not his baby and Lizzy was most assuredly not his wife.

That much was obvious, for so many reasons.

It had been such a powerful episode, truth told, it almost overwhelmed the man.

That few seconds had felt so real... so right. He hadn’t felt such a strong emotional attachment since his wife and child. The reality hurt like hell, because he knew it was just an illusion.

“Raymond?” Dembe questioned, holding the back door open for him. The large man had felt the quietness, concerned for his friend.

Reddington waved the unasked question aside, “Let’s go.”

Two hours passed, but it had felt like an eternity until the man finally was allowed to come back to the world he preferred.

Red’s hand massaged his neck and the tension in his body as he walked the halls of what he now considered, home.

Lizzy’s musical laughter floated on the air, lightening his spirit. He followed the sound which led his footsteps to the back of the house.

Coming on scene the man halted briefly, a gentle smile coming to his lips.

The woman was holding Sam on the first step of the pool, the tiny feet kicking and splashing so fast that Red was hard pressed to follow the activity.

“Oh, hi.” Liz beamed up at him as he came further into the room.

Red was pleased to see both her hand and leg were wrapped in plastic. Silas was sitting just behind her, flipping through the latest publication of Gun World.

“Are we having a pool party?” the older man smiled at the ecstatic pair, taking off his shoes, rolling up his pants legs. He slipped his feet into the warm water, sitting close beside Liz and their tiny guest.

“We are...” she giggled happily.

Red stared down into the water, pointing. “What is that?”
Liz lifted Sam slightly, showing a trash bag fastened into a diaper. “Nora thought, if he should have any accidents...” she said meaningfully, before lowering Sam back down into the warm water.

Dembe walked to the far end of the pool, diving gracefully into its depths.

Sam clapped his chubby little hands at the show, then blinked in awe, smiling a huge toothless grin when the man popped up a few feet from them, as if by magic.

The baby started clapping his fingers quickly as though motioning Dembe closer, then stood on the first step bouncing jerkily in the buoyant water. The sound of the little laughter peeled through the room and truthfully into Elizabeth’s heart.

All at once the infant practically leapt for Dembe who had been gently splashing the little tummy with water.

Red quickly reached out, catching the anxious little body, “Whoa there, lightning.”

He held Sam out, smiling at the rapidly kicking legs. Dembe closed the gap, taking the infant in capable arms.

Red and Liz watched as the child smacked the water, splashing water in Dembe’s face but unfortunately, Sam got a little of the backlash, his eyes blinking rapidly at the unexpected occurrence.

Liz smiled, waving to the baby as he passed by, making cooing sounds and impressed faces of delight.

“Look at you swimming all by yourself.” she clapped her hands energetically. “What a big boy you are.”

“Dembe.” Red called out a warning, before tossing a float in beside the man.

Dembe maneuvered it beside him, laying Sam on his belly, allowing him to float around much to the delight of the small human.

Dembe dodged the flailing arms and legs as best he could, chuckling his amusement.

“Did you have a good day?” Red asked the woman beside him.

“We did, he tried apple cinnamon oatmeal today.” she beamed happily. “He ate the whole thing.”

“I had the same thing in mind for dinner.” the man quipped.

“He was just a little piglet.” Liz chuckled quietly, “He really loved it.”

“I’m happy to hear he had a nice day, but the question was directed at you.”

Liz sighed, then wiggled her toes in the water, “I’m... dealing with it.” she replied quietly then scrunched her nose when Dembe came floating up to them with his sleeping passenger.

“Waterbeds have the same affect on me.” Silas mentioned to no one in particular before returning to his magazine.

“Well, I guess if he has trouble sleeping, we can just sit him on a raft to knock him out.” Red shrugged before reaching out and taking the sleeping baby from his impromptu water bed.
Dembe arose out of the water, like a Greek God, offering his assistance to Liz who gladly accepted.

“Red, I can take him,” she pointed to the bag leaking water everywhere, “you’re pants are getting all wet.”

“Like that hasn’t happened before.” he tore the bag free with Dembe’s help, situating Sam in his arm. Dembe caught Liz’s puzzled look, delivering a dead pan... “Army-Navy game.”

Liz sighed her frustration because she had noted Red’s instant grin of camaraderie.

Silas had stood, laying his book aside coming alongside the woman.

“Red, put the baby into the towel, he might get cold.” Liz advised, whereupon the little one was instantly given over.

The older man looked down, watching as the baby was swaddled into a warm, dry cloth. His fingers absently trailed slowly back and forth over Liz’s nape.

“Isn’t this the most adorable baby you’ve ever seen, Silas? Admit it.” Liz crooked her head upward, catching the skeptical features of her guard. “You know you like him.”

“Little germ carrier.” the bearded man retorted. “I think I’m coming down with something.”

Dembe shook his head dolefully. He lifted his weapon off the towel where he had carefully placed it, having dried off his muscular frame.

“He is not!” Liz instinctively took up for the child. “He’s just the most precious thing ever.” she murmured lovingly over the baby, kissing his little forehead. “You take that back!”

Silas rolled his eyes, “Getting a little nauseous here.” he pulled a ‘gag face’. “He’s drooling.”

“And you haven’t?” Red spoke up instantly sharing a knowing glance with Dembe. All three men spoke in unison... “Army-Navy game.” Silas nodded grudgingly.

“Damn fine game.” the brawny guard had to agree in spite of everything that went down that fateful day.

“What the hell happened at that game?” she was mystified. “Sam’s teething!” Elizabeth defended staunchly, letting the other subject go, not sure she wanted to know any of the specifics.

“Did the kid shit his pants, because I absolutely smell... something.” Silas wrinkled his nose at the abhorrent odor.

“Red...” Liz’s eyes hardened perceptibly, “shoot him in the ass.”

Red’s grin was halted instantly by the sound of a loud pop.

Silas instantly placed his bulk over that of Elizabeth Keen and her charge, his large arms encompassing both small bodies.

Dembe dropped his towel, grasping his weapon, pointing it in the direction of the source.

Red turned, blocking the three behind him, his own weapon raised and at-the-ready.

Another two shots rang out, almost simultaneously... Red glanced over to Dembe, a fixed scowl on
his face.

If they were under attack, someone was taking their sweet time.

Silas’ radio was alive, squawking information to the Head Security Guard.

Dembe’s scowl was even darker than Red’s because all posts were reporting no breech of property... no activity on the grounds what-so-ever.

Silas soothed Elizabeth, glancing around hectically for any means of escape offered. Finding none at the moment, for they were surrounded by a glass enclosure... he continued sheltering them with his own body.

Red’s arm swept slowly across the horizon, his eyes alert and active, his weapon still raised searching for the threat.

A gigantic pane of glass shattered close by the large black man to Red’s left.

They now knew the location of the assailant.

Red tapped Silas’ back, signaling it was time to vacate. Silas’ beefy fingers pushed the cart’s control forward as he slowly walked the vehicle toward the opened French doors in front of them.

Red followed, his body a shield as well, his weapon trained at the appropriate location. Dembe was close behind and soon, all exited the area... Liz and the baby, safe and sound.

Silas arose finally, his face an angered mask of rage. He jerked the radio to his lips, secure in the knowledge, Red and Dembe were rushing the only ones who mattered, from the scene.

“Somebody better tell me what the fuck is going on out there!” he advised icily.

“Be advised...” Joe’s voice came back calmly, “shooter is secured, danger eliminated.”

“Who the hell breeched our security?” his rage was barely held in check.

“No one breeched... it was the neighbor lady... and I use the term loosely, to our South.” Joe hurried on with the explanation before Silas could get any more upset. “Husband supposedly cheating, woman got soused, started shooting up the guy's man cave.”

Silas looked at the radio as though Joe had suddenly gone off the deep end, his face comically askew.

“We have the weapon... and the woman in our custody.” Joe glanced at the person in question, ignoring the disparaging remarks concerning his birthright. “She’s still a little under the weather...please advise as to what the Captain wishes us to do at this time.”

Silas leaned heavily against the wall for support, his hand wiping across his brow. “If I had my druthers,” he uttered quietly now, “I’d put a bullet in her fat ass.”

Joe glanced at the woman in question, who practically fell out of the chair. Fortunately, David was there to prevent just such an occurrence.

“You’re not usually so unchivalrous to a woman.” Joe was finding the remark amusing however.

“She could have killed that baby!” Silas’ tone was a little tremulous, the reality having set in a goodly while back.
“You okay, boss?” Joe was a little concerned.

The silence was telling.

Silas calmed himself mentally and physically. The professional finally re-emerging. He drew in a deep cleansing breath.

“All right...” he exhaled slowly straightening to his full height, “I will get back to you once I speak to the Captain.” he crooked his neck back and forth, easing the tension from his body.

He had smelled the baby’s scent, the little thing having remained quiet throughout the entire fiasco. At one point, the blue eyes had trained on him full of trust and innocence.

At that moment, Silas had truly felt the weight of the responsibility bestowed upon him. And while he was concerned greatly for Elizabeth Keen’s safety, he would have to admit, if only to himself... that little boy was his priority. He would have given his life, gladly, to ensure the safety and well being of that tiny human being.

His esteem had heightened greatly as well for the woman who had put her own body over the baby’s the entire time, Liz’s softly whispered assurances calming the infant as nothing else could have.

“Sober up that psycho.” the man blocked the emotional onslaught determinedly. “The Captain will want to speak with her... personally.”

“Wouldn’t want to be her...” Joe shook his head woefully. “Has the Captain ever capped a woman?”

“In this instance...” Silas snapped, “I wouldn’t blame him if he did.”
April 23-24

Elizabeth slipped into a somber mood once back into the privacy of the bedroom. She sat on the couch, flipping through a magazine, trying to calm her frayed nerves.

Her eyes constantly checked on the sleeping baby, who lay in the middle of the huge bed.

Red had disappeared a few moments after the incident... oh fine, now she was beginning to think in those terms. The woman constantly checked on the time, wondering what was taking the man so long.

Silas stood calmly by, his own temper barely held in check at the woman’s constant abuse.

“You people have no right keeping me here, like I was a prisoner or something.” The still inebriated neighbor was not shy about voicing her displeasure. “When my husband gets home, you will be very sorry, I can assure you of that.”

Red Reddington allowed the verbal diatribe, his manner calmly collected. He leaned over the desk, hefting the silver plated .45 in capable hands. His eyes shifted coldly.

“Barry is an upstanding pillar in this community that.”

“Fucks around behind his old lady’s back?” Silas stated so off-handedly that, for a moment, Red thought the man was making some sort of weird small talk.

He glanced over his shoulder at the fuming individual, his expression unreadable.

“How dare you!” The woman’s face turned a crimson red. “I will not stand for that vulgar, uncouth speech from the likes of..”

“What I find ‘vulgar and uncouth’...” Red stopped her in her tracks, his look a deathly quiet one which sent a warning signal even to Silas’ seasoned brain, “is a rich bitch who feels it’s her ‘right’ to fire off a weapon, right in the middle of Suburbia, destroying property, not to mention...”

He lifted himself upright, suddenly towering over the seated female. “Almost killing a six month old child and a young woman whose only crime...was to try to enjoy a moment’s relaxation in our own fucking pool.”

Silas shifted a wary scan Red’s way, sensing the tension emanating from the older man.

The woman in question blanched visibly. “.W-Wha..” The related news stunned her. “I..I d-didn’t..I wasn’t a-awar..”

“You know what I would like to happen now, Silas?” Red ignored the useless apologies, turning leisurely, checking the whereabouts of his Chief Security Officer.

“No, Sir..” Silas answered dutifully, uneasy with his contemporary’s mood. “But, whatever it is, I will try to accommodate your wishes.”
“Take this fucking idiot out somewhere...oh, I don’t know...” Red mused openly. “Do you remember where we dropped that slime bag, Archie Dunbar?”

Silas finally ‘got’ where the ‘Boss’ was headed, his face keeping a carefully neutral expression. “It’s a long drive, Boss.”

“You got somewhere else you have to be?” Red asked pleasantly.

“W-What are you talking about?” The ‘Neighbor Lady’ was beginning to sweat and Silas didn’t think it was from all the booze she had ingested. “Are y-you insane?” The light blue eyes darted about the burly individuals surrounding her, a new-found terror found within. “Who are you people?!” She demanded shrilly.

Red simply glanced back at her, remaining silent.

“People will miss me.” her voice had begun to shake.

“I highly doubt it.” Joe mumbled under his breath.

“My husband knows, I just wouldn’t up and leave.” the woman tried again, her desperation showing.

“Oh, like he would give a shit.” Silas scoffed. “Hell, he’ll probably send us a thank you note.”

“The police will–”

Red held up a silencing hand, then offered a curt motion.

Silas nodded to Joe, who instantly lifted the woman from the chair, manhandling her roughly to the entrance of the huge office they now occupied.

Red and Silas ignored the pleas and shouting, watching calmly as the woman was ushered into a corridor which led to the garage. Soon enough, the silence returned to the room.

“So what do I do with her?” Silas wanted to know. “Because I have no idea who this Archie Dunbar is... do you?”

“He was a very dear friend of mine.” Red supplied the answer. “Too bad I had to kill him.”

“You want me to kill this woman?” the man was confused.

Red looked at him oddly. “Would you?”

“An hour ago, sure.” he confessed. “But even I have some scruples left...” the man thought the statement through, for all of two seconds, “oh, who the hell are we kidding.”

“No, Silas. I don’t want you to kill her.” Red shook his head exhaustively. “Just take her out to the ‘wilds of New Jersey’, and drop her off.”

“You mean like, Paulie and Chris on the Soprano’s, ‘wilds of New Jersey’?” Silas needed clarification, yet again.

“Exactly.” Red nodded contentedly. “I want to scare the hell out of her.” and he did. “But make sure, some anonymous do-gooder calls in a tip to her location a few hours after you drop her off.”

“What about the husband?” Silas asked. “If he comes snooping around.”
“Handle him.” Red lifted an exasperated hand. “Now, I’ve got places to be. And I do not want to be disturbed the rest of the evening, for any reason.”

“What if I get stuck in the ‘wilds’ with her?” Silas face was perfectly serious.

“Send David and that new kid... Kevin.” Red waved the issue aside. “They have a better sense of direction.”

Silas held his smile. “You can be a hard man, Reddington.” it was mentioned in passing. “You know of course, I’ve had Survivalist Training.”

“You’ve taught it.” Red smirked disdainfully.

Silas’ smile finally broke through. He watched the man saunter away before tackling the task assigned him. A task he was going to enjoy.

When Red returned, he found the baby had awakened and Elizabeth playing with the little boy by blowing kisses on his tummy.

“You should put him on his stomach for a while.” Red suggested, having watched the interaction for a long moment.

“Oh, right.” Liz lay out a soft blanket, tossing Sam’s toys down haphazardly around the square. “Tummy time,” she placed the infant down face first.

Red held his smile. Liz got down on the floor, opposite the baby, cooing and encouraging the little one to crawl by her actions and words.

The little boy was very animated but getting no where fast.

“Show him a toy.” Red motioned with his hand, his arm resting leisurely on the pillow beside him. “He might try for it.”

The woman picked up Sam’s teddy bear, waving it back and forth. The blue eyes beamed with joy, the baby kicking his legs frantically, his tiny toes catching on the blanket.

His tummy was to full and too big, no progress was being made what-so-ever. Sam was fast getting frustrated, his little face scrunching up accordingly.

Red sat his paper aside, getting down on the floor with them. He put his hand behind the boy’s feet, providing the purchase for which Sam had been looking.

“Look at him, Red!” Liz beamed, watching the little guy drag himself across the surface of the blanket with his arms and Red’s help.

Red rubbed the little feet with his thumb in silent encouragement, “Bring it closer now, he’s worked enough. Let him grab his prize.”

Elizabeth grinned madly when Sam grabbed the bear with his tiny fist. The toy instantly headed for the mouth. The baby diligently chewed on it’s nose.

She clapped enthusiastically, “Good job, Sam!”

The baby looked up from his toy, grinning furiously, pooting, loudly.
Liz lay face down in the blanket, her shoulders shaking with her laughter while Red rubbed the boys back, chuckling. “You do live up to your namesake.”

A pleasant hour passed, before it was time for the baby’s feeding. Red did the honors, his attention caught by the commotion behind him.

Liz was singing softly, playing a game of sorts. She pumped the chubby legs in time with the song she sang.

“There’s more to that song than what you’re singing.” he sort of chastised, handing the bottle over.

“Well, who remembers the words to “The Wheels on the Bus”.” she kissed the baby’s feet, sparing the man a disgruntled glance.

“I do.” he supplied, readily. “And Dembe.”

“You’d think we never feed this kid, to watch him.” the woman commented offhandedly.

“He’s been a good eater.” Red nodded approvingly.

“What did you get?” She motioned to the jar.

“Ahh, yes.” he checked his choice. “A favorite of even the fussiest of palates... apple sauce.”

Cracking open the jar, the man spooned some of the pale mush out, placing it in the waiting mouth.

Sam, unsure of the texture, pushed it around his mouth, some falling outside his pursed lips.

Red caught it with his thumb, wiping it off on the cloth, before spooning the rest into the small mouth.

“You’re so good at this.” Liz smiled warmly, watching him spoon over another small portion. “With him.”

“He’s an good baby. Good natured. Easily distracted.” Red got the kid’s attention again, tapping the soft spoon on Sam’s messy lips.

“Oh well now, look.” Red wiped Sam’s cheek off with his finger, offering a disgruntled expression. “Look what you did here.” he showed the baby the food. The blue eyes widened, the little mouth opening wide like a little bird.

Elizabeth placed her hand quickly over her mouth, stifling a chuckle.

“He turns his head right when I’m going to stick the food in.” Red enjoyed her mood, hiding the fact well, keeping up the façade. “What’s that all about?”

A few more bites and Sam was full. Liz leaned over, grabbing a baby wipe, cleaning off the dirty face.

“Have you ever thought about having more kids?” She asked.

Red sat back slowly, his thoughts turning introspective.

“For a very long time, after I had been branded a traitor,” he began slowly, “all I could think about for a few years was survival.” he glanced at the sleeping baby between them, his arm coming to rest along the back of the couch on which they sat.
“I thought that what had occurred, couldn’t possibly go on forever, however,” he mused, “that sooner or later I’d get some semblance of my life back.” he felt his way along. “But as time went on, that hypothesis became blurry, so the thought was pushed to the background completely.” he shrugged mentally. “Then I got comfortable in my new lifestyle...”

“And that was it?” she queried.

“While I was traversing the underworld,” he confided, “I met a woman who didn’t know who the hell I was.” Liz looked at him slightly befuddled.

“We didn’t have Google like we do now,” his hand lifted slightly off the back of the couch. “She either had to go to a post office and happen upon my picture, or get hold of an American newspaper that was running low on headlines that day.”

“So what happened?” Liz was intrigued.

“I fell in love with her. Or at least, the idea of her.” he contemplated. “She was sweet, kind and beautiful. Incredibly naïve. Normal.” the man had welcomed such a concept at that time. “She wanted to have a child, and I grew to embrace the idea, until I came over one day, finding my rival sitting in her front room, conversing with her.”

“She was a traitor?” the woman was flabbergasted.

“No, as I said, incredibly naïve.” he shook his head slightly. “She thought him to be one of my close associates, allowing him inside the house. He could have snapped her neck anytime.”

“He didn’t hurt her, though.” Liz was somehow relieved.

“No, it was a message.” Red’s face hardened. “He didn’t have to draw a picture. I couldn’t stand the thought of putting her in danger, so I left.”

“She must have been heartbroken.”

“We both were.” he lowered his eyes for a beat, then lifted his head and his spirits. “But, she’s alive and married with three beautiful children. A price well worth the payment.”

“You say that so easily.” she hesitated visibly, not having meant to be so forward.

“No Elizabeth.” his eyes allowed his pain for a second. “Not easily.”

Quiet entered the room for a goodly spell, the only sound Sam’s soft snoring.

“So you never thought about it after that?”

“Well,” the man glanced up at the ceiling, rubbing his chin thoughtfully with his thumb, “after I killed the son-of-a-bitch, it started a chain reaction that required clean up, which took place over the next couple of years.”

“This is the man in the living room?” she clarified in her own mind.

Red nodded. “Well, he just had to die.” the quiet returned for a brief second.

“Then what happened?”

“I turned myself into the FBI.” He smiled warmly at her. His phone rang in his pocket, breaking the spell.
Red sighed heavily, answering the call. “Oh,” his eyes shifted to the woman’s profile, "...hello, Aram.”

He felt Liz tense next to him, rubbing her shoulder comfortingly.

“I see. And you’ve confirmed...” He broke off, jotting down the information Aram was conveying. “Tell Cooper I will take care of it personally. Good night, Aram.”

He shut the phone, squeezing her shoulder. “They found his parents.” he announced without preamble.

“Okay...” she managed a reply of sorts.

“I’m sorry, Lizzy.” he reached for her hand, rubbing her fingers tenderly.

“When do we leave?”

“In the morning.” he was pleased when the woman leaned over, supporting her head on his shoulder. She needed comfort and had sought it with him.

“You know why babies are so cute and cuddly?” he asked quietly. The woman lifted her eyes, seeking his. “So we’ll take care of them. Love them.” He squeezed her shoulder gently. “You were just doing what came natural to you. You protected and nurtured Sam but now you have to give him away, which goes against your instincts.”

The woman listened earnestly.

“I also think once you see him with his mother, you’ll feel comfortable letting him go back where he belongs.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Do you want to hold him?” He asked.

“He’ll wake up.” She warned.

“You’re forgetting, I’m the baby whisperer.” Red shifted, lifting the child placing it in capable arms.

Sam never stirred once, until his head was settled between Liz’s breasts whereupon, he sighed contentedly.

The woman felt a range of emotions, as she held the tiny bundle protectively close. She tried so hard not to cry... but in the end, the tears slid down her pale cheeks.

Red wished things could have worked out differently. He wished it with all his heart. But the reality was, he was not a miracle worker... no matter the general consensus.

So he accepted what was. All he could do for the moment, is to be there, be supportive.

He could truthfully say however, he did not think he had ever dreaded an approaching morning more.

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True to form, the day was an overcast dismally cloudy affair that somewhat matched the atmosphere
inside the mansion.

It was early morning still, but all was set for the pre-arranged meeting.

“Go ahead, I’ll be right there.” Red motioned to Dembe, who was loaded down with baby paraphernalia. Liz tried a smile which failed dismally before she preceded the man out the door.

“What ever was left in that room, regarding Sam,” Red informed Silas, who had accompanied them from the room, “needs to be gone by the time we get back. We’ll be about two hours.”

“Sure, no problem.” Silas nodded. “She’s taking it hard, huh?” the two men watched the baby and the woman being loaded into the SUV.

“She is.” Red fixed his hat, fingering the rim. “Most of the gear is gone... I didn’t really want to do the rest in front of her.”

“I understand. All traces of Sam will be gone by the time you get back.”

“Thank you, Silas.” the man nodded shortly, using the only coping mechanism he ever allowed himself, gently biting the inside of his mouth twice. It was a habit he had acquired over the years which often served him well.

It was either that minuscule gesture, or just go ahead and follow his body’s dictates, which would be to allow the rage that always simmered just under the surface... to erupt.

They drove for fifteen minutes, Liz playing with the baby’s toes the whole time. They finally pulled up alongside a replica of Red’s plane.

“Whose plane is that?” the woman craned her neck, taking in the sleek jet from front to back.

“An associate of mine.” Red answered glancing at the aircraft absently. “He’s here visiting family and won’t need it for a couple of days.” he unbuckled Sam from the seat, handing the carrier over to Dembe, before helping Liz from the car.

Dembe traversed the stairs, carrier in hand, before disappearing through the jet’s portal.

Liz blinked the tears away, walking to the steps slowly. Red matched his steps to hers, his head tilting as he watched her progress.

“You’re doing better.” he commented offhandedly, nodding approvingly, as the woman managed the steps slowly but steadily.

“Better than what?” Liz kept her eyes glued to the portal, her hand gripping the rail tightly. “A Galapagos turtle?”

“Oh no, you’re not that fast yet.” Red managed with a perfectly straight face. She halted at the top of the stairs sighing, slightly amused in spite of herself.

“You’re such a smart ass.” she held her smile with difficulty.

“You should make him a bottle for the flight.” He suggested evenly, nodding amiably.

The woman hobbled to the galley, mixing the bottle quickly.
“We’re leaving in a few minutes.” Red came back from the cockpit, checking on the safety of the baby. He reached in his pocket, pulling out a pacifier. The man wiped it once against the fabric of his slacks, just about to stick it in Sam’s mouth.

Liz made a disgruntled sound snatching the object, with only one lethal look in the man’s direction, went to rinse the pacifier of any supposed germs.

Red lifted his brows, he and the baby exchanging enigmatical looks. “Little does she know, that you’ll be eating sand in a couple of months.”

“He most certainly will not.” the woman snapped her belief.

Red shared a moment with the baby that bespoke volumes. Sam’s mouth was suddenly filled with baby toes. He gurgled happily around the soft warm socks he now chewed upon.

Red smiled approvingly down at him “We good to go?” he asked the rhetorical question.

“Oh my God!” Liz clasped the bottle to her chest, her face aghast. “Stop that!” she hurriedly pulled the toes from the baby’s vicinity.

Red glanced up to the stricken woman, smiling benignly.

“Sammy, honey...” she allowed Red to seat her, then buckle her belt. “We don’t eat our sockies. We just don’t, ‘kay?” she asked sweetly.

“In my country,” Dembe chimed in helpfully, his expression most sincere. Red closed his eyes, sensing the direction the statement was going to take. “Children often eat crickets.”

Liz’s eyes widened in horror, a visible shudder racking her entire body. She offered the most disgusting sound she could express, her features echoing her distaste.

“Oh, stop it!” she practically screeched. Which brought a soft smile from Red and a wide one from her antagonist who sat across the way. “Bleh!”

“Well once actually,” Red leaned back into the tale he was about to embark upon, “when I was in Columbia...”

“Don’t you even go there!” the woman warned, covering her ears with her hands, shutting her eyes tightly. “Blah, blah, blah!” she chanted repeatedly.

Red held his smile, glad that they had managed to lift the woman’s doldrums slightly.

He felt his own ears adjusting as the plane lifted higher into the sky. The baby began to protest the change in altitude.

“Here.” he handed the bottle to Dembe. “It will help pop his ears.” Red said as they started leveling off.

The flight was uneventful thereafter.

Liz held the baby the entire way until the pilot directed his passengers to ‘buckle up’.

Red glanced out the window as they taxied into Dekalb-Peachtree Airport. The Airport Security was already on-site, awaiting their arrival.

Sam’s parents were to come on board, so they could reunite with their baby in private. And
hopefully, ease Lizzy’s worries about leaving the baby.

When the plane stopped, Dembe lowered the stairs, waving the parents forward.

The couple jogged quickly to the plane, as the Press pushed hard at the arms holding them back.

The security were doing the job well.

The young couple ran up the steps, into the plane, searching breathlessly about, before finally zeroing in on their baby.

“Oh, Sam!” A young woman, crying brokenly, rushed for the infant. The mother lifted a confused Sam into her loving arms, showing her prize to an anxiously awaiting ‘dad’.

The tall man stood by, his arms encompassing his small family, his face a rapturous beam of contentment.

The woman laughed and cried her joy, touching her baby at every possible advantage point. She kissed the little one repeatedly, anywhere Sam would allow.

Finally, the moment was broken, the father having noticed the small audience. He looked up teary eyed, staring directly at Elizabeth Keen.

“Thank you, thank you so much.” He clasped her hand, then noticed her casted arm. “Oh my God, did you get injured?” there was instant concern on the boyishly handsome face. “Rescuing him?”

“Oh, no.” Liz blinked back her need to weep, clearing her voice gently of the throaty lump of emotion welling inside her heart. “His name is Sam?” she had picked up on that anomaly instantly, totally amazed by the coincidence.

“Samuel Christopher.” The man smiled happily, smoothing his hand over the baby’s head. He had barely taken notice of the two men on board, smiling at them wildly now before his expression sobered slowly.

“I know you.” he tilted his head. “You’re Raymond Reddington.” his tone had cooled decidedly, his eyes hardening perceptibly. “Are you the one who did this?” he accused heatedly. The niceties of seconds before fading into oblivion. “Did you take my son!”

Liz stepped before the accused, scowling angrily. “No!” she defended staunchly. “He’s the one who saved your son!” it was snapped right back. “Red would never harm a child! Apologize to him this instant!”

“Lizzy...” Red chided, fully understanding the emotions playing out.

“No! You saved him, Red!” she turned her fury on an unsuspecting co-hort. “You took care of him. Kept him warm and comfortable and safe.” she pointed at nothing in particular, but she had meant to point to the one in question. “You made his gums stop hurting.” She cried plaintively. “You don’t deserve this!”

Red pulled Liz into his arms, soothing her. “It’s all right.” He murmured.

“I-I’m sorry.” The father stumbled. “I didn’t know.”

Red nodded, his embrace tightening about Elizabeth’s frame. He glanced at Dembe, his expression speaking volumes.
Dembe gestured the two young people to the door of the jet, picking up the baby supplies Liz had brought. The couple moved slowly away from the solitary figures, feeling horrible that they had accused the one person who had actually been the catalyst for saving their infant son.

The woman halted her steps uncertainly before turning about, “Thank you for bringing my baby home, Mr. Reddington.” She hesitated, totally befuddled suddenly. “...There just aren’t any words to express.”

“No.” Sam’s father echoed the sentiment. “No... there isn’t. How do we possibly...”

“You’re welcome.” Red mumbled into Lizzy’s soft hair, his hand gently rubbing a peculiar circular motion on her back.

“Hey..” he halted the intended departure, “he’s teething. He likes a damp cloth filled with crushed ice to chew on.”

The mother smiled warmly, hugging the baby close. “I’ll do that.” the smile reached her eyes. “Thank you for taking such good care of him, both of you.”

Their steps echoed inside the now empty plane. Liz broke completely, sobbing into his chest, collapsing into him. He took their weight effortlessly, easing into the couch.

Red murmured soothing inanities, his arms tightening consolingly.

“Shh, it’s all right.”

“How could he s-say something so horrible?” she stuttered, gulping for a semblance of control. “You s-saved that little boy, you saved m-me.” she blurted sub-consciously, her hands tightening on the front of his lapels.

Red startled against her, looking down at the crown of her head. He had not expected that statement.

“He didn’t know, Lizzy.”

“He couldn’t see how well taken care of he was?” her anger would not be silenced. “He couldn’t see you had flown here specially to deliver Sam to them?”

“He was just scared, relieved, thrilled.” Red fingered the strands of hair caught on her wet cheeks, liking the feel of silky mass. “We can never really know what those two were suffering.”

She lifted her head, staring at him oddly. If Red Reddington did not know, who could? His own daughter was still missing.

Liz knew that was a subject for another time.

“Well, he had a piss poor way of showing it.” she sniffled, wiping angrily at her eyes with her sleeve. “I am so sorry, Red.”

“What are you sorry for?” he smiled down at her, offering a handkerchief.

“You saved over forty kids and don’t get your just dues.” she was suddenly on a roll. The injustice of it all was simply too much to bear. “The Feds get the slap on the back and all you get is... that!”

“Lizzy, I don’t care about the back slapping. I care about the kids going home to their parents, where they belong.”
Red settled more comfortably beside her, his eyes mellowed, filled with gentle humor.

Dembe came back into the jet, his expression a foreboding one. “I hate the Press.”

“They got to their car okay then?”

“I gently persuaded a few of the more persistent reporters, the meaning of the word, privacy.” Dembe grinned evilly. “Where to now?” he asked pleasantly.

Red tilted his head, enquiring of the woman.

“I want to go home.” she sniffed quietly.

Red settled, locking his hands together, propping his feet onto a convenient table. In the ensuing quiet, his thoughts turned introspective.

It was good that Liz had seen how very much Sam’s parents loved him.

He had not anticipated her jumping to his defense, acting as a shield... not that he had ever needed one.

It had been totally unexpected, but left him with a warm feeling inside. Perhaps it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibilities, that one day, she might actually see him as a friend.
Old Insecurities Revisited

April 24

Hours later, after they returned to the mansion, matters finally got back to normal.

Liz went to take a nap because leaving the baby had drained her emotionally. On the other hand, her anger over how Red had been treated, had bolstered her spirits in spite of the sadness she had experienced.

Red knew she was emotionally and physically exhausted and was glad when she finally went down, listening to the dictates of her body for once.

He stood for a moment in the darkened room, watching her sleep, his own mind finally at rest, then went directly to his office.

The first thing on the agenda, was to check the mail. Shuffling the stack, he finally found the one thing he hoped would not be there.

"Reddington was at the Blacksite today. But then, so were you. Guarded by his security, of course. He’s certainly doing everything he can to keep you under lock and key, isn’t he? What was he thinking, loading the responsibility of caring for an infant on you when you’re still injured. I have to confess, you look natural with a child. Perhaps, maybe we can have one to call our own. Liz, keep believing."

“Like hell.” Red mumbled as he read the latest letter. If anyone was going to get her pregnant—

Red jerked in his chair, unsure where the hell that thought even came from.

He chastised himself severely for such a lapse. But filed it for the moment, more important issues at hand.

He thought of her the way a man thought about a woman, yes. And most definitely wanted to share his bed with her, more intimately than he all ready was, granted.

That little moment yesterday, when he had kissed her goodbye... when she’d been playing with Sam. That was a sweet memory that he found most palatable.

But that... getting her pregnant, had come completely out of left field.

It had never once crossed his mind. Perhaps it was a hold over from baby Sam or it could have been that fucking last line of the letter he now reread.

The thought of this person touching her, agitated him. This whole business was aggravating him, truth be told.

Plus, he was still upset that he had not been informed that Liz was going to visit the Blacksite.

Had he known, he would have taken the proper precautions and in doing so, perhaps he would have
been able to ferret out this creepy son-of-a-bitch who was obviously watching her every move.

Every day he walked into the Blacksite, he felt out of sorts, something was off. There was nothing concrete to which he could apply his theory.

Which was pissing him off, royally. He had pinpointed Carver so easily that night... he had felt the danger, sensing the brush of death.

He and Death were old friends by now.

Most people feared that Entity. There were times in the past, Red welcomed it like a source of comfort. The man pulled his thoughts back to the present determinedly.

He was looking right past this stalker which was so unlike him. The fact that Elizabeth would most likely pay for his distraction, was totally unacceptable.

“You rang?” Silas popped his head around the door, interrupting his wool-gathering “Oh, you got another one?” He gestured to the paper in Red’s hand, his tone off-handedly neutral.

“She did and it mentions her arrival at the Blacksite and some other interesting little tidbits.” Red frowned, tossing the sheet over. “Did you notice anybody lurking about?”

“No, I didn’t.” the large man scanned the neatly typed print, before returning his attention. “But then, I was too worried about you cutting my balls off for aiding and abetting her.”

“Not this time.” Red snorted lightly. “But I have a long memory.”

“So, you want to increase her security?” Silas asked politely, glad to pass over the other subject.

“I want every building in at least a block radius to be manned.” Red handed over an updated photo of Tom taken by Dembe the last time they saw him. “The Blacksite is to be considered a hot spot.”

Silas scanned the photo, then let it dangle loosely from his fingertips. “And if we find our little double agent?”

“I want the bastard caught and held... so I can beat the hell out of him.”

“It’s going to be difficult to throw together a team on a whim.”

“No it won’t, because there aren’t going to be anymore of these unexpected side trips like the one you two made.” Red lifted a cold glance.

“When she wants to do something–”

“She can wait.” the words held a finality.

The guard was visibly impressed. “Oh, she can wait.” Silas tone said it all. “And she’ll go for that?” he smirked. “And you are the one who is going to deliver this news?”

“I’m going to have a talk with her, make her understand why this needs to be done.” Red went back to shuffling the mail on his desk. “She may disregard her safety, but she won’t yours. Besides these letters scare her.”

Red returned the latter to his files.

“It’s nice to be so highly thought of...” Silas scratched his cheek slowly, trying desperately to keep
his grin under wraps.

“It’s that high regard that she has for you, that’s keeping your people and you... alive.”

A loud crash interrupted the conversation.

Both men rushed from the room, even before they heard a muffled shriek coming from down the corridor.

Red smacked the door open to the bedroom, getting a big surprise when the door swung heavily back, almost hitting him directly in the face.

He poked his head quickly around, noting a heavy potted plant blocking the entrance.

Silas had pulled up short, almost crashing into the man’s bulk.

Red put his entire frame against the object, pushing past the obstacle. His heart skipped a beat, sensing the woman was safe and unharmed... for the moment.

But all hell was breaking loose in the room.

Hudson had somehow gotten into the area, which was normally not allowed for one reason and one reason only.

Keres the cat stood on the bed, haunches lifted, head down, attack mode in progress.

The dog pranced happily back and forth at the foot of the bed, squishing Elizabeth’s feet, having the time of his life, making the cat’s life more than miserable.

Red noticed under the covers, a hunched form giggling and moving every which way, in order to avoid the commotion taking place directly over her.

“Help...” Elizabeth giggled deliriously, her voice muffled under the blankets.

Hudson dove forward, almost but not quite reaching the cat... who in retaliation, scratched the hell out of the poor dog’s nose.

Hudson whimpered momentarily but soon enough regained his momentum, his agenda resumed... which was, in Red’s humble opinion, to kill the cat.

While the man could sympathize, the shambles of the room was something he simply was not going to ignore.

Silas’ throaty laughter coming from behind him, reminded Red of his mission.

“Son of a...” Red grumbled, stalking over to the bed, swatting at the rowdy animals, “get out of here, you little bastards.”

Keres jumped, avoiding the large hand, running smack into Liz’s head, which had poked out momentarily from her hiding spot.

The woman gleefully laughed, resuming her former position.

Missing the cat by inches, Hudson ran into the same spot except he decided to sit and rest a spell.

Liz’s laughter increased as she staunchly attempted to remove the dog’s butt from her blanket...
covered face. Which only made Silas double over, joining in the fun and melee.

“Some fucking bodyguard you are.” Red grumbled, wrangling the cat, avoiding yet another deep scratch on his forearms. “Take this fucking thing and drown it in the lake.”

“We don’t have a lake, boss.”

“Then fucking find one.”

Silas took the cat good naturedly, “Come on poor baby.” he crooned softly. “Let’s get you away from this grumpy old bastard.”

“Excuse me?” Red’s tone dripped ice.

“Let’s get’s you away from this understandably disgruntled gentleman.” Silas corrected silkily.

“Hudson!” Dembe stepped through shambles, calmly beckoning the dog.

Hudson snapped to attention, running over Liz to get to Dembe which increased the muffled giggling even more so.

Red walked over, holding the door ajar, his look saying it all.

The room was hastily vacated of both human and beast. The man released a heavy sigh, closing the door firmly, before finally unearthing the amused woman under the blankets.

Red glanced at her stalwartly, sitting next to the woman, before smoothing the disheveled hair from her face. He smiled affectionately at her infectious giggle.

“Nice nap?” he enquired.

Red had visited the Blacksite, later that afternoon. It had been a productive operation. The bottom line being, all the children including baby Sam, were safe and sound after such a harrowing interruption in their young lives.

Red picked up his hat, ready to take his leave but was waylaid by the computer specialist.

“Mr... uh... Reddington.” Aram stuttered as he normally did when addressing the imposing man.

“Yes, Aram?” he answered pleasantly.

“The ballistics came back from that bullet you gave me and uhm...”

“Yes...” Red drawled patiently.

“It was government issue.”

“Whose weapon?” was the question of the day.

“Uh, that they aren’t sure of, uh, sir.”

“Why not?” Red was fast losing patience.

“Well, they had it narrowed down to the type of weapon, well, really the—“
“Aram.”

“The bullet’s gone missing.”

“From here?” Red pointed, pointedly.

“Well, no. They don’t think so anyway.” the young man had begun to sweat. “It, along with some other evidence, was being transported to the lab to help with the backlog and sometime between here and there - it vanished.”

“Was that the only item to go missing?”

“Uh...” Aram turned to his desk, rifling through papers until he pulled out the one he wanted. Handing the sheet to Red, he pointed to it. “As you can see, there were quite a few things missing from the manifest pertaining to the raid you went on with Agents Navabi and Ressler.”

Red scanned the sheet, finding the statement to be true.

So it could have been O’Brien’s men tainting the evidence against their boss. It could have been an oversight, a large one and not unusual when dealing with the government. It could have been Tom, being the sly weasel he was very adept at being.

Or they had a rat in their midst.

Any of the options were plausible.

It was also plausible that while it had been government issue, it could have been a case of friendly fire, all most gone horribly awry.

In one of the letters, the writer had taken credit for the shot in the back. This guy was a highly delusional man, needing accolades for a shot he probably hadn’t actually delivered.

The stalker was obviously trying to impress Elizabeth, though it had failed to kill Reddington.

That the man had supposedly taken the opportunity in her honor, may be enough to feed his twisted ego.

Too many questions and not one damn answer. Not even a hint of one, left Red annoyed.

“What about the copies of the data they did get off the round?”

“It was on the truck.” Aram said, rolling his eyes at the stupidity.

Red shook his head disgustedly, “Thank you, Aram.”

He didn’t know why he bothered.

These people routinely took the ‘I’ out of FBI.

His gut had said to take the bullet to his own people for analysis, but had the round been a Fed’s, Cooper would have to be involved at some point. So he decided to cut out the middle man and cut to the chase.

A decision he was very much regretting at this point.

In trying to please Lizzy, by doing things by the book, he had lost a lead to her stalker. And it pissed
him off to no end.

He clung to the notion that it could have been a friendly fire incident.

It had been rather chaotic that night. The shot could have come from a couple dozen agents he’d come to know in his time here... or even Ressler’s weapon. It would have been an accident.

Something he’d hang over Donald’s head until the end of time, but written off and forgotten.

But what if it hadn’t been?

Granted, he knew of a dozen places where you could get a Fed issued gun. It wasn’t inconceivable that one of O’Brian’s men had tapped him.

But then again, one of them wouldn’t be writing to Elizabeth boasting of the fact.

And if what the letter said was true. That man, a man with a government issued weapon, had purposefully shot him in the back with the intent to kill.

Red scanned the room and the Agents it held, vowing to listen to his own gut from then on.

“Mr. Holbrook is here.” Silas informed over the communication device... “I'm sorry.”

“Well, excuse me!” Liz smiled widely at Francis’ rejoinder. “What am I around here? A fucking leper?!”

She rolled up off the yoga mat, grabbing her own radio. “Stop being mean Silas. Let him in.”

“Red here?” the young man came around the corner, jauntily flipping off the guard who had been so ‘mean’ to him.

Elizabeth ignored Silas’ hearty laugh, “He went out to run an errand, but I expect he won’t be long, if you’d like to wait.” she pointed to a chair. The young man collapsed in the chair, groaning.

“Well you look rough.” she observed.

“Maybe, but I’m still pretty.” he gave a lopsided grin. “Your fiancé really rocked the boat, and while it’s been enjoyable watching everyone scrambling,” he nodded agreeably, “one must remember that I have to have eight full hours of beauty sleep if I want to keep looking as good as I do... and really, who does not want that?” he was confused.

“Is it calming down any?” she wanted to get things back on track.

“Not particularly. But Red was right, it’s shaken things up pretty good,” he brightened considerably, “in fact, it might have helped the business. No matter what anyone says.”

“I don’t understand?”

“You know when the holidays come along and production slows?” She nodded, knowing even at the Blacksite, they all hoped, that whatever case came in, was cut and dry, little paperwork. If only for the promise of time off.

“Well, it’s like we’ve been on some extended holiday. It was just a bit... stagnant.” he corrected sagely. “Boring, I guess.”
“And now it’s not?”

“No, it certainly isn’t.” he brightened again. “I haven’t seen the routes or production of supply running so smoothly in a long time.”

“But you implied people are not happy?” Liz was puzzled.

“Some of the older cronies are pissed. Anne, definitely.” he rubbed his hands together gleefully. “They are set in their ways, which is fine, but they have to understand supply and demand are at an all time high.” he motioned slightly. “And if no one is working to fulfill their end of the deal... people are going to pay for it with their lives.”

She still didn’t quite understand the process, but maybe it didn’t matter. Francis obviously didn’t mind explaining until she got it.

“Back in Capone’s day, if someone in New York wanted a shipment of liquor, it was just accepted that it would take two days for delivery. Live with it.” he elucidated. “The truck could only go so fast with contraband on board and the drive was long.” he rolled his eyes for such a system. “Now, with the advent of jets, faster ships, and what not. Two day delivery just isn’t acceptable on most supply.”

The woman listened intently, truly interested.

“Fed Ex has nothing on Red.” the man crossed his arms leisurely. “He freaks me out sometimes,” again, he nodded sagely. “I think on purpose.”

“What do you mean?” She laughed.

“I was in Canada a year ago and needed a cache of weapons, pronto.” he motioned with one hand. Elizabeth realized the man spoke volumes with his hands.

“I told Red as much over the four minute phone call I had with him and by the time I was crawling into the back seat of the car, bending over to kiss my ass goodbye... “the man frowned hard at the remembrance, “I got word that my cargo was on it’s way to the meeting place... damn show off.”

The conversation was momentarily interrupted as the still beautiful woman entered the area unannounced as was Nora’s way these days. Nora now felt comfortable in her surroundings and with these people.

Elizabeth beseeched the older woman forward.

“Oh, I’m sorry Mr. Holbrook.” Nora smiled, seeing the man, hesitating visibly to interrupt anything important.

“Nora, my love.” Francis immediately stood, closing the space between them, taking the woman’s hand in his warm palm. His thumb rubbed hers in an overly familiar fashion, his eyes suggestively running the length of her attractive figure.

“How many times have I told you...” he scolded superficially, lifting the warm hand to his lips.

The woman permitted such familiarity, her eyes filled with a gentle humor. “Francis,” she corrected herself immediately, “I see you are just in time for lunch.”

“Oh, goodness.” Francis laid his hand over his chest in mock surprise, then looked wide eyed at Liz. “Am I?”
Liz exchanged prudent glances with her cook. “Gee Francis, would you like to stay for lunch?”

“Well, now. I wouldn’t want to intrude.” he returned his attention immediately to the other woman, whose hand he still held captive.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Liz hobbled forward awkwardly, halting when no assistance was offered. “Francis?” she enquired pleasantly.

The man’s attention was still riveted, “Yeah?” he answered offhandedly, again lifting Nora’s hand to his waiting lips.

“You want to help me with the crutches here?” Liz asked civilly.

The man sighed heavily, reluctantly releasing his prey. “Oh when are you going to get better?” he asked peevishly.

Walking over, he bent unceremoniously, lifting the startled Elizabeth over his shoulder. “Which way Nora, my love?” he asked solicitously.

Elizabeth had squealed her shock before hitting the man’s shoulder playfully. “Put me down, you idiot.”

Francis sniffed at the delicious aroma filling the air, ignoring Liz all together.

“Yes, you idiot...” Red’s voice, laced with annoyance, also suddenly filled the air.

Elizabeth compressed her lips tightly to conceal her need to laugh right in Francis’ face. She waited patiently now, for the fireworks to begin.

“...Put... her... down.” Reddington finished frostily.

“Oh like this is my fault.” Francis was instantly on the defensive. “Where is her cart... do you know where? I’ll tell you where!” he sat Elizabeth down decidedly, steadying her in the process, his attention focused entirely on Red Reddington.

“Those guards you hired, especially that one, that looks like an overgrown gorilla...” the young man warmed to his tale, “they have the cart. And do you know what they’re doing with it? No, you don’t know...” it was smugly declared, “they are putting on stickers that say obscene things that a person can do when alone in the privacy of their own room.” He sought comfort in Nora’s understanding eyes. “What kind of people do that?”

Nora shook her head sadly, in empathy.

Red walked over, handing Elizabeth her crutches. “Do you have a death wish?”

“My psychiatrist thinks so, yes.” Francis shrugged carelessly. “Was there a point to the question?” the man was truly at a loss.

Liz patted Red’s shoulder sympathetically. “I think you’re going to lose this one, honey.” she sympathized. The endearment alone served to nullify Red’s mood.

“Yeah, and anyway, you’re in the way here.” Francis griped, “lunch is ready.” he navigated himself around Red, walking purposefully into the dining room.

Red bit the inner part of his jaw, his fingers drumming slowly along the tightening muscles of his thigh. But in the end, he let it go, to Liz’s great amusement.
Francis called over his shoulder, a perplexed look on his face. “Did you guys see that woman on the news today?” he queried. “They found her wandering around some State Park in New Jersey... spouting off about someone kidnaping her and leaving her stranded.”

Red glanced away, his expression blank.

“The idiot... all she had to do was turn around and look at the lights of the city.” he pulled an endearing grimace. “How do you get ‘lost’ in New Jersey?”

“I did see her, actually.” she nodded conversationally. “She looked so familiar for some reason.” she sought Red out for some sort of confirmation.

“Maybe she just had that kind of face.” Red shrugged off the topic. “Lunch is getting cold.”

It was about two hours after lunch before Liz saw the two men again. Francis was on his way out and Red seemed in a good enough humor now.

“Again, thanks for lunch.”  Francis said, tapping the door with his fingers, paused to exit. “What time is dinner?” he asked innocently.

Red closed the door in his face. Liz chided such an action. “Red! Why did you do that?”

But on the other side of the door, she had heard laughter, “So, like seven?” the young man obviously could not resist the taunt, before she heard retreating footsteps and more laughter.

“How long had he been here?” Red asked, watching the woman’s face carefully.

“Oh, I guess about thirty minutes before you came home. Why?”

“No reason, just wondering.” Red enquired. “Did you have a nice visit?”

“I did actually. He helped me understand how your business works.” she rolled up her yoga mat, stowing it under the couch. “It was interesting.”

A discrete knock interrupted anything more he would have asked. Red opened the door, expecting to find Francis on the other side.

Joe sat there patiently, having driven Liz’s cart from the garage.

“Didn’t mean to interrupt, boss. Just wanted to get your cart back to you.” the man arose, motioning accordingly.

“What was wrong with it?” Red enquired.

“Battery connection was fried.” Joe reported. “New battery and she was as good as new.” It was pronounced proudly.

Red’s eyes narrowed at the man, for he had been searching the cart meticulously for some seconds now. “And this?” he pointed out the newly acquired bumper sticker which read:

*I have sex daily, I mean dyslexia, Fcuk!*

Joe looked innocently about, shrugging his massive shoulders. “I don’t know nothin’ boss.”

Red just stared at him.
The man became a little uneasy. “It was Silas, boss.”

Red dropped his head slightly, his look one of amazement.

“Okay! So I caved.” Joe muttered, unhappy with himself, clearly. “I don’t want to lose my balls.”


“Thank you, Joe.” Liz called out after the quickly retreating man.

“Anything going on at the Post Office?” she quickly changed the subject, watching the man guide the cart into the room. She tried not to notice the new bumper sticker. She tried very hard.

Red shrugged, “Still the same tension.” he walked over, taking the seat beside her. “Samar can be wickedly funny when she cuts you off at the knees.”

“So Moore is still being a jerk?” Liz smiled.

“I don’t think he knows how to be anything other than that,” Red surmised, “with women especially.”

“So, he’s old school, ‘boys’ only’, mentality.” Liz shrugged. “They were at Quantico. If you can’t handle them, you can’t handle the bad guys you come up against.” How many times had she been confronted with such men. “She’ll be fine.”

“Oh, she’s more than fine.” Red reassured. “I think she’s starting to enjoy knocking him down, every chance she gets, more than she thought she would.”

“And he doesn’t give it back to her?”

“He tries, but fails miserably.” Red glanced around for a cigar, finding none. “As I said, she can be quite cutting, when she wants to be.” he settled back accepting his lot in life. “It’s like watching a live action play, unfolding right in front of me. I even spontaneously applauded her quick wit a time or two.”

“I’m sorry I’m missing it.” she winced, glancing critically down at her person.

“What’s wrong?”

“I feel grungy.” she suddenly did. Perhaps it was the fact that Red spoke so highly of Samar. Who really was a beautiful woman and now the man had evidently noted the dark beauty’s other virtues as well.

“Have a sponge bath.” he suggested.

“You know what, I think I will.” she pushed off the couch, moving to her cart, disappearing from the room.

He sat in the quiet of the room, thinking back over the last few hours.

To the outside world, to Francis, she was his fiancée. But that didn’t mean things didn’t change, even in his world.

Liz had seemed perfectly comfortable in the younger man’s company earlier, finding amusement in Francis’ quick wit and charm, as most women did.
They even looked good together. Both young, energetic, eager. Excited still by the world around them.

There was something going on there between the two of them, an easiness...a camaraderie, that had taken Red two years of careful handling and patience to achieve. Francis had managed the same status quo in two short visits.

They might not see it yet, but Red did.

While it might be... awkward for a while, he couldn’t and wouldn’t begrudge her or even Francis a chance at something vital, if it came down to it.

They both deserved happiness, even if it meant they were together to do it and Red was left out in the cold. It was not as if it was a place he was unfamiliar with.

He’d watch and act accordingly, no matter how much it hurt.
April 25-27

Elizabeth Keen awoke to the sound of a terrible hacking cough.

She sat up immediately, seeking the source in the darkened room.

“Red, are you okay?” She enquired instantly, her voice allowing her concern. She snatched a magazine off her bedside table, frantically fanning the man’s face.

With the cool air, the coughing fit eased, finally. “I’m all right.” it was croaked, the man’s voice more hoarse than normal.

Liz moved closer, shocked to feel the heat radiating off his pale skin before she even touched him.

“Uhh, no,” she corrected impetuously, “you’re not.” her cool palm felt wonderful on the man’s feverish flesh. “You’re burning up.”

She hastily rolled out of bed, making her way to the bathroom, coming back a minute later with a couple of damp cloths.

Reaching out, he stopped her from touching him. “Don’t. You’ll catch–” he broke off, coughing harshly.

“What ever.” She rolled her eyes, wiping his face with the cold cloth. She gently pushed him back into the headboard he had been leaning against.

His eyes slid shut, relaxing under the gentle touch and cooling relief.

“I told you this would happen.” She scolded, running the cloth over his cheeks.

“It’s just a cold.” he croaked.

“That’s been exacerbated by exhaustion.” she tried to keep the vexation from her tone. “I won’t be the least bit surprised, if I find that Dembe has contracted this stuff too.” she made up her mind. “You’re taking a couple days off.”

“I’m fine Lizzy.” He coughed fitfully, groaning his misery when the episode passed.

“No, you aren’t!” her tone was a little sharper now. “You’ve been running non-stop, pushing your body and do I have to remind you, that you were shot, twice... and didn’t even take time to recuperate.” she sat her features. “You need to rest.”

“They were just flesh wounds.” he dismissed, sneezing spasmodically.

“There was a hole in your thigh.” Liz gritted her teeth, feeling his face again, checking for the intensity of the fever. “You should take a lukewarm shower.”
There was a soft knock on the door. Red, himself, bid ‘enter’.

Dembe stuck his head around the door, phone in hand. Reddington beckoned him forward.

Elizabeth held out her own hand, demanding the object.

“Go, now.” She pointed to the bathroom.

Dembe stepped forward, really looking at his employer and friend. “You are sick.”

“That’s been established, yes.” Red groaned. Dembe entered the room further, his instincts to assist the man.

“Damn, I’m sore.” Red straightened his back, wincing from the pain, every muscle in his body rebelling against such an unwise move.

Elizabeth heard whoever was on the other end of the line speaking, bringing the phone to her ear as she watched Dembe enter the bathroom with Red.

“Red can’t come to the phone right now, may I help you?” her brows knitted together at the rather impolite rejoinder. “I’m his fiancée, why?” she listened patiently, then not so much so for the tone had turned more acerbic in nature.

“I don’t care who you are. I don’t care what you need.” she could be just as blunt. “If you can’t handle anything without Red fixing it for you, I’m sure he can fill your position when he’s back in three days.” her mouth fell slightly agape at the downright rude reply.

“Because I want him in my bed for more than a night at a time, not that it’s any of your damn business.”

She shut the phone down forcefully, listening to Red hacking his lungs out in the shower. She started as the phone rang again.

“What?” She snarled in the phone, relaxing slightly, recognizing this voice.

“Ressler. No, he can’t come to the phone.” she half heartedly listened, more interested in the sound of Red’s distress. “Why does everybody keep questioning me?” her temper flared.

“You’re a damned FBI Agent, investigate the lead!” she lost patience. “Listen to me and listen well... Red is taking the next three days off. When I end this call,” she explained calmly, “I’m shutting the phone down, so you better get your shit together because as of right now, you’re on your own!”

She pressed the button until the system shut down completely. Red came out of the other room in a comfortable shirt and pants. The man was pale and had a pasty pallor. His gait was slow, as if he measured each step carefully.

“Lizzy, all I really need is a couple hours re--” He broke off, coughing again.

“Get in that damn bed right now, Red Reddington.”

He got on the bed, collapsing into it, grinning his amusement.

“You’re hot when you’re cranky.” Red smiled sleepily up at the woman, before closing his eyes.

Liz pulled the blankets up around him, before turning on Dembe, her expression saying it all.
He rose his hands in self defense, grinning as well.

“You get some rest, too.”

Dembe bowed his head in deference, heading for the door. “Yes, ma’am.”

Liz spent the entire night, caring for Red. Wiping him down with cool cloths, fetching ice packs and medicines... anything to make him more comfortable.

She awoke first with a start, from a fitful half sleep. She sought out the man, gently caressing his forehead with her lips. He had cooled some, she was pleased to note.

He appeared completely exhausted, however.

She flipped on the overhead fan, hoping it would help the fever some, before heading off to dress for the day.

Red’s eyes opened slowly, staring after the woman until the door shut behind her. His mouth pulled at the corner, before he turned on his side and dozed a bit.

Elizabeth made her way down to the dining area after having ascertained that Red was sleeping still.

She didn’t feel much like eating, for she was very worried about the man. He had passed a restless night and clearly felt terrible.

“Good morning, Miss Elizabeth.” Elizabeth smiled at the woman warmly, “How are you today?”

“Oh, I’m pretty good.” Liz acknowledged the older woman, glancing at the plate Nora placed before her. She inhaled the delicious scent. “And yourself?”

“I’m well. Now, young lady” Nora stepped back, clasping her hands primly before her. “What is on our menu today?”

“Well, actually. Mr. Reddington is home sick.” Liz informed readily. “I was wondering what would make him feel better? Any suggestions?”

“My long shot coming in at Belmont.” Red’s voice was rough and gravely.

“Oh, sure.” Liz huffed, turning slightly in her seat as the man entered to her left. “Like that’s going to happen... why aren’t you in bed? You sound terrible.” Although secretly, had circumstances been different, the woman would have thought the husky quality to his tone was quite sexy.

Nora frowned her concern, pulling out a chair for Red. “I have to agree with your lady there, you sound horrible.” She rushed to set a bountiful breakfast before the man. “Now, you eat up and we’ll get you feeling better in no time.”

Red frowned hard, at the solicitous ‘pat’ the woman offered on his shoulder.

Liz chuckled for his mood. “You have to try to eat something, Red.” she picked up her own fork as incentive.

Red did just that, though not tasting very much.
Nora sat a cup of steaming tea to his right and cold juice to his left.

He looked at her questioningly, “Where’s my coffee?”

“Oh, sir.” the woman tsked. “Coffee is the worst thing for your cough.”


Both Liz and Nora looked at him pityingly.


“Give me my damn coffee.” he insisted.

Liz lifted apologetic eyes to the other woman. “He’s a terrible patient.”

“I had two boys and a husband, I’m used to it.” Nora nodded knowingly. “Big babies, all of them.”

“I’m not a terrible patient, I just want my coffee.” Red’s voice was a little perturbed. “Who do I have to kill to get it?”

Liz reached over, patting his hand consolingly. “We’re just trying to make you feel better.” her tone hardened a bit as did her expression. “Besides, you don’t need the damned caffeine... obviously.”

Red folded his arms over his chest, his expression set.

“Please, Red. You really have to eat more.” she crinkled her nose. “For me?” she tried another tactic seeing the first was not working.

Dropping her hand to his fork, she stabbed a chunk of the food then held it out, waiting for him to take it.

Red’s eyes narrowed slightly, the blood shot orbs holding hers stubbornly.

“You want me to make an airplane sound, like I did for Sam?” She asked pleasantly.

The man’s tongue flicked the inside of his cheek, as the humor of the situation hit him, his eyes softening.

He reluctantly conceded victory, taking his fork back with but one lethal stare for both females.

He looked at the plate for a long moment, then lifted a small bite to his mouth.

“Drink your juice, dear.” Liz said, smiling brightly.

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After breakfast, the man wanted to dress for the day.

“After my shower,” he walked ahead of her, his gait lacking his usual swagger, “I’ll need a few hours out of the house.” He held out his hand. “Where’s my phone?”

“I’m not giving it to you.” the woman informed him blithely.

“Lizzy...” his tone chilled a bit.
“Red, if you don’t get back in that bed and take the day off,” she pulled alongside of him, staring up at the set features stubbornly, “I swear, I’ll call Mr. Kaplan and have her come sedate your ass!”

With that said, the woman zoomed her cart down the corridor, disappearing rapidly into their bedroom.

The man shook his head, slightly befuddled and he did not know, if it was from the woman’s actions or his present condition. He had to admit, if only to himself... he felt like hell warmed over.

He reluctantly followed her lead, glancing around the empty room when he arrived.

The woman came out of the bathroom, her cart loaded with paraphernalia.

“What are you doing?” He half laughed, intrigued.

The woman stuck a thermometer in his mouth, silencing any sort of protest he might think to make.

He stared down at her, his glassy eyes looking at her fondly. She ignored the effort, putting a hand under his chin, keeping his mouth shut, holding the thermometer in place until it beeped.

“See! It’s one hundred and one degrees.” She held it up for him to see.

“I’ve been worse, Lizzy.”

“Oh my God!” the frustration was palpable. “Get in that bed!” She pushed his shoulder, turning him around. “Go...” she shooed him, hopping right behind him, her cart all but forgotten.

He went to the other side of the bed, grabbing his pillow and book... casting her an annoyed glance.

“What are you doing?” Liz interrogated.

“Well, Agent Keen...” the man held his smile, “if I’m going to stay here, I should be in one of the other rooms so you don’t–”

“Red, I’m about to knee cap you.” she threw back the covers angrily. “Get in this bed, right this minute!”

Red glanced at the bed, then back to his little Nurse Ratchet. He reluctantly retraced his steps, at length settling into the comfort provided.

“Now shut up and read your damn book.” She growled, throwing the blankets back over him before handing him some pills and water. “Take these.”

Red coughed quietly, “The Warden at Sing-Sing has nothing on you.” but he took the offered drugs and water, downing the pills.

“Should I check under your tongue to make sure you took them?” she narrowed her eyes.

“I took them, you little despot.” he assured, before relaxing back into the pillows, at length, opening the book.

She hopped around to the other side of the bed, huffily tossing her laptop onto the soft coverlet before climbing up herself. Liz threw him a nondescript glare.

Red leafed through his book, not seeing any of the print. He was inwardly amused and after all, it was only one day.
He’d do as she wished to make her happy. And truthfully... he really did feel like shit.

They were both silent for some time, comfortable enough to enjoy their separate activities. Red’s interest was taken from his reading, he glanced over at a disgruntled bed partner.

He sat his book on his lap, asking the rhetorical question. “What?”


“Show me.” He leaned over, staring at the screen on her lap. “Good God...” he winced at the hideous phot. “What is hell is that? French provincial meets the Seventies?”

“You’re just being kind.” Liz was certain. “‘Ugly ass bathroom’ describes it well enough.”

He chuckled, then coughed, he held a staying hand. “You’re going to get sick.” The woman had instinctively slid closer.

“We’ve been sharing this bed for a while now, if I have it, I have it.” She made herself comfortable against him. “What do you think of this one.” she clicked another image.

“Is it a double-wide?” he quipped.

“You’re such a snob.” she moved on to another, interested to see inside the ones he would chose.

Twelve houses later, he tapped the screen. “Now, what’s wrong with that one?”

“Uh, it’s a hundred thousand over my price range.”

“There is nothing outside of your price range, because you don’t have a price range.”

“Gee, I’m pretty sure that there was a dollar limit that I was given when you sold my house.”

“If you find something and love it,” he was adamant. “I don’t care how much it is, you’re going to get it.”

“Red, I can find something well under my price range and fix it up.” an idea occurred to her. “I don’t need a lot. It’s just me, really.” She tilted her head, thinking. “Actually, if I do this right, I can use the rest of the money to pay off my credit card debt.”

“About that...”

Liz let her head fall back into the pillow, all ready knowing where this was going. “You paid them all off, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes.” he freely admitted. “It was just one less thing to worry about.”

“Either way, I can still find something cute and make it mine. All within my budget.”

“Aren’t you tired of settling, Lizzy.” His tone held a tinge of discouragement. “Find something that speaks to you, that makes you happy. And if it’s beyond your “price range”, he mockingly quoted with his fingers, “let me help you.”

She just kept her mouth shut, knowing arguing with him was pointless. She had one thing in mind, he had another. There had to be a compromise in there somewhere.

And why there needed to be one at all, confused her.
It was her house, her money. But even with that thought in mind, she would still try. She’d take suggestions on security and what not too, if only to show him, she did appreciate his input.

They looked a little bit more, when she realized he had gone quiet.

She looked over, smiling warmly, finding Red had nodded off. He appeared quite comfortable too, if his peaceful expression and even breathing meant anything.

She busied herself with the computer, continuing her search.

She heard a familiar sound, hastily setting aside the computer. She reached even more hastily for Red’s arm.

“Don’t you dare shoot my cook.” she whispered harshly.

“Are you ready for lunch?” the cheerful voice echoed from outside the door.

“That would be lovely.” Liz forced a brightness to her reply.

She felt the man’s arm relax, hearing the ‘click’ of his automatic weapon as the safety was pushed back on.

“We will be in shortl...”

“Now, you stay right there.” Nora directed breezily, walking away. “I’ll bring it to you.”

“You really have to set up a camera in the hall.” Liz suggested strongly.

“It wouldn’t be half as much fun.” Red’s reply was muffled by the pillows.

A minute later, Dembe and Nora arrived, carrying trays laden down with food. Nora set up the small private table across the way, by the large picture windows.

The sun was shining today, the weather was wonderful. She thought it might brighten the man’s spirit.

Red thanked both participants for their kindness. Lizzy made her way to the table.

She looked over the delicious array, seating herself, then realized her companion had not yet joined her. She cast a quizzical glance his way.

“I’m waiting for an early release, Warden.” he quipped, clearly pleased with himself.

“How does solitary confinement, hit ‘cha, jailbird.” she lifted noble brows.

Red shrugged mentally, having enjoyed the exchange. He lifted his weary body, trudging over to his self appointed keeper.

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Red blinked the hazy fog from his eyes trying to focus on the surrounding area. Lizzy stared down at the man, her face a mask of concern. She wiped him gently with cold wet cloths.

“You temperature spiked.” she answered the unasked question. “You think you can get some more
pills down?"

He inhaled shakily, nodding.

She disappeared from sight, but was back seconds later, offering him more drugs and water.

He sat up, shivering with the intense fever. Liz placed a wrap about his shoulders, her lips grazing his cheek.

Red leaned into the touch, both wanting and needing the attention. She moved to his forehead, laying her lips against his fevered brow. She drew back, her concern deepening.

“You feel hotter than before.” the back of her hand wavered gently across his forehead, lingering slightly.

He dutifully took the other pill, his forehead falling weakly to her shoulder for support. His breathing was short and labored.

“How are we going to get this fever down?” she fretted, her fingers trailing soothingly against his head. “You think you can shower?”

“Yes.”

He leaned back into her, enjoying the light massage as she rubbed his back absently.

He was hot, trembling with fever... and so quiet. When he’d answered her, his voice was weakened, shaky.

She had never seen Red Reddington so vulnerable before.

He was usually so animated, even when wounded. You could shoot the man and he waved it off, making a smart ass remark.

But now, he leaned against her silently, his muscles shaking with exhaustion.

This was not good.

She reached for the radio, calling for assistance.

It only took seconds but it seemed hours before Joe pushed through the door, coming to her aide.

“What’s the problem?” he looked his boss over, frowning at the unresponsive man.

“Elizabeth?” Dembe had followed the guard, having heard the call for help.

“Dembe, he’s burning up.” Liz’s voice was laced with anxiety, her eyes beseeching the men for help.

The large man came to their side, grasping Red’s arm, frowning at the heat coming from Red’s body.

“Start the bath.” Dembe directed the other guard.

Liz backed away, noting Red’s shaking had intensified without her support.

Dembe grasped the man around the torso, sliding his slack frame from the bed.

Both men maneuvered Red to the bathroom, lowering him into the half full tub.
“Should we call Kaplan?” she wished desperately to follow her instincts.

“Let’s see what this does,” the large man suggested. “If his fever breaks, we will be fine.”

Both men methodically doused Red in the lukewarm water. Any attempt at communication failed to garner a response.

“Has he ever been this bad before?” she paced restlessly about the large space, watching the proceeding, feeling utterly helpless.

“I have seen worse.” Dembe’s quiet voice was somehow reassuring.

“You think he has an infection?” which was what she was most concerned about.

“No.” Dembe assured. “There was a particularly nasty virus going around Europe while we were there.” The man continued his efforts to cool his friend’s body. “He may have contracted it... it only lasts forty eight hours.”

“Why don’t you have it?”

“My exposure was limited.” he explained patiently. “Raymond did more face to face than I.”

“Cold...” the man in the tub muttered quietly.

“Red?” Liz hastened to the man’s side. “You want us to call Mr. Kaplan?”

“Already feel like shit.” he groaned miserably. “Don’t make it worse, please.”

She smiled at the man, brushing his face gently, “You big baby.”

“I’m cold.” he repeated.

Liz stuck the thermometer in his mouth, waiting. “It’s ninety nine, now.” she nodded at Dembe.

Red pushed up slightly, then stopped when Liz sat her hand on his shoulder.

“I can do it.” he snapped.

The two men ignored the ‘suggestion’, hooking his arms and legs, sitting him on the side of the tub.

“I’ll get him something dry.” Liz hobbled to the closet, picking out one of Red’s favorite lounge clothes.

Red’s head swirled slowly, as he mumbled something indistinguishable to Dembe.

Joe lay some fresh towels beside the man, blocking her view momentarily. “We’ve got this, ma’am.”

He smiled pleasantly. “If you would give us a moment’s privacy.”

Liz blinked, waylaid by the request. “But–”

“We’ll get him changed.” the man, while supposedly an employee, suddenly made Elizabeth feel that her only option was to obey the recommendation.

“Thank you, you’re very kind.” he smiled softly at her to ease the rebuke and it worked.

Liz peeked around the large guard, her view totally obscured, indecisive as yet whether or not to leave Red.
"You little voyeur." Joe quirked his brow in forced amusement. "Come on now," he took her arm, guiding her gently into the bedroom, "Red wants you to rest, get warm."

She took one last look around the large man’s frame. Dembe was pulling on Red’s shirt sleeve, and then the door was unceremoniously closed in her face.

She headed for the bed, a little annoyed at the obvious brush off before stopping dead in her tracks.

"Ice packs." she turned quickly, only to stopped by her muscled guard.

"I will get the ice packs." Joe’s pleasant smile was in place. "You get in bed." he pointed behind her. "Now, go." he shooed her. "Everything is under control."

"Were you always this bossy..." she grumbled, but did as bid, "or is it hanging out with Silas?"

"I’ve always been like this." he assured. "I’ll be back in a minute. You stay out of there." he pointed towards the bath.

Elizabeth crossed her arms over her chest, sitting back into the pillows with a huff. Joe smiled down at the vexed woman, before heading for the door.

"He likes the big blue one," she called after the man, "with the felt covering."

Joe waved a dismissing hand, disappearing around the doorframe.

The master bath doors swung open, as Dembe navigated Red to the warm bed.

"Joe’s getting your ice pack." the woman rolled up on her knees, pulling the blankets back for Red. Her eyes were filled with concern.

Red nodded silently, sitting heavily. The man’s usually ramrod straight posture, was slumped over, his head bowed. He was so quiet, exhausted... so unlike the boisterous, self assured man she knew.

Everything about him bespoke of how ravaged his body was being by this insidious virus.

"Lay down Red." Liz pleaded.

Red eased back into the bed, laying down slowly, pushing the heel of his palm into his forehead.

"Dizzy?" she enquired solicitously.

"Headache." it was corrected.

Joe arrived on scene, ice pack in hand, handing it over gingerly. Liz slid the cool pack under Red’s neckline.

"Raymond." Dembe held out a pill and water.

Red rolled to his side, swallowing the pills then laid back, winded by the small activity.

"Let him rest. He will be fine tomorrow." Dembe stopped in the doorway, looking back at Liz. "If you need assistance, do not hesitate."

And with that, he shut the door behind him.

She reached, shutting the lights down, scooting close to the man, curving her body closer. Her
fingers gently kneaded the fine hair by his temples, easing down to the tight muscles of his neckline.

“Can you roll to your side.” she asked, whisper soft. “I want to rub your neck.”

Red considered the consequences. She might inadvertently touch his scars.

“You don’t have to do that.” Red decided, replying quietly.

“Just...” she sighed, “let me help you.”

The man lay there debating his options before listing to his side, reluctantly giving her access.

Her hands worked miracles on the tension in his body. She was pleased at the soft sigh of relief which escaped his lips.

She massaged her thumbs into the nape of his neck, kneading the tightness.

“Too hard?” she asked quietly.

“Huh uh.” he muttered sleepily around his yawn.

It was funny that something so simplistic could bring her such joy. Red had helped her so much, in so many different ways... so to return the favor, as small as it was, and for it to be so well received, was very gratifying.

She was pleased to hear his breathing deepen minutes later. For a long moment, she continued her efforts, believing him to be asleep.

“Thank you, Lizzy...” Red’s deep voice somewhat startled her coming out of the night, as it were. “That is helping tremendously.”

She leaned forward, kissing him tenderly behind the ear, “You’re most welcome.” she whispered.

She felt horrible that he was ill, but in some way, she also felt vindicated.

Red had given so much of himself to her lately, that in this minuscule way, she felt she had repaid him just a tad.

She found she enjoyed the task. It was no burden what-so-ever.

She genuinely cared for this man. How it had come to such a state, she could not have said.

Somewhere along the line, he had become more...

At this point, she would not label any of the emotions she was feeling for Red Reddington. She did finally realize however that those emotions existed.

Red had been relaxing... truly relaxing for three days. Thanks to his little no nonsense nurse. He almost felt his old self again.

He had truly been enjoying the down time. His favorite part of the day was rapidly approaching.

He and Lizzy had established a routine of sorts. He found she enjoyed when he read aloud passages from a couple of his favorite books. They would find a secluded spot and in this instance, today...
was to be the sitting room and he would do his thing and the woman appeared utterly enthralled.

Quite the ego boost, he had to admit.

It was with a light spring in his step that he journeyed to the prearranged spot now.

But Lizzy was not alone... she had a guest.

The woman sat facing the door way, her eyes closed and she was totally reclined on the couch.

Francis sat in front of her, positioned between her legs. Red could not see exactly what was taking place but whatever it was, put a serene smile on Elizabeth’s face.

Red’s first instinct was to back away and give them privacy. He hesitated, fighting against that instinct.

Liz raised her head, opening her eyes, the blueness focusing on him.

She grinned widely, motioning him forward then pointed downward.

Red inched into the room, staring over Francis’ shoulder as he came closer.

His brows rose in mock surprise, finally seeing what Francis was working on.

Where once there had been a plain white cast, there was now a plethora of color covering most of her leg in a beautiful peacock design.

“He thought I needed something.” She sniggered.

“Oh, hey Red.” Francis concentrated hard, filling in the feather he had drawn. “I didn’t hear you come in.” he sat back, critically analyzing his work. “We may have a little problem.”

“It looks okay to me.” Red tried to keep the elation from his voice. He thought the little asshole had been giving the woman oral... to say he was relieved was a great understatement.

“No, no.” he replied impatiently. “Conte has Anne.”

“Ah, damn.” Red finally understood. “All right,” his sigh was genuine, “...I’ll take care of it.”

Both men adjourned to Red’s office to begin arbitration.

After an hour of careful negotiation the problem was solved. Conte released Anne with the understanding that she would never cross his path again.

When Red hung up the phone, he groaned audibly.

“You think you made a mistake?” Francis asked.

“We’ll see in the next couple days. I probably shouldn’t have bailed her out, but she has had her uses.” Red was already beginning to second guess the nature of the problem, however. “If she screws up again, she’s on her own. I’m just hoping she’s learned her lesson.”

“I’m not holding my breath.” Francis chuckled humorlessly.

“You and Elizabeth are getting along, it seems.”

Francis glanced around hastily, searching for someone else the man might be speaking to... but the
room was empty.

“You talkin’ to me?”

“Well, I’m not talking to Robert De Niro.” Red confirmed.

Francis had always prided himself on his ability to go with the flow, so in this instance... he went.

“Yeah, she’s nice. I like her.” he shrugged mentally. “Much better than Madeline. You picked a good one this time.”

“You didn’t like Madeline?” the statement had surprised Red.

“Hell no. She was evil.” the man shivered slightly. “I always expected to turn around and find a knife in my back when she was around.”

Red chuckled, “Why?”

“I don’t know, she always had that sly grin thing going on.” the man scrunched up his face in open distaste. “Like she was the cat and you were the mouse about to get pounced on, and not in a fun way.”

“But you don’t find that with Lizzy?”

“Nah, she’s laid back.” the young guy roamed the office, snooping in this thing and that. He held up a finely crafted sailboat from a shelf over by the large picture window. “Isn’t on guard, though, maybe she should be if she’s hooked up with you.”

The young man shifted a sly up and under look to his host.

“With Silas and Dembe a radio call away, she’s finally relaxing in a way she never has before.”

“Getting used to the guards, huh?” Francis examined a pocket watch meticulously. “How she can, is beyond me... Neanderthals.”

“She’s adapting to the life quickly.” Red tried to keep the pride from his voice.

“Which isn’t easy, I know.” the man put down the watch, moving onward. “Hence, one of the reasons I haven’t seriously dated anyone in... ever.”

“But you like Lizzy?” Red kept his tone carefully neutral.

“Sure, but she’s a rare type.” he picked up a metal shell casing which was one of many in a wooden container on the man’s desk. “What? You too cheap to buy news ones?”

Red let it go. Francis shrugged, continuing. “And of course, she has you to help guide her along.” it was granted. “You’ve been at this a long time, you’re a pro. Who better to help you adapt to this weird ass lifestyle?” he sighed heavily. “Maybe I’ll get lucky one day and find someone who can handle it as well as she does.”

Francis put a glass paperweight back into place. “I hope she can cook.”

“Francis, are you listening to me at all?”

The young man sat down in a chair, his face twisting in confusion. “Uh, I think so?”
“Do you like Lizzy?” Red repeated slowly.

“Well, like, sure.” the guy hated repeating himself and then something dawned on him. “Oh... wait. You mean... like her, like her?”

“...Yes.” Red’s tone was quiet.

“How can I answer this and you won’t kill me?”

“I won’t kill you, no matter what you say.” the eyes turned slightly cold. “Unless you threaten her, then you’re dead.”

Francis inhaled shakily, “Okay. I like her, but not romantically. She’s your girl, for God’s sake.”

“And if she wasn’t?”

“Is this a trick question?” he was becoming agitated. “I don’t know. I guess I could, but really I haven’t even...” He arose, his expression an earnest one. “Red, I would never move in on your girl.”

“No, you haven’t done anything wrong.” Red tilted his head slightly. “I’m just curious. Checking.” he shrugged well defined shoulders. “She’s young, your young.”

“I’m also Caucasian, like romantic dinners, horseback riding, long walks on the beach and funnily enough, the missionary position is my favorite.” The man’s speech patterns tended to run together when he was unsettled. “What the hell does that have to do with anything? Is there something wrong? Has she...”

“Made suggestive remarks about you?” Red tested the waters.

“No!” it was emphatically denied. “Has she?” Francis’ tone was definitely interested... then not. “I meant, has she cheated on you or something before?”

“No.”

“What? You’re bored with her? You don’t want her anymore and you’re looking for a new home for her? What’s going on?”

“No, nothing like that. I just saw you two together and how comfortable you were getting, and I thought I should ask.”

“What the hell for?” the kid was beside himself for such an outlook.

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I am a little bit older than she.” the fact grated on the man. “I’d be an idiot if I didn’t think she might want to move on to some younger stock someday.”

“So what,” Francis squeaked, “you thought it would be me?”

“Well, I don’t see why not. You’re charming, handsome, you make her laugh.”
“You’re going to make me blush.” Francis disdained. “Red, I wonder about you sometimes. I may be those things... God knows it’s the truth.”

Red rolled his eyes at the younger man’s boasting.

“But you... you’re all that, plus some. You may be older, but you wouldn’t know it. You make us young guys look like pussies. You speak of power, experience, and stability. And don’t think she doesn’t see that.” he shook his head despairingly. “We all pale in comparison to you.”

It was true that Red did have power, experience and stability. But he had become cold and merciless to gain those qualities. He had enough blood on his hands, that the thought of touching Lizzy with them sometimes, troubled him greatly.

His Past... haunted him. And in turn, would do that same to her. Would he ever be able to tell her the truth about who he really was? What about her mother? Her father?

Would she even believe him if he did?

He had rolled those facts around in his head so many times, tried to think of the best way to deliver the truth. But without concrete proof...

It sounded outlandish in his head sometimes. And he knew it wasn’t. So who the hell knew what she would think.

“Even if I did have romantic intentions towards Liz, which I don’t,” Francis was quick to reassure,” not only because the threat of death cools my ardor,” he waved irritably, “she wouldn’t give me a second glance when you’re standing there blocking everyone else out.” he shook his head woefully. “And if you don’t see that or know that to be a fact, then you’re delusional.”

Red knew he could give Liz everything she could ever desire. He could be a better man. Because damn it, he was a good man.

He had just been caught up in this damned fiasco for so long now, all he could do was fight back. Fix what was wrong, one step at a time.

“If you haven’t seen how she lights up when you enter a room, then you’re either blind or don’t want to see it.” Francis philosophized “But I suppose, I should be flattered that you would see me as a replacement for you.”

“Yes well,” Red’s eyes glazed over with that thing he did which sent shivers down the most stout of spines, “I’m not dead yet.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, my little readers.

My Beta... the troll... played a little joke on me.

I let Beta name some of the OC’s since I was concentrated on future chapters.

She has named one.... Daniel Courtland. She did give an option to call him Danny or Court, but has pretty much filled it all in with.... Danny.
She said: Hey, he’s a lot like you in some respects, so why not? And then she laughed maniacally.

He plays a pretty large part in the fic later and to change his name would be time consuming (and the troll knew it) but I could edit it as I go.

It is a pretty great name, I have to admit.

So should I change his name or what?
April 27

“If I don’t get out of the house, for even a little while, I’ll go crazy.” Red broke the news to anyone who was listening.

Dembe looked up from his morning paper then went back to perusing the same.

Nora stopped tidying up, smiling at her employer understandingly.

Liz was pleasantly surprised, finally sensing the man was actually, truly feeling better. “What would you like to do?” she asked amiably.

“Something normal people do.” Red had long since decided.

“And what is it that normal people do?” Liz smiled at the seriousness of his proclamation.

He pulled on his ear, thoughtfully. “What about checking out a few of those houses you’ve been searching online?”

The woman’s face masked instantly. “Maybe that’s too soon...”

“I won’t tax myself.” he replied gruffly. “We’ll just see one or two.”

Liz checked with Dembe who had secretly ‘checked’ with Mr. Kaplan throughout Red’s three day convalescence.

The woman was thrilled to see a subtle nod of approval from the large black man.

“Well, I guess...” she began uncertainly, “it would be okay... for just a few hours. I mean, if you really want?” excitement bubbled up inside her.

Red was just as pleased she had accepted his offer.

An hour later, found them on site for the first house Elizabeth had checked off for her list.

Somewhere in the process, they had picked up a small entourage.

They traversed the small winding sidewalk leading to the front entrance.

Silas looked over the small two story townhouse, his gaze a critical one. “Is this the dodgy part of town?” he wanted to know, checking out the surrounding buildings absently.

“I don’t even know what that means.” Liz told the truth.

“He’s just being snobbish.” Francis dismissed airily. “He forgets, I’ve seen his digs.” the man exchanged belligerent glances with the guard. “This is her house. We have no input... how many bedrooms does it have?” it was instantly questioned.

“Well, in case I come to stay. And of course there’s Dembe,” he reminded helpfully,” and you’ll need somewhere for security.” he added.
Liz frowned hard, looking back over her list. “He’s right, maybe three bedrooms isn’t enough?” she looked soulfully in Red’s direction. “You could just stay in with me if we could manage four, I think?” she said for his ear only.

She reworked her search parameters on her tablet, completely missing Red’s face go through a plethora of expressions.

The man was stunned, one part of him pleased as hell, she was interested in accommodating his friends, but more specifically that they continued to share a bedroom. On the other hand, pissed that she would change her own plans to do so.

“Hello, I’m Janet, the realtor.” A woman waited patiently for their arrival, immediately handing over a print out of the pertinent information concerning the house to Red, who scanned it quickly before passing it on to Liz. “I didn’t expect so many visitors today.” she gushed enthusiastically.

Not that the woman really objected, for all four men were quite handsome, each in their own way.

“If you or your husband have any questions...” The woman smiled brightly, freaking Liz out for a host of reasons. “I will be close by as you tour this lovely find.”

They all filed in orderly to the small foyer, which seemed infinitely more so by the bulk of Silas and Dembe. Each man shouldered the other for a proper place of residency in the limited space.

“That woman’s cheerfulness in beyond ‘Stepford Wife’ creepy.” Francis whispered aside.

Liz held her amusement, more interested in touring the house.

“Is this a bedroom?” Silas asked, scowling slightly.

“That’s the living room.” Francis corrected before walking over and kicking a baseboard.

“What the hell are you doing?” Silas bitched. “You’re not checking air in a tire.”

“It is the formal dining room.” Dembe had guessed correctly.

“Get out of town.” Francis was appalled. “How many will that seat... four?”

Liz heard, her insecurities coming to the fore.

“Shut up.” Silas suggested evenly. “You’re making her feel bad.” he had noticed the stricken look on the woman’s face.

“Why, she didn’t design the house.” Francis was confused.

Red threw the entourage a lethal glare. “When she wants your input, I’ll ask for it.”

Francis took the news in his stride. Silas grinned. And Dembe, checked out the backyard through the French doors which opened out unto a small deck.

“Hudson would enjoy the back yard.” Dembe nodded his approval.

“Maybe this isn’t the right house?” she confided to Red. “It looked bigger online.”

“Everything looks bigger online.” Silas leaned over, confiding in Dembe. “Especially those nude pictures I send out.” he shared the joke, gleefully.
“It would have to...” Dembe responded effortlessly.

“Burn!” Francis laughed heartily. “Score one for Dembe.”

“Let’s check out the upstairs.” Red ignored the byplay completely, guiding the woman with a gentle hand on her back. He turned, his expression saying it all. “And we will do so, alone.”

The next two houses had been duds... according to the entourage.

The neighbors in the first, were too nosy. They had greeted them upon arrival, even going through on the tour.

Perhaps they were a nice couple, but considering Liz was planning on hosting the FBI’s Most Wanted and friends, they were a little too interested in every aspect of her life.

Thankfully, Red was so charming and friendly, the couple didn’t pay much attention to anything else.

The second house, the neighbors were the complete opposite. Halfway through the kitchen area, loud raucous music suddenly filled the air.

Liz lifted a helpless shrug whereupon Red excused himself briefly.

Within a few moments, the noise had abated, the man returned, an amiable expression in place.

“I think they will keep it down now.”

Silas grinned maniacally, sensing the course of action which had been taken.

“Some people...” Francis tsked knowingly. “And that music... reminds me when I was in the Monastery in Tibet.”

“They let you in a Monastery?” Silas screwed up his expression.

“It was a money laundering operation.”

“Excuse me?” the realtor had heard several interesting comments from these gentlemen, but that one was deserving of a response.

“What I meant to say...” Francis had caught Red’s hasty shift of the eyes, “we had to do our own laundry while there, as a penance for all our sins.” he pulled a sad face which charmed the hell out of the woman.

“I bet you did an ass load.” Silas was relatively sure, but he had kept it for Francis’ ears only.

On the way to the next house, Liz could not contain her curiosity. “Red, what did you do to make those people shut off the music?” she shifted him a scolding glance.

“He got cocky.” he shrugged. “I just brought him back to reality.”

“Made him shit himself, you mean.” Francis translated. “Been there, done that.” he elbowed Red in
open camaraderie.

Red shifted away, his expression saying it all.

Dembe pulled up to the last house.

Red set his hand on the back of the seat turning towards the woman. He lay his hand on hers, his eyes mellow. “You’re going to look at this house by yourself.” she was informed. “There will be no unwarranted, unsolicited advice.” he glanced at the peanut gallery.

Silas grinned, suddenly concentrating on the scenery outside the darkly tinted windows. Francis seemed genuinely put out by the proclamation. Dembe pulled out a crossword puzzle.

“You know what you like, you can see the possibilities.” he had complete confidence in her. “You know what you want. You know what you don’t.”

“I don’t see why she can’t just live at the house?” Francis piped up.

“If it was any of your business, which it isn’t...” Red stated. “She wants her own place.”

“Oh, I get it...” Francis finally did, “it’s for when you get in one of your pissy moods, the one where no one can stand to be around–”

“What he means, boss.” Silas helped out. “You know when you go off the deep end and even Dembe here wants to get out of Dodge...”

“Shut up, both of you.” the discussion was ended. “She wants a place to decorate, a piece of real estate on which she can make a profit, her own money.”

“Women...” Silas mumbled to himself, “What the hell do we see in them... oh, wait.” it dawned on him. “Never mind.”

“Can you come with me?” she asked plaintively. “I value your opinion.”

“Oh, and you don’t ours.” Francis was ‘hurt’.

“No.” she said succinctly. She waited on pins and needles, for Red’s reply.

She instinctively knew that the man wanted this to be special for her, a moment to be remembered.

_Her_ first home.

He understood the importance of that connection.

His understanding meant more than he realized.

Usually, searching for a new house, was a process a husband and wife should make together. Not that Red was “her husband, but she knew now, that he would be a good one.

If he should ever remarry, the woman would be lucky to have gained his acceptance.

But if he did remarry, what did that mean to them? Would he stop seeing _her_?

The thought disturbed her. She had become so accustomed to Red being there, just a call away. She found herself feeling... agitated, that he might become romantically infatuated with another woman.
Because if she were romantic with Red, she would want him within reach and certainly not constantly hanging around another female.

“Come along darling...” Red’s voice was laced with something she could not read, as if he sensed the direction of her thoughts and found them mildly charming perhaps, “let’s see if this will be our new love nest.”

Minutes later they had walked the small property, Red watching her face as she looked things over.

So far, he had picked up that Liz loathed the color of the walls, wasn’t crazy about the kitchen cabinets, hated the back yard, and wasn’t pleased with the placement of the laundry room. But, she did like the powder room.

And she hadn’t said a word.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t said anything since leaving the car. He wondered what was on her mind.

“Did they really bother you?” he motioned to the men in the waiting car.

She downed her head in lieu of an answer. “Not bother per se, no.” she lifted those eyes. “They were just trying to be helpful.”

“Then what?” he persisted. Again she fell silent. “Was it the fact that the Stepford Wife referred to us as husband and wife?”

She flushed slightly. “Of course not, that was just an oversight on her part.” she managed a weak smile. “I wasn’t sure what to do, to be honest.”

“I rather enjoyed it.” he stated bluntly, while watching closely for her reaction.

“Y-You enjoyed it?” the statement through her off balance. “Why would you say such a thing?”

“Because it’s true.” he said simply. “What were your thoughts on the matter.”

“Well I...” she was flummoxed. “Well, I mean, that’s the part we’re playing, right?” she felt him out carefully.

“Maybe I’m sick of playing a part.”

She tried desperately to read his face. “What does that mean Red?”

“What do you want it to mean, Elizabeth.”

His gaze rested on her, as he stepped back once, cocking his head waiting patiently.

“I..I’m not sure what you want me to say?”

He nodded agreeably. “I see.” was all he offered.

The silence was deafening.

Panic arose in the young woman’s mind.

“Shall we continue.” he lifted his hand, hat held firmly between two fingers.
“Wait...” she caught his arm as he had stepped forward. He resumed his former position, again falling into his patient vigilance. His gaze stealing her soul from her body.

She reacted instinctively. Liz leaned closer and for a brief moment, as she scrutinized the taciturn obliqueness staring back at her... time stood still.

She found herself inexplicably drawn into wondrous depths of the complicated individual in front of her.

Red stood perfectly still, willing the woman forward. He could smell the spearmint on her breath, she was so close.

Her eyes pleaded with him for assistance but in this instance, he knew, it must be her choice and hers alone.

Not that he couldn’t help in other ways. His eyes softened, his head tilted, his lips parting ever so slightly in open invitation.

Liz was out of her depth, knowing as much but she found herself brushing away that line in the sand, one grain at a time.

Her arm lifted of it's own volition, her fingers feather light on the curve of his lapel as they traced a gentle path to his shoulder.

Red’s eyes dropped meaningfully to the full pout of her mouth, his breath grazing her cheek.

Liz’s fingers tightened slightly into the muscles of his shoulder, as she stepped fully into his warming aura.

Her breasts brushed the rich linen of his suit and suddenly his scent surrounded her. She closed her eyes, lifting her lips in anticipation.

Red’s lips trailed a tentative path from her forehead, across the sculptured pertness of her nose, to the pink freckles of her cheek, lingering for a breathless moment.

Liz’s breath escaped in light pants of anticipation. Her fingers curled tightly into the fabric of the man’s collar, urging him closer.

Red’s mouth brushed the very corner of her parted lips.

A discreet clearing of the throat alerted the two that they were no longer alone.

Elizabeth started visibly, her cheeks flaming a rich hue as she guiltily moved away from Red’s vicinity. She lowered her head, hiding her embarrassment.

Red’s look spoke volumes as he checked for the intruder’s whereabouts. His entire focus had been with Elizabeth Keen.

“I’m sorry, Raymond.” Dembe clearly was. “There’s been an... incident.”

Reddington was instantly alert, his features showing as much.

“Your friend, Anne.” the dark eyes said the rest.

Raymond was stunned. “When...?”
“Francis said that her body was found an hour ago... in her hotel room.” Dembe delivered the news.

“Oh my God...” she stepped up close to Red, her hand unconsciously seeking the security he always afforded her.

“What the hell happened?” his steps hurried to the source of information he trusted.

He guided Liz gently to the waiting SUV.

Francis and Silas were outside the car, both wearing serious expressions. Francis approached as the trio came on the scene, phone to ear.

“It was not Conte.” the young man advised hastily. “What we know so far... no signs of a struggle, no forced entry, so she must have known whoever...” he glanced at Liz.

“How was she killed?” Red demanded.

“They set it up to look like an overdose, boss.” Silas said. “Needle in the arm, coke spread out on the tables, yada, yada, yada.”

Francis nodded, “Yeah, we know... she didn’t use.”

“But it wasn’t Conte?” his eyes hardened.

“Air tight alibi, boss.” it was Silas’ turn to shake his head. “I had my guys check it out.”

Red sighed heavily, dropping his head for a second. “Well, just... shit.”

“We’re running our own tox, Red.” Francis gave some hope.

“Kaplan?”

Francis confirmed. “It was one of ours who found her. So we have a head start on the cops at least.”

“Was she still in New York?” Red asked quietly.

“That’s an affirmative.” Silas verified.

“Make arrangements for the flight out.” he had turned to Dembe. “By nightfall, Dembe, if you will.”

Red breezed through the doorway half an hour later.

An impeccably dressed woman followed close behind, her arms full of what looked to be catalogs and several samples on rings hanging from her fingers.

“Lizzy, this is Karen. She’s here to help you shop.” Red called on his way through to the bathroom.

“Shop?” Liz set up instantly, her head jerking from one person to the other.

“Since we’re on a time schedule here,” Red stuck his head out of the closet, “I thought I’d bring it to you.”

“Red?” her expression was more than guarded. “With what has just happened...” she hoped he would pick up the clue. “I don’t think this is the perfect time to shop.”

Liz thought he referred to clothes for the funeral. “Oh, of course. I’m sorry.” she apologized. “I didn’t know I was going along.”

“Well, you are.” he motioned with his head to the woman. “So if you would please...”

An hour later, Red came out of the bath, refreshed and looking like a million dollars.

She had only just finished with the woman she had dubbed, ‘Miss Perfect’.

“Red...” she was about to burst. “I told that woman I only needed a simple black dress for the funeral and stuff, not that I said funeral... but she insisted I buy all these gowns and shoes and...” she stopped for a breath, “I kept telling her and she kept saying, ‘Mr. Reddington said you would need these’. I just...” her eyes were large and befuddled.

“And she was right.” Red nodded his satisfaction.

“I can’t afford those things.” she argued. “News flash, I am a lowly government paid employee.”

“Who is playing the part of Red Reddington’s fiancée.” He reminded, fixing his tie in the mirror. “Why is it that you keep forgetting that, Elizabeth.” his eyes caught her’s in the mirror. “Is it Freudian.”

She fell silent, having no reply. She was still feeling slightly depressed over this ‘Anne’ person’s death. She had not known the woman personally, but she still felt bad.

“Now,” he turned to fully face her, his eyes running her body inoffensively, “we have a little under an hour before the flight... let’s go get those casts off.”

Liz forgot all about the poor woman’s death for a split second, her face beaming her joy. But then she remembered, feeling horrible again for her lapse.

Still, getting these heavy weights off her body was like getting them off her mind. She could not truthfully say she was regretting it.

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“How are you holding up, Lizzy?” they had arrived at their destination.

“Oh, I’m so good.” She said, wringing her hands anxiously. “I’m really, really good... a little nauseous, but in a good way.”

“This should not take long.” He held his smile. “We’ll go to dinner afterwards to celebrate.”

She looked at him oddly. “Getting casts removed?”

“No, it’s our anniversary.” he teased.

“Anniversary?” she was totally confused.

“You’ve been with me for a month now. It was actually a couple days ago, but I was sick.” Red explained. “I think the occasion calls for a celebration.”

“Not that I’m going to turn down free food...” she tried to say what she needed to say correctly. “This poor woman just...”
“Forget about the poor woman, Lizzy.” Red suggested. “She would not think twice about you. Besides, in our business... it happens.”

“You seemed upset.”

“I am upset. But I live in the moment.” he waved his hand about in a dismissive manner. “We will celebrate her life, we will avenge her death and the matter is closed for the moment, all right.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “If that’s how you want it.”

“After a month in the same house... I would have figured you would have tried to kill me at least once, by now.” he shrugged. “You haven’t... something to celebrate.”

“Sam always told me, don’t bite the hand that feeds you...” she replied solemnly.

“Sam also said, life is like toilet paper, you’re either on a roll or taking shit from some asshole.” Red sighed, then raised a finger to his forehead, suddenly remembering another gem. “And boobs are proof that men can focus on two things at once.”

“So what?” she finally giggled. “Are you saying I shouldn’t listen to Sam’s advice?”

Red tilted his head, lost in thought for a moment, “Actually, I’m not quite sure what my point was, exactly.” he shook his head, clearing it of ‘the world according to Sam Milhoan’.

“But I think the point I was trying to make was, don’t hold back from doing what makes you happy.” he waved about his hand with flourish. “Even if it means you end up maiming me.”

A short time later, they exited the doctor’s office.

Lizzy was practically dancing due to her new found freedom, having lost not just one, but both casts.

Granted, she had soft casts for a couple weeks, but as she grinned up at Red, it was evident that she was more than happy to be mobile again.

“Let’s go eat.” Red tipped his hat, settling his hand on Liz’s low back, escorting her to the car.

Elizabeth should have known when in Red Reddington’s company, one should expect the unexpected.

After a quick stop by the house, they found some of the garments Liz had ordered waiting for them, along with new luggage. After quickly packing, they were loaded back into the car and bound for New York before she could even process what was happening.

After their arrival, Red sent Francis on ahead to the hotel to meet Mark, leaving them to hit a favorite spot of Red and Dembe’s for dinner. And Liz had to agree, it had been quite an adventuresome outing.

As they finished, Dembe went across the way to take care of a quick errand, leaving Red and Liz to enjoy coffee and a small treat.

After relating a story about two sisters who both had an unhealthy infatuation for Dembe, which terrified the poor man, something Red had never witnessed before in his entire time with Dembe... he left Liz laughing at their table, while he went to see what was taking so long with the damned bill.
He waited semi-patiently, looking out the large bay window just as Dembe slid to the curb in the black SUV. He glanced back at the table, to note Elizabeth gathering her bag.

“Raymond...” a woman’s voice purred softly behind him.

He turned towards the source, pulling up short.

“Lexa...” he glanced hastily to check on Liz who was headed his way. He turned back, making a leisurely transition. “What are you doing here?”

She smiled flirtatiously. “I did not expect to see you here.”

“The feeling is mutual.” Red took the card the attendant handed him, shoving it in his wallet. “I don’t mean to be rude, but I have to...”

The woman put a stilling hand on his arm, “I’m in town for a few days.” she stepped into his space, stroking his tie with her fingertip. “If you would like to– ”

“I don’t think that will be possible this time, Lexa.” Red pulled back a hair, smiling charmingly at the woman.

He needed to keep Lexa in his good graces, for so many reasons. Being his top ‘go to’ source for money laundering and a reliable contact with the underground in Italy, she was a very valuable resource.

“You don’t appear busy now.” the woman sidled cozily up against him.

Dembe glanced to the restaurant, taking in the developing scene. He grimaced slightly, seeing Liz step around the corner just as Lexa drew her lips sensually across Raymond’s chin.

Red winced slightly, tsking under his breath for the unfortunate timing with which he was cursed.

“Red?” Liz’s tone was a cross between total disbelief and hopeful anticipation that there was a perfectly logical reason why this woman... this absolutely stunning woman, was sucking on Red Reddington’s face as if she had every right to do so.

The man stepped back leisurely, gently clearing his throat. “Elizabeth, this is an... associate,” he explained, “... Lexa.”

Liz’s brow furrowed deeply. She stepped, taking her place at Red’s side, looping her arm through his, territorially.

The two women sized each other up.

“Lexa, this is Elizabeth.” Red gestured to the steely eyed woman beside him. “My fiancée.

Lexa swiveled her head jerkily towards Red, her expression incredulous then hastily masked.

“So, congratulations are in order.” the woman smiled pleasantly. “And how long have you two been engaged?”

Liz laid her hand over Red’s arm, flashing her ring. “Four months.”

Lexa’s brow rose, staring silently at Red, long enough that an uncomfortable silence ensued. “I see.” she replied evenly, then smiled. “I’m very happy for you.”
Red glanced out the corner of his eye, finding Dembe, who now stood a few feet away, rubbing his temples methodically.

Red on the other hand found himself very hard pressed, not to laugh at the absurd situation they found themselves in.

The tension was so thick right now, you could cut it with a knife. And for what reason?

Because he was literally stuck between a woman he had fucked, and one whom he would give anything to fuck.

Both of them, with their own little thoughts about the man between them.

And he was positive none of them were pleasant thoughts.

He was sure Lexa thought he played around on Elizabeth.

And Lizzy, was playing her part as Red’s fiancée... to the hilt. She was savvy enough to pick up that there was some sort of past between him and Lexa, and what that past entailed.

Just not the exact timing of said... dalliance. Not that it seemed to matter.

Elizabeth was making her displeasure very well known, staring down the woman opposite them for all she was worth.

Shit...

“Thank you, Lexa.” Red replied amiably.

Lexa looked at her watch, breaking the stalemate. “I should go.” she stated, smiling widely at nothing in particular.

Never a good sign, in Red’s opinion.

“I’ll be late for my meeting.” She leaned up, gently kissing Red’s cheek. “I’m at the Four Seasons.” she whispered before discretely pulling back. “Have a lovely day, and congratulations, again.” she smiled genuinely at Elizabeth before taking her leave.

Red directed Elizabeth out the door and to the waiting car, before going to the other side where Dembe waited.

“I’m sorry, Dembe.” the man said to his friend.

“If she pulls her weapon,” Dembe warned, “I’m leaving your ass and calling Uber.”

“Chicken shit traitor.” Red chuckled before opening the door, climbing in beside Lizzy.

“What the hell was that?” the woman asked peevishly.

“Awkward.” Red replied simply.

“Who was she?” Liz crossed her arms over her chest, scowling when Red just smiled. “And what the hell are you smiling for?”

If he didn’t know any better, he would think she was jealous.
“As I said, she is an associate.” Red said. “I work with her.”

“That’s not all you did.” she muttered heatedly.

The man turned his head to glance at the beautiful profile, his thoughts private.

Liz looked out the window, sighing. She didn’t know why she was so upset. Red was entitled to a past.

Or present, it seemed.

“What did she say to you?”

Red watched the woman’s foot tap impatiently, awaiting his answer.

“Excuse me?” Red enquired lightly, knowing very well what she was asking.

“When she kissed you.”

“She didn’t kiss me.” Red corrected. “She only–”

“You’re skirting the issue.”

“She told me where she was staying.” he replied evenly.

“She...” Liz’s mouth pinched irritably. “After we told...” she huffed in irritation. “Bitch...” she whispered, though not softly enough, since Red heard her quite clearly.

The man glanced in the rearview mirror, his head cocking lazily when he found Dembe staring back at him with humored eyes.

“And I assume you’re going to pay her a visit.” the woman retained her window vigil.

“No.”

“But you’ve been so clearly invited.” she bit out.

“And I’m clearly not interested.”

Liz turned her head, frowning. “You’re not?”

“No, I’m not.” Red said in no uncertain terms. “I’m right where I wish to be.”
Red’s eyes slit open, slowly blinking away the last of his sleep.

“Damn...” he whispered softly, scooting his hips back, away from Elizabeth.

He rolled to his back, urging the ramrod erection to recede, as he often did these days, more often than not, since he awoke just about every morning with his cock nestled against Lizzy’s soft ass.

He sighed heavily, rolling from the bed, heading to the shower, hoping for a private moment to deal with this very noticeable issue.

_This was getting old fast._ Red was not accustomed to denying himself anything, let alone sexual release.

As he relaxed under the heated spray, Lizzy had come in to use the facilities and ask about the agenda for that day. After which, she busied herself with her morning routine.

Red could smell the feminine soap she used. She had left the cap off the bottle after her shower the night before.

The woman’s musical voice had a pleasing lilt as she related an amusing incident between her and Francis. Red zoned off into, not so much the words, but her soothing tone.

He had no trouble at all, relieving himself of the rigid erection under such conditions.

This cock tease he’d been on the receiving end of for the last month had been wearing him thin. He realized, as he gasped the last vestiges of the primal urges away...

He really needed to get laid.

He hadn’t been with anyone, in that way, since Lizzy had been staying with him.

He had been propositioned, but coming back to Lizzy seemed more important. He had been on the verge of taking Bridget up on her offer for a tumble, when Silas had called the night Lizzy had been in such distress.

The handjobs in the shower were holding him off, but that didn’t mean he hadn’t been and wasn’t feeling the itch for a good fuck.

Normally, when he went to Mark’s for the week, if he didn’t bring someone, he always seemed to
end up between a woman’s legs. His very favorite spot to be in the entire universe.

But this year, that might prove to be difficult, seeing as he had a guest, a very important one at that, with which to occupy the time.

He shut the water down, dried himself and made way for the closet, donning his clothes for the day. Maybe after seeing to Lizzy’s needs and getting her settled in for the night... he’d have a little free time to scratch that itch.

He pulled his shoe on, tying it when he realized he was scowling darkly.

It felt wrong to go fuck someone when Liz was with him. But then, it seemed wrong to jerk off in the shower while listening to her talk on the other side of the wall, but he had done it.

*Face it Red, your morals are shot to hell.*

Maybe when he got to Marks, he’d feel differently, hopefully he would find a toy to play with. But right now, the thought of leaving Liz alone to go fuck, set him on edge.

“One thing at a time, Red.” He sighed and pushed off the bench. “Deal with it later.”

“Deal with what later?” Liz said, stepping inside the closet, holding out a coffee to him.

He took the hot cup, sipping it, pleasantly surprised to find it to his liking.

“I made it correctly, right?” she asked.

“You did, thank you.” he took another mouthful, humming in pleasure.

She held her hand out, taking the warm cup then took a drink. “Now... deal with *what* later?”

“Nothing, sweetheart.” He looped his belt, pushing it through the buckle before taking his coffee back from the thief who had stolen it.

Red and Francis were just about to hit the phone lines, touching base with contacts, getting the low down on Anne’s activities in her last day.

When he was waylaid by a most pleasant surprise.

Liz stepped out of the bath area, her face slightly grimaced. She held her arms out from her sides, shaking her head slightly.

“Too much?” she held her breath for his critique because she secretly adored the creation she had donned.

The gown she wore was one that Red himself had suggested for the upcoming weekend.

Red halted his steps, as did the man beside him.

“Hot shit...” Francis’ mouth fell agape, but he sensed Red’s cool glance. “I mean... goodness, that gown is lovely.”

Red took in the deep purple silk with it’s black gossamer webbed overlay. The woman looked like a medieval fairy princess come to life. The train fell in sheer folds around her bare feet.
There was something disturbingly sensual in the image she evoked.

“Elizabeth,” his eyes said so much more than his words, “you’re absolutely ethereal.”

The woman suddenly felt beautiful and all warm inside, her smile alluding to the fact.

“Well... I’ve never been that.” she practically giggled. “But I simply adore this gown. It’s almost too sinful to wear.”

She retired to the other room, while the men continued on with their task.

An hour into their investigations, Red slapped his phone closed with a finality that bespoke of his mood.

“That little bitch!” he fumed.


“It was Natalia.” Red pushed off the couch, heading to the bar, pouring himself a stiff drink.

Liz entered the room, securing the tie around her robe, surprised at the venom in the man’s tone. She remembered Red mentioning that name before... it was the woman who had spiked his drink.

“How can you be sure?” Liz crossed, taking a seat by the picturesque windows which offered an amazing view of the city behind them.

“I told you, I turned her in on that drug charge?” Red reminded. “This is her little way of ingratiating herself back into the fold.”

“You mean she...” Liz gaped, “she killed Anne to get her business contacts?”

“Dog eat dog.” Francis muttered, before taking a drink from his own tumbler. “Or in this case, bitch kill bitch.” he swiveled his head towards Red, shrugging. “Sorry...” the man sighed. “What are you gonna do?”

Red huffed irritably, pouring another finger. “What the hell can I do?” he leaned back into the bar, crossing his ankles. “Why Anne even got involved with her, is what I don’t understand. She thought Natalia was trash.”

Francis’ phone ringing broke Red’s reverie, for the moment.

“Red, do you have a copy of that list from Anne’s room?” Francis asked.

“It’s in the bedroom, on the dresser.” Red gestured.

Francis pushed out of his chair, leaving the sitting room.

“Should I call Ressler to pick this Natalia up?” Liz whispered.

Red shook his head, negatively. “Not yet. She’s up to something, and I’d like to know what.” he explained. “Don’t worry though, Silas is putting a team on her, so we’ll be tracking her movements.”

The man’s jaw pulsed with his aggravation. Red closed his eyes, scratching at his neck, which Liz had come to learn, was as close as Red came to having a nervous tick.

“It’s not your fault.” she muttered softly.
“It is.” Red disagreed. “If I hadn’t—”

“She drugged you Red.” the woman interrupted, checking on Francis’ whereabouts, finding him still on the phone. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but considering who you are, you didn’t have to go easy and just get Natalia jail time.”

Red lifted his eyes, staring through her. The woman winced, knowing she should have found a way to word that differently.

“Dammit, Red. You know I didn’t mean anything by that.” she hissed. “I just meant, by rights—”

“My kind would have killed her.” Red gritted. He had wondered if Elizabeth would ever see him as anything but her CI... but it was moments like this, that clarified that thought with a resounding... no.

Liz arose, sensing the man’s mood. He stood, swirling the amber liquor in the glass, his thoughts and focus completely on his actions.

She placed her hand over the top of the glass, fingering his chin gently, demanding his attention.

“That was a rotten thing she did, dangerous...” it was stressed. “Even being who I am, I would have been hard pressed not to kill her.” she continued. “You didn’t, where so many others would have.”

Francis came out of the bedroom, stilling in his steps, feeling the tension in the room. More specifically, the stand off beside the bar. He eyed the two combatants warily.

“What did Mark want?” Red asked, holding the woman’s gaze dispassionately.

“He uh...” Francis tried to ignore the strain exhibited by both parties, “got a request from someone who supposedly had worked with Anne, Mark wanted to confirm if they were legit.” he looked between the couple, scowling. “What the hell is wrong with you two?”

Red broke his gaze, looking over to the young man. “Nothing.”

He pushed off the bar, grabbing his phone and wallet. “We have business to attend to.”

He left with no further word.

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It took Francis and Dembe several drinks and calm, rational reasoning to get Red in a better mood.

Francis’ idea of rational reasoning, having heard the reason behind the man’s sour mood was to rationalize... “Well Red, you do kill people. Let’s all be honest here.”

Dembe cut the man a severe chastising glance, putting it much better. “You mistook her intentions, Raymond. Perhaps what she was saying was that she admired the fact that you are attempting to react differently to situations than you have in the past.”

Red could accept that and he secretly wondered if he was really upset with Elizabeth or the fact that he was the cause of what Natalia had done.

After dinner that night, Red found himself relaxing a little bit. Francis and Mark were relating different versions of their misadventures over the years, each poking fun at the other.

Some of the tension that was blanketing him and Lizzy abated with the good humor and jovial atmosphere. A time or two when their eyes met, she seemed to sober a bit, her smile losing some of
She was still upset by what happened earlier.

He wondered if she was upset with herself for what she had said or his reaction to it?

She excused herself at one point. Red watched her trek across the hotel dining area, his scowl transferring to the large guard beside him.

“She’s being followed.” Silas assured, his own eyes trailing the guard he’d placed on the woman.

“You haven’t apologized?” he assumed.

“I don’t think he should.” Francis said.

“When’s the last time you had a serious girlfriend?” Silas quipped. “Hell, when’s the last time you got laid?”

Francis pulled an endearing ‘denial’ face. “And when have you?”

“This morning.” Silas’ face was perfectly composed.

“Oh...” Francis’ face fell.

Mark snickered into his glass for the exchange.

“Now, go see that she’s safe.” Silas pointed to the two men sitting across from him.

“You have a guard on her.” Francis screwed up his face, pointing the man out.

“Okay, you can’t take a hint.” Silas leaned into the table, eyeing them. “The adults are talking for a moment, get lost.”

Red gestured for the two young men to give them a moment, turning his attention to the head guard, as the two men reluctantly scooted back from the table.

“What about Dembe?” Francis squawked.

“Dembe...” Silas gritted his request.

The man followed suit, smiling at Silas’ vexation, leaving not because he had to... but because he respected the need for privacy.

When they were finally alone, Silas glanced over at his boss, his friend, sighing heavily.

“Are you pissed because of what she said or because you feel like it’s a step back?”

“Isn’t it?” Red replied curtly. He hadn’t meant to answer that quickly, nor that honestly.

“No, because unlike before, she tried to correct her error.” Silas clarified. “She hadn’t meant for the words to be taken as an insult, but that she noticed a change in you...” the man shifted his weight comfortably, “that you reacted differently than your reputation would suggest.”

Red’s brow knitted, remembering Dembe had said something similar.

“She doesn’t just see you as her CI anymore.” Silas continued. “Do you really not see it?”

The large guard’s head dropped meaningfully to one side as he realized that the other man actually
did not see the reality.

“Besides the two of you sleeping in the same bed, being more hands on and–”

“It’s for work.” Red countered.

“Don’t give me that shit.” Silas scoffed. “You two do not have to sleep in the same damn bed for work.” the man tossed his napkin on the table, leaning on his elbows. “Since when has she valued your opinion at work, let alone when hunting for her own home?” Silas scoffed. “Stop bullshitting me and quite frankly, yourself.”

Red sat back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest, his expression benign.

“I know about your little aborted kiss as well.” Silas knowingly admitted. “Was that for work too... because I didn’t see anyone around to impress.”

“If we go to Mark’s we have to keep up certain appearances–”

“You’ve gone this long without sucking face.” Silas pointed out.

“She’s hung up on Tom.”

“No she isn’t.” Silas disgusted. “Her reaction to that damn dream was proof enough of that.”

“She’s confused.”

“And Liz’s reaction to Lexa?”

“What the hell?” Red scowled. “After you and Dembe are done gossiping, do you paint each others nails before or after the pillow fight?”

Silas shook his head, irritated at Red’s diversion. “I’ve never known you to be afraid of anything, Red.”

Red’s eyes connected with the guards, the heavy silence saying enough.

“She’s giving you signals, hints that she’s interested, and you aren’t seeing them,” the man told the truth, “because you’re too afraid of her rejection.”

The stocky man pushed back his seat, standing. “That is not the Red Reddington I know.” Silas stated bluntly.

“You need to get your head straight, both of them.” Silas strongly suggested. “Either grow a set and make your move, or get on with it and go fuck someone else.” the handsome face hardened slightly. “You’re turning out to be a real bastard...”

“I apologize for upsetting your sensitive nature.”

Silas leaned into his fists, resting them on the table, glowering at the man across from him. “You told me to protect her. That’s what I’m doing.” he reminded. “And since you didn’t specify, I’m assuming that it was to shield her from all harm.” the man’s tone had hardened as well.

“You’re being a major dick. Stop speaking in fucking riddles and be straight with her for fucking once.”

Silas took a few steps, then hesitated, looking back at Red. “I know which path you’re going to
Red could not truthfully answer that question at this point and he secretly wondered how Silas could possibly do so.

About an hour later an orchestra arrived and couples filtered slowly to the dance floor.

Red’s expression spoke volumes as he sipped his drink, his eyes following the path of his friend.

“What?” Liz turned in her seat, watching the muscular man approach a lady a couple of tables away. Dembe leaned into the woman’s sphere, his smile almost lighting the room.

“Well now. That is unexpected.” there was total approval in Red’s tone and manner.


“Lizzy, he’s only asking the woman to dance, not mother his children.” Red pointed out.

“Who is she?” Liz was more than curious.

“I believe her name is Sarah,” Red tilted his head slightly, as the two made their way to the dimly lit dance floor, “she’s Rebecca’s right hand woman.”

“Like Dembe is to you?” Liz was surprised.

“You sound shocked.”

“I guess I just think of yours as being a mans’ world.” Liz realized how sexist that sounded, once said. “I’m not sure why, I’ve met Madeline. And then there’s always Mr. Kaplan.”

“You’d be surprised who’s lurking behind the scenes.” Red smiled secretively.

“Do they have a history?” she stuck to safer subjects.

“Not so much a history, more like two ships passing in the night.” Red saw no harm in confiding as much. “They’re always exchanging glances with one another but never had the time to get it together. I’m surprised he got the balls to finally approach her.”

“So you’re saying Hannah should be worried.” Liz stared at the handsome couple, dancing closely.

“I wasn’t under the impression that Hannah and Dembe were serious.”

“I guess they aren’t. She just really seems to like him,” Liz felt rather disappointed at the moment, “And I like Hannah.” She mumbled.

“Stay out of it, Lizzy.” Red advised. “Perhaps all they really want out of the relationship is nothing more than sex.”

“You think?” Liz tilted her head, wondering if it could be a possibility.

“Dembe, while being a good man, is mostly an absent one. Some women are fine with the constant travel, some aren’t.” Red could speak from experience. “I would imagine that Dembe would make sure of any problems that might arise before solidifying anything.”
“I guess he would.” Liz wondered what it felt like to have a ‘friend with benefits’. She herself, had never had a one night stand.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Honestly?” She smiled wickedly.

“Of course.”

“I was just thinking, I’ve never had casual sex. I wonder what it’s like?” Instead of him spitting his drink across the table like she expected him to do, he turned serious eyes to her.

“It’s empty and lonely. There’s no affection.” He replied evenly. “The sex feels great, sometimes. Afterwards, that’s the let down. Someone inevitably leaves at the end of the night.”

“But you’ve had a couple stay, haven’t you? Madeline?” she openly fished.

“My partners and I took care of a biological imperative.” he stirred his drink methodically.

“Partners?” Liz was intrigued and though she would only admit it to herself, maybe a little jealous. Red pursed his lips, side glancing her before continuing, “We had a cat nap or two before the next round. But a whole night together... no.”

Liz was stuck on his choice of words, next round. How many rounds could he do in a night?

“You’re the first woman I’ve slept with since my wife.” He confided. “If only due to the fact that you won’t stab me in the back while I’m sleeping,” he held a small smile. “Or at least, that is my impression up to this point.”

Both fell silent.

He wondered if he had over shared. He looked at the world and relationships one way, she another.

Everyone had a past, some more than others. While parts of hers, he would rather forget, they still made her who she was. He wouldn’t hold anything against her, ever. Nothing he learned about her was too much.

How she viewed his past, he wasn’t sure.

“It’s their loss.” Liz finally spoke.

“Excuse me?”

“That they didn’t ask you to stay. It’s their loss.”

“And why is that?” He smiled, waiting for the punch line.

“Because, when you’re there I can sleep.” She glanced out over the dance floor, sipping her wine. “I’ve never felt so safe.”

Red stared at her, slightly shell shocked. It was the last thing he had expected to hear.

The silence returned, but this time it was not uncomfortable.

Red pushed his drink aside, standing, his decision cast.
He held out his hand. “Would you care to dance?”

“I can’t do much with the boot.” She distastefully waved at the bulky thing.

“We can sway.” He took her hand, leading her to the floor. “It’ll be just like prom.”

She giggled her response.

He pulled her into him while she wrapped her arms around his neck. Slowly they began swaying.

“Yep, just like prom.” She laughed at the silly picture they must paint, being surrounded by people dancing correctly.

“No, you can’t see the moon between us.” Red quipped.

“I hated when the chaperones said that.” Seemed stupid rules applied everywhere.

She remembered back, dancing with Chad Krakow and a chaperone had split them up, saying almost the same exact phrasing.

“Like people weren’t having sex later on that night.” she smiled gently with the remembrance, a thought suddenly occurring to her. “Wait. You went to prom?”

“I keep shocking you, why is that?” he questioned lightly.

“It doesn’t seem like your thing.”

“I wasn’t always the Concierge of Crime, you know.” he shrugged slightly. “And you’re right, it wasn’t.”

“Then why did you go?” she enquired. “Did you have a date?”

Red looked at her, his expression saying it all.

“Of course I had a date. She was Prom Queen!” Red stressed, the importance of such a roll. “She had to go.” rolling his eyes dramatically. “I just wanted to fuck down by the lake... I was such a romantic back then.”

She giggled, “Were you already dating her?”

“Yes, terrible woman that she was.” he sighed bleakly.

“Red...” Liz chuckled.

“Not that I was much better.” He granted philosophically. “We both drank, heavily. It was toxic.”

“Then why did you two date?” she was stumped.

“She was dramatic, bitchy and had an evil streak wider than mine. It certainly wasn’t boring.” he looked off into the distance. “I detested being idle, she kept me busy.”

His mood changed, becoming darker. And as much as she was dying to delve more into who Red was and where he came from, she sensed, now wasn’t the time.

“Did you wear a powder blue tux?”

“Never!” He grimaced disgustedly. “I was debonair, even back then.”
“And modest… I bet you were quite handsome.” she eyed him speculatively. “What I would do for a picture of the high school you.” She shook her head, the tendrils around her face swaying hypnotically. “Please tell me you had long hippie hair and followed the Grateful Dead.”

Red laughed at the thought, “Unfortunately, no. I believe that my father would have actually made an appearance had I done that.” Liz frowned, wondering what that meant, but he continued speaking. “I was one hundred percent Preppy asshole.”

“So, not much has changed?” Liz surmised, her lips quivering in amusement.

“Oh, believe me. I was a darling compared to when I went into the Navy.” the man thought back on those times. “That’s when I became the huge asshole you know today.”

“Why do you say that?” She asked, intrigued.

“Besides having joined up only to piss my father off. I went in with a chip on my shoulder.” he wasn’t proud of that time. “I pushed boundaries and got away with it since I was good at what they threw at me. I enjoyed the challenge and wanted more.” he guided her gently back and forth. “I wasn’t above pushing buttons of those around me to achieve my goals.”

“Why did it piss your father off, you joining the Navy?”

“He wanted me to go into the Army, follow in his footsteps.” he shared. “I had wanted to be a Marine, but my love of the sea won out, so I joined the Navy.”

“I didn’t know that…” She said.

“Not much of who I was before I disappeared makes for good reading material,” he conceded, “except that I was being groomed for Admiral, a rising star at the Pentagon.” He mimicked the reporters perfectly. “It adds dramatic flair when speaking of me on CNN.”

He looked down at her, his expression more than serious. “They are so fair and unbiased, you know.”

“Were you, after working so hard, disappointed when you didn’t reach the goal of Admiral?” she ignored his quip.

“Contrary to popular belief, I didn’t want to be Admiral.”

“You didn’t?” she was mildly shocked.

“No. While the paycheck and prestige, stature, would have been a feather in my cap. Being an Admiral would have put me behind a desk.” his head lifted proudly, almost defiantly. “I wanted to be a SEAL.”

“How did you end up being set for the promotion then?”

“Because I moved up the ranks so quickly, that’s where everyone thought I was headed. And maybe I was.” he shook his head once slightly, almost jeeringly. “All I thought at the time was with rank, comes privilege and I wanted my choice of assignments.” he licked his lips thoughtfully. “Who knew it would lead me here.”

“How—”

“Raymond.” Dembe interrupted, quietly. “Mark needs to speak with you, he asked that I see if you
are available."

“I’m busy.” He gestured to the woman in his arms. “We’re waiting for the last dance call.”

Dembe was slightly lost.

Liz slapped his shoulder lightly. “No we aren’t.” She pulled back with a smile. “Go ahead, I don’t mind.”

But Red tightened his hold on her waist.

“Go on or he’ll just come looking for you.” she predicted. “Duty calls, Sailor…”

God, he hadn’t been called that in a long time and found he almost missed it.

Red sighed, “Tell him I’ll be right there.” Liz took his arm as he led her back to their table. “I’ll be back as soon as possible.”

“Take your time, I’m not going anywhere.” she pointed to Francis who was sauntering toward their table.

The man nodded, both to the arrival of his friend as Francis seated himself by Elizabeth and the woman, indicating his farewell.
Red followed Dembe down the long hall, nearing the conference rooms. “Did Mark say what he wanted?”

“He was approached about taking on a new shipper earlier. He would value your input, seeing as you frequently do business in the area.”

“And did he say who it was that approached him?”

“He did not.”

They rounded the corner, finding Mark Donovan waiting at the door for them.

He smiled at who ever was in the room behind him, closing the door before walking down the corridor to greet Red and Dembe.

Mark was a remarkable young man with piercing green eyes and an intelligent brow. He had the physique of a Roman God, and swagger of a man who was confident in his abilities.

“Who is it?” Red asked.

“A woman, Ariana Sanchez.” Mark began the tale. “She came to me earlier about taking on Gabriel Ramirez.” he explained. “He was to begin shipping for Anne, but...”

Red’s brows rose, his interest immediate.

He’d heard about Ramirez, but had not worked with him as of yet. He had relied on Fermin to handle most of his shipping needs, but Fermin handled the Western portion mainly. And since Red had not been in need of the Eastern portion at that time...he had put off securing anyone.

Until now.

Ramirez and his bunch were quite good at their jobs. Red had heard in passing, that not one shipment had gone missing or was damaged and these men were very serious about product arriving intact and on time. No matter what they had to do to ensure that scenario.

“I want to meet her.”

“You and the rest of the hotel.” Mark mumbled, flashing a quick grin before beginning the route to the Conference Room he had booked. “She’s quite beautiful.”

The three men entered the room, Red’s eyes zeroing in on the woman immediately.

She was indeed stunning. A true Spanish beauty with bronzed skin, soft and delicate features, long flowing brown hair down to her waist and an amazing figure.

She sat straight in her chair, holding Red’s gaze as though she was used to being ogled. And while he did enjoy her beauty, he was looking past that, seeing beyond what others focused on.

While she held a dignified air, she was definitely nervous. And grew more so under his unwavering
She adjusted in her seat, moving her large natural breasts in a bid to break his scrutiny, but it only seemed to heighten his awareness.

“Ms. Sanchez.” Red greeted, holding out his hand to her. “I am Raym–”

“Raymond Reddington, yes. I know.” she smiled engagingly.

He had to give it to the girl. She was holding it together well.

Her hand had been slightly damp and her posture a bit rigid, but it certainly could not have been the dozen pair of eyes undressing her.

Men were often swayed by her voluptuous figure, shapely legs and flowing locks. She was used to it and paid them no mind.

It wasn’t until Red walked into the room that she put up her front. If he was new to the game, he might have missed it, but when you had been on his side of things for twenty plus years. He saw her for what she was.

Someone was playing messenger.

The others were too busy drooling over the girl to hear much of what she was actually saying anyway. Red pulled the seat out opposite her, focusing her attention where it should be...

On him.

“What is it that we can do for you, Ms. Sanchez?”

“Oh, please,” she smiled warmly, “call me Ariana.”

Red smiled in return, though not for the reasons for which she assumed. He would let her fall back on what made her comfortable, until it became a distraction. But if it helped her get some confidence back... it didn’t hurt anything. Yet.

“All right, Ariana.” the deep baritone rumbled almost intimately, leaving the woman wondering what he sounded like in the bedroom after a good tumble. “Tell me, what is it that you’re here for?”

She gave a quick background on Gabriel Ramirez and his crew and answered some of Red’s questions until they were interrupted by a phone call.

“Excuse me for a moment.” she batted long lashes charmingly, stepping a couple feet away.

Red turned in his chair, staring off vacantly, totally focused on the one sided conversation. She spoke quickly and fluently in her native language.

As her conversation continued and a quick check of the room assured her no one was listening, she assumed that no one understood her language, speaking more freely.

Apparently not one of them had paid attention in high school Spanish.

She hissed into the phone, then lowered her voice. But Red had heard enough.

“Mark, clear the room.” he requested sotto voce.
Mark questioned the man with a look.

Red pointed at the others talking amongst themselves. “They’re holding back our deal because she can’t talk freely. Get them out.”

Mark gaped, then pointed at himself in mock consternation.

“If you would just me a few moments alone with her, I would appreciate it.” Red smiled unassumingly. “I’ll find you later and fill you in.” he assured.

Mark shrugged, pushing back from the table. “Gentlemen, why don’t we go visit the bar, maybe have a smoke?” he gestured to the door. He threw Red an amused smirk when not one of the men present, questioned why they were leaving.

Red pushed back his own chair, conferring quietly with his friend. “Dembe, if you would check on Lizzy for me.”

Dembe offered a slight incline of his head, the dark eyes transferring to the still occupied woman.

“I know what she wants. You know what she wants.” Raymond sing-songed his head. “I’ll secure the deal and be with you shortly.”

Dembe left the room, leaving the two remaining occupants alone.

Red sat back in his chair, listening as Ariana finished off her conversation, summarily clicking the phone shut.

“I do apologize. Business you know.” she smiled charmingly, retracing her steps to her former seat.

Red enquired, in her own language, if there were any problems with which he could assist.

The bronze complexion paled visibly. Red simply smiled.

“Now, tell me. What proposal is Gabriel offering?”

She deflated a bit in her chair, then gave him the run down. Gabriel was in trouble.

There hadn’t been many shipments lately of any real cash value, with others cutting into the supply. Gabriel was worried because he had a crew to keep employed and more importantly, fed.

“Are they limited to the East?” Red asked.

“No, they will deliver where product is needed.”

“And how many are in his crew?”

Ariana sighed, “We had twelve in the compound, but now there are only nine, plus Gabriel.”

Red waited patiently for her to finish the story.

“The others left. Unhappy with lack of production.” she frowned at their lack of loyalty. “We live well, but they wanted better.”

“I’m not traveling down that way for a couple weeks, and when I do, I’ll be on vacation.” Red explained. His eyes softened when Ariana bit her lip anxiously.
She was certain she had screwed up securing her people work.

Red set his fingers under her chin, raising the beautiful face, “I planned on taking seven days off... but after that time, if Gabriel is so inclined, I would like to fly him there to discuss more with him and finalize a deal.”

Ariana took a deep breath, her eyes lifting immediately, hope shining within the dark depths. “Really?”

“Yes, now, why don’t you call him back and see when it would be a good time for him to meet.”

She snatched her phone off the table, dialing quickly. She spoke excitedly, relaying the information, until Red gestured for the phone.

Gabriel had a few jobs lined up and would be free after that. He would have a better understanding of his time frame when Red headed South. The man was very pleased about the upcoming meeting with Red Reddington.

After swapping information, Red bid the gentleman a good evening, before ending the call.

Ariana was practically vibrating with enthusiasm by the time he sat the phone down. She had done well by her people and Reddington seemed like a good associate to have on their side.

He stood, smiling down at the woman then helped her from her chair. “Thank you for taking a chance on us, Mr. Reddington. We will not let you down.”

Imagine the man’s surprise, when the Latin beauty impulsively leaned into him, the full lips latching securely onto his unsuspecting ones.

Even more of a surprise, she kissed as good as she looked. Normally, that wasn’t the case. The more beautiful the woman, the less she put into it, thinking her looks were enough.

But Ariana gave it her all.

Red inclined his head, allowing the physical pleasure for a long moment. Wrapping his arm around her small waist, he pulled her tighter into him. When her tongue flicked his lips seductively, he opened for her.

The dance continued, both teasing one other until the woman herself, moved his hand down to the curve of her shapely ass.

Cupping the supple flesh, Red effortlessly lifted her to the Conference table, deepening the sensual kiss.

Spreading her legs, Red stepped between them, more than pleased to feel her hook a leg around his ass, pulling him into the cradle of her thighs. Raking his bulge against her center, the woman moaned, her legs opening wider.

Her hands stroked him, giving Red exactly what he had been needing. The sensual and sexual touch of a female.

Ariana gasped, baring his chest, skirting her fingers through the wealth of soft down found there.

Red freed her bountiful breasts, his darkened eyes taking in the supple flesh, his palm flattening against her warm skin as he lay her back unto the table.
He surveyed the beauty unveiled, his hands cupping the firm mounds, his fingers pulling the pert nipples. The sensation sent a jolt to his pulsing cock.

He gently kneaded, squeezing the firm plumpness experimentally. A soft whimper from her beautiful lips urged him on. He grasped her hips, dragging her roughly into position.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard.” he snarled, reaching under her skirt, palming her full ass cheek as she moved into his touch.

Red grunted his approval. Her small hand cupped the crotch that had been teasing her so effectively, massaging the quickly hardening length.

Her fingers pulled at his belt and zipper.

Red reached under her full skirt, removing her panties in one effortless move. The woman’s deft fingers slid into the expensive silk of his boxers, stroking his erection, teasing his thickened head.

“God...” he hissed, pushing hard into her touch.

He grabbed at his jacket, pulling a condom free just as her warm fingers released him from his confinement.

Yanking his arms free of his jacket sleeves, he dropped it carelessly to the floor. He tore the foil packet open, rolling the protection in place with practiced ease.

Palming her tiny hips in his hands, he yanked the woman closer, catching her cry of desire in his mouth as his erection brushed her slit.

Leaning his weight into one arm, he laced his fingers through hers. His other hand grasped the hem of her skirt, bunching the soft material up around her waist. Ariana’s hips rocked up in open invitation just as his cock lined up with her moist offering...

The scent of aroused female filled his senses...

*Shit...* his jaw clenched tightly, the man’s entire system shutting down.

*What the fuck Reddington?*

“I can’t...” Grunting painfully, his body shook, his craving increasing when he felt her damp, wet heat rake his cock head.

Ariana massaged his erection lovingly, her hand halting uncertainly when she felt his abrupt retreat. “Is something wrong?” her voice shook with the emotion he had evoked.

His eyes shut tightly, his jaw clenching inflexibly. “I can’t do this.”

Squeezing the small hand in his, he fought for control until he finally had the will to pull away. Taking a deep shaky breath, he lifted off the delectable little body, releasing the grip on her hand, instead curling his fingers tightly into the hard wood of the table.

“Did I do something wrong?” Ariana stroked him harder, desperately hoping to please him. His shaft was hot and thick, she could feel him throbbing through the thin sheath of the condom.

He shook his head with undisguised turmoil. “You did nothing wrong.” he panted. “I did... I’m wrong.” he shuddered when she stroked him, teasing his sensitive head.
He placed his hand over hers, halting any further movement.

_This felt wrong._

But he was so confused. Why should it feel wrong?

What the _fuck_ was his problem! There was a insanely beautiful woman right here, with her legs opened, more than ready for him. So why had he stopped?

_You know why you stopped._

Ariana smelled wonderful. Her arousal was more than enticing.

But Lizzy...

Elizabeth was captivating...alluring...mesmerizing. He kept close to her all night, because he couldn’t get enough of her scent. He awoke periodically, just to nuzzle her neckline... to inhale that womanly aroma.

He had never smelled anything so sweet, so pure.... he had never wanted anything more than to make Elizabeth his, to claim her as his own...

Elizabeth is all he wanted.

_Lizzy was all he needed..._

Red stepped back, gripping his cock, urging the ramrod erection to recede.

“Dammit!” Red pulled at the unused condom, flinging it into a nearby trash can.

Ariana hurriedly arose from her prone position, raking the long hair out of her face. Her expression was one of concern. She modestly rearranged her clothing, the dark eyes never once leaving the man’s face.

Red sensed her distress, feeling bad for the woman.

“It’s not you.” he breathed his relief, as his erection finally started to ease, “I’m a bastard. A fucking rotten bastard.” he trembled visibly, the pain finally making itself known.

Had he been having regular sex, it would just be a mild annoyance. But after the ever present ‘cock tease’ he’d had for the last month and being denied real relief, the man was left with a deep ache in his balls.

“What can I do to help?” she was genuinely sincere.

He waved the issue briskly aside, bringing his breath under control. “I never should have allowed...”

“I started it.” she admitted freely.

“I’m engaged.” he blurted, as his erection slowly deflated, allowing him to slip it back inside his pants and it would damn well stay where it belonged.

Ariana inhaled sharply, “Oh! No one told me. I hadn’t heard.” she felt horrible.

“She was hurt and I...” Red didn’t know why he continued to talk. “We couldn’t... and I guess I just got caught up in the moment.”
“It’s okay. You didn’t do anything.” Ariana smiled softly, further adjusting her person. “Trust me, if I thought you were an asshole, I’d tell you.” she laughed shortly, then sobered. “You just miss touching her and being touched. And you slipped a little.” she shrugged slender shoulders. “But you stopped yourself.” she reminded encouragingly.

Well, that much was true at least. He sure as hell had ‘slipped’ a little.

He had to figure this out. He either had to tell Elizabeth how he felt and accept her rejection so he could move on, once and for all. Or just push her to the private little corner of his brain, fuck someone and deal with how he felt after that.

Neither option sounded ideal.

Red buttoned his shirt, “I apologize, Ariana.”

“No need, as I said. I started it.” she smiled understandably. “I didn’t realize how... riveting you were in person.” she chuckled softly, striving for a lightness she did not feel. “I do hope this doesn’t change your plans for–”

“No. No,” he assured her quickly, “I want to speak to Gabriel.”

He was just fastening the last button on his shirt when a knock on the door interrupted the conversation.

Francis peeked his head around the corner. “Oh... I was looking for... you.” his voice trailed away as he took in the scene.

Red thanked God he had stopped. If he hadn’t, he would have been balls deep in Ariana when Francis just blithely waltzed in, as was his habit these days.

“What?” Red snapped at the man hovering at the door.

Francis slowly stepped into the room examining the two occupants critically. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, slapping it into Red’s chest.

“You better wipe that lipstick off before Lizzy sees it.”

Shit... Red took the white cloth, rubbing his lips clean.

“Please do not say anything to her.” Ariana pleaded. “I kissed him... I didn’t know he was engaged. It is my fault. I was just so excited about...”

“Ariana...” Red halted the stilted explanation, his mood dark.

Francis looked between the two, then bent over, coming back up, casually tossing Ariana’s panties on the table.

Fuck... Red looked at the tiny scrap of cloth, his thoughts stagnated.

“Please, he did nothing wrong.” Ariana begged Francis to understand, balling the flimsy material in her clenched fists quickly.

“Ariana, I will handle this.” Red’s tone stopped the woman from speaking further. He was the one at fault, not her. He wouldn’t let her take the fall for his mistake.
“If you would be so kind as to inform Gabriel I will expect his call.” he smiled gently at the woman. “The details will be worked out later.”

She nodded solemnly, taking her leave, with but one look of total remorse before closing the door behind her.

Well, she was certainly loyal. Red could appreciate such a virtue.

“What the fuck, Red!” Francis snapped. “What the hell did you do!”

Red braced his arms on the table, breathing out his stress and relief. “I know you and Lizzy have become close friends and I appreciate your concern here, but it was just a kiss.” Red glanced over, his eyes issuing a warning.

“A kiss wasn’t all that just happened!” Francis pointed to Red’s disheveled clothes. “How can you have fucked someone else when she’s... what the hell! Lizzy is just right out there!” He jabbed his finger towards the dining area.

“I didn’t fuck Ariana.” Red stood upright, tucking his shirt back into place almost casually.

“Really?” Francis pointed down at Red’s belt, scowling. “Then what the hell did you do? Get a blow?”

“No...” Red zipped up, then buttoned his pants, his manner stiff and unyielding.

“What the fuck is wrong with you!” Francis was beside himself.

“It just happened, Francis. She kissed me and it just got carried away for a minute.” Red gritted, fastening his belt. He threw another warning glare. “Let it go.”

“Is this why you were asking if I was interested in Liz? So you could have a rationale to fuck around?”

Red narrowed his eyes at the man, “No.” he growled. “I told you, let it go.”

“Yeah, I heard that.” Francis replied sarcastically. “Oops, my mistake. So what do I tell Liz when she asks... oh, it was no big thing. Red just accidentally fell into another woman’s pussy.”

“Damn it, Francis!” Red’s tone dripped ice but the man only absently continued fixing the knot in his tie as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do at this moment.

“How far did you get?” the younger man questioned heatedly. “And don’t you dare tell me nothing happened. Because the guilt in your eyes says enough.”

Red’s temper flared, ever so glad to have an outlet for the emotion he was feeling. “Don’t you fucking judge me... don’t you fucking dare.”

Francis’s eyes narrowed into slits of fury, “You son of a bitch!”

The man drew back quickly, punching Red directly across the jaw, that fury transmitted into his action.

Reddington staggered slightly, turning slowly, wiping the blood from his mouth. His eyes were suddenly cold stones of empty darkness. “I will give you that one, because of Lizzy. Don’t ever raise your hand to me again... because you don’t know shit.”
“Maybe not, but you did fuck Lexa the whole time we were in Italy.” Francis growled an angry reminder.

Shit! What could Red say to that?

He had fucked Lexa over those three days, a lot. While Francis was in the next room.

But he and Lizzy were not playing this charade then. A charade to which Francis was not privy.

He could understand the younger man’s frustration and anger on one hand, but on the other... he was not accustomed to anyone speaking to him in that manner any longer.

“Who the hell else have you fucked when you’ve been gone?” Francis snapped. “While I was keeping your fiancée company, who were you fucking!”

Red stood perfectly silent, debating his options.

“Lizzy is the best thing to happen to you in a long time, you idiot!” Francis seethed quietly.

“I know that...” he stated deathly quiet.

“I don’t think you do.” Francis stalked to the door, “And you sure as hell aren’t worthy of her.” he flung open the door.

“Oh, and not that you probably care,” the man needled, “but Edward is out there, hitting on Liz even as we speak.” the man gritted, slamming the door closed behind him, leaving Red alone.

“Fuck!” Red spat, punching his fist into the hard oak table before hurrying out the door.
April 28

Red stalked the hall, rounding the corner into the ballroom, searching for Elizabeth.

Among the myriad of people crowding the opulent area, he finally located her over by the bar and sure enough, just as Francis had said... that bastard Edward was clearly making his move.

The little weasel overtly moved closer, pushing Francis aside without seeming to do so, totally disregarding a patiently watching guard, who smirked openly at some remark Elizabeth had made concerning Edward’s advances.

Reddington pushed back a primal urge to stalk over and slice the man’s throat from ear to ear.

His confrontation with Francis was bad enough but seeing the scene unfolding before him now, his anger reached a boiling point.

And for so many other fucking reasons.

He was sick and tired of this shit!

*Enough!*

“Look man, she’s not interested.” Francis snapped. “What the fuck aren’t you understanding.”

“I haven’t heard her say anything, actually.” Edward countered. “Since you won’t shut the fuck up and mind your own business long enough for her to do so.”

“I’m not interested.” Liz sighed her annoyance. “Besides, I know you are well aware that I am in a relationship.” she held up her finger in proof. “I am perfectly happ–”

“Are you sure he still wants you?” the weasel of a man questioned, moving closer. “I mean, I don’t see him coming out to defend his property.”

Red’s eyes blackened, focusing on his target as he reached out, snagging Francis’ collar, yanking the young man out of his way.

“What the fu...” Francis bitched, stumbling back, only to be caught in the sure hands of a chuckling Silas.

“Look who showed up.” Silas mumbled, steadying Francis on his feet. “I guess he *does* want her...”

Francis pulled at his collar, loosening his tie, watching the show begin.

“That remains to be seen.” he muttered tightly.

Silas glanced over at Francis. “We have front row seats.” He was so excited to see the master at work... finally.

“I’m here, asshole.” Red forced himself between Elizabeth and Edward, his bulk moving the other
man to arm’s length.

“I thought I made it perfectly clear last time we spoke, all that was required of you.” Red stepped into the man’s space, forcing Edward back yet another step. “I see I wasn’t clear enough.”

He jabbed his fingers into the man’s chest, shoving him back. “You are not to speak to Elizabeth.” he grasped the front of the man’s shirt, jerking him forward. Red’s face, inches from the other man’s.

“Don’t look at her... don’t come near her... don’t even fucking think about her.” Red gritted, his thumb suddenly pushing in on Edward’s windpipe, focused intently on the quickly bulging veins of the man’s neck which was now in his grasp.

“...If you so much as breath in her general vicinity,” Red tilted his head, his eyes void of any real emotion, as was his tone which somehow made it more chilling, “...I will kill you.”

The silence was brittle.

“Do you fucking understand me, now?” it was pleasantly enquired.

Edward glanced over the broad shoulders, his eyes falling on Elizabeth Keen, a small smirk playing about the thin line of his mouth... openly defying such a threat.

Red’s nostrils flared at the blatant brush off, his blood surging through his body drowning out the sounds of reason.

“You fucking prick.” Red grated a snarl.

The enraged man landed a series of vicious punches to the younger man’s face, one such blow fracturing the bones inside the other man’s nose. A horrendous gush of blood covered Edward’s mouth and chin, dripping down the front of the man’s pristine shirt.

“Red!” Liz gasped, mortified.

Red’s foot swept out swiftly, knocking Edward to the tile floor. He crouched over the bastard, his face enraged, his arm drawn back for yet another series of assaults.

Edward feebly fought back with a intended right hook, which was blocked easily by Red who had clear advantage.

Red stared murderously down, increasing the tightness of his grip on the front of Edwards’s clothing. He shifted his weight hard, his knee sinking into his victims chest.

Edward gasped for air, but Red’s hand tightened systematically around the fucker’s throat.

Red’s expression was totally without emotion.

“Silas, do something!” Liz winced, as the vicious beating continued.

“I am.” Silas replied lazily. “I’m staying out of it, and so are you.” he reached out, snagging her arm, dragging her out of harm’s way, sensing the direction the slight debate would take.

Having wiggled his way to the wall, Edward put his foot against it, flipping both men to their sides. He struggled to overcome his opponent, but Red had worked his leg up against the man’s chest.

One strategic shove, containing all Red’s brute strength, sent the other man crashing backwards,
careening into the hardwood bar.

The crowd gathered around them, having come to watch the spectacle unfold, cheering loudly now.

Francis noted the guy next to him was taking bets right and left, cash in hand, jotting names and numbers into a slender notebook.

Silas grappled for the young man’s attention. Francis pulled it momentarily away from the confrontation. The guard was waving a hundred dollar bill, wanting his own wager recorded for posterity.

But Francis was in no mood, waving the money aside.

“Take this you little asshole.” Silas warned. “Or we’ll be the next one they’re betting on.”

Francis sighed heavily, absentmindedly obeying.

Liz watched her surroundings, slightly shell shocked. Silas kept the crowd at bay, so she still had an excellent view of the horrible thing taking place before her.

She was jostled unceremoniously, having tried to forge her way forward a bit.

“Get your ass over here, dammit.” Silas pulled her back into his embrace, his burly arms protecting her on all sides. “Isn’t this cool.” it was the first time the woman had ever seen the man so animated.

Red regained his dominant position, delivering several punishing blows to Edward’s lower stomach.

“Let me go...” she struggled against Silas’ firm hold.

“Hey, the boss needs to work off some frustration.” the tall man winced as Red rammed Edward’s head into the wall. “A lot of frustration.” he clarified. “Besides, the little prick deserves it and more.”

Liz flinched as Red threw Edward towards a nearby table. The younger man spun around, grabbing a glass.

She opened her mouth to warn Red but a large palm silenced her. She tried biting the hand but Silas shook off the effort, laughing gaily.

“Behave, you little minx.” the guards attention to the center ring.

The stocky man hurled the tumbler at Red, but Reddington jerked his head slightly to the left, avoiding the projectile.

“Do not distract him.” Silas warned, scolding the woman. “Red does not need your help.”

“What the hell is wrong with you!” she gaped. “I meant you, you idiot!”

Silas grabbed her, quickly dragging her out of the way of several men who came tumbling toward them, having unfortunately been caught as a byproduct of the fight.

“He doesn’t need my help either.” Silas seemed a trifle upset by the fact, clearly wishing to join in the melee. “I think he would prefer I stay the hell out of it.” he tsked his disappointment.

“You’re a bodyguard!”

“You bodyguard.” he reminded. “Not his... per se.” he rolled his eyes with great exaggeration when
the woman turned the full force of the precious pout upon him directly. “He’s defending your honor, you numb skull.”

He would have laughed in her face, if it hadn’t been for that pout. For anyone to be concerned over Red Reddington in a fight was beyond ludicrous.

“You look like a confused puppy.” His smile faded quickly enough as he noted four men entering the bar. Silas zeroed in on them, his Spidey senses tingling.

Silas’ hand went to his weapon just as the new arrivals reached for theirs. The tall man leading the way held up a stilling hand, his interest clearly caught by the identity of the participants of the ruckus.

Elizabeth was taken aback by the difference in her guard. The fun loving, carefree, flippant personage of a second ago, had been replaced by a coldly calculating individual that she had never met before.

Silas glanced back and forth between both sides, hyper vigilant, ready should his services be required.

“It’s Anthony.” Francis sidled up beside them, explaining the situation as it now stood. “It’s his hotel.”

Silas half nodded, checking the whereabouts of his charge.

Liz was meandering her way through the crowd, pushing and shoving into a spot that she could maneuver to the front.

“That little ingrate...” Silas gritted, bolting forward with Francis right beside him. “Who ever gets her first, takes her out and spanks her ass hard!” the man growled angrily. “And not in a good way.”

The woman pushed hard at the gathered crowd, breaking through to the front just as Red stalked towards the other man, drawing back his fist yet again.

Edward Costa looked as if he had been through hell. His clothes were ripped and bloodied as was his face and hands. He was bruised and clearly broken in more places than one.

Liz stepped between the men, her face allowing her fear, her eyes pleading for some semblance of sanity to prevail.

Edward took the opportunity presented since Red’s focus was now elsewhere. He looked around for any weapon available, finding it instantly, turned on its side, laying there just begging to be used.

He hefted the metal seat, his intentions more than apparent. Never mind that Elizabeth was between himself and his former assailant.

Silas’ hand gripped the leg of the barstool that Edward was just about to smash into Reddington.

Red saw the danger immediately, choosing to bring the woman into his arms, turning hastily to protect her from any harm.

He shielded her, his arms bands of steel. He waited for the impact which never came.

He had not seen Silas’ intervention.

Silas’ large hand engulfed Edward’s face, shoving hard. The force landed the smaller man clear across the length of the dance floor.
Silas grinned as loud booing and hissing was directed his way. He had after all, broken up a perfectly good fight. The guard held his hands up apologetically, his grin firmly in place.

Red slowly turned his head, then lifted his body, bringing the woman along with him.

He straightened, searching for the little prick who had been the focus of his murderous rage.

Red watched as the ‘prick’ was unceremoniously escorted from the area by the Security detail of the hotel in which they resided.

He nodded his gratitude to the man Francis had earlier identified as Anthony Burke, owner of the establishment. Tony grinned back at him sheepishly.

Red turned his attention to a very anxiously awaiting, Elizabeth Keen.

“Are you all right?” she measured his physique critically, zeroing in on his bloodied knuckles. The only marks she could visibly see at the moment, was the blood of the other man on Red’s clothes and a slight bruise forming to the left of his chin.

“Oh, he’s fine, as usual.” Francis finished off his tumbler, letting the empty glass thump heavily into the bar. “He always lands on his feet. Everyone knows that.”

“Why don’t you go fuck yourself.” Red returned in kind and for a moment, Francis’ face lost it’s belligerent glaze, but soon enough it was back.

“If anyone would know about fucking... it would be you, right Red.”

Silas was completely perplexed by the change in the men’s attitude.

Red shifted his own dark gaze, finding Dembe staring at him with furled brows. He waved aside any unasked questions with a curt motion of his hand.

“Get the hell out of my sight, Francis.” Red gripped the corner of the wall so tightly, his fingers turned white.

“Red!” Liz had never heard Red speak to Francis in such a manner.

Francis glanced at the woman, feeling for her. She was in the middle of something she could not possibly understand. He thought to make it better for her by easing some of the tension, if only for appearances sake.

“Let’s keep this somewhat civil, shall we.” Francis directed his statement to the older man. “We have to work together remember.”

Reddington lifted a cold stare. “No, we don’t.” he cut a meaningful look in Silas’ direction.

The guard could not believe what was being asked of him... asked hell, demanded.

Francis smiled wanly in encouragement to Elizabeth before Silas directed him away from the immediate vicinity.

Elizabeth was completely lost. She watched the young man literally being escorted by her own bodyguard, her friend and confidant suddenly persona non grata, apparently.

*What the hell was going on?*
She turned expectant eyes to a patiently waiting Red Reddington.

“We have a problem.” Red bleakly announced. “Well, two problems, really.” he conceded.

“When are you going to share this with me?” she asked plaintively, reaching out to touch the slight bruising on his face but his hand prevented the move.

She slowly dropped her arm, a chill traversing her body. He had never denied her access to any of his person before.

“Red, what’s wrong.” she had to know.

“Francis hits like a girl.” he muttered his annoyance before turning his attention to the real problem.

“Yes, but more importantly, he thinks I’m fucking around on you.”

The woman took a few moments to digest that statement. “Okay, why?”

Red hated to have to do this, but his former colleague had left him no choice. Either he told the story or Francis would. It was infinitely better coming from the source.

“When I was away with Francis on a business trip,” he began slowly, “I reacquainted myself with an old lover and when I wasn’t with Francis, I was with her.”

Liz closed her eyes, making the connection. “And we’ve supposedly been together for over a year.” her head whipped around aimlessly. “Is she here?” she squeaked her dismay.

“She was here.” the man admitted. “She left.”

She waited with bated breath.

“An associate kissed me and Francis saw evidence of it, tonight.” he furthered the sordid tale.

“Oh.” she was a little deflated. “So he knows about this lover and now this woman tonight.”

“Yes.” he verified. “When I asked if he was interested in you...”

“You asked what?!?” her tone was particularly shrill at this latest development.

Red held up a silencing hand, “He thought I asked because I wanted him to cover my tracks. He’s understandably pissed, in your defense.”

She was touched that Francis was such a good friend, even going up against Red for her. She gathered her thoughts, one most prevalent coming to mind.

“Did you have sex with her?”

“No...”

“But you were going to?” she needed confirmation.

“Yes.” he answered quietly.

He saw it coming, allowing it to take shape, taking the full brunt of her hand as it connected to the same cheek where Francis had hit him earlier.
Liz gasped her shock, having no idea why she had done such a thing.

He turned back, his eyes devoid of any emotion.

“I-I don’t know why I—I” she was flabbergasted. Stumbling through her churning emotions, attempting to find a logical explanation. “Oh my God!” her eyes grew wide as the stain of her hand print reddened his cheek. “I am so sorry.”

The words sounded to hollow and nonsensical to her. This entire night had been one big cluster fuck in her opinion, and she had just made it so much worse.

Why in God’s name would she do such a thing? “Red, I am so very, very sorry. I don’t know why I did that. I just don’t.” her hands covered her mouth, her fingers tremulous.

“It’s all right, you hit like a girl too.” he turned serious for her stricken face, touched his heart. “I’ve put you in a hell of a predicament?” he acknowledged.

Liz was still reeling, trying to figure out exactly what was going on here. She had no right to feel the feelings that his story evoked inside her.

Was she jealous again. Because if she were honest with herself, she had felt that particular emotion after their encounter with Lexa.

She had been thinking about it and that was the only answer that made any sense. And now, her actions tonight.

They weren’t dating. They weren’t engaged. But... she had about kissed him yesterday.

She had wanted to kiss him. She could freely admit that.

To think of him having been with this other woman tonight, touching that woman how she wanted Red to touch...

Her cheeks flamed and she turned away so the man could not see her conflicting emotions.

“I know that we’re here, playing roles. But I should remembered that they don’t know that.” He explained as best he could. “And for that, I do apologize. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

She glanced around the quiet enough bar now, watching the staff put things to right. She did not know exactly what to say or do, so she allowed the man to continue without interruption.

“You are my main priority and that I let my libido get the better of me...” he growled, angry with himself. “I let my judgement get away from me and I have probably fucked up a good relationship between us all because I—”

“We can fix this.” she hastily interceded, sensing where he was going. “Just let me handle this my way, I have an idea.” she advised quietly. “I am more concerned at the moment, for this thing between you and Francis.”

“I don’t give a shit about Francis.” he snapped. “I understand his alliance to you, hell I even commend it... but there is a line, and he crossed it.”

“You’re just angry right now.” she suddenly saw the humor of the situation. “You know what I think is really bothering you?” she leaned closer, lowering her voice and Red could smell that scent he had been thinking about all afternoon. “I think that Red Reddington has found out... that he is human
after all.”

She turned thoughtful for a moment, remembering her own humanity. “We all have our little frailties, Red. Myself included.”

Red’s brow furrowed slightly, impressed with her maturity.

“You have needs, you’re a man.” she lifted knowledgeable brows. “God knows you’re a man. A very attractive one that women flock to. It would be unnatural if you did not... respond occasionally.”

“This is just a little hitch in our plans that can be rectified.” she touched his lapel tentatively. “Will you trust me to do that?”

Red looked at her in a different light. He had expected something entirely different, more than pleasantly surprised at how she was handling the situation.

A situation entirely of his making.

“I jeopardized what we’ve built and I’m very angry and disappointed in myself.”

“We all make mistakes once in a while, even you.” she smiled up at him. “You just needed to blow off some steam and as you said, it’s perfectly natural. A biological imperative.”

“Need or not, I promise it will not happen again.” the man never lied... to her. “I truly didn’t mean for it to happen, Elizabeth.”

She about laughed out right, but caught herself, when she realized how serious he was.

“It was a huge mistake. She wasn’t what I wanted.” he got lost in the narrative. “I wanted y–”

“They’re headed this way.” she whispered urgently, putting on an innocent face.

The man’s head fell back, the frustration apparent on his face. God, he had been so close.

Mark and Francis approached somewhat warily, unsure if they would be welcomed at this stage. The man only had eyes for Red’s face. He and Silas had a long talk on the merits of loyalty and misunderstandings.

It was Silas’ considered opinion, an opinion Francis valued regardless of how their relationship seemed on the surface... that the young man had acted hastily in his judgement where Red was concerned.

Besides the fact, that Reddington was the father figure that Francis had never had, when Red had said what he had said before, about their business association being terminated... Francis had totally been thrown a loop.

It was the very last thing he had expected or wanted.

He did not know how to get back into the older man’s good graces, but he did know, he was damn well going to try.

“We’re meeting within the hour.” Mark stated without preamble.

“We’re bidding on Anne’s holdings, apparently.” Francis explained. “Via the terms of her Will.”
“Where?” Red’s tone was short.

Mark’s brow crinkled at the man’s clipped tone, but he pointed across the way to a Conference Room.

Mark and Francis, having delivered the needed info, took their leave. Both sensed there was something left unsaid, which needed to be continued, between Liz and Red.

Francis nodded his farewell, regretful an opening had not arisen to make amends.

Liz called out after his retreating figure. “Francis, wait.”

He halted his steps, glancing at Red expectantly.

The man looked away. Not a good sign.

“Red told me what happened and while I’m not happy about it...” Liz scolded the individual in question with a look. “I do understand it.”

“Excuse me?” Francis immediately questioned, then caught his reaction, regretting it.

“When you went on that trip?” Francis nodded slowly, letting her know he was following along. “Red and I had an argument, well, fight actually. We didn’t speak to each other...” she checked with the man who brooded silently beside her, “for what, a couple of weeks?”

Red lowered his eyes, not sure he wanted to be a part of this.

Francis kept his opinion to himself this time.

“It’s no excuse, I know.” Liz placated hurrying on with her story. “But to be honest, I had...” she managed a guilty look, “I mean...when Red was gone...”

Red snapped his head around sharply, feeling an instant flare of anger.

This was handling it her own way! he seethed inwardly. Where the hell was she going with this?

Francis blanched visibly, thinking he knew where this was going.

Red stepped closer to the woman, his gaze fixed and heated. “What the hell are you saying?”

Liz thought he was playing his part very well. So well in fact, she backed away slightly from such intensity.

“I-I think it’s evident.” she thought an addendum was needed however. “You can do it, but I can’t?” she asked innocently.

Red’s rage erupted incandescently. He knew she was playing the part expected or at least she had damned well better be. He knew it was damned hypocritical, given he had been with Lexa.

But it didn’t negate the fact that he felt... an outrage so deep, it was coloring his perspective completely.

Had somebody touched her? Had someone fucked her? How the hell would he have not known?

She better be playing a part.
He grasped her arm tightly. “Who?” he demanded gruffly.

“It doesn’t matter.” she waved it off nonchalantly, mentally preparing the next phase of her agenda.

“Who, dammit!” Red growled out, hissing venomously.

“Red you’re hurting her.” Francis gripped his arm slightly as a deterrent.

“Fuck off, Francis!” Red clenched his jaw tightly, jerking away from the hold. He glared down at the unsuspecting woman. “Elizabeth...” he warned furiously.

The woman certainly thought he was playing the part well. This guy could be an actor if he wanted, a damned good one. She wanted to match his intensity, hanging her head shamefully as she blurted the first name to come to mind.

“...Donald.”

“You fucked Donald!” Red snapped his disbelief.

Francis closed his eyes wearily, feeling for both parties.

Red turned away, leaning his arm unto a convenient wall, trying desperately to calm himself.

*How the hell could she fuck Ressler! Of all damned people!*

Red tried to wrap his mind around such a concept and then he remembered... this was an act, then why he wondered... did it feel so damned real?

Why did it hurt so much?

She was lying, she had to be. He had to get his head straight... she was just making up a story to sell the relationship.

That’s all this was.

“Maybe I misunderstood everything tonight.” Francis tried to mend fences for all concerned. “If you’ve forgiven him, who the hell am I to make waves?”

“He wouldn’t push me to resume relations because of my incident and I thought maybe he had turned off to me.” Liz used her profiling skills to her advantage. “He saw me at my worst.” she grimaced. “We had some major mis-communication going on.”

“So, you forgive him?” Francis was more than relieved.

“I forgive him, but that doesn’t mean we’re done talking.” Liz stressed.

“All right then. Well... I’ll leave you to talk.” Francis leaned in, kissing her temple, hugging her gently. “Red... maybe we can talk later, too?”

He didn’t receive an answer, but he thought that the woman could get Red in a better mood. Female persuasion and all that.

When Francis was a good length away, Liz blew out a relieved breath.

“Well, that was stressful.” she laughed shortly, pushing off the wall she had leaned against, only to be dragged back to her original spot by a well placed hand against her chest. “Wha—”
“Did you?” Red’s tone was barely civil.

“What the hell are you–” she pushed at the contact, his palm burning her skin beneath the elegant gown she sported.

“Did you!” Red hissed angrily.

Red knew he was being completely unreasonable. What the fuck was his problem... why couldn’t he get the images out of his head of the woman and Donald Ressler intertwined in some ungodly, erotic scene.

“Lower your voice dammit!” she snapped irritably. “Francis will think–”

“Fuck Francis!” his eyes blazed irately. “Or maybe... you already have.”

“Excuse the hell out of me!” she was more than incensed at such a ridiculous accusation.

“Is that why Francis hung around so much?” He spat the allegation.

“Red Reddington, I’m about to smack you again!” Liz was beside herself, not understanding his passionate outburst. “What the hell are you talking about!”

Red stared down at the woman glowering up at him, his own eyes pinpoints of suppressed torment. He could not stand this a moment longer.

“Fuck it!”

This thing between them... a turning point had just been reached, at least to his way of thinking and this shit needed to be settled.

He was unintentionally hurting her, in so many ways.

He was hurting.

She might not admit that something significant was happening between them. But that did not negate the fact, that it was.

He needed something concrete, dammit! Some sort of sign, that she needed him as much as he needed her. That she fucking wanted him as much as he did her.

He would give her time to acclimate herself. To become comfortable with him... he could be patient, if she was his end goal.

If she would just open herself to the possibilities, to allowing him to love her... he could wait.

He just needed... something.

And he needed it... now.

He was tired of waiting, he was tired of this cat and mouse game.

But Elizabeth was reaching her end game too.

She pushed hard at his chest, sliding away from his bulk, only to be caught by a firm hand pulling her back under his influence.
“Do you want to be with Tom?” Red locked his arm low around her back, holding the combative woman in place, until she eased her struggles to get away from him.

“What?” she shook her head in confusion.

“Do you love Tom.” he stressed the words.

“No!” she scowled her confusion.

The man stared at her silently, jerking his head in a curt nod, furthering her confusion.

“I don’t love To–” she began, only to be silenced by the firm press of his lips against hers.

Carding his fingers through her hair, Red cupped the back of Liz’s head angling her slightly, capturing more of her pouty lips against his own demanding ones.

Without thought, she found herself tip-toeing, leaning against his solid frame, increasing the pressure of their kiss.

*Oh my God*... she was kissing Red and it felt... right.

Who the hell was she kidding? It felt... *perfect*.

His lips were so soft, so warm, gentle but experienced. She mewled softly as his large hand spanned the width of her back, drawing her even closer into his warmth.

Sighing in contentment, Liz caught the subtle scent of his cologne as it engulfed her, making her feel as though the only safe place in the entire Universe, was right here... enfolded in his arms.

She exhaled shakily, inching closer into his embrace, obviously pleasing the man. She’d never heard Red issue that low gravelly sound before. She found that she liked it and very much wanted to hear him do it again.

It made her tummy flutter chaotically.

She inched her hand up his chest, her fingers clawing at his collar, in a bid to gain more connectivity with the large man.

His manner had softened with her compliance, the kisses becoming more sensuous in nature. His lips conformed to her’s erotically, the tip of his tongue flicking gently against her own from time to time.

Her senses reeled, a gnawing hunger growing inside her. She felt a definite dampness moisten the heat between her legs.

Red had never felt anything as wonderful as what he was feeling. Elizabeth... finally in his arms.

He wrapped her tighter in his hold, drawing her closer, feeling the soft feminine curves of her body meet his more masculine solidity.

Her firm breasts pressed into his hard chest as his hand slid down, settling along the curve of her hip, his fingers reaching for the swell of her rounded bottom. He curled the appendages into the fullness of her buttocks, spreading them slowly outward.

The woman moved up against his ever hardening arousal, encouraging such familiarity.
Her waist was so small in comparison to the circumference of his hand.

He felt his blood heat as it coursed through his veins.

Just this simple touch of lips, the feel of her body against his... and he felt the change.

_This_ was what he needed. That glimmer of hope.

She was not only kissing him back, she seemed to be enjoying it as much as he.

It was almost as if she had needed his embrace, his touch. As much as he had needed to touch. He was experienced enough to sense that need went deeper for the woman.

Her hands clung to him wantonly, her lips hungrily devoured his mouth.

He had no problem with returning such emotions. Even though he was fully aware of the public display they must be making of themselves. But they could just go fuck themselves.

Just as much as he had felt her need for him, he felt his for her, grow exponentially.

A fierce protectiveness flooded his system like never before.

He needed to shelter her little body safely with the bulk of his own as he made love to her. He needed to crawl between her beautiful thighs and stake his claim. He wanted to flood her body with his arousal, which grew even now, to unbelievable proportions.

He allowed her to feel his involvement.

To love her... like she needed, like he wanted, suddenly felt within reach. It was so close, he could almost taste it, just as soon... he would be tasting the essence of her.

The thought made his mouth water.

Elizabeth was his, whether she knew it or not.

Now, it was just a matter of time, before he made her understand it, completely.

Chapter End Notes

It was suggested in a Facebook PM that I add my email address for readers wishing to make anonymous story suggestions. I guess I'll add this in every couple chapters for quick reference for you guys. :)

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Facebook PM: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978
Muted Conversations

April 28

Red kissed Lizzy’s little mouth to his heart’s content, because she sure as hell wasn’t going anywhere.

Besides the fact that he was enjoying this too damn much to let go, she was damn near crawling under his skin, craving more, which he was more than happy to provide.

Her small tongue tentatively stroked his, eliciting a deep rumbling groan of approval from the man. There was something about that sound that sent jolts of awareness into the essence of Liz’s being.

Red adjusted his hold on her, bringing her body flush with his, allowing her to feel his growing arousal.

Red was too experienced, sexually, to be reacting like this to a simple kiss. He had to get in better control, but dammit... he had waited so long.

He broke the kiss, allowing her a full breath. His lips teasingly brushing hers, withholding just enough contact to make the woman want more.

“Lizzy...” he muttered, a raw plea issued against her soft mouth.

She had never felt anything as sensual as this. Red didn’t just kiss with his mouth, his whole body was involved. He nuzzled her nose with his own, touched cheeks, the prickly days growth reminding her of his masculinity.

She did not mind in the least, that the coarse fuzz chaffed her skin slightly.

His hands could not be stilled, not that she wanted that, in the least. He was exploring her body inch by inch, his fingers deft and probing into secret areas that even she did not know existed, until his touch awakened her.

She fell into the world of sensual delirium he was creating. She had never been so involved, so concentrated on a kiss... until this moment.

Liz ran her hands up under Red’s jacket, feeling the man’s warmth, curving her fingers into the muscles of his back.

He tensed slightly, breaking her concentration. He cursed softly under his breath, slowly releasing the pressure on her lips.

“What?” she asked breathlessly, her confusion genuine, her flesh needing his particular brand of abuse to continue.

“Dembe...” he grated the explanation, his eyes seeking out the intruder into their suddenly private world he had so meticulously created.

“Oh...” Liz’s cheeks flushed as she tried to disengage from the man.

Red gripped her quickly, holding her in place as he looked over her shoulder. “Get Silas.”
Dembe nodded his assent, taking his leave.

“We need to talk.” his eyes reassured her.

She nodded slowly, lowering her face to hide the flush reddening her cheeks. “All right.”

Red lifted her eyes to meet his. His fingers stroked her cheek intimately, his gaze holding hers almost hypnotically. He slowly lowered his mouth, his lips parting hers erotically.

Liz’s tummy flipped as she felt a surge of excitement.

This was so much better than her dream. She didn’t think she’d ever say that, but to actually feel the heat of his kiss... the demanding standard this man expected.

That dream had been erotic as hell, had even made her orgasm.

But to actually feel Red Reddington’s hands on her, to feel his lips...

It felt better than she had ever imagined. There were no words that came to mind to describe the experience.

Red finally broke the kiss just second before Dembe arrived with Silas.

“This shouldn’t take too long.” he reluctantly released the hold he had on her, both physically and mentally. “Silas will watch over you.” he directed her towards the large guard with a gentle urge of his hand.

“I’ll be along shortly.” Red handed her over to Silas begrudgingly.

Silas noted with amusement, the new air of possessiveness in Red’s tone.

“Come on Trouble,” he crooked his head accordingly. “Let’s see what kind of mischief you can get into before your Old Man comes back.”

Liz looked at the guard, her expression confident. “He’s not old... not at all.” she headed for the elevators as directed, with but one lingering look back to her “old man”.

“Now, if we’re talking about you...” she held her smile, her mood high.

Silas’ brow furrowed slightly. “Hey, don’t let this gray hair fool you.”

“Of course not... daddy.” Liz was suddenly having the time of her life. She could feel Red’s eyes the entire way to the exit. She found her hips swaying provocatively. She even found herself hoping that Red was some what moved by the gesture.

She felt absolutely sinful, and it felt wonderful.

“You know, when I’m normally called that, it’s followed by me, spanking bare ass.” Silas replied seriously, bringing her back to the present.

“I bet that costs you a pretty penny.” she quipped, stepping into the elevator.

“I’m not charged for my spankings.” the guard boasted. “I’m asked for them.”

Liz tsked her disappointment, “And here I thought a man of your advanced age would know what he was doing in the bedroom.” she looked at him pityingly. “That they have to ask for more... really
Silas.”

The guard pulled his ear, grinning slowly. “Okay,” he conceded good naturedly, “I’ll give you that one.” he seemed impressed. “Red must have kissed some good sense into you. Because you sure didn’t have it before.”

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It took longer to secure the portion of Anne’s estate than Red wanted. He headed back upstairs. Anticipation heightening the closer he got to their room.

He was still having difficulty believing that he and Lizzy had kissed tonight.

He wanted to taste that sweet little mouth again, so damned badly. He had to hold himself in check, from literally running the last stretch of hallway which led to their hotel room.

Silas waited outside the door holding his grin with stressed difficulty.

“Oh, shut the hell up.” Red disgusted, opening the door, entering with but one disdainful glance backward.

Silas waved another guard into position as he himself, went to make his rounds.

Red had Security throughout the hotel, and Silas periodically and faithfully checked each and every position.

Finding the main room empty, Red crossed the space to the bathroom, tapping gently.

He shoved the door open, his eyes tracking across the room quickly, before falling on the vision in the tub.

The blissful woman was submerged in the steamy waters, completely relaxed in a way that had been unavailable to her for so long. A pile of bubbles was threatening to cascade to the floor and the scent of roses, permeated the air.

“Enjoying your bath, sweetheart?” Red grinned, stepping closer, staring down at her serene face.

“Uhm hmm.” she sighed. “I’ve refilled it... twice.”

Red took off his jacket, tossing it on the nearby stool before rolling up his sleeves, enjoying the small respite from the humid room.

He leaned over, brushing his lips over her forehead, caressing her damp curls.

He sat on the side of the spacious tub, trailing his fingers over the mountain of bubbles.

She sat forward, handing him a sponge. “Would you?”

“Would I what?” he took the offering. He noted an amused smile playing on her lips for his quip.

“Do my back.” she answered innocently.

The man soaped the sponge liberally, stroking her back in generous swirls. He smiled softly as she moaned her appreciation, her long naked back, erupting in a series of goosebumps.
“Your back...” he watched his handiwork, his gaze heating slightly. “Your front...” his tone held a wealth of hidden meaning. “Whatever it takes.”

She chuckled appreciatively. “The meeting went well, I assume?” she glanced back at him slightly. “You’re in a good mood.”

Red got lost in his activity, slowly working the sponge in a circular pattern until she trembled with the good feeling.

“I’m always in a good mood when I’m with you.” he dropped the sponge into the steamy water, his palm taking over. “And yes, I got what I wanted.” he shrugged.

“When have you not.” she was curious.

“Well, the night is young.” he philosophized. “And I’m trying my best to get my worst critic in a better mood, even as I speak.” he drew shapeless designs on the silky flesh.

“Well, what ever you’re doing... it’s working.” she closed her eyes to the delectable touch of the man. “Tell me about your meeting.”

“I don’t want to.” it was the last thing he wanted right now.

“But I insist because,” she teased, “I am your worst critic. Something interesting must have happened... I don’t want to hear it on the streets or from Silas.”

He thought back over the evening trying to think of something that might amuse her, his hands spreading over the small of her back, disappearing into the water, his middle finger easing a searing path down the indenture of her bottom.

“Pissed a rival off.” Red spread his fingers over the slight bulge in either direction.

“W-Who? Why?” she tried not to stiffen at such an unexpected invasion of her privacy, finding herself lifting slightly for any further exploration the man might think to attempt.

Red found her reaction not only encouraging, but slightly amusing. “A man named Charles DeCarlo.” he allowed his finger to remain stationary for a long beat. “I find the man annoying and will do anything to return the favor.”

The small talk helped the woman gather her equilibrium. She gently removed his hand from her backside, casting him a scolding glance.

Liz shook her head, slightly exasperated, flicking bubbles at him.

The man grinned down at her as he arose, “I’m going to make some quick calls.” he informed her. “I do not want to be disturbed tonight.”

Liz was left wondering exactly what the night would bring.

The woman’s heart was thudding in her chest. She wondered if the man had felt the slight vibration his touch had caused throughout her body.

Her cheeks tinted, knowing that she had risen into that touch, clearly wanting more.

Did Red think she was brazen? She felt she was. She was reacting to this man like no other before him. At times she felt like a schoolgirl in comparison to his worldly personification.
He had not made any other overt move and yet, just that one simple gesture on his part, had turned her insides to mush. She would have done anything he would have asked of her and what’s more... she truly thought Red was aware of the fact.

She toweled herself off, her thoughts still on the subject. She could still feel the imprint of his hand on her bottom. The woman looked at herself in the mirror and for the first time, actually liked what she saw.

She always thought her hair was mousy brown. Tonight it looked to be a deep dark chestnut, the soft damp curls framing her face seemed to highlight the blueness of her eyes.

She always wanted green eyes. Why was it women especially, wanted something other than what God had given them. But tonight was different.

Red Reddington had made her feel desirable in that tub. She glanced at the object in question. It was just a tub. Why then, was she smiling so broadly.

She dressed with the utmost care. She thought about make-up even, but decided against such measures.

She crossed to the door, her hand hesitating on the knob. She took a deep breath, stilling her racing heart.

Walking from the bathroom, she found Red propped up in bed, reading. His pajamas matching her black satin gown.

The man glanced up, his eyes running the length of her figure with masculine appreciation.

“That’s a pretty robe.” he smiled gently at her approach.

He watched her move across the room, his brows lifting slightly as she tossed the outer garment to the end of the bed.

“Turn around, let me see.” Red’s eyes followed the curves of her shapely figure, the unveiling had revealed.

She glanced over at him, hesitating.

Doing as he requested, she turned slowly, her arms slightly lifted from her sides.

It was a very beautiful, figure hugging, ankle length gown, with slits up to her thighs, edged in the most delicate and baby soft lace she had ever felt.

Thin straps and a sweetheart neckline trimmed in more lace, completed the top. The satin rippled like dark water when she moved. Besides being lovely, it was incredibly comfortable.

“You like it?” She asked breathlessly over her shoulder, awaiting his verdict.

If she was wearing anything under that slip, Red couldn’t tell. And believe me, the man was looking. But there was an absence of any lines, so that said a lot. It was suddenly very warm in the room.

“Very much.” Red nodded minutely, turning back the covers, inviting her in. Again, his gaze was saying so much more than his words.

Elizabeth felt her heart begin the old familiar thudding, the one she had determinedly stilled in the
bathroom.

She hiked the satin to her knees, climbing in with his help, before settling with her good leg comfortably beneath her.

Red had to admit, he felt a shit load of tension he’d been carrying around all evening, vanish into thin air.

He hoped this meant that the woman had forgiven him for his transgressions with Ariana Sanchez.

He had embarrassed her tonight.

The man was trying to formulate an articulate way to get back into the woman’s good graces when she spoke...

“I’m sorry I slapped you.”

“I’m sorry you slapped me too.” he moved closer to her, his eyes dropping to the cleft of her breasts. “Have I told you how much I like that gown?”

“Not in so many words.” she leaned into her hand, laying a soft kiss against his mouth.

The woman pulled back after the most fleeting of contact, unsure of herself and of the man’s reaction.

Red instantly followed her retreat, his arm encircling her waist, his weight pressing her form back into the cool sheets of the bed.

His mouth parted hers hungrily, his tongue entering the warm moist mouth without invitation. He pressed his body closer still, his arms tightening. His free hand filtered into the hair of the nape of her neck, his fingers gently holding her from any supposed escape, as he completed the kiss to his satisfaction.

Liz lifted her arms about his neckline, her fingers massaging the area of the base of his scalp, her mouth responding amorously.

Red shifted his weight over the lithe frame, his leg parting hers, wedging into the heated space. He could feel the dampness of her center infiltrate the satin covering his thick thigh.

The man nudged the area insistently, attempting to feel more of the steamy cove.

Liz felt her nipples harden against the satin gown, her breasts swelling with the need to be touched. She lifted into the hardness of his chest, pleading for his attention.

Red’s fingers teased the small of her back, encouraging any closeness, his mouth working feverishly on the sweetness of her lips.

His free hand eased the strap from the warmth of her shoulder, his mouth breaking away, leaving Elizabeth gasping at the coldness his departure caused.

He kissed a searing path, his teeth gently nibbling the lobe of her ear, as his mouth traveled the curve of her neck unto the beginning swell of her breast.

The man’s fingers grasped the satin gown, bunching the material as he dragged it up her thigh and in doing so, easing his leg further into the heated patch of her middle as his lips covered the pert nipple of right breast.
He sank his teeth gently around the throbbing little peak, nipping playfully, before soothing any supposed pain with the coarseness of his tongue.

Even through the cloth, Elizabeth was amazed at how good the sensation felt. She grasped his head, holding it to the pleasurable pastime, lifting into his demands.

A soft mew of contentment escaped her throat.

The woman tugged at the flimsy strap, exposing the full plumpness of one alabaster breast.

Red lifted his head, his eyes taking in the visual beauty for a long moment. The soft lace had inadvertently caught on the tight peak, causing the voluptuous mound to bounce erotically before being completely unveiled.

Red palmed her bottom, dragging her up against his thigh, pulling a sharp sound of enjoyment from the woman’s throat. She pushed into the touch, rolling her hips against his muscled thigh. She felt her clit throb deliciously. His thigh was suddenly replaced by his cloth covered shaft.

The man pushed against the rapidly wetting satin, feeling his own nightwear being saturated. He flicked her straining nipple, tightening the peak against his tongue.

Liz wrapped her leg around Red’s waist, giving her the leverage to ride the man’s offering with more determination. She held her breath, feeling the height of orgasm quickly approaching.

She had never felt this lustful before in her entire life. She found it exhilarating.

Liz allowed her emotional state to evolve naturally, not once thinking of stemming the tide of overwhelming passion she was experiencing, uncaring as to its ramifications.

She felt the onslaught begin, closing her eyes to better experience each stage of what was to come.

Red religiously watched her face, the ecstasy beginning.

He felt her hips jerking quickly to the tempo her body dictated. Her breath was being released in quick, ever increasing, sharp short bursts.

Her pouty lips panted breathlessly, her hands gripping his shoulders more intensely with each moment she neared her release.

The woman stiffened, curling her fingers painfully into his arms, as she held her breath, convulsing moments later, shattering with the intensity which washed over her.

Red dropped his mouth against her’s, catching her cry of release, her thighs trembling against his own. Her shaky breaths beat sensually against his kiss swollen mouth.

His shaft jerked eagerly in response, his body tensing, his muscles flexing in salacious anticipation of his much needed climax.

He barely heard, let alone paid attention, to the discrete tap on the door of their room. But his mind was screaming out against any such invasion.

He acted on instinct.

He felt his hardness flex painfully. He took Liz’s hand, guiding it downward, until her small fingers trailed uncertainly over the tender flesh. The satin only added to the effect.
He could feel every nuance of her touch. He lowered his head, his mouth gently teasing her nipple, his tongue suckling her zealously.

He curved her fingers tightly to his cock, rapidly stroking his turgid rigidity. Within seconds, despite the distraction, Red reached his own pinnacle.

The man groaned soulfully, his cockhead throbbed achingly, streams of cum pulsating from the tender slit.

His fists curled tightly into the sheets as he keyed his body down to a more normal state. He ground a hoarse rejoinder...

“What!”

There was a momentary pause on the other side of the door and then a hardly suppressed smirk from the opposite side. “Hey boss...” Silas’ amusement tinged voice reported almost joyously, “it’s all clear out here. How you guys doing in there.”

“Fuck off, Silas.” Red snapped his dissension. His head jerking angrily to the closed door, his eyes allowing his annoyance.

“Aye, Aye, Captain.” the man laughed heartily as he walked away.

The woman sighed blissfully, tugging the man’s lips down to her waiting softness. Red instantly forgot all about the slight nuisance of the unexpected distraction, preferring to concentrate his full efforts where they belonged.

The evening hadn’t quite turned out how Red thought, but to have shared this new intimacy, a closeness with Lizzy... it was all he ever wanted.

He knew the rest would come in time. Now he just had to be patient. Not an easy task, mind you. Especially after tonight.

But for her... to be what she needed. He could and he would.

Red took a quick moment to change out of his soiled clothing before hastily returning to the woman. He looked down for a second on the beautiful features.

But then, he still had this.

She was laying against him now, snuggling with him. So, that was something. Definitely something.

Stroking her hair, he kissed the top of her head, getting lost in the feel of her fingers lazily stroking over the buttons of his top.

Listening as her breathing deepened, he enjoyed the hypnotic feeling of her fingers.

Red quickly followed her into sleep.
A small, lazy smile worked its way across Red Reddington’s face, his thoughts instantly focused on one thing, and one thing only.

Last night... he had made Lizzy come.

More to the point, she allowed herself to come.

More surprisingly... Lizzy helped him to that eventuality.

It hadn’t happened per his usual style when with a lover granted, but Liz hadn’t seemed to mind, and God knows, he certainly had not either.

Regardless of the specific mechanics of their lovemaking, it had happened and had felt damned good.

And had been very much needed, at least on his part. He hadn’t felt this relaxed, this serene, in quite a while.

But it was the emotional peace...serenity, that astounded him the most. An aspect he had very much missed in his life.

It was as he once stated. Sex can feel great, but if it’s lacking emotion attachment... the emptiness in your heart, overwhelms the orgasmic high soon enough.

The need for that emotional connection... the love from your partner was an essential desire which needed fulfillment.

Red could have fucked Ariana and had a decent enough time, true. Eventually, his euphoric elation would have crashed, leaving him empty inside and yearning for more.

Yearning for the one he truly desired.

Lizzy...

He loved Lizzy.

What had ended up being a more sensual, and a damned sight more comfortable, version of back seat petting... left him satisfied in ways he hadn’t felt in years, because of his love for the woman.

He had been sated, not only physically... but emotionally. And it was an intensely wonderful feeling.

Red rolled from the bed, answering nature’s call. After which he returned, then stood for a long moment, simply staring down at the peacefully sleeping woman.

He hesitated, torn between duty or pleasure. He should get dressed for the day, that’s what he should do.

The man pulled the covers aside, laying back down beside Elizabeth. He propped himself up on his elbow, resting his hand on his forehead, just watching her sleep.
He knew instantly, staring at the pretty profile, that duty could wait. The business could wait. He had made the correct decision.

While he would have loved to have completed their late night activities, he could see now, in the light of day, that it was better for her... that they had not.

There was a part of him that would love to wake her right now by crawling between her silky thighs and bury his face against her folds before sliding into her wet warmth.

Before that eventuality, he realized, he would first have to deal with the emotional fallout of what had occurred between them.

They had went from a kiss to orgasm within the span of only a couple hours.

Liz had to get her bearings. She needed to come to terms with what had happened.

She would most likely feel guilty.

Why did women always feel guilt after something so incredibly beautiful.

She was an FBI agent, and had essentially, slept with the enemy.

Red tilted his head slightly, scrutinizing the tranquilly slumbering female.

Would she be embarrassed?

Lizzy was not the ‘one night stand’ type of person. Not that this was by any means, a one night stand, but she didn’t do ‘reckless’.

Elizabeth Keen was not in the running to be the next, ‘Miss Fuck Number Four on the Most Wanted List’.

She was comfortable in making lists, planning, having the answers at her fingertips.

And for her to find comfort in any involvement with him, she would need answers.

He had been preparing himself for the eventuality. Now that time was nearing, she would expect him to supply those answers.

He suddenly felt suffocated. The knowledge that he carried, was almost choking the life from him, because to hurt her, would hurt him more.

They hadn’t communicated last night... except on one level.

And they should have.

But they would, today.

He didn’t want to tell her about Katarina, her father, because there was only so much emotional upheaval a person could take in one day.

Unless she asked about them specifically, he would hold off until another time.

Now, he only had to make her understand that while he wanted more out of their growing relationship, there was no rush, no expectation... no pressure.
He was rather fond of the idea of wooing the woman, truth be told.

They had missed some important milestones along the way.

He had yet to ask her on a date. An event that, even after last night, made him a bit apprehensive.

He hadn’t bought her flowers. Well, he had, but not while actively dating her. They hadn’t experienced a weekend holiday together. They hadn’t held hands while walking through a park, gone to a movie. Hell, they hadn’t even swapped keys, he thought with a smile.

While he would in no way, turn down having sex with the woman at any time, he needed to make her understand a few basic edicts. Such as, those moments were just as important and essential to their relationship becoming more... intimate, personal... loving.

He knew a lot about Lizzy. How she took her coffee, that she teared up during Hallmark commercials, that she loved the ‘find the object’ in a child’s Highlight magazine.

But he wanted to know her favorite color, flower, movie, book. Who was her first crush? What did she dream about? What were her secret passions? Her fantasies?

He had a great need to find out all about the beautiful, vibrant woman who lay beside him.

What the hell made Elizabeth Keen tick?

The information about Red was all contained in a file. A file of facts only. There was nothing personal about the man himself, which was the way he wanted it.

Anything she wished to know, of that nature, he would supply directly.

The woman in question stirred, stretching her body with feline grace before snuggling back into his side.

He waited patiently, for an awareness to set in. It did not take long, he felt her tense, then slowly open her eyes.

“Good morning,” he stated soothingly, lifting the small strap back unto her shoulder. “Is this awkward or what?” he kept his tone light. “I bet you give just about anything at this point... to go freshen up.” he gallantly gave her the opportunity she needed.

Liz instantly rolled from the bed, glad for the momentary reprieve. She needed to get her thoughts in order. She walked quickly to her retreat.

This moment was a crucial turning point and Red knew he had to tread carefully.

Moments later, the woman emerged from her hiding spot, uncertainty written on the pretty features. She ventured slowly into the area, standing staunchly in the middle of the room.

The blue eyes, while able to meet his unwavering stare, were full of doubt and insecurity.

“Come here...” Red patted the bed. “We need to talk.”

She crawled up on the high structure, wrapping her arms tightly around herself.

Red watched for a moment, gauging that reaction.

She was cold. That was all.
He wrapped the blanket around her, before resettling himself.

“We did nothing wrong.” he wanted that made perfectly clear.

She raised her eyes slowly, a wealth of meaning in the cool depths.

Red smiled softly, stroking a large hand through her tangled hair. “In fact...” he lowered his voice to just above a whisper, making the conversation very private, “I believe we did it just right.”

His fingers danced delicately over her pink cheeks. “Don’t you agree?”

“I’m...” she was reeling from the man’s nearness and the reality of what was... what had been. “I don’t...”

“You’re nervous.” he surmised. “Scared.”

Liz opened her mouth, then hesitated, “... Maybe a little, but I don’t know why.”

Red watched her pulling at the lace on her slip, “Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m extremely exhilarated.”

She stilled her distraction, her eyes flying to his hastily. “You are?”

“Beyond scope.” his eyes told her he did not lie.

She flushed slightly, well pleased with such praise, truth told.

“Can you tell me what you are feeling?” he fished.

“I’m not sure exactly.” she knew how she felt, she just didn’t know how to verbalize it.

“Do you regret what happened?” he had to know.

“No.” It was the one thing of which she was certain. And she answered without hesitation. Her eyes held his easily this time.

“Nor do I, not one moment.” Red dismissed the idea entirely. “With that said. I want it known right now, Lizzy.” he iterated.

“I do not expect anything. There is no rush or pressure for a repeat performance.” he clarified. “But also know, I would very much enjoy the opportunity to be with you again and when you’re ready... I would like to explore more with you.”

Liz quickly raised startled eyes, “You would?” She asked breathlessly.

“Very much so.” Red’s voice held a tone of finality. “I can honestly say, making love with you is very... satisfying, not to mention, gratifying in every aspect of the word.”

The doubt in her eyes returned, but faded slowly, seeing the truth in his own.

“But we really didn’t...” she reminded sheepishly, “...make love.”

“It is making love when you care deeply for your partner, no matter the activity.” Red disagreed. “And when you’re with the one and only person you wish to be with.”

“But earlier...” she did indeed, have questions. “You and that woman...”
“Lizzy, have you ever been aroused to the point that nothing will satisfy, but another’s touch?” she nodded slowly, his meaning clear. “Perhaps it’s crass of me to say, but she was a means to an end.” he felt his own inadequacies deeply. “A tension relief, a purely sexual release.” he explained.

“I let my sexual tension and frustration get the better of me, and it almost cost me dearly.”

“I don’t understand?” she frowned.

“If I had sex with that woman, I would have lost something of far greater importance.” he reached, taking her hand in his. “And that was... being with you.”

The woman’s eyes blinked rapidly, as though it would help her thought process.

“I truly would love to be given another opportunity to be with you.” Red continued, before he lost his rhythm. “If you are ever so inclined... do not hesitate.”

With that, he stood, giving his words a chance to settle in.

Red traced her earlobe with the tip of his finger, leaning in to kiss her forehead.

The woman lifted her chin, capturing his lips with her own. The kiss both warm and intimately suggestive. He held the moment as long as he could, his mouth responding passionately.

He kept his senses about him, not wanting to frighten the woman away so early on.

This was a romantic kiss. Not a carnal one.

A very important distinction needed to be conveyed here, to his way of thinking.

His need and want for her went far beyond sex.

Of course, he wanted Elizabeth as his lover.

But his determination to have a partner, a friend, a confidant... someone with which to share his life... that was of the upmost importance to him.

If he was so privileged to share it with Elizabeth... then all his hopes and aspirations would become a reality.

He pulled away hesitantly, reluctant to be about his business.

“I’m going to dress.” he headed across the plush carpet. “Room service should be here shortly with breakfast and your coffee.” he turned with his intended exit into the other room. “Oh, and the Service pressed your dress, for the funeral.”

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Liz watched Red as he retreated to the bath, leaving her stupefied and a little more than stunned.

If she understood correctly, Red had enjoyed their evening. His words had indicated, very much so, in fact. He even said, he would like the opportunity to have another go at it... with her.

She had no idea what to think, or feel, at this point.
She had really enjoyed last night. Red had touched her in a manner no other man had done. When he looked at her, she melted. Red Reddington was addictive. He was like a drug and she really wanted to experience that high again.

But there was an underlying fear. Was she was making a terrible mistake?

Last night did not feel like a mistake. He had made her feel desirable, cared for and cherished.

But Red was who he was. A very complicated, complex man who very few were privileged enough to be included into his inner circle.

After Tom, she was afraid to trust her own instincts again. He had treated her so badly, he had turned on her so quickly... was she getting involved in a similar situation?

How could she compare the two men, however?

Red had been up front and open with who he was. Red always helped her in some way or another.

Red respected her work. He understood her unusual hours, when she would have to take off at a moments notice. He had never made her feel guilty for doing her job.

Red would never raise his hand to her and God knows, she had given him enough provocation in the past.

But what would it mean to involve herself with someone of his caliber? He had an abundance of friendly acquaintances around the globe, but he had just as many enemies, and most of the latter were deadly.

What would that mean to her... to them? He could be taken from her at any time, without warning.

But really, couldn’t the same be said for an accountant driving on the 395, getting into an accident on his way to work.

How would any romantic association affect their work? Would it cause strain between them?

And the FBI would never sanction such a relationship.

But on the other hand, why should she give a damn what they thought?

She had turned in Tom, choosing the Organization over her own husband, and the FBI had made her out to be an enemy, or stupid or... worse yet, a fool.

Red had been with her every step of the way.

He had been so incredibly kind and caring during her convalescence.

He respected her space.

He had respected her moral ethics...

Hell, he had even slept in a chair for several nights to that ends.

It was his damned bed. She was the intruder, but he put her at ease, making her feel welcome.

The man had truly made her recovery, stress free. Taking care of every aspect of her needs, so she could rest her body and mind.
What if they had a child.

She felt her stomach flip crazily at the thought, and it wasn’t necessarily in a bad way. What the hell was she thinking, but then again, things happened.

And what else was she thinking except having a physical relationship with this man, which could lead to that very thing.

But Red was so experienced. He must know ways... even though, Liz had an uneasy feeling that if the man was sexually involved with a woman, he would probably forgo contraceptives.

She herself, had not been on the Pill since Tom.

Perhaps she was worrying about nothing.

There were other aspects to consider, however.

With what they were up against, a child would be their biggest vulnerability. But also the most loved child on the entire planet.

She had seen Red interact with kids before, her heart warmed every time she saw the man interact with a child.

One day, not long ago, they had been standing in line, for what seemed like hours... waiting for her much needed coffee.

Without coffee in her system, Liz knew that she would be like Ultron on a very bad day.

A mother and her fussy baby were ahead of them in line.

While Liz hated to admit that she was damning the Universe, getting stuck behind the fussy infant before her caffeine fix.

Red had taken it in his stride.

He reached out, tickling the little sock covered toes, asking the baby what his ‘issue’ was. The baby’s interest was immediate and focused on that deep soothing voice.

In that one instance, a camaraderie of sorts, had been established.

The baby found his soul mate.

The little guy was clearly enthralled with Red; smiling, chortling, and playing, the entire time they waited, much to the mother’s everlasting relief.

Not only had Red’s apparent fondness and patience with the baby been sweet. That he didn’t give a damn that anyone was watching as he played peek-a-boo with the child, had been charming as hell.

The mother as well, had fallen under his spell. To top it off, Red had ended up paying for her order as well.

Number four on the Most Wanted list, confessed killer, the Concierge of Crime... my ass. The though still brought a smile to Liz’s lips.

He was the only one who commiserated with a harried mother and a worn out little boy.
Red would be a wonderful father. But then, he was already a father. A father who worried for his daughter on a daily basis. What must it feel like to live under such a dark cloud?

Would he even want to have children again? They had discussed it before, when baby Sam there. But there was a definite abstract to the question now.

They hadn’t made love in the traditional sense, true. It had been just as satisfying.

Liz had enjoyed Red’s attention last night, plain and simple. She had needed his gentleness and was surprised at how very passionate a lover he had turned out to be.

Her cheeks tinted slightly as she recalled the time in his arms. She was not the type to kiss a man, then fall into bed with him mere hours later.

But last night, it was if she was another person. She had felt comforted and fully at ease almost as if they had been intimate before.

Which was absurd really, that was how she had felt as if being in his arms was the most natural thing in the world.

This morning, Liz was shocked that the man hadn’t pushed for more.

Part of her appreciated such a chivalrous action on his part. But another found herself resenting it somewhat.

Why hadn’t he simply pushed her slip out of his way and made love to her. She felt a little irked because she knew she was on that level last night.

It was almost as if Red was in total control, something Liz was not.

Maybe he knew she would do this. That she would question and analyze everything down to the smallest of details.

She had to admit, she was intrigued. What would it be like to make love to Red Reddington? A man who had the admiration of woman spanning the globe.

And if she did, what would it mean? Was she just another notch in his bed post?

No... she got the feeling that this was not a one time thing.

If she slept with Red... this could lead to a romantic entanglement. She was sure of that.

And she found herself... wanting to take that chance.

She needed to see where this would go...

Elizabeth Keen had just opened herself up to the possibilities.
After the funeral and reception, Red and Dembe were called away to finalize the details of Anne’s estate.

Liz headed down to the corner bistro, her bulky guard regaling her with anecdotes from his time spent in the Orient. One such tale involved a Geisha girl and a disgruntled Marine and platoon of MP’s from a nearby Army base.

“A platoon?” Liz had to question that part, her expression amused.

“All right, so it wasn’t a platoon.” Silas granted. “More like a division.”

The revelry was interrupted by a somber enquiry.

“Are you allowed to talk to me?”

Liz looked around, finding Francis coming up on their rear, his expression a prudent one.

“Why would you even ask such a thing?” she frowned having entered the café.

She directed the young man to a nearby table.

“I’ve been shunned.” the man leaned into the chair instead of taking the seat she had offered, his eyes darting to the patiently waiting guard who had taken a stand at the end of the bar. “Or hadn’t you heard.”

“Whether you have been or not,” she began, “it has nothing to do with me.”

Francis once again lifted wary eyes to Silas who was sitting on a stool just behind the woman, his burly arms crossed over his chest, his expression unreadable.

“Look at me,” Liz scolded, “not him.”

Silas’ brows lifted slightly for the ‘slight’.

“You really don’t understand how this works, do you?” Francis’ smile dimmed.

“I don’t give a damn.” the woman was adamant, throwing a peevish glance over her shoulder to the other man. “You’re my friend.” she stressed. “If Red doesn’t like it—”

“I no longer exist.” the younger man chuckled, then outright laughed at the stunned expression on Liz’s face. “Now, do you get it?”

Liz nodded slowly, before turning on her guard. “You do not touch him. Do you understand me?”

“I take orders from you now, do I?” Silas smirked.

“In regards to Francis, yes.” she took a stand. “I will deal with Red, personally.”

Silas stood, sauntering to where Liz sat. “I have a better idea,” he began, “why don’t you discuss
this with Red first, then you guys can get back to me.”

“Fine.” Liz grumbled, then smiled at Francis. “Are you going to sit, or not?”

To Liz’s vexation, Francis checked with the guard once more, waiting for Silas’ permission.

“Sit down, you idiot.” Liz gritted, shoving the chair out with her foot.

Silas inclined his head, gesturing for the man to sit before retaking his own seat. His eyes returned to his normal scan of the surrounding area.

“And you, eat.” Liz had glared her demand over her shoulder.

Silas rolled his eyes, settling more comfortably into his stool, making the woman’s lips pinch in open aggravation.

Francis held his smile as he watched the power play.

Silas studiously ignored the fuming woman.

Liz felt her annoyance turn into trepidation. She had never really been at odds with Silas before. She felt the ground shift slightly under her feet, not liking the feeling one bit.

The guard’s solid frame sensed as much, losing a bit of it’s rigidity. He pushed off the stool begrudgingly, trudging forward yet again.

“What’s up your ass...” he grumbled quietly, as he neared, “cause I know it ain’t Red.”

Liz gasped, her mouth falling agape. Francis chuckled quietly into his hand, hiding his amusement behind the façade.

“You got her a minute?” Silas gestured his request to Francis.

“Yeah... uh, sure.” Francis nodded, his surprise more than evident.

Liz scowled, watching the guard walk to the small line of waiting customers.

Two men instantly stepped out of Silas’ way, indicating he should take their place. The man shook his head silently, stretching his hand forward. Clearly however, the other men were more than hesitant to piss off such a imposing figure.

“He’s even a bully when he’s not trying to be.” Liz screwed up her face, turning her wrath on a more receptive individual.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked cantankerously.

“I just...” Francis shrugged, “I didn’t expect that.” he told the truth. “I guess at least, Silas still trusts me.” the man’s voice lowered dejectedly, his fingers folding the edges of his napkin over and over in an unconsciously perturbed manner.

“Red trusts you. He was just upset.” Liz pacified. “It’s been a rough couple days for him, whether he admits to it or not.”

“I suppose.” the man sighed. “I should have stayed out of it though.” he blurted after a moment. “But I just couldn’t, you know.” he lifted enquiring eyes. “You’re... you’ve been,” he threw his napkin aside, restlessly sitting back in his chair. “Well dammit, I like you... you’re almost like a friend or
something.”

Liz smile widened, reaching out to grip Francis’ hand. “I like you too.” She let the other part go.

A delightful afternoon passed quickly and then it was time to return to the hotel.

Francis walked abreast of her, but Liz noticed Silas kept a professional air as he held back a good four or five feet.

“Do you think you can sneak away...” Francis glanced back at Silas, “not sneak away per se, no not that at all.” he placated. “Get away, shortly for a quick swim at the pool?”

Liz’s acquiescence was cut short as she noted Red coming out of a side room, Dembe in tow, a few meters down the foyer. He was distracted momentarily, by a man Liz did not recognize.

Soon enough however, the arresting gaze fell on the woman and her companion.

Red focused on them intently, his smile fading slowly.

“Shit...” Francis whispered his distress.

“Shit.” Silas whispered his annoyance, because he knew he was going to catch hell for his little lapse.

Liz laid her hand on Francis’ arm in open support. “We’ll fix this. I promise.”

Francis sighed, watching Red closely. The man laughed, shaking hands with the attorney.

“Now go change,” Liz suggested, “and I’ll meet you at the pool.” she smiled.

Francis half nodded, knowing the chances of her being there were slim to none, but did as she asked.

Silas trailed after Elizabeth, walking to the elevator banks, “You really think you can change Red’s mind?” he asked, pressing the button for their floor. “When he gets something in his head...”

“He’ll just have to get it out of his head.” Liz jutted her chin stubbornly. “Francis is my friend, anyway. Who I choose to associate with is...”

“Red made you come, didn’t he.” Silas interrupted rudely.

“I...I...” Liz stammered, totally flustered by the question of course, but more so, by the smug knowledge presented.

“You don’t even have to answer, I know the answer.” he disdained. “So trust me, little girl, who you associate yourself with from here on out, is very much Red’s concern.” Silas smiled knowingly.

Liz was just about to question the validity of such a statement when she felt Silas stiffen at her side, his entire focus suddenly for three men who had stepped up behind them.

“You... are with Reddington.” one of the men stated without preamble.

Liz turned, nodding. “Yes. But he’s back off that way,” she pointed back up the hall, “if you need him.”

Silas maneuvered himself between the men, pushing Liz behind him. The woman stumbled slightly, unsure of what was transpiring.
“I don’t want him.” the man replied, motioning the two huge individuals forward. “He took something from me that I wanted,” the man continued, “so I will now, take something from him.”

Silas punched out, his beefy fist sending one man careening into the opposite wall. The other charged him.

“Run!” Silas grunted lowly, blocking two blows aimed at his head simultaneously. “Now!”

The man who originally spoke, made a grab for Liz.

She yanked her arm away, falling back into the elevator, only to be caught a moment later and dragged forcefully from the steel box.

Silas tossed the man he was fighting aside like a limp rag doll, sending him rolling in an awkward heap, down the hall.

He reached out, gripping the other man’s arm, breaking his hold on Liz, before slamming the man’s bulk up against the slowly closing elevator door.

“Go dammit!” Silas urgently snapped. The first assailant was on him again. “Go to Red!

Francis rounded the corner, having heard the sounds of a struggle and Silas’ raised voice. The young man had discreetly hoisted his weapon, rushing to the location.

All he saw at that exact moment, was one man pulling his weapon, the gun pointed directed at Elizabeth Scott.

Red had seen Francis rush past, his second sense kicking in.

He jerked his head, silently asking Dembe to check out the situation.

Red bid his farewell to Anne’s lawyer, his eyes following Dembe’s retreat.

Seconds later, the sound of gunfire echoed throughout the enormous lobby.

Red pulled his weapon on his way before he knew exactly what he was running into.

Francis hit the man who was coming up behind Silas, with the butt of his weapon, leaving the large guard to put himself between Elizabeth and her struggles with DeCarlo.

Dembe was just now rounding the corner, trying to take in all that was occurring.

Seconds later, Red came on scene, his brain rapidly taking stock of the immediate danger.

That bastard DeCarlo raised his weapon towards Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth...” Red whispered his agony.

Everything slowed to a crawl. He watched the woman turn jerkily in his direction, her eyes meeting his.

Francis leapt towards Elizabeth, throwing himself between any danger and the woman.

He caught her waist, the momentum of his speed, spinning her around. He tucked his muscular bulk around her smaller frame.
Francis’ legs crumbled, taking Liz with him as they slid haphazardly along the marbled floor, their rapid movement coming to an abrupt halt as they crashed into a solid wall.

DeCarlo followed their trail, Dembe’s volley just missing its target as both men once again, took aim.

Francis hunched over Liz, blocking any avenue of entry to the flying bullets around them.

Red lifted his arms, his hand steady as he locked onto his target, firing his weapon in rapid succession. He was however, off balance, having been unwilling to slow his pace upon his arrival.

His shots missed DeCarlo by a fraction of an inch.

Silas broke his attackers hold, jamming his weapon into the man’s gut, firing twice. The sound was muffled by the man’s suit as the projectiles exploded out the man’s back in a spray of blood and cloth before he dropped heavily to the floor.

Silas spun rapidly, training his weapon, just as Decarlo lifted his own, zeroing in on his target.

Red’s weapon spewed forth a lethal volley just as Silas emptied his last remaining rounds. Each man hit his mark with deadly accuracy.

DeCarlo’s body jerked in rapid succession, as bullets tore threw him. The man staggered back under the onslaught, sliding against the wall, leaving a slick trail of blood on his descent before landing with a thick thud, as he fell in a crumbled heap on the floor.

Silas turned, watching Dembe take down the last remaining threat.

As Red approached Elizabeth, he felt a surge of fear and panic, seeing the wall just above where both Francis and she lay crumpled, streaked with blood.

He could not really see the woman at this time because Francis’ body obscured the smaller body.

“Elizabeth!” Red gasped in horror, sliding down hastily beside the two.

“Francis...” Liz’s soft voice shook. “Are you all right?”

The man grunted, nodding against her shoulder. “Yeah...” he grumbled dejectedly.

Oddly, to Elizabeth’s ears the man’s reply reminded her of Eeyore asking about his missing tail.

“Move, Francis!” Red gritted, trying to shove the man aside. “She’s hurt, dammit!”

“It’s not me!” Liz bitched tartly. “He’s hurt!”

“Francis.” Red gripped the man’s shoulder, easing him up slowly.

“Shit....” the younger man hissed, sitting upright. “That fucking burns!” He winced, quickly grasping his side. Francis leaned into the wall for support, exhaling sharply, before gaining a semblance of control.

Liz spun on her knees, reaching for the man.

“Call 911!” she yelled, pressing her hand over the large blood stain on the man’s shirt.

“Ow! Dammit!” the man yelped in pain. “You’re killing me here, Lizzy.” he gritted. “I think I’m gonna die.”
Dembe had been examining the wound, mindless of all the present chaos around him. The hotel security had arrived, already in the process of cleaning up the scene.

Another contingent was assuring the ever growing crowd of onlookers that it was only a movie company doing their thing.

Red was astounded at how easily people would believe something they wanted to believe. Already people were walking away and/or taking selfies with the supposed ‘actors’.

“It is only a flesh wound.” Dembe reported to Red.

Francis looked down, his expression deeply troubled. “Really?” he was disappointed to say the least. Elizabeth hovered around anxiously. “There’s so much blood.”

“I know!” Francis agreed whole-heartedly.

Red pulled at the man’s shirt, examining the wound himself... or should he say, wounds. Francis had taken two to the side.

But Dembe had been right, they were only flesh wounds. They would sting like hell, but that was about it.

“He’ll be fine, Lizzy.” Red assured, reaching to check on the woman herself.

“What do you care,” she knocked his hand aside. “He’s not worthy of being in your presence anymore.”

Red bit at the inside of his cheek, controlling his sudden ire.

“He could have been killed.” she trembled with her anger and fear, her fingers shaking over Francis’s side. “And would you really care? All because he called you on your fuck up!” she tried to stop her words, because the man’s face was giving away nothing. “All he did was stand up for me and you turned on him!”

“Stop it, Liz.” Francis did not like the anger between his two friends. And whether or not Red returned the sentiment, did not matter. “I screwed up... not him. Let it go.”

The woman looked at him, suddenly speechless.

“It’s how things work.” Francis informed her readily. “I told you, loyalty above all else.”

“You were loyal, dammit! To me!” Her lip quivered. “No one has ever done that for me before. And when they do, they get punished for it!” she wiped angrily at her eyes. “You just saved my life!”

Red sat back surveying the problem analytically. No one could say, he could not take constructive criticism.

She was right, on all counts.

“You stood by me, again, when you didn’t have to...” she cried into her hands, before lifting teary eyes to Red. “They wanted to take me away from you...”

Red’s eyes darkened, staring hatefully at the dead man they were quickly carting away.

“Francis put his life in jeopardy... for me.”
Red jerked, the words hitting home. He now realized why DeCarlo was here.

“Liz...” Francis put his hand out in an attempt to calm her. “You’re saying shit that you’ll regret.”

“Doesn’t this mean anything!” she looked around lost, seeing the blood on the wall where the young man braced himself. “You were loyal to Red, and he needs to comprehend that!”

“I butted into business that wasn’t my own.” Francis’ tone grew firm. “End of story.”

“Then maybe I don’t want to be a part of the story,” She countered, “because I don’t understand and I never will... that type of loyalty.”

“I apologize, to you both.” Red’s deep voice washed over both, silencing them. “It wasn’t any of Francis’ business, true,” he began, “but he only did it for you.” he focused on the woman. “The last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt you.” he bore his eyes into hers. “And you know that.”

Liz blinked hard, sending tears skirting down her cheeks. She nodded shortly, rubbing her hands against her thighs in agitation.

“I am sorry, Francis.” Red turned his attention to the man. “Elizabeth could have been taken away, hurt or worse... killed.” he felt a wave of nausea roll his stomach. “But you saved her, at great risk to yourself.” Red reached out, grasping the man’s shoulder. “You have my eternal gratitude for keeping her safe.”

Francis tensed under the touch, upsetting Red greatly.

He had known Francis for so long, had been through so much with him... always had a open and easy camaraderie with the man. He had to wonder now, could it all be thrown away so easily on both parts.

What a fucking mess.

Red increased the hold on the younger man, dragging him into a tight embrace. He only breathed easier when Francis’ head fell against Red’s shoulder.

Francis had done the same thing when he found out his mother had cancer and when his father practically disowned the boy.

And now, that he found his friendship with Red was still intact, the young man felt his world fall back into place.

Red relaxed into the gesture himself, comforted in the knowledge that he had finally been forgiven.
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Red put out his hand, shaking Anthony Burke’s gingerly.

“Tony, I’m so sorry for all this...” Red looked around the area as each member of Burke’s team did his or her job, so efficiently.

Burke’s eyes twinkled slightly, but he managed to keep a straight face. “Yeah, Red,” the man remarked, “last night at the bar, oh and by the way, thanks for two hundred I bet on you,” he nodded agreeably, continuing, “and now today in the hall?” the man waved his hands around expressively, eyeing the area just as the floor cleaners arrived on scene. “You’re going to get a bad reputation if you don’t slow it down.”

Red managed a small smile. “Well, we wouldn’t want that. I do appreciate your discretion, I wanted you to know.”

“It’s all her fault.” Francis looked up from his seated position, finally pulling his attention away from the cute medical assistant that had bandaged his side.

Liz gasped, astounded to be sudden center of attention. “You little weasel! And I was concerned for you.”

“Red’s got himself a girl.” Silas shook his head, grimacing his distaste. “Dames, they’re too much trouble.”

Francis nodded his agreement. “Ouch!” he jumped, pulling away from the doctor’s less than gentle handling.

“That hurt! I want her back!” He pointed at the cute medical assistant, smiling charmingly at the woman.

“What do you mean _dames_?” Elizabeth took exception.

“Hey, I just saved your ass. Show a little respect.” Silas suggested.

“For the elderly.” Liz snapped.

“Hey, I saved her ass too.” Francis corrected indignantly.

“All right all ready!” Red put an end to the bickering with his raised tone, having noted Tony’s delight at his predicament.

“Lively group you have there.” the man nodded perceptively.

“They’re all idiots.” Red stated his opinion.

“Hey...” Liz really took exception to that statement.

“Except her.” Red corrected instantly.

“Well of course you’d say that,” Silas stretched his shoulder this way and that, an old wound acting up after the battle today, “you’re sleeping with her.”
Elizabeth was simply stunned, the blue eyes darting frantically to Red for assistance. She could not believe these men were turning on her so quickly.

Again, Francis nodded knowingly. “That’s right, that’s what’s going on here.” he continued to nod. “He’s boning her.”

“Oh my God!” once again she looked to Red with a ‘aren’t you going to do something’ look.

Red met Tony’s eyes easily, his head lowering once before he shook it shortly, meeting the guy’s eyes again before shrugging his assent.

“Oh... my... God.”

Red sent an apologetic glance the woman’s way. “Is there anything we can do here today to help out?” he offered politely.

“You can do something right now, for me!” The man was informed in no uncertain terms. “You can inform your goons here, that our private life is just that!”

“He started it.” Silas pointed at Red.

Red crooked his head sharply once, a crisp snap helping to ease the tension building inside his temples before returning his attention to their host.

“We have it covered.” Tony was just as pleasant. “This sort of thing happens all the time.”

“Well, you certainly have it down to an art.” Red glanced around to the pristine area, his senses slightly askew.

“Why, thank you Red.” Tony took the compliment well. “We pride ourselves on our professionalism.”

Elizabeth glanced around the area herself, flabbergasted. One would never have known that anything nefarious had taken place, let alone that two dead men had recently lay sprawled on the gleaming marble floor just below her feet.

“I’m going to have Mr. Kaplan come in to look at Francis, not that I don’t trust your...”

Tony waved the issue aside. “I can’t wait to see Kate again.”

“Can’t I keep her instead?” Francis moped, watching the doctor and the aide pack up the last of their gear.

Red glanced at the cute little intern. “No.”

“Then can I have some of the good stuff before Mr. Kaplan arrives.” he whined. “She thinks I should man up and...”

“It’s a flesh wound, you pussy.” Silas reminded scornfully.

“Two flesh wounds! Two...” the young man held up two fingers. “I’m hungry.”

Silas shook his head sardonically.

Tony’s expression shifted a tad, but he was always the consummate host. “I have a private dining room.” he suggested.
“Does it have a bar?” Silas needed to know.

Tony seemed offended. “Of course...”

Elizabeth stifled a yawn. Red noted as much. She had a long day, she needed to rest.

The man glanced down at her blood spotted clothing.

“Well gentlemen, on that note, I believe it’s time for us to retire.” Red lifted his hand, and Elizabeth instantly placed her fingers into the warm palm. “I need to get you in the shower.”

“Well, of course you do.” Silas simply stated the facts as he knew them.

Red cast the man an warning look. “Please, stay, enjoy drinks on me.”

“Don’t we always?” Silas quipped.

“Yes, but this time I’m actually offering.” Red’s eyebrow arched as he led Lizzy to the elevators.

“Hey Tony,” Silas perked up somewhat, a thought occurring, “we’ve been through a lot today.” the man explained his next statement. “You know that little blonde waitress,” he held his hands before him indicating, “the one with the...”

“Oh, I like her.” Francis perked up as well.

“Yeah well, I get first dibs.” Silas pointed a silencing finger.

Francis did not seem waylaid by the problem though. As a matter of fact, the young man arose on his own, brushing his clothing, preening his hair back into place.

“What say,” Silas continued, “if you assign her to this private dining room, say.”

“You all ready said that.” Francis pointed out.

“Said what?” Silas was confused. Francis waved it aside.

“Have a good evening.” Red drawled, shaking Tony’s hand once again before the man took his leave with but one grin of camaraderie to all concerned.

“I’ll check with you two later.” Red nodded to Silas and Francis.

He checked for his ever present shadow. “Dembe, if you could call Mr. Kaplan? She’ll get you in top notch order in no time, Francis.” he ignored the other man’s mournful moan.

“I’ll join you when I can.” Red stated aside to the large black man. “I want to show you all my appreciation, but in a more substantial way.”

“Raymond, there is no need.”

“There is a great need.” the man leaned kissing Liz on the temple.

The woman released his fingers hastily, rushing back. She threw her arms around Francis, hugging him dearly.

“Thank you.” she whispered. She quickly transferred her gratitude to Dembe, whose face lit with a brilliant smile.
She hesitated visibly when confronted by the large bulk of her bodyguard, who stood formidably before her.

But in the end, she threw her arms about the massive shoulders, holding tight even when she felt the tenseness rack the solid frame.

Red lifted an incredulous brow. Slowly but surely, the tension eased in the other man’s rigid frame, Silas’ arms lifting to embrace the woman. His head dropped, as he took in the scent of her hair, his eyes closing in open relief that she was truly safe and sound.

For most he protected, it was merely a job, but in this case, somewhere along the line, it had become personal.

He thought of the woman as a younger sister and God forbid anyone should ever mess with his baby sister.

Francis stared after the pair, as Red and Liz took their leave. He could still feel a slight tension emanating from the older man. He sensed however, it had nothing to do with himself any longer.

Red was having a difficult time forgiving his lapse in judgement where the woman was concerned. DeCarlo had come out of the blue.

Red had put all the necessary precautions in place, and they had succeeded. But to the man, Liz almost died.

Red Reddington would never forgive himself for such an oversight.

Once they stepped through their door, Red pulled Elizabeth into his embrace. He held her tightly, basking in her warm scent.

So many times in the past, he had wanted to hold her like this.

So many times she had been in mortal danger. When he had finally retrieved her from Stewmaker... his relief that he had made it in time had overwhelmed him.

Tipping that bastard back into that swirling mire of filth, had somehow cleansed his own soul.

Then later, Liz had called him a monster himself.

In some ways, perhaps he was. But he had almost welcomed the hateful words, because it meant... she was still alive to say them.

“I’m all right.” she assured, her voice muffled against his suit jacket.

“I’m not.” he told the truth.

Watching DeCarlo, knowing he had the control of life or death over Lizzy. And that it was his fault, made him physically and mentally sick.

He had been playing the game as they always did in this business. He swept the rug out from under someone, they’d try to exact some sort of revenge... Red would win in the end.

Only this time, he hadn’t taken into account that he had a vulnerability. That his enemies would attack what he loved most.
He knew it happened, but he was never a participant in the disgusting practice.

Only someone who was weak, would attack a wife or child. He should have seen it coming, because DeCarlo was weak.

Red took a calming breath, his arms tightening, holding as if he never wanted to let go, but in the end, he forced himself to do just that. “Get ready for bed.”

Liz straightened her exhausted body, grateful for the suggestion. “I think I will.”

Red followed, set on automatic pilot. Going through the motions as he did every night, only this time, he suddenly realized that Liz was right there beside him.

They had never done this before. It was their established routine that once the bath was free, the next would enter.

But not tonight.

“Thank you...” she muttered softly, putting her toothbrush aside.

“For what?” he was stymied.

“Forgiving Francis,” the blue eyes shifted to his, soulfully appealing.

“I thank it should be the other way around.” Red disagreed.

Liz was a little taken aback by the declaration. The woman stepped closer, reaching for him, though hesitantly. So much had happened today and she was trying to wrap her head around it.

“He’s a good friend to you, and I almost jeopardized that.” Red lifted his head, staring back at her through the mirror. “I am sorry for that.”

A soft smile lit her face as she laid her hand on his shoulder. She watched him breathe in at the touch, his shoulders losing a bit of their tension before he turned to face her.

“I’m also sorry that I didn’t take into consideration that the deal I made would have such dire consequences, to your life.” his jaw pulsed erratically. “You have always been my vulnerability in dealings with the Cabal, never in regards to one of my business deals.”

“Is there really a difference?” she asked.

“Most people I outbid have the same outlook as I do.” he turned her around, taking the brush from her hand. “You win some...”

“You lose some.” she concluded, wondering what he was about.

“Yes, but there are also DeCarlo’s in the world.” he continued, lifting the long strands of hair as he stroked the brush through the silky maze. “And I know that.” he sighed, smiling gently at her heartfelt moan of appreciation. “But this is my first deal where we have been... intimately involved, so to speak.”

Liz stood perfectly still under his administrations, but a slight flush graced her cheeks.

“I know what we are, but they don’t...” he concentrated on his efforts, enjoying the feel of the soft strands filtering through his fingers. “But that doesn’t make you any less a target. I will take proper precautions from here on out, I promise.”
“And what are we?” she asked quietly, redirecting the path of their conversation.

“That remains to be seen,” he halted his hand, his eyes meeting hers in the mirror once again, “doesn’t it?”

He lay the brush aside much to her dismay, disappearing into the closet space for a spell, leaving the woman to her own thoughts.

After he changed, Red fixed a quick drink at the bar, heading towards the bed. He sat a glass of wine on Lizzy’s bedside table.

She came out of the bathroom moments later, having taken her time, paying particular attention to her state of dress this night.

Red raised, having plugged up his computer, his attention immediately caught and held. In fact, he had offered a double take the moment he saw her.

And if he didn’t know better, he would think she was purposely teasing him.

Like her gown last night, this one ended at her ankles, had long slits at the side and flowed with her movements. The soft red material plastered to her skin as she walked, showing him little glimpses of what lay beneath, which made his damn mouth water.

“Oh, do you like it?” she asked all too innocently, having noticed his attention was still riveted and direct.

“Yes...” his eyes drifted slowly over her form, hesitating on the empire waist, highlighting the fullness of her breasts.

“Good...” she smiled, taking a sip from her glass, “because you bought it.”

Red felt a smile working it’s way across his face.

“I did, did I?” he queried, settling back into the soft pillows, his computer all but forgotten.

“Yep.” she nodded. “In my defense though,” she began, as she crawled up on to the mattress, “I saw it in one of the shops downstairs,” she explained, “Silas was blathering on about his many exploits with members of the opposite sex and my head was about to explode.” she sighed. “They asked my room number...”

“And they charged it to our room.” Red concluded.

“Yeah...” she winced. “They said, because I tried to pay for it myself... “

“That it’s a long entailed process that will take months on end to correct.” he nodded knowingly.

“Trust me,” he looked over the gown once again, the nipples tightening under his penetrating gaze, “I do not mind.” his eyes focused pointedly on the small peaks, his mouth pursing. “Are you cold?” he finally lifted his stare to hers, finding her lips quivering in barely held amusement.

“A little...”

Red pulled back the blankets, laying his arm out in invitation.

“You’re not gonna offer to turn the heat up?” she asked, sliding closer, laying against him. She hooked her leg over his, relaxing blissfully into his solid form.
“I’m perfectly capable of keeping you warm.” he said, adjusting the sheet over them. “Don’t you remember?”

The woman felt an electric shock course through her at the blatant flirting... finding she very much enjoyed it.

She had never thought of herself as a femme fatale, but this man made her feel every inch the part and she enjoyed it, immensely.

“Yes...” she snuggled into his heat, sighing happily. She took a steadying breath to slow her rapid heartbeat. Which was all for naught when the man’s large hand swept a searing path down and across her back.

He leisurely stroked her bare skin, getting lost in his own thoughts.

Everything that had happened in the last two days, left him exhausted and wired as hell.

Liz leaned up into his lips, kissing him, holding it for a moment before she pulled back slowly.

“Do you mind me kissing you?”

“Why should I mind if a beautiful woman kisses me.” he smiled. “Unless you are practicing for something? Were you afraid you’d forgotten how?” he reached up, tracing her lips with his finger. “Because I have to tell you, you’re doing quite well.”

She giggled quietly, “Which is always nice to hear.” she played with a button on his shirt. “I seem to do this a lot... it’s almost as if, I wish you didn’t have clothes on or something.” Liz could not raise her eyes, the bold remark surprising even her.

Cupping her small face, he pulled her towards him, “Which is always nice to hear.” he murmured, kissing her sweet lips, grunting appreciatively when she rocked her pelvis forward against his thigh, getting more intimate with him.

_God please, don’t let me screw this up._ He prayed, wondering briefly if God even knew his name anymore.

Liz laid back, laying her head on chest, getting comfortable. Red listened to the quiet room, his mind refusing to shut down. The events of the day recoiled sharply in his brain. He unconsciously gripped the small frame tighter.

“Stop feeling guilty,” she mumbled, “it’s keeping me awake.”

Red snorted quietly, “Even if I were, how could it keep you awake.”

“You’re thinking too much...” she whined. “Disturbing the room aura or something.”

“Go to sleep,” Red kissed her brow, “you’re delirious.”

“You’re demented.” She countered, her mouth curving into a smile.

“No, that’s Francis.” Red corrected, rolling towards her slightly, wrapping his arm lower about her waist.

“Fine, deranged.” she had no problem with the adjective.
“Still Francis.” he murmured contentedly.

“You’re gonna be dead in a minute if you don’t let me sleep.” Liz warned playfully.

Red ran his hand down the slope of her spine, getting lost in the satiny feel of the fabric laying over her feminine curves, his hand stopping just above the slope of her ass.

“If you’re checking for panties,” she muttered, “you’re wasting your time.”

Red chuckled quietly into the crown of her head, “Thank you for that very valuable information.”

He lay there a moment, formulating his plan.

“What are you doing?” she mumbled into his neckline.

“My curiosity is now peaked.” he rumbled softly, humor clearly in his voice. “Not that I think that you’re lying.”

His large hand swept across her bottom, clearly finding her statement to be true.

“Are you happy now?” she sighed.

“I don’t know...” he hesitated, his fingers tapping against her bare, satin covered bottom.

“Well, there’s not that much there.” Liz informed him. “Unless you you’re talking to Silas. Who says I have a big ass.”

“First of all, what’s he doing looking at your ass.” Red looked at other places, like the deep cleft between her ample breasts.

“He and Francis were making comparisons a couple days ago on my merits as opposed to a little Barista down at the coffee shop.” Liz watched intently as the man lowered his head gently kissing the swell of her mound. “There was nothing personal about it.”

“Seemed pretty damn personal to me.” Red’s hand ran over the gown, a gown that didn’t leave much to the imagination. “I have to be honest with you, I’m rather shocked that your drawers are missing.”

He palmed her ass, his fingers naturally curving to the rounded bottom.

She giggled against his chest after a second, tilting her head up to look for him in the dark.

“Drawers?” she tittered.

He smiled at her apparent dismissal to his invasion of her space, patting her bottom. “Skivvies?”

“I am not wearing drawers or skivvies.” she politely corrected herself, if only for the man’s sake.

Red bunched the satiny fabric in his hand, baring a bit of thigh to his touch. Liz found her breath suddenly tremulous and she could not prevent herself from arching into his thigh.

“Sweetheart, I know I said there was no pressure to further along relations...” he began tightly, “but I am only a man unfortunately, one feeling a definite pressure in a certain area of my anatomy at this particular moment in time.”

Liz bit her bottom lip, trying desperately to hold her smile.
“With that said,” he breathed out calmly, “unless you had another agenda in mind to which I am not privy...perhaps we should simply... go to sleep”

Liz winced a bit, hearing the discomfort in the man’s voice. She did not pretend to misunderstand his statement.

Was she ready? Her body certainly wanted to further things along. Even now, she was having difficulty silencing a slight throbbing between her legs.

“Sleep, sweetheart.” Red muttered tightly. “If it’s meant to be, it will be.”

She cuddled close into the man, still trapped in her thoughts, wondering what she should do.

Because her heart was telling her to take a leap of faith.
Clarification

Chapter Notes

I wanted to say a HUGE thank you to everyone who has voted for me on the Lizzington FB page for 'Best Love Scenes'.

I can't tell you how shocked I was to hear that I'd been picked! You have no idea how awesome that makes me feel!

Thank you all so much for your continued support, wonderful reviews, kudos and following along with my story! It honestly means the world to me!!!

April 30

Liz startled awake, her eyes slowly opening as she listened to the familiar sounds of the dark room.

Red was laying behind her, sleeping.

She lifted her head slightly, finally recognizing the sound of one man berating another. Someone else chimed in from down the hall demanding the revelers be silent.

After a few seconds, quiet prevailed.

The woman yawned, stretching slightly. She wondered what would have happened if the man behind her had been awakened from a sound sleep by such a disturbance. She dismissed the thought, cuddling back into her warm spot.

She sighed happily, settling more into the curve of Red’s body. She stiffened instantly, instinctively rubbing her bottom closer to the amazing sensation she had just felt.

The stiffness of his body pushed against her backside, the heaviness of the erection very apparent.

She rolled her hips back once more, breathing shakily, enthralled by what she was feeling.

A hand gripped her hip, stilling her movements.

“Elizabeth...” Red’s tone was a warning one.

He had awakened, having heard the people in the hall, when Lizzy had startled awake.

Imagine his surprise when the woman rubbed that tiny ass across his dick... purposely, not once but twice.

She stilled for a moment before pushing against his hold, intentionally.

“What are you doing, Elizabeth.” he rumbled his discontent.

“I need to be close to you.” she whispered, raking her ass cheek against his rigid length.
“Why...” he grunted shakily, grasping her once again, stilling her.

“I like when you touch me.” she readily confessed.

“Have you decided on...”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” she felt the rigid length throb against her backside. “I’ve never felt you like this.” she rocked her hips against him, sighing.

Red inhaled sharply, holding her hard against his straining flesh, almost sliding his cock between the crack of her ass.

“Dammit, Lizzy.” he gritted through his teeth. “If you aren’t ready, you need to stop.” he firmly stated.

Her hand reached about, her fingers sliding his length, her thumb rubbing over the rounded head beneath the satin of his pajamas.

“FUCK.” he growled low in his throat, the word both a description and a vulgarity.

His fingers curled tightly into the silk on her hip, holding his emotions in check.

There was no way in hell he could just touch her and not fuck her? Last night had been hard enough.

His brain rapidly shifted the pros and cons of what she was asking.

“Show me how you feel, Red.” Liz moaned, delirious to be close to the man.

“You aren’t ready...” he began, “I told you to take a couple days to think about this.” he urged. “If we do this and you regret...”

“I won’t regret anything.” she convinced herself, her raging hormones dictating her actions.

“Yes.” He ran his hand around her front, his frustration transmitted to his touch. “You will.”

“I know what I’m doing.” she whispered.

If he had a nickel for every time he heard that phrase, but Red had priorities as well. He knew at this point, he could not simply turn over and go back to sleep.

He had allowed it to go too far.

Red’s thumb rubbed the underside of her breast of it’s own volition, brushed her nipple, raising it into a peak within two strokes.

The full mound pushed into his palm, wanting more.

Red rubbed the hardening nipple between his fingers, causing a raw moan to escape from the woman’s throat.

His fingers curved into the shiny fabric, pulling the cup down, exposing her to the warm air and his touch.

Liz gasped, rolling her head into the pillow beneath her, exposing her neck for the man’s pleasure.

Licking and sucking the long nape, Red tugged, gently rolling the crinkled peak of her breast,
palming the hot flesh, before biting softly into the pale skin.

His groan vibrated along her nape, the creamy mound overflowing as he cupped the voluptuous breast with an experienced touch.

“God...” she panted quietly.

Red rolled Liz to her back, his mouth eager on the her already swollen lips.

Dropping his mouth quickly, he suckled the giving flesh hungrily, grunting his approval as the pink tips hardened to tiny pebbles under his tongue’s guidance.

Liz clutched the back of his head, pressing her breasts together, allowing him to suckle them both alternatively.

He sat back, the sight of the heavy breasts displayed in the cups of her gown, the wet nipples in the low light filtering from behind the curtains, making his blood heat.

Red gripped the center of the gown, effortlessly yanking the silk apart. He even enjoyed Elizabeth’s slight gasp of shock.

“I’ll buy you a new one.” he rasped shakily.

Her loose breasts bounced with the motion, driving Red nearly out of his fucking mind.

Sitting back on his haunches, he pulled at the fabric once more, freeing her flesh to his heated gaze.

He could only see so much in the darkened room, but it was enough to know she was already glistening.

He crouched over her, the tip of his tongue licking a searing path up her middle to between her breasts.

The woman groaned her disappointment when he bypassed her sex completely, but then his hot mouth was devouring her lips, his shirt brushing against her body, tantalizing the woman even more.

“Tell me what you want, Lizzy.” he muttered against her mouth, already knowing the answer. He had, after all, worked diligently to put her in such a state.

“Jesus, Red...” she raised her hips invitingly.

His fingers danced teasingly over every inch of her flesh except... where she needed it the most.

His hot fingers, drew shapeless designs down her body until they teased, sifting through the soft hair at the apex of her sex.

Red’s fingers instinctively curved around the small mound.

The little muff was more than damp and slick to his touch.

And he was fucking touching it against every instinct in his body which cried out for him to halt this madness, he still continued his endeavors.

Pressing in gently, he massaged her vaginal lips, causing the ache in Liz’s center to throb painfully.

Her breathing heightened, as she pressed the taut flesh of her breasts into his willing mouth.
He purposefully teased her, feeling the wetness increase with each stroke of his fingers about the slick vulva.

His mouth worked ardently on her pouty lips causing the woman’s tummy to quiver deliciously.

“Does that feel good?” his deep voice purred against her mouth.

Her only reply was a shaky sigh of contentment.

He slid his fingers down, barely touching the top of her slit.

His eyes focused on that little face, which showed each and every nuance of the emotion welling inside her.

“Open your eyes.” he commanded, his voice rough and raspy. The blue eyes openly hazily, unable to look away from the mesmerizing contact.

He ever so slowly slid his fingers alongside her swollen clitoris, smiling as he felt her tremble under his frame, her legs dropping wider in open invitation.

He felt her moistened folds, dragging his fingers along the dark curls of her opening. Spreading her gently, the pale tissue was slick with her arousal, smoothing his way to her inner heat.

Circling the lubricated tunnel, he breached her opening, pushing a thick finger slowly inside the molten depths.

Elizabeth cried out involuntarily, passion building in her core.

It was the sweetest sound the man had ever heard.

_Jesus._

She was so tight.

Her body gripped his finger, closing in around his digit, trapping it in the confines of her heat. She felt so good, so wet, so damn snug.

He had imagined how she felt a thousand times, but he had never thought she’d be this fucking tight.

_God,_ if she felt like this around his finger... what would she feel like around his cock.

Red slowly stroked her tiny tunnel, working his finger in a little at a time until he was knuckle deep in that sweet pussy.

“You feel so good.” he praised the woman. “Do you like this, sweetheart.”

“Oh, shit, Red.” she bounced rhythmically against his hand, caught up in the emotional upheaval he was inflicting upon her flesh.

Red grinned at her honest reaction. Her body naturally needed to fuck... something. He had made sure of it.

“Do I make your little pussy feel good?” he rumbled softly in her ear.

“Red...” she mewled, gripping his arms tight as she rode that finger harder. “Don’t stop...”
He watched his finger disappearing into her wet depths for a few seconds before clutching her hip bone, slowing her progress.

Elizabeth groaned piteously.

“Now, sweetheart.” he soothed. “I’m only giving you what you want,” he reminded, sliding another finger in alongside his other, stretching that hot hole open, “Let’s take this slowly, shall we.” He cooed, then began an agonizingly disciplined tempo, pumping his thick fingers in an out of the sensitive little pussy.

He watched the lithe body squirm and fidget, the woman unable to find any release because he would not allow her to do so.

And she was drenched. He could feel her wetness pooling in the palm of his hand.

He leaned over, kissing her mouth, tonguing her sensually, matching the rhythm he had established below.

“I want to feel your pussy come so badly, Lizzy.” he whispered intimately. “Are you gonna do that for me? Are you going to come around my fingers?”

In response, he felt the first small fluttering indicating, that she was nearing orgasm.

“Fuck yes...” he urged the woman on, “let me feel this beautiful body come... just for me.”

She clenched hard around him twice, then held it.

Red rubbed her clit soothingly, curling his fingers, tapping a spongy hardness inside her which caused the woman to clamp her thighs hard against his own, which now spread her open wide.

She pulsed hard around his fingers, the tight tunnel convulsing sensually.

“Shit...” he hissed, very much enjoying the damned show. “God baby, that feels so good.”

“So good...” she moaned pitifully, her hips slowing their erotic movement, shaking uncontrollably. Sharp jolts of electricity spiked in her clit, leaving the woman quaking beneath him. “Red...” she mewed softly.

Red slowed his hand, feeling the aftershocks of her orgasm pulse through her body. His mouth connected with her’s throughout, the kiss deepening with each passing second.

“I love making you come.” he purred against her mouth. He gasped then stiffened when he felt her little hand wrap around his thick erection, bunching the material of his pants to do so.

“Stop.” he panted, the blood surging through his veins rapidly. “Enough...”

He had wanted her to climax but he personally did not wish to get involved anymore than necessary until all the logistics was worked out between them.

Her fingers tugged gently on the hard flesh as she had done last night, making him grow impossibly hard.

“N-No...” he grunted waspishly, even as his hips pushed into her touch.

Red closed his eyes to the sinking sensation, reaching down to still her hand’s movement.
“I said, no.” he released her grip. “No more tonight.” his voice held a finality she did not like.

He pushed off to her side, falling back into the bed forcefully. The man dropped his head into the pillow, gritting his teeth, willing the throbbing erection to subside.

Liz rolled her naked body unto his rigid form, her lips searching for the man’s.

He instantly responded, his fingers threading through her thick hair, pulling her closer. His mouth was suddenly demanding and rough.

Liz wantonly ground that perfect little ass against his crotch, wiggling suggestively as it settled directly over his painfully engorged shaft. She linked her fingers with his thicker ones, spreading his arms out into mattress.

Her free hand pulled at his shirt until she felt flesh against flesh, the soft hair on his chest very arousing and satisfying on the sensitive skin of her breasts.

Red snarled his growing anger, but it was not directed at Elizabeth or her actions.

Pushing against the hand in his, he rolled her over easily, pinning her to the mattress.

“Stop...” he breathed harshly against the mouth seeking his. “Before I do something you don’t really want.”

Her hand trailed down his chest, her fingers scratching luxuriously through the soft down which disappeared into the band of his pajamas over the tight, taut belly. She managed slip from his grip, sliding her hand under the elastic waist, grasping his erection before he could think to stop her.

“Fuck...” his head lifted as the man prayed to a benevolent God. He panted heavily, attempting to get his libido to settle down.

Liz stroked the fat length experimentally, teasing the head of his cock.

“Do you really need these.” she tugged at the offending material, her tone an affecting pout.

She readjusted her hold quickly, lengthening her strokes on the turgid rigidity. She liked the feel of him in her hand, gently teasing his fat crown every few strokes.

All of Red’s good intentions were rapidly evaporating. He pushed the cumbersome pants down to his thighs, out of his way. His erection bobbed heavily.

Her fingers caressed his neck, drawing him close to her breast. He latched hungrily to the offering, suckling her tempestuously. Their bodies intertwining sensually.

His fingers tightened around hers, holding her to her lascivious pastime, guiding her instinctively.

He thrust against the wonderful feeling, pumping her hand faster, feeling his cock head brush the softness of her heated tummy. His slit dribbled pre-cum on her white skin.

He watched her hand fuck his cock, the sensitive crown pushing into her stomach. His eyes darted frantically to her face, mesmerized to note, that she was just as intently watching the same scene play out.

“Holy shit...” he groaned his relief at the erotic sight.

He felt the build up of tension and release forming inside his body. He readied himself for the
euphoric ride he knew he was about to take.

Kaleidoscopic hues danced just behind his eyes, a wave of pure unadulterated lust washed over the man as he gave himself up to the wondrous feeling.

His crown expanded, the slit oozing a thick wetness before thick jets of cream exploded from the tip, covering her flat stomach and breathtaking breasts in his hot, white cum.

“Oh god...” he panted shakily, attempting to come down from the incredulous high he had just experienced, “...Lizzy.” was all he could manage, his body too sated... his mind serenely still.

Rubbing the underside of his cock through a drop of the slick liquid, he got lost in the feeling of how her heat felt against his frenulum.

His body quaked responding to the sensation.

He shivered hard with the last push of ejaculate from his over sensitized cock.

His head dropped heavily into her chest, as he gasped for some semblance of control. Shivers ran up and down his back in waves, especially when the woman’s nails scratched his neck in gentle arcs of sensual degrees.

The silence was uncomfortable for the man, extremely so. Evidently his partner did not share such a feeling.

“Well...” Liz blew out a contended breath, “I feel better, you?”

Raising his eyes slowly, meeting hers. “Elizabeth...” his tone held a wealth of meaning as did his look, “we can’t keep doing this.”

She was stunned. “Why not.” she questioned timidly. “Didn’t I do it right?” it was one of her worst fears.

“Did I not make it clear that I would enjoy more from our relationship than just this?” he waved a meaningful hand, his brows furrowed deeply. “Sex.”

Liz felt a small smile working it’s way across her face. She thought he had hinted towards that subject, but to hear it from his own mouth was quite thrilling.

“I want you so much it fucking hurts!” he clamped his mouth shut, his lips pinched tightly. “I want to please you, I want to make you feel good.” he explained. “But...”

“But what...” she felt a small trepidation.

“But I want to do this right.” the man’s shoulders stiffened with his resolve. “You deserve so much better, Lizzy.”

“Better than you?” she questioned such a statement.

“Maybe, yes.” he replied truthfully. “But I meant, you deserve to experience the excitement, romance, sensuality... affection, from your partner. I want to give you those things, in their due time.”

“So you do regret wh–”

“I do not regret making love to you.” Red replied sternly. “I only want to do right by you. I want to take you to dinner, a walk through the park, dancing...”
“I’ve done that stuff, Red.” she tilted her head in confusion.

“With someone who wasn’t hired to do it?” he gritted angrily.

She felt her smile fall a little, truly understanding what he was meaning to convey for the first time.

“Unlike that fucking bastard, I want to be here.” Red pointed a finger into the bed. “I want to give you those things because you are worthy of having them!”

She stared up at the man, listening and finally comprehending what he wanted, truly.

“This is not just about the sex, dammit!” he tried to explain yet again. “I want to build something with you. Something meaningful. Something special.”

Liz’s lip quivered, her eyes misting.

“If you aren’t ready...” he warned with a look, “and I don’t think you are...I will wait, Lizzy.”

He turned on a low light, rolling from the bed, adjusting his clothing before disappearing into the bath. She heard the water running. Her confusion growing until the man came back, sitting beside her on the bed.

He wiped the hot cloth across her skin, washing away the evidence of their activities.

She was so beautiful. For the first time, the man witnessed the perfection of her body, sans clothing.

On one hand, the sight of her torso marked, by himself, made him feel a primal wave of ownership.

On the other hand, he had no right to feel that... yet.

“I want to make love to you, Elizabeth.” he clarified, his eyes masterfully holding hers.

There was no way she could misinterpret that statement. The fact made her heart thud loudly in her chest.

“But I would much rather do that when we’re together, in every sense of the word.”

He wanted her. He wanted to stake claim to her. Women did not understand such things. Most today would brand him archaic. Red only knew what he felt. He did not label things.

They had so much against them at this point. So many obstacles standing in the way.

He was trying his best to work through those barricades plus keep a young impetuous, and he was learning quickly, a highly sexual woman... happy and content until such a time as those blockades were no longer an issue.

And for the first time in his life, he was coming up blank.

While he was in his twenties and even up until before Lizzy came to stay with him, he had no problem falling into bed with an associate when the deal was made. Or even just a woman he met at a club, say.

He could get sex anytime he wanted, he was not being immodest.

But this. Her hesitant touch, her soft kisses, cuddling with her.
That was an anomaly. That was something he rarely allowed himself to experience, if ever.

Anyone else and he’d all ready be between her thighs, fucking her.

But Lizzy... there was something special going on here.

He enjoyed a good tease. He enjoyed hesitant touches and kisses of a innocent lover.

It took Lizzy to reach him, to reach that thing that had been dormant for so long. But it was there, like it or not.

Now, if she would only let him deal with it properly.

“This may come as a shock to you, but I enjoy being romantic.” he continued. “I would like to have the opportunity to be that... with you.”

“I want to make a life with you, share my secrets with you.” he confided. “I want to lay claim to you... be given the right to call you mine, the correct way.” he held up a hand. “Yes, there is a correct way.”

She listened carefully to him, trying to comprehend all he was saying. She understood the words, she heard them... but never in a million years, did she think any of it would apply to her.

“I don’t want a fuck buddy, a one time thing.” He stated succinctly. “When I make love to you for the first time,” he moved closer without seeming to do so, “I want it to be with the understanding, that I’ll do it again the next day, and the day after that and a year from that day.”

The woman had never heard anything stated so articulately before. It moved her deeply.

“While I would give anything to make love to you at this moment,” he hated to say the words, “There are issues that must be addressed before I can do so. And having the option to make love to you ten years from now, is of far greater importance to me, Elizabeth.”

The woman felt her old insecurities coming to the fore.

“I want to love you...” which was an understatement. “But having your love in return is priceless...”

Liz felt infinitely better now.

“I want something better for us.”

He turned up her face, forcing her to look him in the eye. He wiped away the tears trailing down her cheeks, kissing the wet tracks.

“What ever you decide,” he reassured, “I will still give you the Blacklist names.”

Liz hadn’t thought about that at all. She didn’t care about any of it right now. All she cared about was making the right decision for them...

“But if do you want the same things that I do, then we’ll make it happen.” he advised. “Have I made myself perfectly clear?”

She nodded silently, hugging him tight.

“When you’ve decided...” he let it hang. “I will be waiting. I promise you that.”
April 30

The night passed uneventfully. The next morning, as they followed the bellboy down to the lobby, they found the others waiting for them.

Francis was speaking as they approached. Dembe nodded slowly as he listened politely. Silas on the other hand, was shaking his head sorrowfully, a look of disbelief on his handsome face.

“Where’s Mark?” Red asked as he and Liz neared the group, his expression more than guarded. “And what’s wrong?”

“Mark is staying another day to finalize a deal with Anthony Burke and Ms. Toscani.” Dembe replied.

Red’s expression slipped a tad, grateful that Dembe had the good sense to not use the woman’s name.

Lexa.

“As for what’s wrong...” Silas sighed, “he’s telling us about...” the guard searched for the proper description, “how he fucked up.” the man spared Francis an impatient scowl.

“What did you do?” Red feared the worst, his tone saying as much.

“I met a girl online, see...” the young man began what Red was sure would turn out to be, the longest story in the History of Man. “She said that she’d–”

“Francis...” Red gritted his teeth, “is this going to be Great Expectations or the Readers Digest Condensed version?”

Francis seemed totally confused by the question, so Red waved the man to continue.

“Right, so she met me for drinks,” Francis explained slowly, “we had a couple and we went back to my room...” he winked, his brows waggling, “one thing led to another...”

“Didn’t she ask about your wounds?” Liz had to wonder.

“Well, yeah. But it worked in my favor.” Francis smiled happily. “She pampered the shit out of me. But, I assured her I was in proper working order.” he stated, unconsciously cupping the package between his legs.

Red glanced around the hotel lobby hastily to ascertain if anyone was paying any real attention to his companions.

Liz rolled her eyes at the display, but found herself waving the man on just as Red had a few moments ago.

“Get on with the story, please.” she encouraged.

“So anyway, we started fucking...” Francis was more than happy that someone at least, was interested in his adventure.
Lizzy giggled behind her hand, a little shocked at the man’s forthrightness, but stalwartly attempting to maintain her perspective on the matter.

Her amusement grew by leaps and bounds however, when she noted Red’s reaction. The man stood, head cocked, shaking slowly back and forth, as he exchanged pained looks with the head guard.

“... and while we were...” Francis hesitated a moment, thinking of the proper euphemism, “in fragr, no, in flamingo...”

“In flagrante delicto?” Red presumed, though he didn’t think the definition quite applied to what had happened here, but the boy was on a roll, which meant he would finish the story more quickly. So Red kept his mouth shut.

“No,” Silas followed Red’s train of thought, holding up a stilling hand, “in flagrante delicto actually applies, I believe.”

Red’s brow furrowed, his puzzlement sincere.

“Yeah, that.” Francis pointed excitedly. “I... well, you see, the thing is... I ate salsa. They had it last night, in the bar, instead of...”

“He farted.” Silas replied blandly, cutting to the chase.

“I was telling it!” Francis complained.

“Thank you for that painful reminder.” Silas replied.

Liz turned away quickly, slapping a hand over her mouth to silence her desperate need to laugh out loud, right in the young man’s face. Her shoulders shook, as did the rest of her body as she unsuccessfully tried to hide her ever growing amusement at the sordid tale.

Not only was the Francis’ story telling technique animated, to Red’s point of view, it was downright painful to experience.

Red sighed heavily, removing his glasses, rubbing the building tension behind his eyes.

“Anyway, as I was saying.” Francis stressed. “I farted mid-fuck.” the guy stopped mid-sentence, his hands going to his hips as he contemplated the events of the preceding evening. “Well actually, it was more towards the end, but it’d been hanging there for a while, you know.”

Red looked at Dembe, finding the man nodding understandably, clearly sympathizing with his compatriot. Silas merely looked at the man, his mouth slightly agape.

Liz’s face was red and flushed from trying to hold back her overwhelming need to laugh out loud.

Red kept silent for that fact alone. It was so rare to see her having such unbridled fun.

“And then what happened.” Red asked, figuring he had heard this much, he might as well hang on until the end. “We all wait with bated breath...”

“I think she got pissed. Or disgusted, I couldn’t really tell. I was a little busy after all.” Francis pumped his pelvis to show just how ‘busy’ he had been.

“I mean, it is my fault? I was using some stomach muscles, quite well, mind you.” he nudged Liz as if she understood his meaning, making her laugh harder. “It was either lose the tempo she seemed to like so much, to go rip one in the privacy of the shitter...”
Liz broke, spewing her merriment. Red glanced down at the woman, airily brushing the results of her action from the sleeve of his suit. He was suddenly hard pressed to keep his own amusement in check.

“What’s wrong with her?” Francis demanded, slapping her back quickly, his touch none to gentle, as if she was choking. “Anyway, it was either that, or let it go a little, while I tended to business. I don’t see what her problem was, she came... pretty hard too.” he was proud of that fact until...

“Faked it, you mean.” Silas corrected meaningfully.

Francis drew back, frowning. “It sure didn’t feel like she did.” His concern was apparent. “You think she did?”

“Would you if a chick farted mid-fuck.” Silas queried, interested by the answer.

“Well, no.” Francis shrugged. “You don’t see me freaking if there’s some queefing going on, either.” Francis was once again proud and happy.

Red dropped his head back, looking up to the heavens to deliver him to his next existence.

“So, what’s a little man queef, as it were.” Francis demanded to know.

Silas shrugged minutely. He didn’t mind them either, truth told.

A woman beside them scoffed disgustedly, grabbing her bag before walking away in a huff.

“What?” Francis scowled. “Are you disgusted that I farted or what I said about queefing?” he called out after the woman whose high heels clicked on the expensive marble of the lobby as she made her getaway. “Because if it was the second one, you knew what it was!” he taunted. “So don’t act all high and mighty with me!”

“Francis.” Red snapped, drawing the boys attention.

“What?” Francis threw his hands to his side. “She was eavesdropping, then had the gall to judge me, for what?” he questioned, then it dawned on him. “It had to be the queefing, because she didn’t say anything after I farted.”

“Must you be so crude?” Red scolded firmly.

“You want me to be technical instead?” Francis dismissed such a notion. “How do you explain a queef?” the man threw up his hands questioningly.

“Expulsion of air from the vagina.” Dembe replied stoically.

“Oh... well, yeah, that works.” Francis shrugged. “My way is faster though.” he looked lost in thought for a moment, then sought them out. “Does queefing extend to ass fucking too. You know what I mean?” The young man was suddenly overly concerned. “When you get going, and push out air... is that a fart or a queef?”

Red ran a hand over his face, “Jesus Christ....” he whispered

Liz fell into the wall, leaning into her shoulder for stability. Her laugher rang out loudly in the massive exterior of the grandiose hotel. Dembe reached over quickly, steadying the woman, as he continued listening politely to Francis’ tale come to it’s conclusion.

“Anyway...” the young man took a breath, finally, “I made it up to her, I think, with a little post-
coital cuddling. I like cuddling.” Francis’ face softened slightly.

“Or you gassed her, rendering her inert so she couldn’t escape.” Silas stated his belief.

“May I ask why you’re relating your evening activities to us all?” Red asked, rubbing at his forehead, completely mystified as to the ‘why’ of it all.

“Well, you asked what I did?” Francis screwed up his face. “If you didn’t want to know, why did you ask?” he asked slowly, as if Red was an idiot.

“Get in the car, Francis.” Red replied just as slowly, returning the favors.

Silas shoved the young man in the proper direction, he and Dembe trudging off behind.

Liz collapsed into Red’s chest, cackling her repressed amusement into the lapel of his suit. Red smiled down at the little head bouncing off his chest, patting her back until she started to calm down a little.

“H-He’s s-such an i-idiot!” she snorted breathlessly, pushing away from Red, dabbing her eyes, stumbling about haphazardly in a giggling fit.

Red, ever the gentleman, which was more than he could say for some others...he lifted a staunch glare at Francis who was just now entering the car which waited at the curb. Red handed the woman a handkerchief to use instead, as Liz was trying to dab her eyes with the palms of her hands.

“Which is an insult to idiots...” Red replied, before taking her arm, leading her from the hotel.

A good forty-five minutes later, after fighting down town traffic, they boarded Red’s jet heading for Washington D.C. Liz and Francis chatted amiably, during the flight.

Silas took the opportunity to catch up on his sleep. Red and Dembe manned the phones. Each lost in their own activity for half the flight.

Francis headed to the bar to refresh everyone’s drinks. Red had a brief conversation with the man, before returning to his business call.

Liz quirked her head as Francis approached, drinks in hand but felt their descent begin. She settled back, accepting the refreshment graciously.

She buckled her belt, taking a small drink from her glass.

“You wear your seat belt?” Francis disdained. “You little pussy.”

“Red’s orders.” Liz shrugged. “One you should follow, you big pussy.” she hastily looked over, checking on Red’s whereabouts. That word had never passed her lips before and it felt odd to say it to anyone but this idiot here, who she felt ridiculously comfortable with.

Francis was looking at the ends of his seat belt, completely lost.

“Don’t tell me...” Liz shook her head, “you’ve never worn one.”

“They’re for pussy’s.” Francis held up each end as if to explain the obvious. “Besides, the fucking plane crashes. What’s a little strap gonna do?”
“You don’t wear them in the car?”

“They wrinkle my swanky threads.”

Liz gave it up as she watched the guy try to figure out the mechanics of the simple seat belt.

“What was that about?” she changed the subject. “You and Red?”

“Oh, he was just asking me if I was available for the next couple days in DC.” Francis beamed her a joyous look as he completed his objective. He had buckled the belt and felt as proud and happy as when he had taken down the Baroffio Brothers.

“Why?” Liz ignored his euphoric state.

“Oh, he’s... *fuck*!” Francis squawked when the plane hit a patch of rough air, making the man lurch forward. He stuck his arm out, steadying the glass in his hand, grinning triumphantly when he didn’t lose a drop.

“Now, aren’t you glad you were wearing your belt?” the woman smirked, as they once again dropped quickly in altitude.

She chanced a quick glance to Red, finding him as cool as ever, as though nothing was happening. His feet were kicked up on a nearby table, phone in hand, but his attention was on her.

He inclined his head towards her, silently asking if she was all right.

She smiled softly, nodding once. His sighed heavily, returning his interest to the call, but was clearly bored out of his mind.

He rolled his eyes as he caught Dembe’s attention, raising his hand eye level, flapping his thick fingers together indicating the person was blathering on and on.

Dembe arose, walking to the cockpit. He had received confirmation, from the other man, that the plans had just changed.

Liz’s mouth quivered with amusement. She had noted the exchange between the two men and Red’s gesture had tickled her. There was something so human sometimes about the man, that she felt her heart soften toward him.

It was a feeling that was becoming more and more prevalent these days. Needless to say, she couldn’t wait to get back into the comfort of their own home... their own bed, to see where these feelings would lead.

Francis tapped her arm, nodding his chin towards Silas. The turbulence had not disturbed the man in the least. He still slumbered peacefully, though the skies through which they flew, were still tempestuous.

If anything, it appeared the man relaxed even more into his sleep state, molding further into the leather chair. His stocky frame cuddled up to the posh leather interior as if to a warm lover.

Liz looked out the opposite window, watching the scenery blur past the windows. They slowed on their approach, allowing her to see buildings and cars below more distinctly.

Though their descent was bumpy, their landing was superb.

As they slowed and rolled to a stop, Red dropped his head dramatically. “Oh, Miguel, I’m about to
head into a tunnel, I fear I–” he slapped the phone shut before flinging it to the table top.

Francis chuckled quietly at her side, then frowned at Red. “You’ve gone through tunnels while speaking to me...” he narrowed his eyes. “Have you been doing that the whole time.”

“No.” Red finished off his drink, then looked at Liz, instant communication passing between them, which meant in reality, of course Red often had done just that.

She snickered quietly, then whipped her head towards Francis who had jerked back into his seat, his feet flying out from under him. The man had attempted to stand having forgotten he was still snuggly buckled in.

“You can unbuckle the belt now, sport.” Liz pointed out helpfully. “Do you need instructions?” unbuckling her own to demonstrate.

“I know how to do it!” Francis struggled with the belt frantically, but the mechanism refused to give way.

The woman stood up, stretching luxuriously, noting the man beside her. She reached, meaning to shake Silas awake. A hand came out of no where, gripping her wrist to prevent such an unwise maneuver.

She looked at the owner of the hand, frowning hard. “What?”

“Don’t touch him when he’s sleeping.” Red warned, then transferred his attention. “Dembe, if you please.”

The large man shrugged nonchalantly, picked up an umbrella then lightly touched the slumbering giant.

Liz startled when Silas turned, gripped the umbrella, weapon aimed and ready, before she could even think to blink.

“Never touch him while he’s sleeping.” Red reminded sotto voce. “He’ll wake if you say his name.” he directed. “Silas.” he demonstrated, dropping his voice soothingly, cutting through the man’s REM state.

Silas sat up instantly, rolling his neck to get the kink out, his expression slightly confused as he noted he now held an umbrella.

“Is it raining?” he enquired, laying the object aside. He did not note Dembe’s sudden grin.

“Lizzy was about to touch you.” Red explained.

“So you probe me with an umbrella.” he yawned, looking around. “At least buy me dinner first... have we landed?”

Red’s head swirled around quickly at the distinctive sound of a switchblade knife opening. “... Don’t you even think about it.” he warned.

“Then get me out of these fucking shackles.” Francis was wiggling back and forth in his makeshift prison.

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Red reached, his fingers deftly snapping the release on the belt. Francis breathed a breath of exhilaration. “A monkey can do this.”
“Oh yeah right... they have opposable thumbs. It’s easy for them.” Francis defended himself, hastily lifting out of the seat.

Silas shook his head to clear it. “Did he say what I think he just said?”

Dembe lowered his head sheepishly, feeling bad for his friend.

“What?” Francis was as usual... lost.

Red handed Lizzy her bag. “Francis... get off the plane.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” he pushed ahead in line, almost knocking Liz back into her seat which brought another round of giggles from the woman.

“Do not encourage him...” Red threw a stern look her way, which only brought on more giggles. “Lizzy... get off the plane.”

The woman dissolved into a fit of laughter. Silas arose slowly, a concerned glare on his face.

“Boss, is there something wrong with her?”

“Yes. It’s the associations she keeps.” Red replied lazily.

Silas shifted a wary stare. “You talkin’ ‘bout me or Monkey Boy down there?” he jerked his head towards Francis who was headed for the red auto parked on the tarmac, even though Joe stood by the large SUV, hands out stretched in a ‘what the hell’ manner.

“Francis!” Red called out. “It’s the black one.”

“But your name is ‘Red’.?” Francis snapped his pique, glancing around expectantly. “Oh! Hi, Joe. You’re late.”

Joe searched for some kind of meaning in it all, receiving no ‘answers’ from anyone departing the plane.

“Black is less conspicuous.” Red played along because that’s all he could do at this point.

Silas bounced down the steps, his expression a wry one. “Yeah, Joe..where ya been?”

“Hey, a man can lose a few hours without even trying.” Francis defended staunchly. “Cut him some slack. He’s here, ain’t he.”

Red tried to ignore his surroundings, helping Liz to navigate the steps of the plane, careful of her injuries still. “Ignore them, maybe they will just go away.”

“Wishful thinking on your part.” She tried hard not to giggle again because if she did, Silas threw her a mystified glance.

“Does Silas...” Liz had a burning question bothering her. “I mean..how does he..eh..” She thought how to put it. “If he’s with a woman and ...falls asleep, afterwards..I mean.” She lifted hopeful eyes to an amused companion.

“We’re very aware when the naked female form is laying cuddled up to us.” Red replied. “The mode we experience upon waking is... less acerbic, shall we say.” he smirked.

“You do that too? Wake like Silas did?”
“Yes.”

“But you don’t do it with me.” she countered. “And I’m not naked.” she teased.

“I’m very aware of you, no matter your state of dress.” Red’s eyes dropped to her shapely form, remaining far too long to be decent. “Besides, I have seen you in all your resplendent glory...finally.”

The woman held the arresting gaze, determined to do so. “So you have...”

The crew pulled off the luggage in no time, loading it into the waiting SUV. Liz realized the jet had yet to power down.

“Are they going somewhere?”

“I am.” Red guided her to the car door, reaching around to open it.

Liz stepped in front of the action, preventing it. “What do you mean,” she scowled, “you’re going somewhere?”

“I’m going to London for a couple days. Check out what I just bought from Anne’s estate.”

Red craned his head, finding his men otherwise engaged. They were giving them some privacy.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” she practically accused.

“I wasn’t sure I was going until about twenty minutes ago.” Red explained. “But actually, I think this is a good idea.” he nodded minutely. “It will give you some space.”

“Space?” she frowned. “What for?”

“Without me underfoot, you’ll have time to think, get your feet back under you.” Red laid it out carefully for the woman. “Instead of thinking with our hormones, perhaps we may think with our hearts.” He rather liked the poetic reference. “Besides, as they say, absence and all that...” he smiled.

Makes the heart grow fonder. She concluded.

The woman was suddenly befuddled. She had assumed they would have time together, to discuss any issues they had with each other. The thought of him leaving unsettled her completely.

There seemed so much to say, so much to iron out.

“Francis is going to stay with you while I’m gone.” he informed her. “I thought you might appreciate it, since you enjoy his company.” he smiled.

She nodded silently, unconsciously playing with Red’s tie.

She wrapped her fingers around the fabric, pulling on it gently. Red followed her directive, stepping in closer until they were mere inches apart.

Liz felt her heartbeat increase, feeling his warm breath skirt across her lips. She leaned forward, pressing her mouth to his.

Red’s fingers curled into the top of the large vehicle rack to maintain control of his senses. He
tightened a free arm around her waist, pulling her up against him.

Her little tongue darted out, teasing his lip. He willingly submitted, opening for her gift. His lips lazily explored the sweetness offered.

Liz lazily rubbed her tongue sensually along his. The man issued a deep groan from his throat, before pushing her form against the car, as Red deepened the kiss further.

She stretched up into his efforts, humming her enjoyment. He ran his fingers through her thick hair, softly rubbing the tips into her scalp. The other hand settled around the small of her back.

She gasped in his mouth, as his fingers pressed into that bundle of nerves, making shivers course up her spine.

Liz sighed her contentment, relaxing into Red’s handiwork.

The man enjoyed tremendously, the feel of the soft, warm body pressed so intimately to his.

Red stared down at her half closed eyes, wishing she would ask him to stay.

But even if she should ask him to stay, he knew it was best to go.

He wanted to do this right. Because she was worth it.

“I will miss you, Lizzy.” his deep voice enveloped her.

Liz fiddled with the knot at his neck, suddenly, intently focused on her distraction. “Do you have to go?” She asked quietly.

Red felt his heart still for a beat, shocked to have actually heard the words.

They were closer, the trust and bond between them was stronger. He should be grateful for that. They had moved their relationship onto a more intimate basis.

And now this...

She wanted him to stay.

A first, and a revelations of sorts.

“No, I don’t have to go,” Red softly brushed his lips against her, “but I’m going to, because you need this time, Lizzy.”

“I think I know what I need, Red.” she stated, a little indignant that he thought otherwise.

“Ah, the innocence of youth.” Red sighed softly.

“I meant...” she huffed.

“I know what you meant.” Red stilled her. “Tell me, Lizzy. Are you ready to commit to me... fully, completely?” he watched her face carefully.

Liz stared moodily at his tie, concentrating hard. There was so much at stake. But maybe just as much to gain?

“Are you ready to warm my bed...” his voice dropped sensually. “Are you ready to make love, with
me? Because if I stay... I will fuck you.”

Liz inhaled shakily, her mouth going dry for the declaration.

She was torn. A part of her wanted to tell him, yes. Another part of her was hesitating, but she didn’t know why?

Everything was moving too quickly? Maybe he was right? But she needed Red to touch her again, so badly.

Last night he had said so much and she was still trying to sort through all the chaos in her mind.

She didn’t want to hurt him... she didn’t want to hurt either, come to think of it.

Red offered a reprieve because he could sense the turmoil inside the woman.

“You think about it, Lizzy...” Red suggested, “if something should change. If you can say for certain you want me in your life,” the thought made his mouth water, “you only have to call and I will come to you immediately.”

“Well, aren’t you eager.” she strived to lighten the moment and her own mood.

“When I’m coming home to claim what is mine,” Red brushed his lips over her parted ones, “yes. I am very eager.”

“And if I don’t call?” she asked nervously, afraid that he might actually answer in the negative.

“Then it isn’t time yet.” Red simply stated. “I’ll be here when you’re ready.”

“But what if you’re not here?” she feared that he would lose interest if she hesitated too long.

“Then I’m most likely dead,” Red replied, “because that is the only possible circumstance I can fathom that would keep me from you.”

He was not making this easy, at all.

Red heard the jets engines warming up again for departure, glancing at the plane. Time was getting short. He looked at the woman, memorizing her features, then did what came naturally.

He leaned in to kiss her.

Francis poked his head around, a disgruntled sound alerting them to an unexpected intrusion. “Aren’t you two done yet?”

Red waved off the interruption, peppering Liz’s flushed face with small kisses.

After a few moments, Red raised his head, finding Francis still standing there, staring at them.

“What?” Red scowled.

“Nothing. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you two do it before...” he hesitated. “I mean...” he grimaced. “I haven’t seen you do it at all, which is to say... I wouldn’t mind seeing it. I’ve just never been invited.”

“And you never will be.” Red mildly advised.
“Well, that’s not very nice.” Francis was mildly hurt. “I would do it for you. And have.” he testily reminded.

Liz looked at Red in a different manner suddenly. Did he like to watch such things? She blushed fully at the thought.

Red chuckled sensually, reading her mind. “Ahh, the foibles of Age, eh, Lizzy?” He turned on the young man. “Francis... go away.”

“How far?”

“Far enough to give me a moment in private with my fiancée.”

Francis grinned as he held up his hands in surrender before taking his leave.

Red turned his attention to Elizabeth. He spoke over the noise of the plane engines.

“I would like to do more than just kiss you...” Red stressed. “You do know that, right?”

Liz’s hands held tight to the man’s tie, the blue eyes filled with open concern. “You’ll call when you–”

“I’ll call.” he assured.

“Be safe, Red.” she whispered.

He kissed her again, a bittersweet brush that left her wanting more. He pushed off the car, running his thumb gently over her swollen lips before turning away, walking toward the waiting plane.

Liz watched him leave, feeling a roiling in her tummy that left her shaken and feeling slightly ill.

Silas opened the door behind her, gesturing for her to enter. After a few seconds, he cleared his throat. “Liz?”

She glanced at the guard, her expression blank before returning her interest to the back of the long swishing coat and hat walking away from her.

Pushing hastily away from the car, she trotted quickly after that retreating figure.

“Red...” she called out after him. The man turned, his foot on the stairs on the plane.

His head tilted questioningly, a welcoming smile playing around the corners of his mouth.

“Go ahead, Dembe.” Red gestured the man to proceed him, turning back to the woman. He stood patiently waiting, his gaze resting intently upon her face.

She tiptoed, quickly wrapping her arms around his neck, capturing his lips with her own.

Red pressed into the unexpected affection, his heart thudding hard in his chest.

He had not expected this at all...

The large black car rolled up behind them. Neither seemed to notice. Red broke the kiss when he heard the subtle whoosh of a window being rolled down.

“Hey!” Silas complained, “I’d like to have lunch sometime today!”
Red raised the finger at her back, plainly telling the man what he could do with himself.

“I'll see you when you get back.” Liz said quietly, her lips brushing his.

Red smiled against her mouth, embracing the small promise.

“I’ll be back soon, Lizzy.” he staunchly declared. “I promise you that.”
April 30

After arriving home, Elizabeth sat quietly at her Ladies desk, sorting through the mail Diane had left for her before they departed for New York.

She smiled, finding another letter from her Aunt and two from her cousins. She owed her Aunt a letter. She opened a birth announcement which made her smile. The other was a wedding invitation.

Liz tapped the card against her palm, wondering how she should respond. Surely Red wouldn’t want to go. Hell, she wasn’t even sure she wanted to go.

She sat it aside, making note to get a wedding gift if anything, along with a present for the baby.

Tossing the junk out, she hit on the last correspondence, recognizing the type on the front. She immediately tore into the plain white envelope, her fingers shaking slightly. She read the single sheet of paper.

*Reddington will destroy you, like he did your mother.*  
*Keep that in mind. Stay in his company and he’ll take you down like he did her.*  
*Hell, your whole family is dead because of Reddington.*  
*Get away from him, Liz, before he does the same to you.*

Whoever was sending these, she had to admit, raised questions in her mind.

What was Red’s relationship with her mother? How had they met?

Had they been lovers?

And if so... what the hell did that mean to her? And why should she even care?

If it did happen, it happened over twenty-five years ago, she reasoned.

She looked out the large bay window, enjoying the sunshine filtering through the opened drapes. She allowed her thoughts to wander.

She couldn’t even remember the woman really, except for small flashes of fragmented memories in the night.

What ever connection Red had with her mother, did not seem all that important any longer.

She was her own person, a fact which Red pointed out to her on a regular basis.

Surely, the man would have told her had he been intimate with her mother. If it was one thing Red Reddington was, it was forthright.

Often he would tell the truth, when a lie would serve him better.
Brushing aside the thoughts of her mother for now, Liz instead, concentrated on something more important.

She was seriously considering a relationship with the man. There was no longer any doubt as to that. But if they did this thing, what would the ground rules be?

How did she feel about him with the others? When he went out of town, could she trust him not to visit other women’s beds? Red had been free for so long, how would he feel about any encumbrance or restrictions.

She did know one thing, if they did do this, she wanted commitment. She wanted better than what she had with Tom and... she deserved it.

Liz sat back in her chair. Where had she heard those words? A small smile danced on her lips.

Red wanted to give her those things and thought she deserved them. That’s where she had heard it.

Red did care about her... truly.

Red wanted the whole package. He wanted her. He wanted to build a life together.

When she had heard that statement, she had difficulty believing it to be true. But now the question was... how did she go about letting him know she was just as interested, that she was open to having a closer relationship?

If she were anyone else, she could ask a friend, a coworker for advice.

They wouldn’t be supportive. They would warn about the dangers of involving herself with a known criminal... it was their job and they would think, that they were merely protecting her.

And the other people she knew, believed her to already be in a relationship with the man.

All except Silas and Dembe.

She really had no clue how Dembe viewed her attachment to Red. The man would do anything if Red said to do it.

And Silas would only tell her to grow a set.

Liz suddenly felt all alone, like never before.

There was one person she could talk to, but the thought made her damn near break out in hives.

The next fifteen minutes passed at a snail’s pace as the decision was debated over and over on an endless loop.

Gripping the phone, Liz flipped it nervously in her hand for the hundredth time before sighing.

“You want to know...” she mumbled to herself, “so ask.”

She dialed the number quickly, drawing in a steadying breath, preparing herself mentally having heard the first ring. She even thought of hanging up hastily but a loud click negated that choice.

“Mr. Kaplan?” Liz asked nervously.

“No problem, dearie?” the calm, oppressively somber tone replied immediately.
“Well... no.” Liz admitted. “But...”

“Yes...” the older woman urged impatiently.

“Did Red sleep with my mother.” the younger woman blurted out before she lost her nerve.

“So this is a social call.” her tone altered only slightly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...” Liz stumbled over her words, “I just...”

“Have you spoken to Raymond about this?”

“Well, no...”

“I wish I could answer that question for you...”

“But you won’t because of your loyalty to Red.” Elizabeth surmised.

“No, that’s not it at all.” Mr. Kaplan brushed such nonsense aside. “I just believe that this is a discussion you should have with Raymond, so that there are no questions left unanswered.”

“I don’t understand.”

“If you ask me, and I say ‘no’,” Kate began, “you may feel a sense of relief, but still some doubt.” she stated slowly as if speaking to an errant child. “But if you ask Raymond and he says ‘no’...”

“I know it’s the truth, because he doesn’t lie to me.” Liz repeated what she thought the woman wanted to hear.

There was a moment of silence, before the older woman sighed brusquely. “Look, you discuss this with Raymond.” she began. “If he doesn’t answer your questions to your satisfaction, you call me back.”

“I don’t know how to say this...” Liz didn’t, “so I’ll just say it.”

“You want to know what to do concerning the proposition that Raymond has presented you with.”

Liz was momentarily stunned, unable to form a proper reply.

“I believe Raymond cares for you deeply.” Kate began slowly. “And you would be a fool to not accept him in such a capacity.”

Elizabeth’s mouth gaped, one part of her rejoicing another rather stupefied.

“I can assure you,” Kaplan continued, “it isn’t every woman who receives such an invitation.”

Liz wanted to say so much but was quite frankly, intimidated by the woman to whom she was speaking.

“Raymond is an extraordinary man.” Kaplan had said her piece. “Consider yourself fortunate that he has taken notice of you.” she hung up with a finality that Liz found slightly insulting.

An hour into the flight, Red sat glancing out at the billowy clouds below the jet’s windows. He felt
the weight of the world sitting on his shoulders.

*What the fuck was he thinking?*

How could he even consider getting involved with Elizabeth. And yet, how could he not?

Red Reddington was a felon. One with a murderous past and present. It could be argued that he had only killed people who deserved it, but in the eyes of the law... and God, the semantics blurred considerably.

Elizabeth Keen was an FBI agent. A woman much younger than himself.

But the real fact was, he was only a man. He enjoyed life, lived large, bet big, and took ridiculously dangerous chances, for the simple fact... he no longer cared if he lived or died.

Or at least that was how it used to be.

He had a daughter... somewhere.

And Elizabeth... who meant a great deal to him... had changed his entire outlook on the world.

But what the hell kind of life would she have being tied to him?

Hell, what kind of life did she have now, just because she was born to the wrong parents?

Which led him to other aspects of their lives, ones he had shoved repeatedly to the back burner, simply because he did not have the courage to face them.

Red dialed the number quickly, drawing in a steadying breath, preparing himself mentally having heard the first ring. He even thought of hanging up hastily but a loud click negated that choice.

“Kate...” Red breathed out.

“What’s wrong, Raymond?” Kate Kaplan’s tone was entirely different when speaking to this man.

“I think I’m in trouble.”  He rubbed his forehead tightly with his thumb and forefinger, concentrating hard on how to exactly put his feelings into words.

The silence was deafening. Red tried to force his emotions to the surface but he had been suppressing them so long...

“You love her.” Kate’s tone was filled with sympathy.

“.... Yes.”

“And what, you don’t want to?” the woman cut to the chase. “Because that’s a load of–”

“There are so many...”

“You think because you’ve protected her since she was a child, that you can’t love the woman she has become.” she stated in that monotone way she had about her.

“...Yes.”

“Raymond...” Kate Kaplan sighed fitfully. “You failed her mother, or at least, you seem to think you did. When it was really Katarina who failed you both.” even though she could not see the man, she
held up a silencing hand. “Regardless of the situation, you’ve made it up to that woman by providing a comfortable life for her daughter.”

“My point exactly, I’ve been like a...”

“Good family friend.” Kate finished. “You did not raise that girl, Raymond. Sam did. He’s her father, not you.” she put it on the line. “You only helped Sam financially from time to time.”

A sharp thud interrupted the flow of the conversation. It sounded vaguely like the fall of an axe... it disturbed the man that he could distinguish such a sound so easily.

“Kate...” he sensed the worst. “What are you doing?”

“Cutting celery for my chicken soup.”

The man breathed out a sigh of relief. With this woman, one just never knew.

“I love your chicken soup.”

“What ever.” it was drolly dismissed. “Elizabeth is a woman now, quite capable of making her own decisions. If she wants to sleep with you–”

“I didn’t say anything about–”

“Please, let’s not even go there.” she waved the butcher knife about aimlessly. “As I was saying, if she wants to be intimate with you, she obviously does not look at you as her father figure. I doubt she ever has.”

“She asked me if I was her father.” Red arranged the napkins on the table before him in an intricate pattern.

“Well, what the hell did you expect?” the woman poured the celery into a colander, running water over the fresh vegetables. “You appear out of nowhere, integrate yourself into her life for reasons unknown... an enigmatical man such as yourself.” the woman grimaced her distaste for the whole thing. “What did you think would happen. And who the hell would not be attracted to someone like you... except me of course.”

“She said she hated me.”

“You’re a big enough man to take a little constructive criticism.” the woman dismissed. “She doesn’t hate you. Let the past go, she has, for the most part.”

“The past can never be put behind us.”

“My God, Raymond. Don’t be so dense.” the woman snapped peevishly. “Why must you hang onto your misguided guilt.” the woman chided. “When all you’re doing is denying not only yourself, but Elizabeth.”

“Denying what exactly?” Red skirted, sitting back heavily in his chair.

“I really hate when you side step the issue.” the woman sighed her annoyance.

The silence came again as Reddington prepared himself to face his demons which he would much rather do than this woman to which he now spoke.

“I’m hurting her...” he confessed bleakly.
“Yes, you are.” Kaplan pulled no punches. “Tell her about her parents. How they were connected to you.”

“Kate...” Red balked instantly.

“There is only one part about her past that interests her right now.”

“Now probably isn’t the best time.” the man bit his lip repeatedly.

“You’ll never think it’s the right time.” the woman scoffed. “When all you’re doing is wasting time.”

“So much has changed for her.” he reasoned. “Her house is gone, her marriage over, her–”

“I know that you’ve made her orgasm.” she stated bluntly. “And don’t lie to me and tell me you haven’t, because I know when you’re lying.”

Red frowned, glaring at Dembe. “Is that all you people do?” he threw out an incredulous hand. “Gossip about my love life?”

“We take bets on it, if you really want the truth.” the woman’s dead pan voice remarked lazily, as she picked up an onion, inspecting it religiously for flaws.

“What the hell does any of this have to do with...”

“You know very well what I mean, so don’t play stupid.” the woman grated. “It’s annoys me.”

“She wants to make love...” Red obediently responded as Kate wished. “But...”

“You’re worried about the scars.” the woman surmised.

“Wouldn’t you be.” Red’s tone held more than a hint of anger.

But Kate knew Red well enough to hear the insecurity underneath the false bravado. “Do you think so little of her?”

“I beg your pardon.” Red was getting irritated.

“You think she’s that shallow?”

“Well... no.” Red didn’t think Lizzy shallow at all, but she hadn’t seen...

“Tell her how it happened.”

“Dammit, Kate!” the man seethed, then sighed. “I can’t take that from her.” the man whispered painfully.

“It’s time she knew the truth, Raymond.” Kate gritted. “It will allow her to move on, don’t you understand?”

Red stared down into his tumbler, frowning hard.

“Raymond, the truth will out one day.” Kate responded sternly. “Do you want her to hear it from you or some reporter.”

He breathed in shakily, swallowing hard around the lump in his throat. “...Me.”

“Stop being so damned secretive and give her something.” Kaplan smashed the onion down on the
cutting board with a finality which boded ill if Red did not heed her advice. “Tell her who her mother was to you and everything you want will be right there at your fingertips.”

“I can’t do that, Kate.” Red hissed.

“When she asks that question, you better answer her, Raymond.” Kate tired of the conversation and Red’s tap dancing. “Now tell her. Or by God... I will.”

Red heard the line click, then silence. Kate had hung up on him. The air left his lungs in a rush.

He had to tell Liz something now or Kate would assuredly take matters into her own hands.

He couldn’t stop Kate Kaplan and he knew as much.

Why the hell had he called her?!

Had he hoped that the woman would veto any involvement with Elizabeth straight out? Take the decision from his hands... well that was exactly what had happened, except... it had worked out the other way around.

And did it even matter anymore? The damage was done.

He began rehearsing in his head scenarios he planned on how he would break the news which had to be conveyed but nothing was good enough.

There was a mental block the man could not overcome. One he had to overcome and damned soon, if he knew Kate Kaplan.

He needed a starting point from which to work. He racked his brain, which ticked away feverishly at the new problem presented him.

“You would be better off telling her, Raymond.” Dembe said quietly from across the plane. “I think you are underestimating Elizabeth.”

“I didn’t ask for advice.”

“You should have.” Dembe retorted. “About a great many things.”

“You used to be so quiet.” Red muttered tightly as he walked past the man to the bar. “It was so much more enjoyable, peaceful.”
Am I Interrupting

Chapter Notes

It was pointed out to me in a review that some of this chapter sounded familiar and I had to agree. (Thank you, thank you, thank you! I would have never noticed had it not been for your help!)

(If you want to know how I screwed up, read the review section below. I explain how I think I did it. And it was entirely my fault. Not Beta.)

I was going to delete this chapter, but thought some of it might be enjoyed, so I’ll go ahead and leave it and hopefully get everything back on track in the next chapter.

With that said... I will not be posting the next chapter today (Thursday), as I planned.

I’m going to take a couple days and reread what’s coming up to make sure that everything is correct before posting.

Thanks for reading and reviewing!

Your feedback is VERY much appreciated!

May 2

Much to Liz’s surprise, Red had called with a Blacklister the night he left. After gathering the info, she had called her team, giving them the preliminary information.

The next afternoon, while Silas tended to Security upgrades, he grudgingly allowed Liz to leave with David and the new kid, Kevin, to take Samar to lunch. They also, after lunch, hit a store to grab some odds and ends before returning home.

When Liz arrived, a large truck was parked out front.

A couple of guards and delivery men were off loading the rest of the clothes ‘Miss Perfect’ had chosen for Liz before their trip to New York.

She watched load after load rush past her, her guilt and recriminations growing by leaps and bounds.

Why had she allowed that woman to convince her she actually needed all this... wait a minute. She did not remember ordering all of that.

After the men left, Liz went through, trying to make heads or tails of all the bundles and boxes. She finally achieved her goal an hour or so later, having sorted through the bulk of the clothing.

With that complete, she fell exhausted, unto the small divan. She had enjoyed her afternoon and now determined to put Red Reddington out of her thoughts for a while and attempt her first dip in the
pool. An oasis which had been calling her name since she’d been here.

She changed into her bathing suit, only to find herself staring at her phone, again. Wondering, for the hundredth time, what to say to Red. Everything that she had come up with sounded so trite.

Sure Red, I’d like to date you. What woman in her right mind wouldn’t?

She scowled slightly, cringing inwardly. That was so articulate, so profoundly moving... bullshit!

He had been so up front, almost eloquent, everything had sounded so perfect in her mind. When he said it.

She felt like anything which she decided upon, paled in comparison.

Maybe it was just that ‘over the phone’ seemed so impersonal? This was an important step for them. And to her, it felt like she needed to say what needed to be said, to his face. Mainly to gauge his reaction, of course.

She snatched the phone off the table, grabbing her towel, marching from the room... intent on burning off some stress.

Stepping out into the hall, Liz pulled up short, hearing men’s voices. She looked down at herself fighting her inclination to wrap herself snuggly in the towel.

No! It was something Red Reddington’s woman would not...Red Reddington’s woman! The phrase made her tingle inside.

If she played her cards right, could she really lay claim to that title. She fought her inclination to continue such a line of thought, lifting her head proudly, trudging forward.

She would have to get used to feeling more comfortable in her own skin. Her body was okay... right? She could work this bikini just as well as the next woman... couldn’t she?

She was still debating that question when a familiar voice broke her train of thought.

“Hey...” Francis called from down the corridor, taking in her state of dress, or undress, “hot ass.”

Liz did not find any offence in the man’s remark, as a matter of fact it bolstered her confidence somewhat.

“I didn’t expect you back so soon.” she smiled at Francis. The man had only been a couple hours at most. She had wondered at his absence. He had left rather abruptly with no explanation at all, but she wasn’t his keeper and knew how to mind her own business... for the most part.

“You going swimming?” the young man asked.

Liz looked down at her bathing suit, then back at the man, her face saying it all.

“I meant, are you tanning or swimming, you little shit.”

“Swimming.” she smiled. “And you, stop hanging around with Silas.” she suggested evenly, a thought occurring to her. “How about getting changed, swim off some of that stress clinging to you.”

Francis rolled his neck, the sound of cracking plainly heard even at her distance. “Sounds like a plan...”
Liz waded through the water, feeling the drag against her body, pulling at her legs and most specifically, her ankle. She was glad Red had suggested the water therapy. If anyone knew how to work away injuries quickly, with the best results, it was Red.

“Feeling the strain, huh?” Francis dove into the deep end of the pool. He broke the surface, wiping the water from his face. “It felt like it took forever to feel normal after I broke my leg. But really, I think it was about three weeks.”

“I’m just tired of feeling... tired and winded.” she could feel the stress even now.

“Here, let me show you some exercises that helped.” Francis lifted a warning finger. “Don’t push yourself.” He scolded. “You can’t make it all better in one day.”

“I’m fine, let’s keep going.” She panted, pushing off the wall. Francis sighed heavily, shaking his head for such folly.

He followed, gliding up next to her. He kept the pace easily all the way into the deep end. He hit the wall with his hand, turning expectantly.

Liz was no longer next to him. He scanned the pool rapidly, panic rising in his chest.

Breaking the top, he inhaled a lung full of air, as he pulled Liz the rest of the way up, clutching her against his chest. She sputtered, coughed and gasped for air.

He brushed the hair out of her face, concern etched on his boyish features. “Are you all right?” He demanded to know.

The woman jerked her head once in affirmation, grasping his shoulder for support.

“Just relax, I’ve got you.” He patted her back, loosening the water she had swallowed. “Wrap your legs around me, hon.”

“Am I interrupting something?” An ominous voice enquired all to pleasantly from the side of the pool deck.

Francis kicked, circling to face the new arrival. There was no doubt as to what was in Red’s mind, his tone leaving little to the imagination.

The dark eyes stared coldly at the younger man who held Elizabeth so tightly pressed up against his body.

“Yeah,” Francis scowled right back, “a near drowning.”

Red’s expression froze as he hurried closer to the pair. He hastily examined the situation more closely, his concern now apparent as well.

The woman coughed spasmodically, finally clearing her lungs and throat. “I’m okay...”

Francis caught her eyes. “Better?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” She nodded. He relaxed his hold, knowing her feet could now reach the bottom. He had guided her far enough to safety.
“You’re back earlier than I expected.” she lifted a surprised glance to the man in question, wading slowly forward. Glad to have solid ground beneath her feet once again.

“That’s all you have to say?” Red snapped. “You don’t think what just happened deserves an honorable mention at least?”

“It was just an accident.” she glanced back at the deep end of the pool and then the young man coming up beside her, subconsciously asking for support.

“Elizabeth.” Red fumed, his mood certainly no better for such an evasion.

“I got tired... I couldn’t...” She sighed.

“You pushed too hard and had Francis not been here, you would have drowned.” Red tracked her movements through the water, walking beside her as she made her way to the steps of the pool. “You told her as much too, didn’t you.” Red directed his attention to the young man who waited patiently for the storm to pass.

“I did, yes.” Francis wasn’t about to go against Red again. “She’s just anxious, Red.”

“Anxious to get herself killed.” At Francis’ look of consternation, Red was reminded to calm himself before speaking again. “You’ll get better, it’ll just take some time... unless you fucking kill yourself.”

Okay, so maybe he wasn’t as calm as he should be.

“Red...” Francis groaned his disappointment.

Red grabbed Liz’s towel, striding to the stairs to help her out.

When she reached the deck, he pulled her against him, uncaring that her wet suit was saturating his clothing.

“Are you okay?” He mumbled into her neckline, squeezing her tightly against his straining form.

“Yes, don’t be mad at me.” She asked quietly in his ear.

Francis exited the pool, grabbing a towel as he passed them.

“Thank you, Francis.” Red grasped the young man’s hand as he passed, his look speaking volumes.

“No problem,” Francis grinned for the one sided apology, “I’m just glad I was here.”

“Why don’t you take a shower and join us for–”

“Ah, I understand now.”

They turned in unison, to see a tall, well dressed, handsome man, smiling widely and eyeing Liz appreciatively.

Liz looked puzzled at Red for the unexpected intrusion.

“Elizabeth, this is Ben Gilchrist.” the older man made the introductions, his hold tightening on the woman’s waist. “Ben is here to finalize some business we have.”

Francis held out his hand, greeting Ben, while Red turned away, holding the towel open, blocking
any view of the woman.

Stepping in, Liz held the material to her body, rubbing away the wetness.

When Red turned back, Ben was craning his neck to get a better look, his face allowing his smile.

“It’s impolite to ogle, Ben.” Red’s brow lifted slightly.

“On that note, I am going to take a shower. See you all shortly.” Francis grinned. “It was nice knowing you, Ben.” he sniggered, walking past the still gaping man.

Red pulled Liz possessively to his side, staring hard at the newest arrival, scowling darkly.

Francis stopped in his tracks, his face bemused. “Man... take a hint.” he lifted his hands slightly. “Do you have a death wish... literally.”

The other man almost laughed his amusement until he really looked at Francis’ face. His enthusiasm dampened considerably.

“Ray, I’m all wet.” Liz tried to pull away from his expensive and now, dripping suit.

“A fact of which you will never hear me complain,” Red quipped, the sexual undertone quite clear, “and which I plan for you to enjoy on a regular basis.”

Liz managed to control her vexation, not responding to the innuendo. But Red continued to needle her, taking it one step further.

“But only with me.” he nuzzled her damp hair in open affection.

Opening the towel wide, she stepped into him, hugging him close. The warmth of her wet body melded with every part of his. Tilting her head, she nuzzled her nose along his chin, “You know I always do, Ray.” she purred.

Now if she was only chewing gum to complete the vision she had in her head of the floozy bimbo she was portraying, the picture would be complete.

But dammit, the man wasn’t annoyed at all, as she had planned.

He ran his hands under the towel, wrapping his arms around her waist, molding her entire front to his, completely ignoring the fact, that he was almost as wet as she was now.

Dropping his head, he kissed her cheeks, before rubbing his own nose against hers. Kissing the side of her mouth, his eyes twinkled with amusement.

Ben cleared his throat, reminding the two they were not alone.

“I can see why you so desperately wanted to get back, Red.” Ben chuckled.

Red suddenly scratched at the back of his neck, avoiding her eyes.

“What?” Liz tried to read the man’s face. “Did something go wrong?”

“It went better than expected.” Red smiled charmingly at her. “There wasn’t any real point to stick around.”

“Yeah, and now I know why.” Ben snickered.
Red shook his head minutely as a deterrent, but Ben ignored him completely, blithely supplying Liz the run down on what had occurred in Red’s absence.

“You have to know, these meetings normally take up to two days to complete.” the man began his narrative, warming as the tale progressed. “So Red walks in, takes off his hat, stands at the head of the table, pointing at each man in turn,” the man held up his hands, as the picture unfolded, “in less than twenty minutes, each of us knew what, when and where we were shipping... what our cut would be, and what accounts the money would be deposited in.” Ben looked at the man in question with admirable eyes. “Then he says, in that inimitable way he has about him, so... are we done here?”

The man laughed appreciatively.

“I didn’t see the point of taking a whole day to discuss the logistics. It’s pointless.” Red defended his actions. “I didn’t hear you complaining.”

“I had just taken a drink. By the time I was finished,” the man chuckled infectiously, “so was he.”

“And have I heard a thank you?” Red admonished. “No, I have not.”

“Red?” she whispered her growing concern. “Did something go wrong?”

“Dembe, could you take Ben to the bar.” Red directed his one time friend with a none to gentle hand, which made the man laugh all the more. “Get him another drink, since his last went by so quickly.”

Ben chortled, moving towards Dembe. “Please, do take your time, Red. I wish to enjoy this one.” the man called back over his shoulder.

Once Ben had left, Liz checked with Red. “Is there something going on I should know about?”

“I don’t know what you mean?” He hugged her close, looking down at the contact.

“Why did you come back so quickly?” she feared the worst. “Is it Carver?”

“No, he’s out of the country at the moment. I didn’t see the point of wasting a whole day on something that could be taken care of so easily.” he dismissed. “Maybe I just wanted another day off.”

“Are you lying to me?” She pulled back, shocked.

“Well, we know that’s not possible.” He pulled the Velcro of her boot apart, reaching for her leg. She sighed, waving him off. “I’m gonna take a shower you know.”

“You still have to walk through the house.” He set her foot in the black cast, tilting his head, his eyes examining the area in open amusement. “I see Hannah and Katie were here.” He pointed down at the flaming red nail polish on her toes, smiling. “Nice color.”

“You’re evading.” she scolded.

“Lizzy, I’m tired, I’m burnt out. If I could, I’d go to Mark’s tomorrow.” After running his fingers along the top of the cast to check it’s tightness, he helped her stand. “I missed you.”

“You did?” her heart sped up a beat.
“You sound surprised.” there was a melancholy to his voice.

“Maybe a little.” she admitted.

“I’m finding I can’t sleep without you near…” He smiled when she looked shyly back at him. “I’ve grown accustomed to your snoring and now I can’t do without the white noise.”

Liz laughed lightly, slapping his arm playfully as they headed back to the master bedroom.

“Take a couple days off Red.”

“I wish I could, but I don’t see that happening yet.” he confessed. “I’ll be here tonight and tomorrow, I think.”

“Can I help?”

“The Blacklister I gave your team has moved off into Canada, so I may have to take them up there to get him.”

“Why do you have to go?”

“To find him,” he explained patiently, “I have to meet with contacts there, face to face.”

“If you keep going at this pace, you won’t make it to Mark’s.” she forewarned. “Because you’ll have dropped dead.” she complained.

“It’s like I said, I know this little get away is coming and time seems to stretch the closer it gets.” He sat down on the couch, collapsing into it wearily. “I think we’re all feeling it.”

Red glanced over, finding the woman staring at him worriedly.

The man dropped his head back, then nodded wearily. “All right. I’ll try to take a couple days off.”

Liz smiled happily, leaning to kiss his cheek. “Thank you.” She clasped his hand, pulling on it relentlessly, “Go change, you’re all wet.”

Red looked her over, taking in her lack of clothing. His glance caused her skin to flush.

“Speaking of wet…”

Controlling her rapidly beating heart for the man’s very apparent appreciation, Liz bolstered herself, “Do you think we can get a minute when you’re finished with Ben?” she asked. “I wanted to talk to you about–”

“Raymond?” Dembe knocked softly.

Red sighed, then straightened his posture, tugging on the back of his vest, turning to the new ‘intruder’ into their world.

“Come in, Dembe.” Liz gestured the man in. “I’m just going to change.” she smiled at both men before making her exit. She threw Red a cautious look. “We can talk later.”

After the woman shut the door, Red rolled his head towards his friend.

“Is this your little way of telling me you want a raise?”
Dembe’s mouth pursed, barely containing his amusement at his friends ire.

“You just wait outside that door, don’t you?” Red evil-eyed his friend. “Just waiting there for your cue to come in and interrupt at the worst possible moment ever.”

“Not the worst ever…” Dembe grinned, holding out the paper he came to deliver.

“I swear to God, Dembe.” Red’s jaw worked furiously. “If you ever interrupt me when I’m fuc–”

He heard an abrupt crash from the bathroom which interrupted him momentarily. He stood hastily, making his way forward.

Liz’s soft murmured curse amused Dembe.

Red took a couple steps, then halted, pointing a warning finger at his friend. “I won’t stop, I’m warning you now.”

The man pushed open the door, “Are we having a small apocalyptic disaster in here?” he viewed the broken disarrayed contents of the shower caddy which lay strung across the tile floor, with open amusement.

“You could break your neck with one of those things.” he quipped before closing the door soundly in Dembe’s face with but one calamitous look for the man.

Dembe chortled quietly, heading for the exit. He knew he would try in the future to exercise more discretion, as Raymond Reddington… always kept his promises.

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Liz had felt stupid, having clumsily knocked the shower caddy down. She was grateful for Red’s assistance in righting the mess. She had been in the shower, soap on her face, naked as the day she was born and just about to shampoo her hair when her arm caught the damned thing, sending it flying.

She had forgotten all about her lack of clothing in her efforts to right the situation, until she arose from her stooped position, finding Red’s eyes resting placidly on her nakedness.

The moment lengthened, Liz feeling like the proverbial ‘deer in headlights’. Red finally looked away, breaking the spell.

“I’ll get that for you.” was all he said.

The simple statement eased her awkwardness instantly. She didn’t know why it did, but she arose thinking only, that she was cold and needed the warmth of the shower again. She stepped back inside, resuming her shower as if the man seeing her sans clothing was the most natural thing in the world.

Red sat the items aside, turning his head to watch blatantly, as Liz continued to wash that appealingly beautiful body.

His gaze traveled over the soapy bubbles cascading down the slope of her spine, watching her hands move languidly over the heavy mounds of her breasts, then slowly slide down the taunt stomach back to the sculptured arms and shoulders.
“What did you want to speak to me about?” he managed to pull his attention away long enough to sound somewhat normal.

The woman hesitated, her hands halting their motions. She had lost her nerve when confronted with the reality of the man.

Red glanced back, raking the sweet curve of her bottom, wishing with all of his heart, that she would turn around to face him. But that did not happen.

“Oh, it wasn’t that important.” Liz’s tone held a lightness she did not feel. “I know you have people waiting.”

“Let them wait.” he advised quietly. “No one is more important than you.”

The woman turned slowly, her eyes locking with his. She suddenly felt all warm and fuzzy inside, beaming him a brilliant smile.

Red carefully kept his eyes forward, sensing this was not the moment to push the subject, he had in mind to push.

He nodded minutely, taking his leave more than reluctantly. The vision of her neatly trimmed pubic hair covering that luscious little pussy, making his cock throb with anticipation.

After Liz dressed, she found the men drinking and smoking cigars in the glass enclosed veranda.

Someone had opened a couple of the huge doors, allowing the smells of their cigars and fragrant early spring flowers to combine, in a pleasant sweet aroma that drifted around the cool room.

A soft breeze blew in bringing a heavenly scent from the kitchen as well.

“Are you cooking?” She asked Red, taking her place next to him.

He shook his head, before blowing out a heavy stream of smoke. “No, I hired out before we landed.”

“No?”

“No, remember she had her grandchild’s recital tonight.” She nodded that she did. “I hired a different crew.”

She didn’t think she’d ever get used to Red’s life. Don’t feel like cooking, hire it out. Don’t want to clean, bring someone in. Want authentic Baklava, get on a jet and fly to another country.

She tracked Ben as he walked back and forth at the edge of the enclosure, phone glued to his ear, a serious expression on the earnest enough face.

“Something wrong.” She gestured to the man, her senses tingling.

“No, just confirming last minute details.”

She watched Red’s tongue flick against the end of his cigar, his lips wrapping around the tip.

“Mmm,” He hummed around the cigar, leaning over to reach into his jacket pocket, pulling free an iconic Robin’s egg blue box. He presented it to her.

She flipped it over so the bow was on top, reading the block script. “Tiffany…” She scolded, lifting awestruck eyes. “Why do you do these things...”
“Why do they always sound so scolding when they hold that box in their hands?” Ben grinned, taking a seat. “Knowing very well that they’re going to keep whatever’s inside.”

Red chuckled around his cigar, watching for her reaction as Liz pulled the lid off. His smile widened as the blue eyes blinked her amazement, her mouth suddenly agape.

“Oh my God...” she reverently removed the platinum and diamond necklace carefully, holding it up to her neckline. It draped elegantly over the warmth of her full bosom.

The single strand of delicate round diamonds broke off into two strands mid-way, mimicking a cowl.

“Oh my God.” Francis ‘mimicked’ the woman’s awe having seen the gift in all it’s glory.

“See... she’s going to keep it.” Ben snickered, watching the woman stare mesmerized, at the sparkling strand of jewels.

Red reached, rolling the cherry on his cigar into the crystal ashtray, his amusement growing exponentially.

Lizzy unexpectedly threw her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly.

“I bet she wouldn’t have done that if you just gave her a box of chocolate.” Francis nodded sagely.

“Usually, she’s more excited about chocolate.” Red felt the woman giggle against him.

“Well, not today I’m not.” he was assured as she pulled back, kissing his cheek lingeringly. “How do I thank you for something so beautiful?”

“Oh, let me count the ways.” Francis piped up, rolling his eyes dramatically.

“We’ll negotiate a deal...” Red traced her brow lovingly, his tone dropping a notch, “...later.”

But his ‘negotiation’ was interrupted by a server standing in the doorway, “Sir, dinner is ready to be served.”

The men adjourned to the dining area but Liz had more important things to do. She fumbled with the clasp of the necklace, her brace inhibiting the task.

“Here, let me help you.” Red took charge, hooking the two pieces together easily. He gently turned her shoulders. “Let me see.”

She turned around, tracing the edge of the diamonds with her fingers. “Isn’t it magnificent?” She moved her chest slightly, making the diamonds shimmer under the light.

“Very...” The man was not looking at the necklace at all, she noted.

“I know this is meant for a special occasion.” the woman could not stop touching the fabulous stones. “But I tell ya...”

“Any occasion that a beautiful woman wears diamonds, is special.” Red took her arm, linking it with his as he followed the others from the room.

“Sometimes Red Reddington,” she had to admit, “you take my breath away.”

“Not yet,” he causally mentioned, “but that day is on the horizon.”
He enjoyed the quizzical glance she offered.

He had actually worried that she might not like the necklace. She was a simplistic type of woman. Usually gravitating to small charms, delicate necklaces, basic watches.

But maybe it was because no one had ever gifted her with something better?

Tom certainly wouldn’t have gone out of his way to give her anything that wasn’t given to him by his handlers. Red knew well, where that wedding ring of hers had come from, and it certainly wasn’t chosen by Tom.

She deserved better... any woman did. But in Lizzy’s case, Red was the very person to give her the very best.
Negotiations

May 2

The house was busy for hours with Red constantly in demand from one person or another. At one point, Elizabeth thought she had cornered the man for a private moment but Francis pulled him away, for a last minute bet on some game everyone seemed involved in.

Red said to put five on the under dog where as Francis laughed gaily, dismissing such folly, before rejoining the guards and Dembe in the larger entertainment room.

“You just bet five hundred dollars on a game you haven’t even been watching?” Liz was a little numbed by the fact.

Red steered her to a convenient couch in a nearby room. “Actually I bet five thousand.”

The man smiled at the sharp intake of breath from the woman.

“Sweetheart, if you’re going to bet, bet big. Makes the winning so much more rewarding and watching so much more exciting.”

He raised his arm, settling it behind Liz, surprised when she leaned into him, resting her body comfortably against his.

When did this start to feel normal? It had been a fluid movement, as though they had done it a couple hundred times before.

He glanced at the top of the shiny crown of her head. “We seem to have a moment alone here.” he checked the empty room as she cuddle closer. “I believe you wanted to speak to me concerning something important?”

“I... uhm...” she hesitated now that the opportunity had presented itself, “well, you see,” she began, “I thought a lot about what you said.” she fidgeted with her necklace. “I mean, before you left for London.” she clarified.

“Yes...” Red tipped his glass, sipping the warm liquid, waiting patiently. He could sense the tension in the small frame.

“Well, I just thought, maybe....” Liz took a shaky breath, trying to calm her nerves. “I’m not quite sure how to...” she sighed her disappointment, when Francis and Dembe entered the room unannounced, laughing over some shared joke.

The woman drew in a deep breath, trying hard to squelch her vexation.

Red sensed again, the woman’s mood. “Could you give us...” he began, catching the attention of the wayward intruders.

Liz squeezed Red’s thigh, hushing him. “We’ll talk later... or something.” she mumbled, before kissing his soft lips briefly.

“Are you staying tonight, Francis?” she asked politely, directing her attention to the man.

“Actually, I think I will, if you don’t mind.” Francis started walking the room, as was his usual modus operandi, searching through anything that could possibly be misconstrued as ‘private’.
“Mitch is still at my house and I just know he’ll have the ‘flavor of the day’ there. And really, I would love to get some sleep tonight.”

“Flavor of the day?” Liz questioned.

“He’s had a different girl there the last four nights he’s stayed. And they’ve all been...” Francis searched a polite word.

“Enthusiastic?” Red assisted.

“That’s putting it mildly. I went home today to pick up some clothes and thought I walked into an episode of *Wild Kingdom.*” the younger man examined the fine leather of a novel he had taken from the shelf. “This is heavy.” he shot a questioning glance to his host.

“Well see, Francis,” Red smiled pleasantly, “all my novels actually have pages in them.”

Francis’ brow crumpled disapprovingly. “The hollow ones are much lighter and just as nice looking... you can hide lots of...” he glanced at Liz, altering what he had intended to say, “neat things inside.”

He looked at the floor trying to decipher if he said anything amiss then realized everything was fine. He decided to change the subject. “You two don’t swing from the vines, right?”

“We’ll keep it down, just for you, Francis.” Liz managed tongue-in-cheek. “Why not put them in the guest house?”

“Funny you should ask.” Francis nodded agreeably. “Why didn’t you tell me about the secret room?”

The woman looked at Red, the statement confusing her completely. “Sweetheart, can we have a moment here?”

Red was already helping her arise, directing her gently from the room.

“Oh, I get it. It’s guy talk.” she disliked being dismissed if she were a child but she could feel a tingle where his hand had met flesh. “I don’t have to be hit in the head.”

“Yeah, why does she have to go?” Francis championed her cause until Red’s lethal shift of his eyes changed his outlook. “Yeah, it’s guy talk, get out.”

Liz sighed heavily, shaking her head as she exited in a huff.

“Well, you’re gonna sleep on the couch tonight.” Francis predicted.

“What... secret... room?” Red practically growled.

“There was a fake wall in the office.” Francis spread his hands defensively. “My contractors found it
when they were remodeling the East wall.” he shrugged any concern away. “You didn’t know about it?”

“I bought the house from an associate. He didn’t mention it.”

“Why did you buy it for her? I thought she was here.”

“None of your business.” Red stated. “And put down that vase, it’s priceless.”

Francis sat the artifact aside carefully, stepping far away from the vicinity.

“Was there anything in this hidden room?” Red got matters back on track.

“I haven’t seen it yet.” Francis was still more interested in the vase. “How much is priceless, exactly?”

“I want to see that room.”

“Yeah, okay.” Francis started wandering around again, looking for something else to catch his wandering attention. “We can go by tomorrow morning...”

“I want to see it now.” Red stood, finishing his drink in one gulp. “I’m going to tell her we’re going out.” he nodded to Dembe who exited to ready the vehicle.

“Can I come?” Francis asked excitedly.

“Do you have the keys to the house? Because I don’t.” Red sighed heavily.

“Oh, right.” the young man smiled happily.

Red headed back to their room, just as Liz was coming around the corner.

“Now, can I have a minute of your precious time.” she asked, her gaze shifting past the man, her lips pinching in open annoyance.

Red’s brow furrowed, looking over his shoulder to see what the problem was. Silas and Joe were sauntering down the corridor, focused on Red.

“No...” Liz jabbed a finger at them, stilling the men in their tracks. “Go away.”

Silas ignored her completely. “We need him to–”

“You need to take a hike, take a long walk off a short pier, hit the road Jack, you need to leave...” she informed the men in no uncertain terms. “What ever the hell you want can wait, dammit!”

Red clenched his jaw tight, staving his amusement because the look on their faces was... priceless. If only Francis were here now, he would understand.

The guards looked at him, awaiting his decision. He shifted his eyes to the woman.

This was her home. They were her guards. She had a perfect right to tell them to bugger off.

“Did you hear me?” she drawled. “Go... away....” she pointed for them to go. “It’s my turn!”

“You need to get your ass tapped.” Silas grumbled.

“I’ll tap your ass, you little son of a b–” the woman reached for Red’s weapon, only to have the
man’s large hand still hers.

“You heard the lady.” Red held his grip on Lizzy’s hand. She struggled harder however, when Silas crossed his eyes at her. “Follow her orders...”

Red knew the men were screwing with Liz and would listen to her if the shit hit the fan, but she needed control right now, and they needed to give it to her.

Liz stuck her tongue out before slipping it back in her mouth quickly when the head guard reached out to snag it between his fingers.

Silas’ reflexes were in remarkable working order and he was just an instant from catching the slippery little nub which shocked Elizabeth if her reaction were anything by which to judge.

Red hid his amusement admirably, even when he heard Silas mumble under his breath as he passed... ‘kiss ass’.

While Red normally would have retorted... he was much more interested in Lizzy right now, than having a verbal sparring session with the Head Guard.

Red chuckled quietly as the woman manhandled him into a nearby room. He leaned against the dryer as Liz firmly shut, then locked the door behind them with a flourish.

She stood there a moment, glaring at the door. She glanced behind her, blue eyes meeting a patiently condescending pair.

“Alone at last.” he glanced around his surroundings. “I love the ambiance of this room.”

“Oh, shut up. I mean... not shut up...” she stepped closer, her hand held aloft. “You don’t have to shut up.”

He inclined his head graciously. “Are you nervous?” He asked solicitously, folding his arms over his chest, his leg crossed at the ankle.

“I’m not nervous.” She almost knocked over the fabric softener bottle with the unsteady shake of her hand. “Okay, I’m a little nervous.” she admitted fitfully, angry with herself for being so.

He pushed off the dryer, coming closer to her, his bulk seeming to fill room. “Talk to me, Lizzy.”

She took a steadying breath, clenching her trembling hands at her side, opening her mouth to speak...

A horrendous knocking on the door made the woman actually start, it was so loud.

“Hey Red? You in there?” Francis called out amiably. “We’re ready to go.”

“Dammit, Francis, go away!” Liz voice shook. “He’ll be out in a minute!”

She waited a spell, shocked when only silence prevailed. She looked at the door in something akin to wonderrment.

“Lizzy?” Red questioned softly.

She braced her hand on his jacket, kissing him softly.

She knew now, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that all she had wanted to feel was... this.
To confirm what she had felt in New York, was the real deal.

She had felt an instant connection when his lips touched hers.

Being kissed and held by Red Reddington, felt right.

He smiled against her lips, inching closer, just feeling the tips of her breasts brush against his chest. Red rubbed his nose along hers, his mouth parting sensually in response.

Liz would be lying if she said she didn’t enjoy these spontaneous acts of affection. A hug, cuddling and even a kiss now and then, made her feel cared for and connected with another human.

Other’s would not understand how this man affected her. When she was near him, her heart would race, her tummy flutter erotically. Just the scent of him, excited her in a way she hadn’t experienced in years. This could not be wrong.

Red knew he should probably push to find out what the problem was with this woman, because he sensed there was one. But right now... he just really wanted to be alone with her. He’d been without this beautiful mouth for days and missed the sweetness of her kiss.

Liz drew back, her eyes searching his pleadingly. Red wanted to help, to answer any questions she might have, but she had yet to ask any.

“I know that you are a little...” he began to search his way, hoping to alleviate any concerns or worries she might conceivably harbor.

“I want to date you...” she whispered quickly, before another interruption could occur or she lost her damn nerve.

Red’s mouth snapped shut, his senses stagnating.

“We can start off slow.” Liz spoke hurriedly, starting to pace quickly back and forth before the man. “...Spend some time together, alone.” she suggested. “Maybe we could take a drive down the coast. No wait, there’s a coast here right?” she had a vague vision of some coast somewhere. “You know what this is like, it’s like one of those dating sites.” she looked at him plaintively. “I like long walks on the beach, horseback ri—”

“Lizzy, stop.” Red reached out, gently taking hold of her arm to slow her pacing. “What did you say?”

She looked down at the towels beside her, unstacking the perfectly stacked column. “I said it was like one of those dating s–” she could feel the man’s stare burning into her.

“What did you say, Elizabeth...” the man repeated the question, his gaze unwavering.

“I mean...” she sighed shakily, “if you’re still interested, that is, of course.” she licked very parched lips, with her very dry tongue. “I-I mean, I didn’t call when you were gone, but I thought it would be better to talk to you, face to face and then you got home...”

“Elizabeth...”

“I accept your offer... to date...” she clarified, then added quickly, “each other, of course.”

Red focused on her mouth moving, the words filtering in his brain... before he fully comprehended
them. It must have taken a while, because when he snapped out of the fog, the woman in front of him looked very self-conscious.

“Really?” he asked quietly.

“... Yes.” she nodded once.

Red controlled his growing excitement, just barely, since it was very obvious the woman needed something more.

“This will be a...” she traced the line on top of the washer meticulously, “a monogamous relationship?”

Red smiled instantly. This is where negotiations began. Fortunately, he was amazing at negotiations.

“I would like it to be.” Red was pleased to see she seemed relieved by his answer. “I take it that is a prerequisite for you.”

“Yes, I would prefer that.” she breathed easier. “That may be old fashioned or not up to today’s standards.” she realized, grimacing slightly.

“In some things, Elizabeth,” Red philosophized, “the old ways are best.”

“I also know, you get busy and stuff.” She shrugged agreeably. “I won’t take it personally or anything if you have to go at a moment’s notice. As a matter of fact, I’m getting used to that.”

“That will have to change.” Red disagreed.

“I don’t want you turning your life upside down because of this thing between us.”

“I call it rearranging.”

“That’s another thing.” she remembered. “I know you have to keep up appearances, so I will not stand in your way of doing your job.” she declared.

“All right...” he let the idea settle, “we’ll work on that.”

“Nothing is changing per se, except we will be more... affectionate?” she questioned hopefully.

“I would hope that we would become more... affectionate.”

“And I understood you correctly?” she needed it clarified for her sanity’s sake. “You won’t have sex w—”

“I only want to make love... with you.” Red clarified. “I don’t want to be with anyone... other than you.”

Liz smiled softly, very pleased with his response.

“And you?” Red questioned. “Will you belong to only me?”

Liz pouted sternly up at him. “Of course I’ll be faithful to you!”

He knew that of course, but that was not in essence, what he had asked. Though it was damn nice to hear her say those words.
Liz moved closer once again, leaning into his embrace which he offered gladly.

The woman primly straightened his tie, her eyes lifting questioningly.

Red was experienced enough to read the invitation. He drew in a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

“Lizzy you just intimated that you would understand about my job.” he was at a crossroads. “Even as we speak, I have two men waiting for me to accompany them on a very important matter. I don’t want to go.” he explained his point of view succinctly.

“I would rather stay with you, but to do so might conceivably put you in some sort of danger. Danger to which I have yet to determine the parameters.” he shrugged. “But danger all the same.”

He looked at her earnestly. “Now, you tell me... what do I do?”

Liz was slightly off put by such honesty.

“When we make love, I want it to be because it is right for us,” he desperately wanted that, “because the affection we share, naturally led us to that moment.”

He was the most romantic man she had ever met. And while she could appreciate that fact, all she wanted to do truthfully, was fall into bed with the man.

There was also something about anticipating how that special moment would come about.

What would lead up to them being intimate?

She was sure if she pressed him to make love to her at this very moment, he would. Right here, probably on top of the washer and somehow he would even make that romantic and sensuous and exciting and most of all, memorable.

But that he was willing to wait... and she knew he told the truth in that aspect.

_Really_ made her want to sleep with him.

Oh, the irony of it all.

“You’re not making the wait any easier, you know.” she grumbled quietly.

Red chuckled, hugging her gently. “I never said we couldn’t fool around until that time.”

He smiled, pressing gently against her neck as he felt her giggle in response to his quip. He leaned slightly, catching her gaze.

“You know what I would really like?” he asked seriously.

She glanced at the washer mischievously. “To brazenly take me here.” she pointed to the lid. “We have to start it first though.”

He chuckled appreciatively. “When I _take you_, I won’t need assistance from the spin cycle, trust me.”

“And do you plan to...” she was suddenly more than curious.

His tone left little to the imagination. “Sooner or later... hopefully the former.”
“I thought this was all going to be natural.” she lifted stylish brows.

“That refers to the first time. Everything after that, is cart blanche.”

“Oh, I see. Thank you for setting that straight.” she held her smile.

“May I take you out to dinner tomorrow?” he asked.

The sudden change of venue was becoming easier to adapt to.

“Like a date.” she teased.

“Exactly like a date.” his tone had dropped slightly.

“Do you expect me to put out on the first date, because Silas says it is expected.”

“Silas is a slut, and you are not.” it was emphasized.

“Then I would like that, very much.” she nodded amiably. “Casual or formal?”

“We’ll wing it.” he placed his lips softly against hers. The heated touch ignited an ember inside the woman’s overactive libido.

Slowly caressing his bottom lip, Liz curled her fingers into his hard chest, pursing her lips sensually against the curve of his mouth.

“This is nice.” she sighed contentedly.

“Nice?” his fingers curved into her hips, easily lifting her to the washer. Stepping between her legs, she slid even closer of her own accord. “If that’s all I rate, I should take a little more initiative.”

He slid his fingers up the inside of her thigh, lifting the dress as he went. Red hooked his index appendage inside the flimsy silk of her panties, rubbing enticingly over her throbbing little clit.

Liz squirmed about helplessly under his guidance, her mouth devouring his eagerly.

“You know what I would really like?” he repeated almost soothingly, his thumb teased the tiny nub religiously. “To taste this little morsel I’m playing with right now.”

Liz moaned brokenly.

“I can’t wait to taste you.” he moved in close, spreading her legs with his flanks, holding her open to his exploration. “Do you want my tongue on your pussy, Lizzy?”

She moaned, gasping his name feebly.

“I can’t think straight some days, wanting so badly to put my face between your thighs and lick you until you come.”

He felt her fingers clutch helplessly at his shoulders as she held tightly, the rising tension racking her body, causing her to shudder uncontrollably.

He grasped the back of her hair, holding her mouth for his pleasure as he finished the kiss to his satisfaction.

He drew back leisurely, inspecting his handiwork.
“‘Nice’ my ass.” Red Reddington never backed down from a challenge and although the woman did not know she had issued one, she could not deny his abilities.

She leaned against him breathlessly, her senses straining, her emotions raw.

Her fingers sought some sort of stability, curling into the soft cotton on his shirt where the material stretched tightly over his lower back area.

Red stiffened immediately, her touch reminding him of an issue as yet undisclosed.

He drew back slightly, breaking the moment. He would have to approach the subject sooner or later. Kate Kaplan had seen to that.

He, in truth, was dreading the disclosure.

“There’s something I have to...” he shook his head slightly, lowering it. Shit, there had to be a better time, a better place.

Red was never so glad to hear his friend’s voice filter through the door. A voice that offered deliverance.

“Raymond, we are ready.” Dembe’s deep tremor filled the other man’s mind with relief.

Red breathed out shakily, accepting his reprieve gratefully... guilt eating away at him.

She laughed quietly, kissing his mouth. She could see the humor of the situation finally.

“Go ahead.” she nodded. “We can talk more later.” she smiled for him alone.

“I’ll be out in a minute.” Red told the man, then heard Dembe’s footsteps retreat.

She giggled quietly into his chest, hugging the man endearingly.

“What?” he muttered against the crown of her head, pleased that she was apparently content now. Whatever demons which had plagued her, now seemed gone.

“Are you my boyfriend or significant other or...” she tightened her thighs around him, hugging him with her legs, just moments before Red cupped her bottom, sliding her from her perch.

He turned with her artfully, pressing her against the doorway, his hands cupping the firm cheeks possessively. He leaned suggestively against her vulnerable middle, moving just so every now and again in a most rhythmic manner.

“You can call me anything you like.” his mouth feasted on hers ravenously.

“What are you going to call me?” she whispered enticingly.

“Mine...” he replied gruffly, before claiming that beautiful mouth of hers once again.
May 2

As they drove to their destination, Francis related a story Mark had told the previous day.

It was difficult to follow the tale because, knowing the punchline, Francis belabored the telling by laughing after every other word.

“So the cop says, ‘sing’.” Francis’ hands were very animated, “and ‘Tony Twitchy Eye’ says, in that Irish accent he has,” the young man mimicked Tony’s accent perfectly, “...‘I’ll sing, I’ll sing’.

He started a fit of laughing again.

“And did he... sing?” Red was interested in spite of himself, his expression one of pure indulgence.

“Yeah,” Francis laughed heartily, “he breaks into this rendition of Copacabana whereupon the Coppers proceeded to make the canary regret the day he was hatched.” the hysterical laughter began anew.

“Yes,” Dembe’s droll voice piped in from the front seat, “quite the knee slapper.”

Red exchanged enigmatical looks with Dembe in the rearview mirror. “Francis, have you been reading Mickey Spillane novels again.”

“Yeah....” the young man’s laughter died a natural death. “I love that man.”

“Why did I forgive you again?” Red questioned the validity of that particular decision.

“Because life without me is boring.” Francis smiled happily.

“Life without you is serene.” Red corrected.

“Oh, look who’s talking.” Francis scoffed. “You don’t see my face plastered on a FBI Most Wanted Poster.”

“Yet...” Dembe sighed from the front seat.

Red chuckled, as they pulled up in front of the dark house. Following Francis inside, he nodded in approval, seeing the work that had been done so far to the house.

“It looks nice, Francis.” Red praised the improvements. He was glad to see the house so changed, especially after the images which lingered still of the last time he was here.

Francis pointed the way, while Red and Dembe followed.

“East wall.” Francis glanced about, getting his bearings. He started off but Red put a restraining arm out.

“East.” the older man pointed the actual direction out as the younger had headed South.
The men stood before the wall, searching for any sign of a ‘hidden room’.

Francis held up a staying hand, stepping, hitting the last panel at the end of the mantel.

The door slid open of it’s own volition, revealing a darkened interior.

Red pulled a flashlight from his pocket, scanning the space. The light danced across the eerie silence, revealing flashes and segments of fragmented images.

The entire room was covered in pictures.

Of Elizabeth Keen.

Red stepped into the area, his focus on the disturbing photos.

There was Elizabeth, getting coffee, on her morning run. There were several stills of the woman sitting with Red on a park bench.

“What is it? What did you find?” Francis stepped inside, his brows raising. “Whoa, what the...” The images rendered him speechless.

Red spun slowly, the beam of light revealing more recent photographs. More specifically, Liz at the Blacksite the day she picked up the baby.

He saw none which would reveal her present location thankfully, but that did not stop him from pulling his phone out, dialing Silas.

“Dembe, shut down the lights.”

In a few moments, the house was once again bathed in darkness aside from the hazy beam from Red’s flashlight.

“Silas, check on Lizzy, please.” Red stepped aside, allowing Dembe to pass into the small space.

The large dark man began taking the photos down, keeping them in order as he neatly deposited them in an empty plumber’s box.

Red watched the progress. “Nothings wrong. Let’s just say, I’m unsettled.” He dropped the phone from his mouth, waiting for Silas’ confirmation.

Red glanced around the room, silently fuming. So this was how Tom knew Lizzy was staying with him.

When Red had come to speak with the team after Carver’s attack, that little bastard had been hiding in this room, listening to every word said.

How long had he been there? Had he been hiding in here when Carver attacked Lizzy and done nothing to help her? Probably... the damn coward.

“Red,” Silas’ voice was reassuring, breaking the man’s thought patterns, “she’s fine.”

“Extra vigilance, please.” Red snapped the phone shut. His mood dropping a degree.

“What the hell is going on here?” Francis was lost.

“It’s all right.” Red allayed any further questions. “I think I know who did this.”
“Well, would you like to clue me in?”

“Before she was with me, Elizabeth was married.” Red yanked down a photo himself, keeping his infamous temper in check. “To an asshole, that doesn’t seem to know when to let go.”

“You mean the ‘asshole’ did this?” Francis gestured to room itself.

“He’s the only one that comes to mind.” Red’s tongue played with the inside of his jaw, a nervous tick he had never mastered. “...he’s been sending her letters.”

“So now he’s escalated to shrines?” Francis was trying to wrap his head around such a mentality.

“It would seem so...”

“How did he get in here without her, and more importantly you, knowing.”

Red knew he had to tread carefully here. Francis didn’t know who Lizzy was, really. Red had to keep the story simple. He would also have to update Lizzy on this... farce.

“She is notoriously bad about setting alarms.” there was a brittleness to Red’s tone. “And I was out of town so fucking much...”

How long had Tom been in this house, was the question of the day. Had he stood over Lizzy while she slept, watching her, the creepy bastard.

“Hey, she’s okay. She’s with you now.” Francis placated. “Are you going to tell her?”

“Of course I’m going to tell her.”

“I think it’ll scare her.” Francis warned.

She was already scared. A psychopathic serial killer had targeted her, not to mention, the damn letters.

“But that is what Silas is for, right?” the young man remembered. “So she doesn’t have to be.”

“Silas is the best there is, but even he isn’t invincible.” Red had seen a lot of good men in his day taken out by unexpected circumstances. He himself, was a victim of such incidents.

“There’s no need to panic her, yet.” Francis held up both hands to signify he had he problem in hand, so to speak. “When you aren’t there, I can be.”

“She doesn’t panic so easily.” Red stated. “She’s been taking care of herself a long time.”

Red patted the man’s shoulder all the same, pleased to have such a friend for Elizabeth.

After the makeshift shrine had been dismantled, they found other miscellanea in the shelves. Weapons, money, fake ID’s.

A room by room search netted yet another hiding spot but it was the one Red already knew about.

“What the hell? Is this guy a fucking mole?” Francis shook his head negatively.

“More like a rat.” Red arose, dusting his hands. He suddenly felt dirty and it had nothing to do with the drywall dust.
“Well, one bright point, the work will be done in a couple days.” Francis said, sitting his box of paraphernalia in the back of the SUV.

Red frowned, “So?”

“So... the Torello brothers are coming in for a visit.” Francis grinned. “I thought I’d let them stay here.”

The Torello brothers were ‘shoot first, hide the evidence’, type of guys.

Red thought for a minute, “Why are they coming?”

“They have some business with the Engraver. I offered the place for their use.” the information was supplied. “Is it important, because if so... I could get them here tonight, within the hour actually.”

“Get them here.” Red advised. “Let’s get out of sight, in case the asshole shows up.”

The three men sat quietly in the car, parked inconspicuously among the rows of many similar vehicles lining the street outside the brownstone buildings.

Francis continually shifted his eyes to a very silent companion. It had been about forty minutes since they had vacated the newly renovated home.

Dembe sat, meticulously scanning the darkened spaces of the neatly kept street. Francis beat out any number of songs on his thigh from time to time. In reality, the young man was trying to get some kind... any kind of response from Red.

He knew, the more contained Red Reddington became the more dangerous the man was.

Not able to stand the silence any longer, another song came to mind, one that would annoy anyone. Francis not only started the rhythm on his thigh, but began singing along with *Copacabana*.

Red’s hand moved with lightening speed as he cocked his weapon, placing the tip of the barrel against Francis’ thigh which halted both the singing and any further action from the young man.

“Worried?” Francis smiled finally, relieved to have received a reply.

“That’s a damn understatement.” Red replaced his weapon in it’s holster, returning his interest to the outside world.

“I should have killed him a long time ago. I should have stepped in and...” the bitterness laced the barely contained fury. “She has the worst taste in men,” Red laughed shortly, gesturing to himself, “obviously.”

Francis was slightly confused over the statement. “Red, I think you’re the best thing that ever happened to her.” He studied the older man for a long beat. “You’re worried he’s escalating... and there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“He hurt Lizzy.” Red gripped his phone, rubbing his thumb over the buttons. “If I get my hands on him, I’ll fucking kill him.”

Francis shriveled under the glare and it wasn’t even directed at him. “Hurt her how?” his jaw tensed at the news.
“He beat the hell out of her.” Red closed his eyes to the images the statement conjured. “I came in an hour too late. The house was tossed, looking like a damned War Zone.”

Red fell silent for so long, Francis thought he would not continue the sordid tale.

“She was sitting on the couch.” Red would never forget, the image burned in his brain. She seemed so broken, so vulnerable, so alone. “Just sitting...”

Francis watched the man’s face carefully. At that moment, Red Reddington seemed broken and vulnerable and...alone as well.

“If I meet the man, I’ll take great pleasure in killing him myself.” Francis did not like to see his friend in such a state, offering the only kind of support he knew would be appreciated. “What’s this prick’s name?”

“Tom Keen.” the icy cold eyes shifted, meeting Francis’ waiting ones. “You find him, you let me know.”

“You didn’t mention what condition he should be in.” Francis suddenly needed to inflict a little injury and mayhem.

Red studied the back of Dembe’s noble head. “Just alive.” he muttered. “Or a close facsimile there of.”

Both men fell silent, lost in their own thoughts.

Dembe stiffened, his eyes on the side mirror. He motioned with his head.

Francis was suddenly all smiles, twisting about, noting the approaching car coming down the street as it shut down it’s lights.

Red watched as the car smoothly slid into a parking space several vehicles behind them.

“Show time?” the young man’s hand was already on the hilt of his weapon as his smile grew. “You think it’s him?”

Red shook his head, his attention focused squarely on the car, his hand tightening on his own weapon as the car doors swung open.

Three very large men unfolded themselves from the other vehicle.

Francis voiced excitedly, “It’s just the Torello’s.”

Red and the others exited their vehicle as well.

All participants met up, gathering behind the relative security of the SUV. Red subconsciously checked his surroundings as old acquaintances were renewed.

Having explained the situation, Red was not surprised when the new arrivals offered their services gladly, especially salivating at the idea of taking out a wife beater.

Dembe shared several of the photos found in the room, catching the Torello’s up on all pertinent information.

“This your woman, Reddington?” The older of the brothers, a handsome Italian with impeccable style, jutted his chin towards the woman in the photographs.
Red’s eyes lifted, sending a message that any male could read.

“She’s pretty enough, I guess, if you like them skinny.” Frank nodded approvingly. “Got a nice rack, and I just bet,” the man brought the photo closer, purposely focusing on Liz’s posterior knowing it would rankle his friend and comrade, “you bare that ass every chance you get.”

The man chuckled lowly, reading Red’s expression. He had worked hard for that stony stare. “Just paying the lady a compliment, Red.”

“That’s my department, so stay the hell out of it.” Red advised quietly.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me to her?” the man grinned, continuing his razzing.

“When hell freezes over.” Red stated, drawing the lines in no uncertain terms.

“So you want us to make sure he can’t ever add anything else to his... collage.” Paulie, the middle brother soothed ruffled feathers. “Or you want we should just hold him for you?”

“I would like to speak with him, but if that isn’t possible...” Red shrugged nonchalant shoulders.

Dembe interrupted the flow of the conversation, touching Red’s arm. All the men turned watching as a large dark car rolled slowly down the street.

“Well, son of a bitch!” Red had recognized the vehicle even as Dembe, whose relaxed stance indicated as much.

“Isn’t that...” Francis pointed animatedly at the approaching car.

“There better be a damned good explanation.” Red fumed his annoyance knowing who was inside the SUV.

Francis nodded his agreement as Red stalked his way towards the car which stopped in it’s tracks as the man approached.

Reddington jerked the driver door open, his ire more than apparent. “What the hell are you doing here?” he grated the enquiry.

“The little snot was trying to sneak out.” Silas bitched right back, his own mood sour. “Said if I didn’t bring her, she’d just keep trying until she succeeded.” he threw a lethal glare to the darkened back seat area. “She about made it too... I stopped Nora at the front gate and guess who was in the backseat, hiding.” his tone sharpened. “What the hell, Red.”

Red stepped to the back of the car, opening the door bending to peer inside. His expression foreboding for any recipient on the receiving end.

“You’ve been gone so long,” Liz made her way to the man, “I missed you.” she reached her arms out in an effort to appease him with a kiss.

Red’s anger softened at the sight of the purposely innocent face and the large blue eyes which searched his so genially.

“Who the hell are they?” Silas bitched, having tried to identify the darkened faces a few feet away. Then it dawned on him. “Oh...” he recognized the bulk, if not the faces, “The Torello’s.” the man shoved his arm out the slit between the open door and windshield, flipping off the brothers, especially the elder.
Muted laughter met his efforts.

Red stepped back, spreading his hands wide, glancing up to a benevolent God. What else could go wrong?

A loud crack rang out in the still of the night, and Red felt a piercing pain rip through the outer part of his left thigh.

He grunted lowly, his legs giving out from under him as he went down into the middle of the empty street.

Silas was up and out of the car in an instant, headed for the man.

Silas watched Red jerk hastily to his right in anticipation of the kill shot which was surely to follow.

And true enough, another shot sizzled the air. A dark stain blossomed over the light fabric of Red’s jacket, seemingly over the man’s heart.

Silas threw his bulk over the man, hunching Red closely into the protective sphere he was creating. The man could hear rounds issuing from multiple weapons as he waited patiently for the inevitable.

He did not have long to wait.

A searing bolt of red hot lava perforated his flesh, drilling through the soft tissue of his shoulder, passing through completely as it sparked off the cement of the road directly in his line of vision. It missed Red’s head by a fraction of an inch.

Liz quickly climbed over the seat, frantically searching in the glove box for the weapon she knew would be there, as two more shots followed.

Francis and Dembe were returning fire as two of the large men that had been with Red, started off at a dead run down the street... toward the unseen assailant’s position.

Lights were flicking on in the houses down each side of the street but none were brave enough to venture anywhere near the windows.

Sliding the car into gear, Liz pulled over, blocking Red and Silas from any further attempts on their lives.

“Get in!” she yelled over the din of gunfire.

Silas was attempting to assist his friend into the back seat of the car.

Liz hid behind the shelter of the door frame, firing the large weapon over the roof of the SUV in rapid succession, in the general direction everyone else seemed fixated on. She winced with each volley because the jolt from the weapon jarred her injured wrist painfully with each shot.

Silas lifted her bodily, shoving her into the passenger seat, climbing in, jerking the car in reverse. He sped down the street backwards, taking a curve dangerously sharp as he exited the field of battle.

Liz climbed into the backseat, desperately searching Red’s torso for injuries.

Dembe and Francis walked backwards in unison, continuing their cover fire. Both men jerked at the cutting sound of a bullet passing between them, followed by the sound of shattering glass from a nearby car window.
Frank Torello stood his ground, not bothering to seek shelter of any sort as he took aim on a second floor window. Flashes of muzzle fire had given away the idiot’s location shortly after the second shot.

Silence fell over the brightly lit street just as quickly as it had begun, the gunfire halting. Torello grinned widely, knowing his brothers had done their job.

In the distance, police sirens signified their arrival shortly upon scene. Torello waved Francis and Dembe off as he slid into the seat of his car, heading to his brothers’ location.

Dembe pulled a neatly executed U-turn, his foot heavy on the gas as he and Francis vacated the vicinity as well.

“Red got hit.” There was an anxiousness to Francis’ statement.

“He has been hit before.” Dembe’s calm demeanor served as an example to the younger man. “Silas will have put out a Code 77. We will know shortly the location.”

Francis sat back, breathing easier but he knew the tenseness would not leave his body until he actually saw Red’s condition for himself.

Liz’s hands fluttered shakily over Red’s blood splattered jacket, gently easing the material aside.

Silas tossed a wadded up sweatshirt from the front seat. Liz pressed the fabric hard against a gaping wound in Red’s shoulder.

She moved closer, her jeans feeling a wetness against her thigh. She reached, feeling about, her fingers instantly covered in sticky warmth.

She ascertained the problem instantly, pressing her knee into the seeping hole in Red’s thigh. She felt Red’s fingers curl stoutly into her thigh, holding the pressure she exerted, his face twisted with the pain.

Silas was breaking every speed law known to man and the woman had no idea where they were headed but she did know, that Mr. Kaplan was on call and would handle what needed to be done.

Liz glanced down, finding blood seeping through the fabric of the sweatshirt at an alarming rate. She leaned harder into the wound, grimacing for Red.

Silas took a sharp corner, and momentarily, Liz lost pressure on the wounds but quickly enough, she had situated Red on his back and found the familiar points once again.

“Are you okay?” Red asked the woman, his eyes blurry, unfocused.

“I’m going to kill you.” she whispered, half laughing, half crying.

“Silas?” he coughed spasmodically, trying to arise.

“I’m functional.” the man hit the straightaway in front of him, the speedometer going into the red.

“You’re gonna be fine.” Liz assured. The man sweated profusely, his skin a chalky pale hue.

There was so much blood.

He reached up, curling a hand around her head, pulling her down to his lips. She held the affection for a moment, before pulling back slightly offering him a soft reassuring smile.
Liz looked up, out the front window as they approached a building. Silas pulled inside an open overhead door. Liz was so happy to note Joe was there waiting and ready.

It meant everything was going to be fine. She had to believe that.

She breathed easier the deeper they drove into the darkened building, seeing more of their guards on site.

And finally, Mr. Kaplan... flanked by people in Surgical gear.

Silas slid to a stop, as the guards flung wide the doors.

Red was extracted expeditiously.

“Ah, fuck....” the man hissed as he was lifted to a waiting gurney.

Liz kept pace with the rapidly moving cart, not once releasing Red’s hand as he was wheeled into a plastic covered room. Unusual things were becoming the norm in Liz’s world and she had a sneaky suspicion, she had better get used to it.

She winced under the bright lights of the room. A man had straddled Red’s body on the cart, but Liz could not take her eyes from the ever growing blood stain under the attendant’s hands as he applied pressure to the chest wound.

Liz could not keep track of all the activity taking place around her, so much was happening all at once.

Red’s expensive shirt was cut open, revealing the extent of his shoulder wound. Someone had hooked leads from a machine to the man in order to read his vitals.

The reassuring ‘beep’ from a heart monitor was something the woman fixated upon instantly.

She stood back, out of the way, her hands clenched tightly at her sides.

She noted Kate Kaplan standing on the opposite side of the gurney, the woman’s expression giving her hope. There was no sign of strain or stress what-so-ever, simply a calm countenance displayed at all times.

Red was still conscious, his eyes searching aimlessly about. “Dembe...”

“I am here, Raymond.”

It took a moment but the words finally outed, “Francis?”

“Oh, like they can get me... can I have your LP collection if you croak?”

“Stand in line.” Red’s lips twitched slightly for the black humor.

Francis grinned joyously, knowing Red Reddington was still there, kicking ass, as usual. “Okay, I guess I can wait.”

Mr. Kaplan’s expression hardened and she stepped around all the activity, finally coming face to face with the much taller individual which had caught her attention. The stern expression did not bode well for it’s recipient.

“Are you that stoic?” she questioned a silently waiting guard. “Do you think your heroics endear you
Liz glanced, only just now noticing that the entire front of Silas’ gray cotton button down was covered in blood. She gasped her shock, all of which the guard ignored.

“No, Ma’am.” Silas responded politely to Kate’s enquiry, uncrossing his folded arms coming to military ‘rest’.

Kaplan snapped her fingers with but one lethal departing glare and the man was instantly led away to another medical station for care.

Francis noted Liz’s concern. “It’s probably just a flesh wound.” the young man had not forgiven Silas for the hotel incident apparently. But even he glanced after the retreating man, his eyes allowing his own concern after a fashion.

“I need to see the back.” the doctor working over Red, instructed his assistants. “The wound, hopefully, is a through and through.”

Reddington instantly balked, pushing away any attempts to touch his person. “Kate!” he barked raspingly.

“Raymond, stop struggling.” Kaplan advised stonily. “You’re making the bleeding worse.”

Red knew he would get no assistance in that arena. Turning his eyes to the one person who had never failed him.

“Dembe...” he batted away the attendant’s attempts to secure him, for they were concerned for the amount of blood he was losing.

“Red, let them help you.” Liz was confused and frightened for the man’s inexplicable behavior.

The doctor waved his hand, indicating he needed a sedative which was instantly delivered with professional haste.

Red locked eyes with his counterpart. Dembe’s eyes softened then fell pointedly to the blood stained streaks running down Reddington’s chest area.

Red felt a wooziness overtake him, his vision blurring, a lightheadedness descending.

The nurses sat him up, slowly gaining some ground against Red’s combative nature.

“Don’t do this...” he whispered bleakly, weakly trying to stave off the inevitable. “I haven’t... there wasn’t time...” his thoughts rambled as he fought a losing battle. His consciousness wavered in and out.

Liz darted her head about, seeking explanations for Red’s uncharacteristic behavior but all she received in return was a stoic stare from Kaplan and inverted eyes from everyone else she knew.

Francis shrugged helplessly, just as lost as the woman. “Maybe he’s delirious?” was all he could think.

The woman’s eyes widened, her mouth dropping agape as the horribly scarred flesh of Red’s back was revealed. She shifted stunned, questioning eyes to Kate Kaplan.

The woman’s expression remained unreadable as she returned her interest to the operating site.
Liz felt the blood drain from her face. She could not pull her gaze from the horrific sight revealed. What horrible accident had befallen this man. And why had he never even mentioned the incident. Her heart filled with sadness and pain for what he must have suffered.

She wanted desperately to go to him. Her eyes met the bleary stare Red held across the room. A lump arose in her throat but Liz fought down the urge to cry. She smiled for him alone, her eyes shining brightly with new found admiration for the man.

“I was going to tell you...” he whispered, his throat too parched to speak above that volume.

She stepped slowly forward, grasping his hand. “It doesn’t matter.” the fingers of her other hand trailed a exquisitely tender path across a portion of the scarred flesh. “Nothing matters but you getting better.”

He tensed, his body stiffening at the touch. The drugs were doing their thing but the man felt a wave of nausea overtake him, not for the effect, but for the fact she now knew one of his darkest secrets.

“I need to tell you...” he fought the drowning blackness descending.

“Tell me later.” she brought his hand to her lips pressing her mouth tenderly to the cold flesh.

“Lizzy...” he whispered painfully. “I meant to...” the man was not ready to surrender to the darkness just yet.

“Raymond,” Kate Kaplan stepped close, her tone now a soothing one, “I will watch over her.”

“Have to tell her...” he slurred, his hand frantically grasping for a stay hold of reality.

“And you will, when they’re finished.” Kate assured, waving Liz forward. She grasped the younger woman’s hand, pulling her along side the bed.

Red’s drooping eyes finally focused on Liz’s lovely features. Blinking heavily, he pushed hard against the developing haze.

Kate mumbled something to the woman, then moved aside.

Liz leaned over, her eyes misting. “Stop fighting,” her mouth trembled visibly, “sleep...”

Red’s eyes glistened with the threat of tears which he quickly blinked aside.

He breathed out harshly, lifting a shaky hand to cup her chin, his fingers gesturing her closer.

The woman followed the directive, laying her lips against his.

“Sleep, Red...” she whispered against his mouth. “I will be here when you wake up.” she stressed. “I promise.”

His breathing deepened, feeling the pull of the drugs finally take him under.

His hand loosened on her face, going slack as he passed into twilight sleep. An oxygen mask was quickly inserted over his face and the race began.

Kate pulled Liz out of the way, directing her from the room.

Liz looked back uncertain whether or not to leave the man but Kaplan’s steady gait urged her to
follow. She exchanged a hurried glance with Silas as she passed the man. He sat quietly, as medical personnel stitched up a nasty looking wound in his right shoulder.

The gray-green eyes followed the women’s exit before Silas returned his attention to the commotion taking place inside the sealed off Surgical area.

“What happened to him?” Liz questioned anxiously.

“I think you know.” Kate replied, gesturing to the scar on Liz’s wrist.

“...Fire.” Liz inhaled shakily. “But...”

“Let it go for now.” Kate sighed. “He was going to tell you himself.” she stressed. “Just... give him a chance to explain.” the older woman’s eyes indicated the arrival of someone else on the scene before taking her leave.

Liz nodded curtly. Francis approached, chair in hand. Liz sat, her legs suddenly feeling too numb to support her.

“Why does she get to go back?” she watched Kaplan enter the operating room.

“Nobody questions that woman.” he stated the facts of life. “You look like hell.” Francis observed the woman’s bloodstained clothing and chalky features.

Liz’s face suddenly fell as the emotional onslaught began. She buried those emotions behind her hands, weeping brokenly, releasing the adrenaline, fear and stress of the past thirty minutes of hell she had lived through.

It felt like two lifetimes.

She could not count how many times, as an FBI agent, she had followed this same pattern. Especially after a horrific escapade. Once, she had even noted Samar, alone...shoulders shaking violently as the other woman stood among the row of silent lockers in the Blacksite arena.

Each Agent handled the release of stress in their own fashion, apparently.

Francis knelt before her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder. “He’s a strong man, Liz... he’s been through worse.”

“I’m scared, Francis.” she whispered.

“I know.” he drew back a little, looking at her. “But Red Reddington is not going to leave you, trust me on that one.”

She smiled wanly, swallowing the bile in her throat.

That wasn’t the only reason she was terrified, of course.

Francis didn’t know she was FBI. He only knew her as Red’s fiancée. Of course he would try to make what happened less scary. And she loved the man dearly for caring.

Joe came up to Dembe who stood just outside the draped area. Words were exchanged that she could not hear.

Liz arose quickly, covering the space in seconds. “Has something happened?” she lifted worried eyes.
“There is no news.” Dembe stilled her fears momentarily.

She glanced inside the blurry containment area, seeing Silas standing erect so she knew the man was ‘functional’.

Dembe relayed some of the news Joe had delivered. “Frank Torello and his brothers are on their way here,” he glanced at Elizabeth. “They have the shooter and are assuming you will wish to...” again Dembe sought the woman, “speak with him.”

Francis nodded agreeably. “Yeah, I want to speak with him.”

“Well, I don’t want to speak to the bastard.” Liz grated her fury. “I want him dead.”

All three men glanced her way, their expressions differing.

Francis grinned, “Now if that isn’t Red Reddington’s girl... I don’t know who is.”

Dembe’s expressions, as always, was unreadable. Joe nodded approvingly.

“I want to see that son of a bitch face to face, Francis.” she stated succinctly. “Do you understand me?”

Francis raised his hands in a defensive position. “When I’m finished with him, he’s all yours.”

Then the long wait began. The men left her to tend to their business and she returned to the chair, sitting morosely.

She didn’t know how long she sat there, listening to the muffled chatter coming from the medical staff across the way, but it was long enough that she began to feel stiff and cold... and totally lost and alone.

Her thoughts rambled from concern for Red to the fact that she had seen the horrible scars on the man’s back.

Liz tried so hard to remember the events of that night, the night of the fire. She knew Red was there but in what capacity. Her father had saved her from the fire but she had a vague recollection of a man laying on the floor of the burning house as they passed into safety.

Was that man Red? Had he managed somehow to escape as well?

She wrapped her arms across her chest, warding off the chill. A warm blanket came out of nowhere, falling gently about her shoulders. She glanced hastily up.

“You all right?” Silas asked, sitting on his haunches beside her. He adjusted the sling around his neck, nodding his gratitude as Liz helped smooth the transition.

“No...” she whispered brokenly.

“Tell me.”

“I don’t know where to begin.” she threw her hands out lamely.

“He’s no different than he was before.” Silas reminded sternly.

“He was scared, Silas.” she had never seen the man anything other than in complete control and it was scaring the hell out of her to think something could phase Red to that extent.
“Yes...” the man nodded in agreement, “of your rejection.”

“I don’t even know what that means.” she almost wailed. “I would never reject him in any way, shape or form.”

“You’re a young, beautiful woman.” Silas reminded. “And he’s not perfect, obviously.”

“Does he think I’m that shallow?”

“You know as well as I do, most women would be turned off by...”

“Well, I’m not most women.” she snapped, glancing down at her hands, suddenly very intent on the ring on her hand.

“Look, I know you’re chomping at the bit to know what the hell is going on.” Silas began. “Just... let him get his shit together before you start the first degree.”

“You don’t think much of me, do you?” she felt the pain of the reality.

“I think you constantly over react.” he did not pull any punches. “I think you act without thinking shit through. You’re always going off half cocked.”

“I do not!” she over reacted, knowing as much.

“Do I really need to list examples?” the man arose to his full height, his face allowing the anger he felt. The only thing was, that anger was probably more for himself this night than the woman before him.

Unfortunately she was going to get the brunt of it.

“Your loving husband...”

The woman’s face blanked instantly, concealing her shock that the man would get so personal.

“You should have let Red kill that fucker.” Silas gritted. “That son of a bitch held a gun to your head.” he seethed. “And you let him live... why?”

She didn’t know why she didn’t kill Tom, at the time. But now, without his steady influence, she did understand and was glad she had broken the cycle of abuse. Something this man would not probably appreciate or understand, granted.

“That psychopath was going to put a bullet in your skull.” Silas looked off to the makeshift room, his jaw pulsing. “While that man,” he jabbed his finger towards Red, “would take a bullet for you.”

Joe gestured for him from across the darkened area. Silas held up a staying hand, continuing.

“Would Tom Keen ever do the same thing?” he asked the burning question. “Fuck no. Because he’s the one pointing...”

“I’m past Tom Keen!” she arose, her anger matching the large man’s fury.

Silas fell silent and she could not tell if her words had reached him or not.

He slowly turned, his stare a steady one.

The guard took a couple of steps before hesitating.
She watched the man’s back, holding her breath expectantly, praying he would turn around.

“Look, you’re not going to like a lot of what Red is going to tell you.” he stated slowly, his eyes averted. “But instead of blocking him out the minute he says something that upsets you,” the cool green stones shifted, steadily holding her gaze, “hear the man out all the way.”

“You know what he’s going to tell me, don’t you?” she felt a foreboding.

“I do, yes.” Silas nodded. “And it’s probably gonna hurt.” he promised. “But Red... would never hurt you unless there was just no other fucking way.”

Liz looked after the man as he walked towards the other guard, the harsh and hurtful words rattling around in her head.

But then, the truth did hurt... didn’t it?

She clung desperately to the one thing said that gave hope.

*Red would never hurt you...if there was any other way.*

Her attention shifted hastily. The doctors were walking from the room, all disheveled and appearing exhausted. All except of course, Mr. Kaplan and Dembe who had followed the medical team more sedately.

Liz was moving before she knew what was happening, crossing the space rapidly, shoving her way through the heavy plastic. The woman slowed her movement, her eyes instantly falling on Red’s bandaged chest and leg.

She approached him cautiously, ever so quietly. She gently took his hand, standing, staring down at the sleeping man.

She saw him now, in a different light.

As Silas had said, Red had consistently placed himself between her and danger. Obviously, at great risk to himself.

If the man was willing to give *his life* for hers, he surely would go out of his way to avoid hurting her.

Silas had just told her a different type of truth. One she needed to hear and to heed.

And she knew in that instant, regardless of what Red would say, no matter how much it hurt... she still wanted this.

She still wanted him.

Chapter End Notes

It was suggested in a Facebook PM that I add my email address for readers wishing to make anonymous story suggestions. I guess I'll add this in every couple chapters for quick reference for you guys. :)
Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Facebook PM: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978
May 3

It was early morning when Red finally awoke having slept the night peacefully. Elizabeth had slept fitfully beside him, awaking frequently to check on his condition. Francis was a frequent visitor as was Dembe, so the three of them kept vigilance over the resting individual.

Red was in a bad mood, but considering all that had happened, he was relatively agreeable.

Liz balanced the tray artfully as she entered the room, a genuine smile on her face as she noted the patient was awake and alert.

“I hope there’s some bacon on that tray.” he practically growled, attempting to arise.

“No, no...” the woman held out a staying hand, “don’t try to get up, at least on your own.” She hurriedly set the food aside crossing hastily to assist.

“Like I haven’t been shot in the leg before...” the man’s tone was downright surly. “What? Two weeks ago, by Ressler, wasn’t it?”

Elizabeth grimaced slightly. “No bacon... Mr. Kaplan left strict instructions. Poached egg, fruit crepe, toast,” she looked the plate over, “umm, and some tea.”

“I want my fucking coffee, I want some fucking bacon.” the man folded his arms, his expression more than set. “And Kate Kaplan can kiss my rosy ass.”

Elizabeth bit the inside of her jaw to keep from smiling. “Well, you can tell her that, but I think I can smuggle you in some turkey bacon.”

Red’s eyes shifted frostily.

The woman sighed mentally. “Coffee and bacon, coming up.” she turned dutifully, but the man’s voice stopped her.

“I need to tell you about the relationship between me and your parents.” the man minced no words, facing the dreaded task head on.

Liz tensed slightly, turning back slowly. “I think maybe, that can wait until...”

“I will just give you the cliff notes. We can discuss the rest later.” He steeled himself, shifting his aching body, preparing himself mentally.

Vowing to take Silas’ advice and hear Red out, the woman drew in a deep breath. She took a seat beside Red, lifting her countenance.

If she needed a minute to process what he was saying, she would tell him. It was just that simple.

She would not run away.
“It must have crossed your mind a thousand times,” he began stalwartly, “why was it, I invaded your life.”

“Did you love my mother? Were you her lover?” Liz asked point blank, blurring out the enquiry.

“Where the hell did that come from?” Red was more than stunned, he was mystified.

He lifted his eyes to hers, holding them steadily. “I was fond of your mother but I did not love her romantically. We were never intimate.”

He had to give her something...he was about to make her life hell.

“I was her handler, like you are mine.” he patiently explained, ignoring the pain he was in, his pills having worn off an hour ago.

“My mother was a criminal.” Liz said that like she had been expecting it.

Red opened his mouth, hesitating, “She was a traitor against her own country.” he amended. “One must understand the circumstances under which she was operating. I was sent to assist her.” he gathered his thoughts for a moment before continuing. “We gathered intel and long story short, we had to get out of Russia fast.”

“And my father?” Liz asked hopefully, grateful for the small amount of information she had garnered.

“Your father was... complicated.” He couldn’t tell her who her father was, there was too much at stake right now.

“He wanted political change.” that much he could say. “He wanted so many things. We were all working towards that end, but he got fed up with it all.” Red sat back, easing his shoulder this way and that, wincing from the experience. “We all did at one point or another.”

“He took the Fulcrum, didn’t he?” Liz had figured that much out.

“Yes.”

“Why does everyone think I have it?” she exasperated. “Why does everyone think he would place something so obviously dangerous, with a child?”

Red’s expression went cold, devoid of emotion. “Because he did.”

“You know this, for certain?” she felt she should defend her father but she had no idea why.

“I do.” it was bluntly stated.

“It could have burned in the fire or he could have~”

“I found it, Elizabeth.” Red put an end to the speculation.

“What...” she breathed out her shock.

“When I closed out your house,” it almost felt good to get so much out in the open, “I found it, in your possessions.”

Liz looked up at the man, in total disbelief... shock.
Red had the Fulcrum all this time and he...

She had been so sure, once he had it in his possession, he would do whatever the hell he was going to do with it and leave.

But he hadn’t done either thing.

“Have you...”

“No.” he stated simply. “I have not used it in any capacity.”

“Why not?” she questioned breathlessly.

Red’s eyes softened, understanding the question for what it was.

He reached out, brushing his hand over her cheek. “I had more important things on my mind.”

He lifted the tea cup, glancing at the creamy liquid, grimaced then sat it back on the tray. He was giving her time to process but not at the expense of his taste buds.

How does one wrap their head around the fact that a parent entrusted something so damning, so dangerous, to a child.

You don’t.

Hell, he had a month to think about it and he still couldn’t believe her father had done something so stupid... so distasteful.

What the hell was the bastard thinking, leaving that kind of target on his own daughter’s head?

“I have to get up.” he threw the covers aside and the woman arose automatically staring at his activity.

“What are you doing?” she was numbed, his actions not making any sense to her right now.

“I would like to use the facilities.” he made mention, continuing on, arising slowly to get his bearings.

“Facilities...” she repeated vacantly, then it dawned on her. “Oh! You need to piss.”

Red’s brow lifted meaningfully. “You have to stop keeping company with Silas.”

He made his way past the woman, around the bed.

“Should you be up?” Liz held out a cautious hand.

Red turned, his own hands lifting in a ‘what the hell, I’m up already’ gesture.

She followed after him hastily, but the man was already by the sink preparing his toothbrush.

“I thought you had to piss?” she was confused.

He pointed at her, “No more Silas.” then crossed to the enclosed facilities.

So many things were going through her head, that she didn’t even notice, she had not given him any privacy what-so-ever until the man re-entered the room, returning to the basin.
He brushed his teeth methodically, waiting for the questions to come.

“Kaplan says the bandages have to be changed.” she blew him away by the change in subject. He shifted his gaze, putting the mouthwash aside.

She must have a hundred questions rattling in her head and instead of voicing them, she picked that statement to say. He smiled slightly, shaking his head.

The man was given pause for thought.

“You want to be the one that, first of all,” Liz was perfectly serious, “ pisses her off about the bacon and now you won’t let me change the bandages?”

“Kate Kaplan doesn’t scare me.” he advised. “I’ll call Dembe...”

“Stop pushing me away.” she cut to the chase. “I already saw them.” she reminded. The woman stepped the space separating them, her hands lifting to unbutton the first two on his shirt.

Red’s hand bunched the fabric below her efforts, his eyes steady on hers.

“I’m still here.” she met his gaze unflinchingly. “Take a hint.”

He glanced at the pile of medical supplies waiting on the counter. His hand fell away slowly and Liz continued to undress him.

The cool air hit his bare torso and for a moment he felt panic.

Maybe in the light of day, she’d feel differently? Or maybe he was kidding himself and it was really him that felt insecure.

After everything they’d been through this past couple weeks, all the privacy she had lost, he’d be a damned coward if he did not take the shirt off.

And there was one thing Red Reddington wasn’t and that was a coward.

Red made the decision, and in the end it was his own hand who pulled the shirt from his torso.

The woman’s eyes scanned the visible scars before lifting innocuously. She picked up a sterile package, peeling the outer package away.

The man felt years of insecurity figuratively and literally, roll off his back.

She stepped behind him, hanging the shirt on a hook. Turning, she took in his newly bared skin, staring openly.

The scarring was... extensive.

She felt a moment of empathy which she quickly squelched, because she was more mesmerized by his broad shoulders, strong arms and the slope of his neck.

Red turned his head seeking her out as the silence had stretched into infinity.

He startled when he felt the light touch of her fingers skirting along his back before she placed the warm palm flat against it’s surface.

She closed her eyes, as visions of fire suddenly overwhelmed her. A hand pulled her close before
she was lifted in strong arms. The heat had been so intense, followed by bitter cold.

She vaguely remembered her hands feeling so cold, they felt like they were on fire.

A complete paradox that had suddenly been overshadowed by a deep, pained voice... soothing her. Telling her everything would be all right. She had been wrapped in warmth, her bunny tucked securely in the makeshift blanket.

Elizabeth’s eyes opened quickly, a clarity in them that hadn’t been there before. Understanding dawning on her.

She lay her cheek just under Red’s shoulder blade, wrapping her arms around his waist, her finger nails curled into his stomach just above his waist. She burrowed into him.

He heard her faint sniffle, wondering if it was pity she was feeling, hating the idea.

“It was you...” she whispered tremulously, “not my father... you saved me.”

He hesitated, uncertain as how to answer.

“You lied?” She stated, no venom or malice behind the words.

“I couldn’t take that away from you.” He took a shuddering breath, “You needed to believe...it was the only good memory of him you had.”

The silence was uncomfortable for the man.

“Is there anything you wouldn’t give up for me?”

“No.” He answered without hesitation.

She ran her hand from his stomach up over his pectoral, threading her hand through the hair on his chest. Resting her hand over his heart.

She hugged him gently, mindful of his fresh wound. She leaned away, guilt racking at her psyche.

“I’ve been so unbelievably cruel to you. How can you have been so patient with me?” she was stupefied. “How can you not resent me, hate me?”

“There are many things in this world I hate, Elizabeth.” he turned to face her. “You are not listed among them.” he smiled gently at the wetness on her cheeks.

He cupped the back of her head with one large palm, petting the silky strands of her hair.

“It’s their fault that I’m in this mess.” she voiced her grievances. “Not you... I should have seen that, I should have instinctively known.”

Red shook his head disagreeing with her assessment. “There is no way you could have known the twisted mess your parents and I had gotten ourselves into.”

He took a deep breath, getting things back on track. “Let me say this while I still have the rocks.”

She lifted luminous eyes, waiting patiently.

“Your mother and I took you to Sam, for safety purposes.” he began. “We worked the next couple years together, trying to...” he sighed, “fix the impossible.”
Liz began the ritual she had watched Dembe preform so often. She busied herself with antiseptically cleansing his wound.

“Your father was many things, but he adored you.” Red stated quietly. “He had been visiting you at Sam’s frequently. There was a lull in our issues and your father felt it was safe for you to spend the week with him.” he recalled the time. “Everything was fine, until Katarina arrived.”

Liz kept quiet, holding her questions for now, her hands gently administering to his injuries.

“She came for the Fulcrum.” Red remembered vividly the details. “They argued, then your mother’s husband showed up with his assistants.”

Liz felt this is where things became... strained, for lack of a better word.

“The argument escalated.” Red scoffed, remembering how heated things became, then of course... Elizabeth’s part in the fiasco.

“Constantine saw you, with your father...” he sighed, “the resemblance was unmistakable.” he explained. “He had suspected, of course, but now, he had proof of Katarina’s infidelity.”

Red sing songed his head. “Things went sideways, somewhere in the fracas, someone started a fire, or a fire started... I don’t remember that part clearly.”

He looked at that beautiful face, staring at his so openly and he just... couldn’t tell her that in the confusion, she had shot her own father. Not right now, not with so much being thrown at her.

He gripped her hands tightly, his eyes gentle on her features. “When the fire started, Katarina told you to get out, to run.” Red distinctly remembered the shrill scream coming from the beautiful woman’s lips. “But being a child, I don’t think you understood. You ran, yes. But you went to your safe space.”

Liz stared off into space, seeing a quick vision of clothes hanging on a bar. Then smoke billowing in through the slats in the door.

“The closet.” she concluded. “Is that when you came for me?”

“I heard you screaming.” he remembered those screams in his nightmares. “I came back in, but the house was... an inferno by that point.” his countenance darkened. “I finally found you but the house was literally giving way underfoot.”

Red rubbed his thumbs hard into his eye sockets, trying to erase the images. “I reached the nearest window...” he stroked the raised skin on her wrist, his expression foreboding. “I can’t recall much after that, to be honest.” He had even tried hypnosis. “All I remember is trying to get out of that damned house.”

He could still smell the burning flesh sometimes at night in his nightmares.

“The next thing I knew, I woke up,” he recalled looking into those blue eyes that had been so terrified, “you were shivering uncontrollably but still piling snow on my back.”

“I was finally able to push past the pain,” he cocked his head slightly, his eyes constantly on her face, “I got you in the car, driving as far away from that damned place as I could, then called Kate.”

Liz could not recall any of what he was relaying.
“They had left us.”

Liz swallowed past the lump in her throat, listening to the raw pain in Red’s voice, which was replaced by searing anger.

“That bitch left you in that fucking house!” he snapped. He gripped a glass, hurling it across the bathroom, which shattered into a fine mist of sparkly dust on impact.

Liz started, feeling the fury emanate from the man’s very being. She stepped in front of him, before he could continue the carnage.

“All that matters is that *you* didn’t leave me.” She said evenly, cutting through his growing rage.

“How could *she* have left you!” he hissed quietly. “After everything we did trying to protect you! How could she leave her child!”

“Perhaps she didn’t have a choice?” Liz tried to explain away her mother’s actions. “Perhaps she was forced away before she could...”

It did not sound feasible even to her own ears.

Red dropped his head, leaning into his fists on the sinks counter top, his mood certainly no better.

It was a possibility. Though, he couldn’t imagine anything keeping him from saving his child.

He would have rather eaten a bullet and died along with his child, rather than leave without her.

He was not present to offer such a service to his own daughter but had he been...

“Your father loved you more than anything in the world, Elizabeth.” he stressed.

She secured the bandage to his back, keeping her eyes averted. “You mean, where my mother didn’t.” She assumed he meant.

What could he say? That her mother did love her? Because now, after all this time, he wasn’t so sure.

“I don’t remember anything but tiny flashes.” she admitted. “I wonder why?”

“You were terrified. Almost catatonic.” he tried to find an explanation himself. “After a couple days, you still hadn’t come out of it, so Kate suggested replacing the night with a different memory.”

He pulled away from her touch, more troubled by the fact than he would like to admit, but in the end... “It worked.”

“It’s very complicated Elizabeth. So damned complicated.” there were times, he himself, could not sort through the mazes of deceit. “There are so many layers, besides you wouldn’t believe me, even if I told you.” he muttered. “There are some times, I don’t believe half of it myself.”

Odd, her heart didn’t feel as though it was in pieces.

She moved closer to him needing the security. He turned towards her, as he always did, looking down at her.

Liz wrapped her arms around his neck, hugging him tightly. She felt Red tense, before relaxing against her, enfolding her in his arms.
Today had been... a revelation. For them both.

She found out a little of her past and what he had physically hidden for so long.

And he realized what he had subconsciously hidden. What he had denied for so long.

Katarina Rostova had only cared about herself.

He wondered now, had he built Katarina up in his mind? Had he been as blind to Katarina as Lizzy had been to Tom?

Did it even matter? The damage was done.

Liz sat her hand in the center of his chest, gently stroking him with her thumb.

She leaned in, kissing the scarring that showed on his shoulder. The man startled at the unexpected touch, his head turning slightly.

She laid another soft kiss to the side of his arm, gauging his reaction.

She stared openly at the hard chest covered in a wealth of hair, scanning the tight muscles of his arms.

Placing her palm flat on his abdomen, she felt the ripple under her hand as he reacted to the unexpected touch.

Liz mapped the rough area of his flesh, one particular indentation catching her attention. She tapped the spot gently with her finger, her eyes lifting questioningly.

“Russia, 2001.” Red stated roughly, answering the silent enquiry. “Gunshot.”

Moving the tip of her finger over an inch, scratching her fingernail across his warm skin which caused a rise of goose flesh over his body. She traced a thin white line about an inch in length.


She traced a jagged scar on his side, faded with time, but still visible.

“California, 1984. Surfing.”

She lifted a quizzical expression, her brows furrowing.

“Got caught up in a wave, was thrown into rocks. Got that and a couple broken ribs.”

“And possibly a lifelong fear of surfing.” she quipped.

“No, I was out the next day.” he dismissed such an implication. “It hurt like hell, but I loved it.”

Liz traced his torso and arms, mapping out each one. Red supplying the place and incident for each, his voice never changing pitch.

She traced the small round scar at his neck, the last one she hit upon.


“I’m sorry.” She apologized readily. Those blue eyes stealing his heart when they were that soft and only for him.
“No you aren’t.” He chuckled. “I’m sure there have been days you wished to repeat the action.”

“Okay then, I’m sorry for the reason I did it.” She grinned. “I have wanted to knock sense into you, but not stab you.” she shrugged minutely. “Not lately, anyway.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” he took it as a good sign. “I have enough enemies, I don’t need one sharing my bed.”

“Red...” she looked at him oddly, and he prepared himself for the worst.

“Um hmm?” he humored her anyway.

“Are we still going on our date tomorrow?”

It was his turn to look at her oddly. “I’ve just been shot... twice.”

“Francis said,” she lifted warning eyes, “they’re just flesh wounds.”

“Oh he did, did he?” Red held his smile.

“That’s what he said.” she nodded vigorously.

“Well then...” he contended, “Damn right we are.”
Red’s eyes opened slowly, the sun bathing the room in a cheerful light. He stirred slightly, grimacing as the pain in his shoulder and leg made itself known.

He lay back carefully, then chanced a look at the clock. A little after eight. He was usually up around six. Damned pills...

He glanced at his bed partner who was still fast asleep. Elizabeth would never be a morning person. The covers were tossed every which way. Most of them wrapped around her body.

The dark hair was splayed against the pillow, the pretty profile snuggled into the blankets, half hidden.

Red looked down at his own body, which was only partially covered. He lay very still so as not to disturb the woman’s sleep. His thoughts wandered back to the night before.

Liz had taken the news he had to relate a hell of a lot better than he expected. She had even cuddled to him before falling asleep. Which surprised the hell out of him.

He had not expected that she would stay. Let alone be receptive to any sort of intimacy. Red had been amused when the woman brought up the ‘date thing’.

A date for which he had no concrete plans... as yet. Although, ideas were taking shape, quickly.

He found himself looking forward to such a simplistic event. He was grateful this morning to be alive. Quite a contrast to some mornings when he awoke. Before Elizabeth, he could remember awakening in a very different mood.

The man arose quietly, making his way to the bathroom.

A short time later, he heard the door open over the shower spray which pelted his skin to a rosy red.

_Ahh..._ the man smiled, replacing his soap unto the ledge, _Sleeping Beauty awakens._

He rinsed off, grabbing the towel off the low bench before drying off the excess water from his body. He tucked the damp towel around his waist, exiting the stall.

The woman was brushing her teeth, blue eyes meeting his in the mirror. He smiled at her, a little self conscious concerning the scars but instead of heading for the closet as he was inclined to do, he forced himself to come stand alongside her.

To make himself feel less awkward, he busied himself with finishing his morning routine.

Liz closed her eyes as the sensual whiff of his cologne drifted into the misty spray, which still clung to the air after his shower. She shifted her eyes to the man, noting the deep slit in the small towel he had tucked around his waist.
A muscular thigh peaked out tantalizingly, the reddish blonde hair very masculine in its appeal. She rinsed her mouth, trying to concentrate on something sophisticated to say.

She stood, her satin robe gaped open, showing the beginning swell of her breasts as she was leaned slightly forward. Red pulled his eyes from the beautiful sight, determined to keep things on an even keel this morning. After last night, he wanted everything simply to return to normal, as quickly as possible where the woman was concerned.

His first instinct had been to comment on such a lovely vision, but he had kept his mouth shut, forcing normalcy.

Liz flicked his body again, this time her eyes remaining transfixed for a goodly spell. She leaned her hand on the sink, the other placed to her hip as she made herself comfortable, facing him fully.

“Not that I’m complaining, because you always look so good in what you wear.” she hadn’t even tried not to say it. “But why do you feel the need to cover up...” she waved her finger up and down his form, “all that.”

The man halted his busy work, his head swiveling to the woman. “Pardon?”

“You’ve been hiding that under those suits all this time?” She held her grin, blatantly flirting with him.

He glanced down his torso, making sure he was properly covered.

“I understand why Lexa asked you to ‘visit’ her.” her eyes traveled his frame speculatively.

The man was momentarily confused by her approach and then he wasn’t.

“Lizzy, you don’t have to make me feel better. I’ve made peace with the scars... for the most part.” It was nice of her to try to make him feel better, but to go out of her way to lie...

“I wasn’t talking about that, you dolt.” she bristled suddenly.

“Then what the hell are you talking about?” Red asked just as shortly.

“Is that how you identify yourself? By your scars?” Liz questioned. “Is that all you see when you look in the mirror?”

“Wouldn’t you?” The man snapped.

“Maybe, I don’t know.” It was answered honestly.

She knew she felt horrible after the Carver incident.

“Well then, I guess that answers your question.”

“But maybe I wouldn’t...” she reconsidered the issue.

“Oh, and why is that.” Red was more than skeptical, disliking the turn of the conversation immensely.

“I’m a woman, and all I noticed as you walked out of the shower,” she cocked her head slightly, her expression benign, “was that you have a great body.”

Red’s expression slipped a tad.
“So if a man said the same thing to me, I would hope that maybe, I would believe, that I had been placing too much emphasis on the negative which was shaping what kind of person I had become.”

Red wasn’t buying any of it.

“And who said it?” she questioned, almost flippantly. “Chicks dig scars.”

“There’s scars and then there are scars, Lizzy,” the man was beginning to get a little angry. “Forget the back, you saw how damaged the rest of my body is.” he gestured curtly.

“All I see right now,” She replied cheekily, “is one hot guy.”

Reddington sighed heavily, shaking his head, his mood dropping considerably from moments ago. “I don’t need you to pretend...”

“Raymond Reddington, I am not feeding you a line of bullshit.” she tossed the hand towel aside angrily. “You’re hot, plain and simple. Either accept the compliment or don’t.”

Liz turned away, walking stiffly to the closet.

Red stood, frozen to the spot. For a moment he was unsure of what action to take. Obviously, he had hurt her feelings, essentially called her a liar because that was what he believed her to be, but now...

He debated his options, then followed her steps slowly.

He silently watched as Liz yanked drawers open, pulling out her lingerie for the day, before slamming the drawer shut. She grasped a shirt, pulling it off the bar, sending the hanger flying.

The man ducked the projectile’s course as it barely scrapped his injured shoulder. He drew in a cleansing breath, man enough to apologize when the need arose.

“I’m sorry...” He swallowed gently, clearing his throat.

She said nothing, not ready as yet, to forgive and forget.

“I’m sorry.” He repeated, stepping closer, barring any exit route she might intend to take.

She dropped her head, squeezing the clothes in her hand tightly, “I don’t lie.” She kept her gaze averted from his, her voice low and intent. “I’m tired of lying, liars.” she amended quickly.

He stayed silent, waiting.

“I can see beyond the façade and know that there’s more to Red Reddington than what people see.” She stated stoutly. “You are generous and kind and incredibly patient.” she practically stamped her foot. “You’re charming and handsome and incredibly stupid at times, like any man.” She disgusted.

“There’s more to you than those scars, Red.” she poked him hard in the shoulder that wasn’t injured. “I see it. Me, of all people. Why can’t you?” she spat.

“I haven’t received a compliment such as yours,” the man had taken a minute to reply, “or one that wasn’t backhanded at least, in such a long time, I forgot what sincerity sounded like.”

The woman digested all the man had said, her mood lessening.

“In a woman’s mind, Red,” she tried to explain, “we never feel good enough. We constantly worry about our weight, our hair, the way we present ourselves to the world in general.” Liz knew she
wasn’t putting it correctly. “Don’t think for one second I don’t understand what you’re trying to say. I do, I swear.”

Red knew women were often self conscious about their bodies. Never feeling attractive enough.

“I want you to feel, at least around me,” Liz was suddenly aware that the man still stood before her in nothing more than a slip of a towel. She tried very hard to keep her eyes level with his, “you can be yourself. You can relax and get comfortable... be comfortable.”

The man shifted his eyes thoughtfully and all Liz could think at the moment was that he had very sexy feet. She had been glancing down, around, anywhere but where she really wanted to look.

“Okay.” she exasperated, trying to extract herself from the situation gracefully, “so what’s this?” she motioned to his upper bicep because the area had caught her wayward attention.

He dipped his head absently, looking at what she was poking at. “A tattoo.”

“I know what it is.” she exasperated. “I mean, I saw them before, but...” she waved her hands about aimlessly. “Tell me about them.”

The man’s scowl increased. “What do you want to know?” he was a little taken aback by the turn of conversation.

“Well, this for example,” She traced her finger over the classically depicted mermaid intertwined, sitting on an anchor, which graced his upper left arm.

Leaning closer, she took in the fine details. How the wispy hair waved around her body, baring one breast, the other covered under the dark silky drape.

Her fins, dancing in the water, floating, tickling at the bottom edge of the anchor she was wrapped about. The intricate detail of each and every scale on her tail was amazing. She was actually very lovely.

Delicate features, small pretty breasts not overly done as so many men were apt to do, muted colors. This was done by a true artist, worthy of being put to canvas.

“First year Navy.” his eyes roamed his ‘old friend’, a secretive smile touching his lips. “We were all drunk, of course. My shipmates chose something about the Navy. Flags, skulls and crossbones. I wanted something a little less... traditional.” Red lifted amused eyes, “It’s a way we have of bragging but still reminding us of what we had achieved at one time in our life.”

“And this one?” Underneath the mermaid, only slightly smaller in size, was a ship’s wheel fashioned into a Victorian compass. A long spindle pointed north to the mermaid. Again the inner detail of the compass face was amazing. The sixteen point star in the center pointed to every imaginable direction, the fading, making it look three dimensional.

“Done by the same man when we got back from our first tour.” It had taken Red weeks to track the man down. “It can be taken a couple of different ways, I suppose. A sailor looks for the northern point or is always looking for a lady.”

“And you are...?” she queried tongue-in-cheek.

“Looking for the beautiful woman.” He indulgently supplied.

“This one?” Red brought his right arm forward, glancing down at the two snakes, wrapped in the
symbol of infinity, eating one another’s tail.

“Done in Japan. Traditionally, the Ouroboros is one snake eating it’s own tail, representing a renewal of life for eternity,” she was informed. “I’m a representation of two different people. Raymond Reddington, the man that had a family and Navy career. And Red Reddington, the criminal. Two distinct personalities in one man, destined to eternally reinvent himself.” He grinned at his own folly.

“This one?” She pointed to a small flower in lilac, the letters JR underneath in flourishing script. “Aren’t these flowers normally blue in color?”

“A forget-me-not.” His tone mellowed as did his eyes. “Her favorite color was purple, lilac specifically.” There was a softness to his tone Liz had never heard before. “She called it baby purple.”

“Jennifer Reddington.” Liz placed her hand on his chest, kissing the small flower softly. He inhaled sharply at the gentle touch for it was totally unexpected.

“Baby purple?” She smiled.

“Baby blue, baby pink.” He chuckled slightly. “It made sense to her that it would be baby purple.”

“You can’t argue with that reasoning.” Raising up, she inclined her head towards his, pulling him down to her, kissing his lips softly. “Thank you for sharing that with me.”

They stood there, silently wrapped together in a comforting embrace long enough that her leg started aching, but she wasn’t about to say anything. It felt good to be held. It felt good to know a little more about the truth. To know more about Red.

“Raymond?” Dembe’s voice called out through the suite.

Red deflated into her. “What?” The man bemoaned his lot in life.

Liz chuckled quietly, hearing Red’s pitiful whine coming from her neckline.

“Jackson’s on the line.”

“I don’t care.” He mumbled into her neck.

Patting his head condescendingly, Liz called out from the confines of the closet to the waiting man. “Tell him Red will call back shortly.”

She stepped back, openly ogling him. Which he had to admit, was something he hadn’t experienced in a while.

“It’s a shame you can’t go around like this in your everyday dealings.” She smiled offering another scan of his body, hesitating visibly on the bulge under his towel. “You’d probably get better discounts on your shipments.”

She was being honest. She liked how he looked. Very much so, if the way she stared at him was any indication.

“Hussy...” He hugged her close, grinning when she giggled. “I have to dress, so go shower,” He stepped back, reaching for the towel, “Or you’re going to see a lot more than you bargained for.”

She stood rooted to the spot, her expression almost petulant.

He lifted enquiring brows.
“I’m thinking!” She grinned impishly.

“Well, you better think fast, sweetheart.” He reached for the towel, pulling the knot.

The towel dropped on one side, allowing her a quick glance of the top of his groin, “No!” She squeezed her eyes shut hastily, her hands lifting of their own volition as she searched aimlessly for the door.

She was still giggling in a fine spirit as she exited the area. “I want to be surprised.” she called back over her shoulder.

**Surprised?**

What the hell did that mean?

He watched her, mesmerized as she stripped down completely, seemingly not a care in the world before she climbed into the shower.

A slow smile spread across the man’s handsome face.

He now understood completely her parting remark.

She had not seen him in his entirety before.

When she finally did see him naked, she wanted it to be on her own terms. She wanted the intimacy to be finalized to her satisfaction.

A day he hoped fervently was fast approaching.

Chapter End Notes

We know James Spader/Red has a distinctive tattoo, but seeing that this is an AU, we decided to have a little fun and play with his character.

Hope you don't mind...
May 4

The Torello brothers had done a fantastic job of softening up the supposedly hardened criminal that had taken the shot at Red the day before.

Red had to admit, if only to himself, he was surprised that Tom had not taken the shot. While the sniper gave a general description that could have been Tom, which had ordered the hit, Red did not believe Tom would hire someone as unprofessional as this guy was turning out to be.

On the other hand, Tom could be fucking with him. Was that his subtle way of telling Liz, even Red could be taken down, or was there even more to it than that?

Reddington was getting a headache thinking about the possibilities so he ended the uncertainty, by turning his would-be assassin over to the trusting, capable hands of the Torello brothers.

It was one less worry off his plate.

Liz was doing face time with her team, as had become her norm so Red left her to her own devices.

While he caught upon correspondences and the Estate bills.

A day like every other day, except this one was filled with stolen kisses and long embraces before one or the other was called away for whatever reason.

When Elizabeth was done with her team, Cooper surprised her by a monumental announcement, at least to the woman.

The Assistant Director for the Behavioral Analysis Unit had requested that she profile for them, at least until her medical leave was over.

Seeing that she was indisposed for a yet to be determined time frame, perhaps she could help lessen the workload that had piled up on them in the wake of losing two agents. One to maternity leave, the other to retirement.

Liz had jumped at the opportunity of course, pleased to feel productive again.

She still had to be on call for the Blacklist first and foremost, but the BAU’s cases, compared to what they had been dealing with at the Blacksite, would be a piece of cake.

She could do this.

Liz excitedly went to tell Red her news and was pleased that he was happy for her. He had not only understood, he was very supportive.

“I think it will be good for you, sweetheart.” Red encouraged. “I need to speak to you about something.”

She sat aside the file she had been carrying, turning her attention to him, waiting patiently.

“You haven’t found a house yet, have you?” He asked the rhetorical question.
“Uh, no.” she frowned, “I’ve been looking, but–”

“Wait, before you read something into what I’m saying.” Red forestalled her. “I wanted to make sure you hadn’t found anything before I offered my proposal.”

“All right...” she was hesitant, not knowing where this was headed.

“Since we’ve been established here at this house and you have taken a liking to Francis,” he began, “I think you should just stay here.”

“Red, that’s very nice of you but I can’t just–”

“Listen to me.” he halted her protest. “We’re supposed to be engaged, Francis visits frequently. If you move out now...”

“Oh! Right...” That would pose a problem to their ‘cover’. “I see what you mean.”

“I thought, whenever Francis is here, I’d make an appearance.” he had given this much thought. “Otherwise, I’ll just be at one of the safe houses or more likely, out of town.”

“Why can’t you just stay here?” she frowned. “It’s not like there isn’t enough room.”

“Sweetheart, I haven’t even taken you on a date yet.” Red smiled. “Don’t you think I should do that before shacking up with you?”

“I think you’re being silly, quite honestly.” she replied honestly. “We’ve managed well enough this last month without killing each other. Unless there’s some problem you aren’t telling me about.”

“Elizabeth, I just want to give you space.” Red stated seriously. “We go on a date, you come home that night to analyze what was said or done, in the privacy of your own home.”

“I’ve had time to think. To clear my head of the garbage.” she was grateful for the fact. “I am not the same person I was a month ago, let alone six months ago.”

“And you don’t think that has anything to do with the fact that you’ve been in my company?” he countered.

“No, I think it has everything to do with me not being in Tom’s company. I think it has to do with the fact that I’ve taken a break from work and rested.” she was adamant. “I think it has everything to do with taking time for myself.”

Red had to consider her point of view.

“I could have left here anytime, you know.” she pointed out the obvious. “I could have rented a small apartment and got around just fine.” she hesitated, then forged ahead. “But the fact is, I enjoyed your company.” Once said, it was easier to continue. “I’ve enjoyed everyone’s company, Francis, the guards, Nora.” She slowed, the next statement not as easy to admit. “I’ve lived alone for almost a year, and it was boring as hell.”

“It had to have some bright spots.” Red was stunned at the words.

“Not particularly.” she shrugged. “I like my quiet time, but I’ve also found that I like companionship.” she motioned accordingly. “I get that here.”

Red was pleasantly surprised to hear all being said.
“If I’m sitting in the front areas, the guards chat with me. If I’m in our bedroom, they do their check and move on.” she smiled gently. “I think they get that I sometimes need the solitude.”

The man was pleased to hear Silas and the other’s were doing their duties so well.

“Living alone is the same, day in and day out.” she gestured, grimacing. “Go to work, order take out, go home, watch a movie, pass out of the couch.”

“Why didn’t you go out?” Red was curious. “You’re a young woman, in the prime of her life.”

“I did go out, with Samar, Aram... sometimes Ress would join us.” she corrected. “The bar scene gets old, fast.” she opened her computer while she talked. “I tried dating and checked out some sites,” she turned the screen so he could see, “but they were so dull and uninteresting, it was a relief to get called into work.”

“You still have an account?” he was amazed, smiling his amusement.

“I check it once in a while, out of morbid curiosity.” she sighed heavily. “Or when I don’t think things can get worse... these prove me wrong.”

Red scrolled through the messages, she showed him, his features showing his disbelief. Out of the ten he opened so far, seven of them only contained one word, Hello. Three said, I'd fuck you. Txt me.

“Charming.” Red twisted his mouth distastefully.

“Aren’t they.” Liz rolled her eyes. “Aside from avoiding the dating pool, at all costs. By the time we got to the Kenyon Family, I was more than burnt out.” Red’s eyes softened in understanding. “I needed this time away from everything, Red.” she confessed.

“I don’t think I’ve told you, thank you, for letting me have it. For giving me the chance to not worry about a damn thing.” she felt genuine remorse “I also haven’t thanked you for giving me the Blacklist names again, after I said I was ready, regardless of what Cooper said about not letting me work.”

She leaned forward, kissing his cheek. “Thank you for giving me the chance to find my clarity again.”

“I don’t think I had anything to do with it, Elizabeth.”

“You had everything to do with it.” she disagreed. “With that said, I’m a grown damn woman.” She reminded almost peevishly. “If I want to shack up with someone before an official date, it’s my business and no one else’s.”

Red felt a smile tug at his mouth. “Why don’t we just see how things go.” the smile grew as the blue eyes rolled in exaggerated annoyance.

“Just for a little bit.” he compromised. “We’ll go on a couple dates, then open this back up for discussion.” he used his arbitration skills to his advantage. “For all you know, you could think I’m a waste of time like these other dumbasses.” he waved the tablet about, before tossing it to the couch.

“Well if you’re not here, I don’t see why we can’t downsize to something smaller.”

“I picked this house because of the secure grounds and guest house.”
“I don’t really need a guest house.”

“The guards do.” he reminded. “Since that’s where the sleep.”

Good point. Liz had forgotten about that.

“Even still, I really only need, what, two guards?” Liz reasoned it out. “For God sake, Red, this is a 20,000 square foot house. No one needs that much space... how can you afford...”

“Have you forgotten about Francis?” he bated.

Again, he had a good point. Not that she minded Francis, she loved Francis and would love for him to stay when ever he wished.

“You’re comfortable here.” Red prodded gently. “And admit it, you know you love the pool.”

She did love that pool. “Well, at least let me give you the money from the sale of–”

“No, I want you to keep that for emergencies.” he absolutely refused. “As a matter of fact, I would like it, if you set up an offshore account with it, should something happen.” he continued. “Now, I have contingencies in place in the event the shit hits the fan, but I would still like it if you had a back up.”

“I don’t feel comfortable, Red.”

“The way you talk,” he reminded, “it’ll be our house again in no time, so this should be a nonissue.”

Liz blushed slightly, gesturing for the man to continue.

“The house suits your purposes. You have enough rooms for your team, should you need them. You’re maybe ten minutes from work.” he ticked off on his fingers. “Security has their own dwelling. Nora loves that kitchen.”

“I don’t think I could keep Nora.” she laughed lightly, already crushed over the reality.

“You’re keeping her. Trust me on that.” he put down his foot. “Lizzy, you love this house.”

She did love it.

Besides being beautiful, she had grown accustomed to sitting in the big picture window that was in the atrium to read. She did enjoy the privacy gates. She liked that there was separate areas for visitors and entertainment. She liked the master bath... a lot. She liked that the closets were so huge. She loved walking the gardens. She did love that pool.

She found peace here with it’s light colors and warmth. For such a large home, it was quite... homey.

She really loved this house.

Red watched her weighing the pros and cons, and knew the pros were winning. Her face had taken on a serene quality as she mentally catalogued the rooms, her favorite spots.

“And you?” she questioned quietly. “Where will you stay?”

“I’ll be close by...” she was assured. “Very close...” his face took on a quiet intensity. “Will you invite me over for a play date?”
Liz’s eyes shifted warily. “What kind of ‘play’ are we talking about?”

“Leap frog...” Red’s eyes twinkled, “see, it’s where you bend over and I get behind you and—”

“I get the picture.” Liz sighed, instantly visualizing what the man had said. A bubble of laughter escaped her otherwise dour mood.

Red’s expression was total innocence when she checked.

“If this thing between us doesn’t work out,” the woman’s face fell a little as Red continued, “we’ll find you a new place, all your own.”

“And if we work out?” she was ready for the challenge.

“Then we can make this our home or find a new one together.” he was open to compromise. “Stay where your heart is, Lizzy,” he suggested. “That will be your home.”

“You’re not talking about leaving again, are you?” Francis scowled, having walked breezily through the door without so much as a knock or a ‘by your leave’.

Liz looked at Red wide eyed. How much had Francis heard?

“She wants to downsize.” Red saved the day.

“I love this house.” Francis pouted, plopping down in an oversize chair. “Are you crazy woman?”

“See, another selling point.” Red mentioned in passing. “Francis loves the house. We can’t possibly move now.” the man said sarcastically, making her chuckle. “Don’t you knock?” he asked the younger man.

“You were expecting me...” Francis drawled, leaning forward, his interest caught by something totally private and personal laid out in front of him, like an unsolved mystery he could not overlook.

Red sighed, rubbing at the sudden tension in his forehead. “You’re right,” he conceded, “I was. But not for another half hour or so.”

“I’m too early, he bitches. I’m too late, he bitches.” Francis fingered the edge of Liz’s file. “What is it with you and being so damned punctual?” he slowly lifted the corner of the folder, crossing his eyes at Red. “You aren’t in the Navy anymore.”

Liz’s mouth gaped, sitting forward quickly, but not in time to intercept Francis’ intended inspection.

Red’s palm slammed the manila folder, keeping it closed tightly.

“Lizzy...” Red called out after her retreat, causing the woman to hesitate.

Liz smiled happily as the man inched closer, wrapping his arms around her waist. Red nuzzled her
neckline, softly kissing the warm skin. Which simultaneously tickled her but also, turned her on a bit.

She released a breathy giggle, leaning into his affection.

“Is seven all right for tonight?” his breath scent tiny shivers down her spine.

“...Yes.” she sighed, arching into his touch. Liz inhaled sharply, feeling the man’s tongue flick against her heated skin. Clutching his back, she lifted bodily, his warm mouth stirring her emotions amorously.

Red’s own emotions stirred, and he could not prevent his hand from cupping the luscious bottom.

He thoroughly enjoyed the woman’s slight moan of approval as his fingers spread searchingly about the ripe young flesh.

Pulling the woman into his thigh, Red grinned when she rubbed against him, trying to ease the sudden ache he had purposely caused.

He squeezed the tiny cheek once, curving his fingers inward, just teasing the seam of her pants.

“Your wounds.” she reminded breathlessly, her ass squirming in his palm. “I mean, your leg...” she mewed softly when the man pushed her harder into his leg, increasing the ache between her thighs.

“Are you questioning my health or my abilities?” he challenged openly, his eyes holding hers hypnotically.

“You aren’t hurting?” she frowned up at him.

“Oh, I’m hurting.” he pacified readily. “Make no mistake about that. But it has nothing to do with my ‘wounds’.”

“I’m perfectly fine.” he assured. “I promised you a date, and a date is what you shall receive... among other things.”

He heard footsteps coming down the hall, his mouth quirking slightly at Liz’s obvious disappointment.

“I’m going to make a quick call, then leave with Francis for about an hour.” he disengaged himself artfully.

“All right...” she smiled up at the man as Dembe pushed through the door.

Red kissed the woman, patting her bottom in a more than friendly fashion which caused Liz to chastise him with a look, if for appearances sake only.

“Could you tell Francis I’ll be out shortly?” he asked sweetly.

She nodded, heading for the door, glancing back at the man, finding him staring at her bottom.

Liz exhaled Shakily, feeling the wetness between her legs increase. She pulled up short just outside the door, blowing out a steadying breath. She winced slightly, squeezing her thighs together, staving off her sudden spike of renewed arousal.

She really hoped they’d make love soon, because these petting sessions were driving her insane. Maybe that was his intention. The need to experience Red was so overpowering, she wanted to pull
him into an empty room and just...

“Good grief.” Francis said behind her, startling the woman from her reverie.

“What?” she muttered absently.

“Someone’s horny.” He munched at the cookie in his hand.

“Shut up, Francis.” she snapped, stalking towards the front of the house.

“That’s the third time someone has said that to me since I’ve been here.” he wasn’t overly upset by the fact.

“Then perhaps you should take the advice.” she retorted.

“Is Red neglecting his baby cakes?” he cooed playfully, “Because it sure smells like he is.” he made a show of scenting her. “Though, why he would, is beyond me.” he replied honestly. “You are quite intoxicating... if you like scrawny, oversexed brunettes.”

“I’m about to push you in the pool and hold you under.” she seethed, promising the threat. “And no, he isn’t neglecting me.” the woman bitched. “He’s just been busy.”

Francis snagged her arm, dragging her to an empty room, shutting the door behind them.

“What’s wrong?” he asked seriously.

“What are you talking about?” she furled her brow.

“You’ve been grumpy for days.” Francis said. “Are you two not...”

Liz sighed, leaning back into the wall behind her. “It’s none of your business... I know you don’t understand that phrase, so let me explain it in detail.”

“Is he still pissed about...” he waved his hand aimlessly, “that Donald guy?”

“No.” she answered too quickly. “We just... keep getting interrupted.” she threw him a lethal look. “He had to go to London...” she ticked off another reason, and why she was explaining in the first place, she had no idea.

“I know Silas was giving you the business in New York, but surely since Red got back...” he hesitated, seeing her frustration build. “How long has it been since you two made love?”

“Okay, read my lips...” she iterated, “stop sticking your nose–”

“This is bad.” Francis shook his head woefully, then brightened. “I can fix this.”

“How long have I been in the casts?” she replied, making it as simplistic as possible. “And we had that fight before that...” she remembered the story when Red had been in Italy.

“You mean, you guys still haven’t...” he was aghast.

“If you must know!” she gritted. “And it seems you do... No!”

“Why?” he gasped audibly at the revelation. “I mean, are you in pain or...?”

“No, the only pain I’m feeling is one in the ass!” she indicated the source.
“Well, evidently not. If all you said is true.” he defended himself. “Have you told him that you’re more than ready?”

“I am not!” Liz denied the truth.

“Oh right.” he dismissed airily. The man sighed heavily, then really looked at the woman. Liz’s bravado melted into oblivion.

“Maybe he’s just not there yet.” she finally voiced her doubts and fears.

Francis looked down at the small woman, his frown matching hers. He suddenly pulled her close, hugging her gently.

“He wants to be with you Lizzy.” he understood the uncertainty. “Don’t think he doesn’t.”

“Then what’s going on with him?” she looked up at Francis, her expression hopeful. Maybe being a guy, he could explain.

Maybe Red wanted to take it slow because he wanted to see if he really wanted to be in a relationship with her? Maybe he would feel guilty if he had sex with her and it didn’t pan out?

“Maybe he doesn’t really want–” she couldn’t even finish the sentence.

“Don’t even go there.” Francis scoffed. “The way he stares at you...” he chuckled. “He really wants to make love to you.” he smiled softly, stroking her pink cheek.

“You know what I think it is?” he said. “I think he wants to make it special, seeing that it’s been a while since you two did make love.” Francis bolstered. “And with the calls and people interrupting, he thinks the moment has been spoiled.” he explained. “When you two reconnect, I’m sure he wants the attention focused solely on what you two are doing, and not the next interruption.”

“I hope so.” Liz hung her head, sighing. “But you know, I’d do anything for a quickie right now.” she raised a flabbergasted expression. “Well, not with you, I mean. I didn’t mean... that.”

Francis sniggered against her hair, squeezing her once before stepping back.

“Just be patient. And remember, when it does happen, it’s going to be really good.” He flicked her chin with his fingers. “Okay?”

She nodded, then leaned against his side as he guided her out of the room. “Now, let’s go bug Nora.”
Chapter Notes

I would just like to take a moment to congratulate the nominees of the ‘Favorite Reviewer’ poll on The Blacklist: Lizzington Shippers forum:

Rolobr/LoriRon
SecretPhoenix679
Meriya
Beautifulocean
Gregwillray
Sera_Clay

And of course, a HUGE congratulations to the winner:

Rolobr/LoriRon

I feel so honored to have been reviewed by some of the very best!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May 4

A short time later, Red headed out with Francis to meet with a prospective client. The meeting had gone well, so well in fact, they not only had another shipment to be handled, but they had padded their pockets with a sizable amount of cash.

As they were headed to the car, Francis reached out, pulling gently at Red’s sleeve.

“Can I talk to you a moment,” he asked, gesturing his head to a secluded spot, “alone.”

Red’s brows furrowed slightly, for the young man seemed in a serious mood for once. A novelty in itself. “Dembe, could you call Louis and get that shipment rolling, please.”

Dembe inclined his head, leaving the men to their privacy.

Francis walked a few feet, then sighed. “I was wrong to stick my nose into your private affairs,” the man began, “and I promised myself I wouldn’t do it again...”

“But?” Red baited artfully.

“Are you still pissed off at her?”

“Okay,” Red sighed, “I know this has to do with Lizzy, but I’m completely drawing a blank here.” the man had quirked his head to emphasize his growing frustration.

“I know it’s none of my business,” Francis held up ‘wait hands’, “but...” the younger man began to pace restlessly back and forth on the concrete pavement.
Red watched the man’s lack of progress and felt as annoyed for some obscure reason as he did whenever he spoke with Glen.

There was no rhyme or reason, he just was.

But the more he watched Francis try to pull his thoughts together, the less he felt the aggravation.

He truly understood how difficult this was for Francis to come to Lizzy’s defense again.

“Francis, just say it.” Red urged impatiently, then altered his tone at the boy’s devastated look. “I promise, I will hear you out.”

Francis built up his courage, taking a couple of steps. The steady gaze pulled Francis up short. He returned to his pacing for a spell.

Red’s arms lifted from his sides in a ‘oh my God’ gesture which the young man caught.

“Why haven’t you made love to her yet?” he blurted the question.

“Not that it’s any of your business–” Red’s tone was more than cool.

Francis held his hands up in open defense, “I know but...” he grimaced, “when my best friend is hurting. When she’s second guessing her desirability, I...” Francis rubbed his fingers on his forehead hard, shaking his head, knowing he was stating it badly. “She thinks you don’t want her anymore.”

Red was momentarily stunned. The statement came out of the blue, shocking the hell out of him. He had expected some sort of concocted story Liz had woven for the sake of their ‘cover’. While there was often, a bit of truth in every lie they told, this truth hit far too close to home.

“If that’s the case...” Francis scratched nervously at his neck, his gaze never leaving Red’s face for any real amount of time, so anxious was he to read the man’s reactions, “then just tell her.”

“I want her Francis.” Red disliked airing his private business before anyone, but he did take into consideration Francis’ motives this time.

“Then what’s the problem?” Francis was stumped.

Red remained silent for so long, Francis began to squirm. He knew he was in dangerous waters here, and Red’s final explosion proved him right.

“I’m not about to fuck her against some fucking wall.” Red snapped angrily, all the frustration of the last few days coming to the fore. “You asshole people won’t give us...” he broke off knowing he was putting the blame on other’s when he could have put a stop to the interruptions anytime he really wanted.

“There’s a reason there’s a ‘do not disturb’ sign and locks on the door.” Francis bitched right back. “And turn off your fucking phone. There is nothing that can’t wait until you give her the attention she needs from you.”

The man resumed his pacing, unaware of doing so.

Red’s arms lifted yet again, his annoyance back ten fold.

“And what the hell is a little interruption?” Francis wondered aloud. “I mean, if you have a kid, you think they’ll knock?” he turned earnest eyes Red’s way.
Yes, the man did have a point. Red couldn’t count how many times his daughter had ‘interrupted’. He and his wife took care of Jennifer’s issue, got her back to bed and picked up where they left off.

So what was his problem now?

“Man, she’s dying for you to touch her.” Francis advocated sincerely.

Red sighed heavily, slumping back onto the wall behind him for support. He gathered his thoughts, allowing the silence to stretch. “...I wanted to make it romantic, for her.”

“And you can do that.” Francis’ tone softened slightly. “But right now, let her know you want her and give her a good fuck.” he stressed and looking at Red, really looking at the man, “And quite frankly, I think you need it more than she does.”

Red lifted a chilly glare.

“I honestly don’t know how you couldn’t have taken that pussy by now.” Francis shook his head, genuinely confused. “She’s so damned hot, even I get a hard on sometimes.” he smirked, until he realized Red’s dark and territorial eyes zeroed in on him.

“I mean...” he quickly amended, “I don’t know how you haven’t got a hard on...” he laughed lamely. “Because I’m sure you have, not that that’s any of my business, but come on... what man would not get a... not that I have. I was just joking about that.” he laughed heartily again, stepping to gingerly hit Red’s shoulder in open camaraderie.

But the man’s expression had not changed one iota.

“I mean, I think of her as a slightly older sister.” Francis continued, mentally slapping himself upside the head, wondering when this ability to not be able to shut up had become a common occurrence. Then suddenly realized... he was still fucking talking.

“Not that she’s older than me, she isn’t. And boy, does she look younger, not so young that it’s unfashionable or unseemly that you two should be involved.” Francis closed his eyes, just realizing what he had said. “Not that you’re too old for her, they’re not thinking that, I mean, why would they?” he poo-pooed the very idea. “Look at you.” he motioned accordingly. “I mean what man doesn’t want to be Red Reddington?”

“Shut up now, Francis.” Red advised quietly. He had to think.

Francis winced inwardly as Red’s fingers curled tightly into his arm, and just knew, he was most likely about to get belted.

Really, really hard.

Francis fell silent, wondering what other stupid shit would come pouring out of his big mouth when Red ended the silent debate.

“Get in the car.” Red gritted, pushing the man toward the vehicle which sat waiting, across the parking lot.

“What?” Francis held his breath, thinking maybe he’d gone too far overboard again and had lost Red’s friendship... forever.

“Get in the fucking car.” Red snapped, his head jerking toward the auto. “I need to get ready for our date.”
Francis walked stiffly ahead of the man, wondering where the bullet would enter. Before he got in the car or after. Probably before. Red wouldn’t want to ruin the upholstery.

“Are you mad at me?” he asked, checking behind him, relieved not to see any weapons drawn. “No...” Red’s tone had not altered in the least, however. “You just made me realize something.”

Francis opened his mouth to comment but shut it quickly enough when Red transferred a steely look in his direction.

“And that is none of your business.”

Both men climbed into the car. As Francis took his seat beside the man, he craned his neck, searching Dembe’s hands out.

No weapons there either. Francis threw Red a disturbed glance. What was going on here?

“Thank you, Francis.” Red begrudgingly drew his attention from the outside scenery as Dembe pulled out into a heavy traffic flow on the Interstate. “For letting me know.” the light eyes shifted lazily to the chalky face, staring at him so expectantly. “...You can relax now.” it was summarily advised.

Francis smiled hesitantly at the man, unable as yet to breathe a sigh of relief, not trusting Red or his instincts any further than he could spit at the moment. Which wasn’t saying much, as his mouth was as dry as the fucking Sahara.

“You’re welcome...” He replied politely, sitting back stiffly.

Dembe pulled up alongside the curb in the downtown section, directly in front of Francis’ office building. The young man craned his neck up the tall building, watching the busy sidewalk absenty.

“Get out of the car, Francis.” Red instructed.

Francis looked at the man dumbstruck. “I never come here unless I have to.”

Dembe’s head shook woefully in the front seat. Red’s look of incredulous disbelief reminded the other man that he should probably just quietly take his leave.

“Okay...” Francis nodded agreeably, pointing to the outside world that suddenly seemed like a refuge from a very bad place he might go, if he did not... “I’m just gonna go.” he shot out of the car like a rocket, calling out as Red pulled away. “Good luck on your date!”

Elizabeth transferred her gaze back and forth a hundred times, having made her choices for tonight’s special occasion.

She shook her head negatively suddenly hating every article of clothing she owned. She stepped once, selecting a long gown only to hang it back in it’s original spot.

She dropped her head into the dresser, her frustration complete. She tugged at the radio on her hip, hesitatingly rubbing her thumb over the call button, before finally pushing it.

“Silas, could you come here for a minute?” she asked hesitantly.
“Copy...” the man returned immediately.

A short moment later, she heard tapping on the main door and the guard call out her name.

“I’m in the closet!” she shouted back.

Silas walked around the door frame, chuckling. “Are you trying to tell me something?” he smirked.

“Shut up and help me.” she grumbled her dissension, waving over her wardrobe selections. “Please.” she added as an afterthought, hoping to buy the man’s good grace.

“Do I look like I read Cosmo?” he folded his arms, leaning into the doorframe. His look saying it all.

“No,” she turned away, running her fingers along the satin of her robe, “but you are a guy.” she lifted a warning gaze, scowling at the man. “Don’t make me look trashy.”

Silas studied her for a long beat. “You’re nervous.” She had expected him to be amused, but his expression was a somber one.

“Yes.” she admitted. “I mean, it’s been years since I’ve...” she felt the pressure of the moment acutely, “with Tom,” she thought how to phrase it, “the fanciest I got was a new sweatshirt.”

Silas shifted his eyes for a beat, sizing up the situation. She wanted the night to be memorable.

“Show me what you got.” his decision was cast.

Liz turned quickly, before the man’s patience wore out, holding up each choice against her small frame.

She sighed wearily, feeling her mood drop with each dress he vetoed. She looked back at her choices which were dwindling quickly.

“No, that one’s too long.” Silas grimaced his distaste.

She sat it back in line with a finality, tears misting her eyes.

“What’s wrong with that little black one there?” Silas jabbed his finger at the one in question.

“It’s a little low cut for dinner, isn’t it?” she hadn’t even considered it to be honest but she wasn’t about to share that information at this point.

“No.” he stated bluntly and at her doubtful look, “I’m not bullshitting you.” and he wasn’t. “It’s pretty modest for where you’re going.” he assured.

Liz looked at the dress, indecision in her features.

“You want Red to make a move on you?” he asked seriously.

“W-Well... I..” Liz stumbled over the question, let alone the answer. Why was it people around here were so blunt in their observations and statements? “Yeah, I guess.”

“Then wear that one.” it was advised. “It’ll give him easy access.” Silas took the dress off the rack, holding it up to her body himself. “It’s low cut and short, so it won’t be in his way when he–”

“Yes, yes. I know all that.” She stopped the narrative abruptly.
The man grinned as her nervousness turned into vexation. He leaned back into the wall, watching her flitter around grabbing shoes, nylons...

“Matching lingerie.” he reminded.

The woman hesitated, tossing the blue set back into the drawer, choosing a black set instead. She bunched them in her hand, hiding them from sight, then sighed heavily before holding them up for Silas’ approval.

“They’re good.” he nodded. “Red will like them.” he sing-songed his head. “But more importantly, you’ll feel confident in them.”

She took a shaky breath, tossing them beside her nylons.

“Why are you so nervous?” he asked. “It’s not like you haven’t done this... done him... before.” the man grinned at his own wit. But to his surprise, the woman’s brow did not furrow in anger, but open concern.

He stopped grinning, shifting his tall frame upright, his amazement apparent. “You two haven’t...”

She held up a hand, “Why does everyone think it’s okay to,” she halted abruptly, licking her lips which were suddenly dry. “Oh what the hell...No.”

To say she was nervous about sleeping with Red was a damned understatement. She had only been with less than a handful of men. And Red... he had a damn Harem of women after him.

She didn’t think she was all that bad in bed, but how would she rate among his other lovers?

She could feel the pressure returning with a vengeance.

But Liz couldn’t push aside the pure exhilaration of experiencing the man.

She found herself in quite the little quandary.

“Taking things slow, eh?” Silas shrugged, giving her an out and breaking the tension. “That’s fun too.” he grin had returned slowly.

Liz cocked her head, intent on the man’s every utterance.

“The anticipation has it’s rewards.” Silas stated simply. “Especially when you get to be our age.” he explained. “Nothing surprises us anymore. Nothing shocks us.” he continued. “So the build up, the challenge... it gets us off.”

“What do you mean.” the woman was suddenly more than very interested.

“I’m not saying Red won’t come when he’s with you.” the man stated bluntly. “But the foreplay, the suspense of what you’ll feel and taste like. How you’ll react when he fucks you...”

Liz blushed from head to toe but she managed to hold the man’s eyes unwaveringly.

“That is very much on his mind. He’s fucking aching to take you.” Silas smiled knowingly. “He’s holding back for you, but he’s also enjoying the hell out of the chase.”

“God, I hope so...” she breathed her anxiousness aside. “You think?” she asked hopefully.

“I know.” It was corrected stoutly. “Everyone he’s been with is so quick to fuck, gives it up too
easily...” Silas did not judge the women, merely stated the facts. “There’s no intrigue. No challenge.”

Liz’s mood heightened a tad. “Really?”

“When you deny him a little bit, make him have to play the game, it’s rewarding.”

“Rewarding?”

“Oh hell yeah.” the guard nodded. “If he has to gain your interest...”

“Gain my interest?” she questioned immediately.

“If you make him get to the point where the urge to throw you against a wall becomes a need.” he explained. “He’ll enjoy the hell out of that.” he spread his hands widely. “He’s been enjoying the little touches you two have been sharing, the flirtation, the build up.”

“Are you creeping around in the shadows or something?” she instantly regretted the retort. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that, keep saying things.”

“You two were making out in the hallway earlier before he left.” It was reminded.

Oh, right. They had been. She had forgotten they were where everyone could see them.

“With that said... he doesn’t expect me to put out...” she grumbled, remembering Red had called Silas a slut for the same offense. “In fact, I think he would rather I didn’t on a first date.” she worried her hands. “So I think if I did push for more...”

“And you really want to push for more.” Silas assumed correctly when the woman cast him a full flush of her cheeks. “If it makes you feel any better, this technically isn’t your first date.” Again, an out was offered. “You two had something going on long before this, you just had to get your shit together.” he put it in an eggshell. “This is just your official first date.”

“What’s the difference?” Liz was not only lost, she was feeling a growing trepidation.

“Red just wants to make sure you have no questions as to his intentions towards you.” Silas explained. “By asking you to dinner, it just signifies that you’re officially dating.” he shook his head at such innocence. “He’s staking his claim, as it were.”

Liz’s mouth gaped a little, understanding dawning on her. “Oh...”

“Shit...” the man bitched when the radio on his hip squawked. He answered the call, his eyes lifting to the woman. He would have to take the call, it was understood.

“Look, let me just say this...” the radio squealed again, he snatched it angrily to his mouth. “Are we about to be attacked! Is death knocking on the door!” he bitched at whoever was on the other end of the line.

“Uh, no.” a tinny voice replied. “We need your approval on a security measure.”

“I’ll be there in a minute then, dammit.” he snapped, then smiling gently at the woman replacing the offending object to his belt. “Red won’t turn you down. But the tease does hold it’s merits. Consider it foreplay.”

“Thank you, Silas.” she nodded her thanks, smiling softly. “For everything...”

She hadn’t thought about it like that. And she should have, being a woman. Foreplay was a good
thing.

So maybe what Silas said held some merit after all.

Unless he was screwing with Red, which the man was known to do. Her doubts resurfaced hastily enough.

But as she replayed the conversation in her head, the man had truly seemed to be putting her at ease. Offering sound advice as he knew it.

Liz set about getting ready for a very eventful night, hopefully. She was a little more secure in her choice of dress now.

But more importantly, she pushed aside her decision to have a ‘game plan’. She intended to sit back and enjoy the ride, where ever it took them.

Elizabeth studied her reflection in the mirror for the hundredth time, checking on her hair and makeup.

Her eyes were constantly drawn to the inexplicable box of condoms which had been left on her night stand.

Silas must have brought them in when she was getting ready, leaving them in plain view. Like an idiot.

“But it never hurts to be prepared, right?” she muttered to herself, hastily ripping the box open, dropping one inside her purse.

She sat the box down, closing the latch on her bag, looking back down at the box.

“Oh, what the hell.” she impulsively grabbed the object spilling it’s full contents into her purse. She started visibly, not to mention guiltily, hearing a knock at the door.

“Come in!” she called out cheerfully, dropping the box, kicking it under the bed as she snapped her purse closed.

Red suddenly stood there, larger than life, his eyes slowly scanning her attire. A sensual sweep started at her feet lifting agonizingly slow.

“You look rather...” the man’s tongue rolled along his lips, his eyes sweeping her form once more, “... delectable.”

Elizabeth looked down at herself on the sly, breathing a little sigh of relief that her tightening nipples were hidden under the lace of her dress.

“Thank you.” she smiled softly. “You look very handsome... as usual.”

And he did. The gleaming band of his watch seemed startling against the classic dark suit, crisp white shirt and bold geometric tie in dark blue. A blue that seemed to darken the hue of his eyes.

Though... upon closer inspection, perhaps it wasn’t the tie, perhaps it was the intensity of the look he was giving her, causing his eyes to seemingly change colors. With each passing sweep of those penetrating orbs, the pupils of his eyes seemed to darkened almost hypnotically.
Red allowed her a release from the carnal trance he wove, slowly stepping towards her.

She felt like prey being hunted by a hungered beast... and didn’t mind one bit.

Liz knew she should take exception to such behavior, but the reality of it was, she had never felt more like a woman.

Silas had been right, she felt amazing in this dress. There was something wickedly sinful that brought out the feminine side of her, one she had never explored before.

She often had envied Samar her beauty and self poise but tonight, she could admit if only to herself, that she actually felt sexy and beautiful too.

And the man’s appreciative gaze did nothing to belie that belief.

“For you...” he replied smoothly, holding up a small bouquet of orange roses.

Liz’s face lit with pleasure, taking the small gift. She took in the fragrant bouquet, inhaling the divine scent.

“Thank you...” she smiled up at the man, “they’re beautiful.”

“Shall we?” Red gestured to the door.

She took his arm, leaving the quiet of their bedroom.

Liz tried to contain the excitement bubbling inside her. Surely, the man could feel it course through her body.

They were finally taking the first steps on their new journey... together.

Silas must die a slow and painful death, Red decided. Just like he was at the moment.

He just knew the man had something to do with that dress Liz had picked the evening. Little subtle hints invaded his thoughts, like when they had exited the house, the head guard’s big shit eating grin when he had seen the woman. And Silas’ suddenly innocent expression when Red had thrown him an ‘I’ll get you for this, if it’s the last thing I do’, look.

Red’s eyes drifted to the swishing little derriere as Liz walked before him down the well lit pathway. That dress was suddenly his most favorite thing in the entire universe.

It was low cut and short... giving him easy access to every part of that pretty package, should he want it.

And God, did he want it.

Every part of him cried out in distress because... he wanted it.

Red held out his hand, pleased when she took it without hesitation, following his footsteps unquestioningly.

“Are we meeting Dembe in the–”
“No.” Red pulled her along, his steps slowing to hers. The two seated Mercedes sat there before him in the driveway, it’s engine purring like a kitten.

Liz had been wanting to take a ride in the sleek car. She showed her appreciation with Red’s choice by an enthusiastic squeeze of his hand, her expression allowing her delight.

“Oh, I love this car.” he was so fortunate to own such a treasure.

Red opened the door, helping her into the low seat. He got more than a tantalizing view of the warm valley between her legs before the woman could modestly pull the short dress down somewhat over the creamy thighs.

He straightened with difficulty, his dick reacting to the sight before taking his place on the opposite side of the car.

“Can you drive?” she asked, absently buckling her belt, her tone somewhat surprised.

Red rolled his eyes towards her, then smiled. “Yes, I can drive.” he put the car in gear, rolling down the driveway. “Dembe just never let’s me.” he pushed the button, opening the gate. “Says I make his ass clench to the seat.”

She chuckled appreciatively. As they approached the moving gate, she glanced over her shoulder, checking behind them.

“We’re going alone?” she was stunned.

“Yes.” Red confirmed. “I’ve had enough interruptions for a while,” he threw her a cautionary glance, “you?”

“Agreed.” she smiled, settling back into her seat.

Throughout the drive, Red had to check himself habitually to keep from reaching over, instinctively laying hands on the exposed thigh.

As they sat down to dinner, his eyes had focused on the deliciously displayed breasts and long legs wrapped in silky nylon...

Throughout the meal, he found himself enraptured by her good humor and animated delivery of any story told. Some of her college experiences were downright amusing. He had not known much about that period of her life because Tom entered it.

Several times that evening, he enjoyed the flush on her cheeks as he purposely focused his entire attention on the woman. He loved how her eyes lit when she laughed. That laugh... he loved that laugh. She had the sweetest giggle when she was truly tickled. And a throaty breathless chuckle, to which he was becoming quickly addicted.

Finally their dessert plates were taken away, their glasses refilled one last time. Red knew at that stage, he truly didn’t want the evening to end.

He could not prevent his hands from gravitating towards her person. He needed to touch her, somehow, someway and in their present situation it was the only ‘decent’ mode of contact afforded him.

Not that he did not make it ‘personal’, he did. He caressed and stroked the warm palm intimately.
And even in the midst of the playful stories and dramatic sagas... with which she regaled him, he made sure that she was aware of his presence as a male. And in the end, as he watched the waiter pour the last of the wine, he knew Lizzy’s hands as well as he knew his own.

She had a little freckle on her thumb and a tiny scar on the other. Her nails were smooth under his own fingers, the polish slick and even. She had a slight callous on her right index finger, most likely from handling her weapon.

And when he held her hand in both of his, it vanished completely.

Red consciously played with her ring, rubbing his thumbs over the large stone, watching the woman’s eyes grow heavy.

He lifted the small palm of her hand to his mouth, softly kissing the sensitive skin, hearing her breathing falter.

He couldn’t help but wonder what her hands would feel like on his body.

“Are you ready to go, sweetheart?” he knew he was. He wanted out of the suddenly stifling atmosphere. He wanted to be alone with the woman, clear and simple.

Elizabeth shook out of the trance like state the man had placed her in, breaking her gaze on Red’s mouth as he softly kissed her hand.

She looked at the clock on the wall, surprised as hell to find three hours had passed since they sat down.

Three hours had passed so quickly and pleasantly.

They walked from the restaurant, hands still clasped. She could feel the heat of the slightly callused palm against hers.

“It’s so pretty out tonight.” she smiled up at the tall buildings surrounding them. “It’s difficult to see any stars in town.”

“It is.” he agreed, smiling down at her happy face.

She leaned into the car door, delaying the inevitable as long as she could. “Do we have to go home right now?”

“No...” he muttered softly, “I wasn’t planning on taking you home. Elizabeth.”

“I’ve had a really nice time...” her tone lowered, matching his.

They stood quietly, listening to the city move forward around them. The people and the sights blind to the two lost in their quiet solitude.

Red’s fingers tenderly brushed away the soft strands of hair caught by the wind, intently focused on the woman, lost in his own personal thoughts for a moment. He smiled gently realizing she was staring silently up at him, waiting.

Red blinked, breaking the stalemate, reaching around her to open the door. As he walked to the drivers side he informed her, “I had planned to take you to a play,” he began, “but upon reflection,” he slid into the seat effortlessly, “I find I would rather have you all to myself.”

The woman’s cheeks flushed in delight, “That sounds about right.” she was past being coy for the
moment.

He pulled the sporty car out of the parking lot, taking to the streets quickly, until they hit the Interstate. He flew down the busy highway, slipping further and further from the city until the roads were tree lined and the stars came out, twinkling brilliantly against the black sky.

Red drove silently for a spell allowing the woman to take in the beautiful night sky. He pulled the car into a hidden alcove off to the side of the small two lane highway upon which they drove.

Liz questioned his actions, but did not object to them.

“I need to talk to you.” the man shut the car down, turning in his seat.

“By my calculations,” she interrupted hastily, “we’ve had a little over four dates.” she held up her fingers to signify, the ring shimmering in the distant light of the moon.

Red was a little thrown, going with the flow however. “...All right.” he wasn’t sure where she was heading.

“We’ve been to dinner, made out a couple of times...” she ticked the items off. “All very date type activities, yes?”

“I suppose you could say that, yes.” Red agreed, still a little in the dark. He hadn’t thought about it, but he guessed there were some instances in New York that could have been considered ‘dates’.

“After our discussion in the laundry room,” he stated just as bluntly, “I was under the assumption that you were open to more.” he shifted more comfortably in the seat, facing her more squarely. “Which is what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“You do want to have sex with me, don’t you?” she had gathered her courage, forging ahead.

The man hesitated visibly, then tackled the problem head on. “Yes, I do. Very much.” his eyes held hers easily.

“Don’t typical couples have sex on the third date?” She hid her trembling fingers from sight, her façade of sophistication wearing thin under the constant scrutiny he offered.

“I... suppose so.” he allowed.

“Then why haven’t we?” she blurted.

“I didn’t want you to feel rushed.” he told the truth, finding her candor refreshing.

“Well, I don’t feel that.” The woman beamed her relief, crawling across the seat, sitting in his lap.

Red stiffened slightly, the heat emanating from her center, feeling deliciously arousing on his instantly stiffening shaft. It didn’t help in the least that the woman was squirming excitedly about, eager to share her point of view.

“I would very much like to have sex with you.” Liz was so happy to finally say the words out loud, to share them with the man.

She tightened her thigh around his leg, rubbing intimately into his zipper. Red quickly caught the small curve of her ass, stilling her movement before he lost his focus completely.

“Just to be clear, you are ready to make love...” the man got things back on track, he hoped,
clarifying his original intent, “to be completely committed to one another?”

“I am.” She replied quietly. “I would love to do more... be more.”

“How much more Elizabeth.” his tone was semi-stern as was his gaze.

“I don’t understand.” she frowned slightly.

“So I’m understood, without question,” he reached, lifting her left hand into view, “I want this...” he held up her finger, the diamond gleaming in the low light, “at some point. With you.”

Liz’s mouth fell agape, her eyes widening with shock.

“I want to make a life with you Elizabeth.” he continued. “I want you to belong to me. In every way possible.” he was more than firm on the matter. “If you don’t have that end goal in sight, or aren’t at least open to it...” he swallowed heavily, “I don’t think I can do this.”

Liz was stunned.

She hadn’t expected this, at all.

He laced his fingers through hers, pleased to feel her squeeze his hand in return, if nothing else.

“I want to be that one person you turn to, Lizzy.” he explained. “I would love more than anything in the world to be your friend, confidant, lover... eventually... your husband.”

He fell silent, just as she had been over the last few minutes, feeling his heart hammer harder in his chest each minute that passed and she remained that way.

But judging by her expression, she hadn’t expected this revelation, at all. She had a lot to process, so he gave her that time.

Her career, what she’d worked for, was in jeopardy. He wasn’t what she dreamed of, he was sure, when she thought of her future lover or dare he say it, husband. She was younger than he. She might be thinking of having a family one day, could he provide her with that.

Her very way of life could turn upside down, just because of any decision cast this night.

And he knew it.

And after Tom, would she want to get involved permanently with... another criminal. And one as notorious as Red Reddington.

Fuck...

He hadn’t quite taken that into consideration, because he knew why he was in this predicament.

She didn’t.

To have an affair with him was one thing. They could keep it low key.

But what he wanted. Commitment.

She’d have to take a huge leap of faith to get involved with him. And that was a fate, he wouldn’t wish on anyone.
“Okay...” she inclined her head almost regally.

Red raised his eyes, locking on to hers. “Okay... what?” he was totally lost after such a long break.

“I would like to work towards the same goals.” Liz confirmed her feelings on the matter.

God... his fingers curved tightly into the steering wheel, his knuckles white from the exertion.

*She had actually fucking said it.*

“If you’re still offering?” she looked uncertain for a moment, wondering if he had second thoughts. She had been quiet for so long, maybe he had...

“Most assuredly.” he confirmed. “Are you certain Elizabeth?” he questioned her rationale. “I know you must have some reservations.”

“If you’re referring to my work or Tom.” she hesitated, sensing, “I’m not going to explain this very well without it sounding—”

“Just say it, Elizabeth. I’ll follow along well enough.” he hastened her words.

“First and foremost,” she began, “I know Tom was probably one of the first things you had come to mind. That I wouldn’t want to get involved with you because of him.”

“Yes,” he admitted as much.

“Big difference between you two.” she had come to realize. “I know that even if you don’t think I do.”

“As for work,” she twisted her mouth slightly aggravated, “I’ll just tell everyone to mind their own damned business.” she said quietly. “How about what I want? And that is, quite frankly... you.”

She placed her finger to his lips to halt his intended rebuttal. “A career is a wonderful thing, but it doesn’t keep me warm at night, it doesn’t hold me, kiss me or make love to me.” she whispered.

“But you can...”

“Yes Elizabeth, I can.” he replied just as quietly.

“Then give me those things.” she leaned towards him provocatively. “A career lasts a short while, but what you’re offering...” she brushed her lips against his, “can last a lifetime.”

Red cupped her face, finally seeing the truth in her eyes.

Elizabeth wanted this, just as much as he did.

He softly kissed her, letting what she just said, settle in his mind.

He pulled back, staring at the beautiful blues eyes, then nodded minutely, his decision cast.

Running his hand along the small curve of her ass, he reached around her, starting the car.

The woman frowned critically as the man helped her slide back over into her seat, “Where are we going?” she was more than vexed. Silas had promised this would work.

Red backed out of their makeshift parking space, heading for their original destination.
“Somewhere private.” he stated, reaching over, taking her hand.

Chapter End Notes

Beta convinced me to go ahead and post, since it's a pretty long chapter. She'll be finishing off ch 65 while I'm in surgery. She's printed it off to make corrections and will type it when we get back. We hope we can get it all finished by Thursday/Friday.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, why orange roses?

They not only signify the beginning of a new journey these two are embarking upon.

They also signify Red’s desire and passion for Elizabeth.
At Last...

Chapter Notes

I actually had the working title listed as 'Lets Get It On' and even listened to the song (Marvin Gaye) quite a bit as we wrote this.

But I thought, 'At Last', was so fitting a title.

Don't you think?

May 4

Red Reddington’s thumb cupped Elizabeth Keen’s knee in an agonizingly slow caress, his fingers ever so gently soothing a searing path over the already sensitive skin.

He kept his eyes on the road they traveled, easing the expensive vehicle along the ever darkening lane.

At one stage, the flimsy material of her dress was eased high up Liz’s thigh by warm, confident strokes of the man’s questing exploration.

Elizabeth fought her instinct but felt her legs part involuntarily in response to the touch of those probing fingers.

Red skimmed the silky nylons, finally finding rich, heated flesh just above the thigh-high scalloped lace border.

He rested his hand on the toned area, allowing his fingers to lay quietly for a goodly spell, already feeling the heat emanating from the scented valley he so longed to approach.

They rounded a bend, white cottonwood trees filled with blooms, shown by the powerful beams of the headlights, loomed just ahead.

Elizabeth clutched the door handle for dear life as those thick digits lightly caressed the inside of her leg, refusing to move one inch to the right or left. They stayed stationary, perfectly still.

Red deliberately baited the woman, refusing any further advances, hoping it might increase the pleasure of the moment for her.

He knew the denial was making him climb the fucking walls. His dick already swollen and aching, truth told, for what he knew awaited him.

He withdrew his touch completely, fighting the urge to simply pull the car over under the fast approaching spreading oak tree which graced the lane on which they traveled, and...fuck the woman raw.

Elizabeth had literally gasped at the totally unexpected move on the man’s part, the cold air hitting the steamy alcove with his abrupt withdrawal, feeling like a dash of cold water in her face.
Red slid the car to a halt, making his way out and around the latter, his hands grasping Liz’s in a no nonsense grip as he tugged her up and out of the low seat. He forced her back to the front of the auto, his lips having descended with ferocious intensity.

Disoriented, the young woman tried to find her bearings, pushing the intoxicating scent of his cologne aside as best she could with him so intimately pressed against her.

“Allone...” The sensual tone cascaded over her senses. His breath, which held a hint of the sweet wine of which they had partaken earlier in the evening, wafted across her cheek as he nuzzled her lovingly. “...At last.”

*Tease him!*

Red upped his game, spreading both arms out, enclosing the slight body on either side as he leaned on the still warm hood, easing even closer to his prey.

Liz eased back, finding support, the slick paint of the car something familiar under her finger tips, finally.

She seized the opportunity, gathering her wits enough to place a gentle palm against his strategic maneuvers.

Red’s mouth caught her lips, parting the full pout with practiced expertise, entirely ignoring her feeble attempt to waylay his intentions.

Elizabeth fought back determinedly, breaking the impassioned kiss, replacing it with a more sedate series of gentle, probing ones, which traveled his cheek and jaw line until she was able to nuzzle his ear enticingly.

Her soft breath heightened Red’s awareness of the woman. Every inch of his skin suddenly burning with unadulterated need for her.

He threaded his fingers through her hair, bunching his fist in the silken mass, tugging at the dark strands.

Liz’s sharp inhalation of breath for the slightly rough handling, delighted Red. A sudden wave of shivers coursed down the woman’s spine.

Red’s lips ran over the fragrant skin, just grazing the delicate line of her throat. He caught the lobe of her ear, having pushed aside the sparkling diamond earring she wore, his teeth nipping provocatively.

The man’s tongue flicked the curve at the base of her neck, as he suckled, marking her pale skin. The pink muscle flicked out with warm healing to soothe the already darkening spot of undeniable affection.

Liz’s body tried to assimilate the intensity displayed.

Her nipples tightened painfully when Red repeated his assault on the other side of her throat. He could feel the tiny imprints through the soft cotton of his shirt.

Liz hid her flushed cheeks, seeking the sanctuary of the man’s neck, breathing in the alluring scent, a heady mix of crisp cologne and fresh, clean male.

The man’s response to her was more than interesting. Red’s breathing had heighted considerably,
his touch not so gentle any longer but boldly inventive as it moved over the plains and curves of her body.

Searching for her mouth yet again, the man met further resistance.

Which he found, he damn well liked.

Her hazy eyes stared back at him, the lust in them heavy. Her tongue flicked against her dark ruby lips, leaving them shimmering softly in the dim moonlight.

“Are your lips...down there...” He motioned minutely, his gaze holding hers masterfully, “as fucking beautiful as these?” His finger traced the top curve of the luscious mouth possessively.

His tone was raw and edgy.

Liz titled her head slightly, the tip of her tongue flicking the end of the thick appendage, the blue eyes softening for the man.

Red’s gaze fell instantly, filling with unbridled lust for her efforts on his behalf.

“You’ve seen them.” She reminded boldly.

“Only in fucking shadows!” He growled, a situation he planned to rectify, lifting off her abruptly.

Elizabeth was stunned by the move, but followed docilely, finding herself seconds later, deposited firmly back in her seat as Red sped down the lane which abruptly ended around a gentle curve in the road.

A sprawling one story home lay before them, spread out over a gentle rolling acreage. The woman was still reeling from the interrupted episode of before, not really taking in any of her surroundings at present.

Red slammed the car door hard, his frustration taken out on the object. “My purse.” she hastily grabbed the bag before being literally dragged from the car.

He led her up the dimly lit pathway to the porch. The sensor on the lights activated, as they approached. Red released her hand long enough to unlock the door.

Liz glanced around the darkened landscape nervously, rubbing her bare arms, not so much out of the chill of the night, as expectation of what was to come.

Red closed the door behind him, throwing the lock with a finality. He set the alarm, then pulled his phone free, powering it down.

Her mouth fell agape slightly as she watched him fling the phone to the table. She stared at the object as if it were an alien thing, the wide eyes transferred to the man in much the same fashion.

She lifted her gaze to his face which transmitted his intentions clearly. She instantly knew what was going to happen, without doubt, feeling her body respond accordingly. Her nipples hardened in anticipation.

Red stepped the few feet separating them, his hands reaching out. He pushed her into a convenient wall, allowing her to feel his ardor. The man’s large hand pulled up on her dress, palming her bottom as he dragged her against him, kissing her zealously.
Oh, so this is what Silas meant... Red had never acted like this with her before. She was enjoying the hell out of the man’s mood.

Liz tried to remember all the large guard had said but her mind was completely preoccupied by other matters suddenly.

Red’s hand slipped down the back of her panties, the touch electrifying. Liz’s hand swiftly reached behind her, but Red shook off her minimal efforts as he slid over the creamy flesh in a rather territorial fashion, the light eyes mellow and focused on the pretty face.

“Don’t think I don’t know what’s going on here, Elizabeth.” His tone, while almost conversational except for the definite edge behind it’s velvet timbre, lulled Liz into a sense of false security.

“Well, I should hope you do.” She strived to be as sophisticated and stylish as he but his palm was burning an imprint on her ass cheek, one that caused her nerves to flutter incandescently. “You’ve done it enough times, right?”

“Someone...” He ignored her completely, continuing his interrupted thought pattern, “has advised you on how to react when with me on this auspicious occasion, which is in a manner totally alien to your normal mode of behavior... I think we can both agree to that, yes?”

“Can we?” Liz moved her hand, her fingers inching over enticingly, one tapered nail ‘auspiciously’ running the left ridge of his hardened erection.

Red’s body jerked visibly, his breath sharply exhaled at the woman’s antics, his cock pulsating longingly even as it elongated once again to it’s furthest abilities.

“I’m just...” The woman innocently felt the evidence of his arousal, warming to her task, “trying to please you.” The slender shoulders shrugged any concern away, as she flattened her palm over the entire length of the man. Which was impressive in itself, but his girth intrigued her completely. It sparked her imagination to wild flights of fantasy.

So much so, she found the courage needed to wiggle out of her present situation, away from the man’s damnable influence and his skillful hands.

Liz flattened her palms on the front of the dark, expensive slacks as she gracefully slid... downward.

Red quickly put an abrupt halt to any further shenanigans, realizing her intent.

But he was too late.

Elizabeth’s mouth covered the straining front of his attire. The warm moisture of those sweet lips, her hot breath, infiltrated the fabric, surrounding his penis in a loving embrace.

Red’s fingers tightened almost painfully on Liz’s upper arms, an inarticulate sound escaping his throat.

He closed his eyes as a wave of sheer ecstasy washed through his body but the man fought the delirium descending, his mind setting rigidly.

“Like fucking hell!” He lifted the slight body effortlessly, straining his shoulder wound in the process, all of which he dismissed as an afterthought. He had more important matters to which he must attend.

“I need my prospective.” She was summarily informed. “So unless you want me to come in that
sweet little mouth after the first ‘blow,’” He pulled no punches in his attempt to convey the urgency of the matter before them, “you’ll settle the hell down and allow me to get this thing right for a change.”

“What about me?” She had to question, not liking his tone one bit, never having heard it directed toward herself before. “You’re always getting it ‘right’...I would like a chance...”

The blue eyes held just the correct amount of petulant annoyance, twisting him inside out, truth told. There was no damned way she would ever know the effect she was having on him if he had anything to say in the matter, however.

This was not going the way Red had envisioned. He would have to alter his mode of communication.

“You ever use...devices, Elizabeth?” Red could out maneuver anyone on the Planet. If he couldn’t divert this little she-demon, he wasn’t worth the reputation awarded him.

The languid eyes lifted to his expectant inquiry.

Liz didn’t know exactly where the man was going with that one but she did realize she was in some sort of negotiations. For a moment, she felt out of her depth but she wasn’t about to back down before this man.

“...Like..IPods?” She purposely misunderstood, thoroughly enjoying the ‘give and take’ of this session even though she sensed she might be out of her depth.

“No.” The man was not fooled in the least. She wanted to play ‘hard ball’? He could do that.

He still held her arms even though his hands had lessened their hold a bit. Which forced her into a ‘face to face’ confrontation.

“Devices, as in...vibrators, sexual toys.” His eyes deepened considerably at the turn of the conversation. “You know, the ones that issue forth that lovely warm cream if you push the right buttons.”

Liz determined not to react to the lovely images he conjured, keeping her facial expressions unreadable, much as Red often did.

“I have...indulged on occasion, I suppose.” She lifted innocent brows. “Is there a reason you...”

“Oh, I know you...indulge.” The sensual undertone and his knowing look was almost her undoing. “I’ve seen the objects in your overnight bag.”

“You...wh...”

He failed to mention, the invasion of privacy had been entirely innocent on his part. He had been in the closet one day searching for something she required and happen to glance down at the opened bag. The objects were clearly visible care anyone glance, which he had.

“Not to mention the night you got off directly before I called you on my way back from Italy.”

She flushed slightly. “...What if I did?” She fought back. “I’m a grown woman!”

His eyes raked her almost insolently. “You most certainly are that.” He could not allow himself to concentrate on that right now, however.
“The point being,” he continued, unfazed by her supposed indignation, “I took the liberty of purchasing a select few,” He jerked his head to indicate. “They are awaiting your pleasure in the night stand by the bed.”

Liz glanced through the darkened rooms, the light from the French doors illuminating the area enough that she could see the opened doorway of the room he had indicated.

A large four-poster bed with a comfortable looking top cover which appeared invitingly soft, welcomed any would-be visitor.

She could even see the mahogany night stand to the left of the gigantic structure.

“Did you think you would need the assistance?” The woman countered easily this time.

Red blinked, not shocked, but certainly...*something* by the retort. “The point I am trying to mak...” He suddenly found himself on the defensive.

Red’s tone caught her attention. “Don’t use that patient tone with me.” She advised.

“Elizabeth, if you will only stop and react to me as you truly wish to do,” he tried reason. “No matter what Silas told you,” he ran his hands gently down her arms. “And, no... he didn’t steer you wrong. I do enjoy a challenge, I do... truly but..”

He sought the correct way to phrase it. “But, you were already a challenge. You didn’t have to alter one thing about yourself.” He smiled down at her. “You had me at ‘It’s my first day... nothing special about me.” He remembered verbatim.

Elizabeth’s memory was suitably jogged. She remained silent, uncertain what feelings he was evoking or what ones he wished to.

“Silas aside..” Liz painted her point of view. “I don’t see anything wrong with what happened between us tonight.”

“I never said anything was wrong.” He shook his head stoutly in denial of her words.

“Well, what are you saying?” She asked plaintively. “I did react as I wanted to for once, truly... wanted to.” She spread her hands. “I have needs that I would like to think, I can fulfill with you.” she sighed morosely. “Red, I know you may have had expectations, how you wanted this thing to unfold, but it doesn’t have to be perfect, just as long as it happens.”

“I wanted this night to be between just you and me and I didn’t...” He faltered slightly, “I didn’t want Francis or Silas or ...anyone to interfere with the natural connection we might establish.” He had stated it incorrectly, trying again. “I wasn’t sure if you were doing what came naturally or maybe Silas’ influence...”

“That was me.” He was assured, the blue eyes boring into his, a truthfulness contained within. “I thought about what Silas had said and it gave me the strength to... actually do some of the things...” She hesitated and then wondered why she was, forging ahead. “I fantasize about.”

“You fantasize about me?” He was shocked by the revelation.

“I’m probably just one in a major league of a lot of other women, but yes.”

“I don’t know of any such group, but if they exist, I, personally am invested in only one.” His look told her just who was on top of that list.
Elizabeth lowered her eyes, feeling suddenly elated.

“Baby, what are we fighting about?” He asked wearily.

Liz took heart that he was using her favorite endearment once again. He had said it so offhandedly that it seemed natural coming from his lips.

“I have wanted you so badly now for what seems an eternity...we have the time to ourselves... we have the whole fucking night.” He shook his head at the absurdity of it all. “You turn me on just by ‘being’.”

Liz lifted watery eyes.

“You are the most desirable, sexy...funny,” he smiled finally, “amazing woman I have ever encountered.”

“I hate you when you make me cry.” She sniffed slightly, her arms opening as she rushed into his waiting ones.

Warm lips met and clung together, the tip of Red’s tongue easing past Liz’s unresisting one, the sensual dance beginning.

His hands searched every curve of the voluptuous form, eager in their exploration. He had planned a slow build-up, a strategically sound advancement worthy of any General down through the Ages, leading a note-worthy charge.

All those carefully conceived thoughts went out the window as he savored the feel of the woman in his arms. All warm and giving and loving.

She was denying him nothing. But he found himself wanting more and more. This was turning into one of the most erotic kisses he had ever participated in. Red’s stomach tightened pleasantly, his shaft plumping into hard rigidity of it’s own accord.

She mewed quietly, the hard shaft poking into her belly, an undeniable incentive for the woman to respond in kind.

Liz tip-toed, wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders, getting lost in the passionate kiss.

Nothing was moving fast enough for the man now. He broke the kiss but not the moment to utter, “What about, taking this..” he looked over his shoulder, “in there... but Elizabeth,” he added because he needed the assurance, “alone, right?” His eyes told her a wealth of things he could not verbalize at this moment. “Just you... and me.”

The woman didn’t give a shit where or how, but she wasn’t adverse to ‘comfort’ by any means.

She nodded slowly in reply. “...Whatever you want, Red.”

His mouth reconnected with her wanton lips, as they blindly stumbled down the darkened corridor. Will and sheer determination guided their journey and in seconds, they had finally arrived at their destination.

Red flicked the switch, bathing the room in a soft light then kicked at the door, his foot slamming it closed behind him. Elizabeth’s hot breath against his cheek fanned the ever growing need inside his groin. His breathing was already labored and shallow. He didn’t give a shit.
He reached behind him blindly for he had felt the edge of the bed hit his calf muscles, grabbing the coverlet, tossing it plus several throw pillows to the floor.

He lifted the woman in his arms, his shoulder burning like fire but it didn’t match the one in his mind.

Elizabeth gasped softly. “What the hell, Red.” She squirmed slightly, grimacing for the man. “You’ll open your..”

“Not now, baby.” He waylaid her fears. “Work with me here.”

She allowed him to lay her into the lush sheets, welcoming his weight when he pressed intimately down on her more slender form. He shoved the short dress out of his way, revealing the lace panties and the thigh-high stockings to his penetrating gaze.

He deliberately raked his straining zipper along her panty covered slit, producing a steamy release of wetness from her core. The woman tried to move from the incessant overload of sensations because the more his rigid erection stroked her the more it pushed her closer to orgasm.

Red slid a hand along her leg, lifting her knee against his side. He removed her shoe, tossing it carelessly as he felt her other leg wrap around his back. She grabbed the other, before she too, threw it aside.

Her tiny feet rubbed against his thighs. He kicked at his own shoes, allowing them to fall in a loud thud on the floor.

He ran his large palm along the zipper of her dress, grasping the warm metal in his fingers. The sound of the catch releasing, mingled with her moan, both combined in one long drawn out sound which made his cock stir.

His warm palm stroked her overly sensitized back inside the fabric of the dress, her lithe body withering under his endeavors. Grasping the shoulder of her dress, he slowly and gently revealed the lovely flesh to his view, the cool air teasing her warm skin as she was bared to him.

As he pulled her dress down to her waist, he arose, pulling his jacket off his broad shoulders, tossing it carelessly aside. It landed on the corner of the bed unnoticed. He rid himself of his tie, his eyes never having left the woman’s beautiful form. The shirt dropped from his fingers unto the floor.

Laying back down against her, Red couldn’t help but focus on how warm and cushioned her semi bared breasts felt against his chest. The full and taut peaks pushed against the soft hair found there.

His hands joined in her effort to push the skirt down the shapely legs. Liz kicked it off, leaving her in lacy lingerie and stockings only.

Red found the sight erotic as hell.

“You are so damned beautiful.”

Liz’s hands restlessly explored his body, her eyes taking in the stocky build. He had a defined chest, which was covered in a fine mist of blonde hair, somehow heightening his virility. She noticed the tattoos gracing his biceps. There was nothing more dangerous than a boy with charm.

The woman held her smile, the lyrics absolutely fitting the moment to her way of thinking.

He had situated himself between her legs and she felt open and vulnerable to him.
She could feel his eyes, a soft flush covering her entire form. She instinctively squirmed a bit trying to find neutral ground. In doing so, she inadvertently moved from his vicinity.

He gripped her hips quickly, dragging her back down, closer than she was before.

“You’re not going anywhere.” he rasped roughly, covering her once again with his body. He pushed her hard into his growing thickness.

She mewled softly as his mouth dominated her own unresisting one. The sound she emitted, echoed in the man’s mind like a beautiful aria he once heard sung by Montserrat Caballé.

He slid his hand down her body, his thumbs brushing the side of her breasts and feminine curves.

“Spread your legs for me.” he whispered silkily against her neck.

Her clit quivered for the masterful command and the woman instinctively tightened her knees against the indentation of his waist line to stave off the wondrous feelings he evoked inside her body.

“Let me see what’s under that little slip of cloth, Elizabeth.” he stated directly into her parted mouth, having misunderstood the action.

“Oh, you’re so masterful.” the woman pushed gently on his injured shoulder as the man winced away from her touch. She used the momentum to continue her attempt to arise.

Seconds later, she had positioned herself astride the man who had followed her lead instinctively, laying back into the mattress.

“Am I hurting you?” she asked breathlessly, looking down into those hypnotic eyes.

“You will tell me if–”

“Right now, I would give you the codes to the Ballistic Missiles in China if you asked...” he gasped, entranced on the rocking motion of her hips as they brushed against his palms which tightened systematically against the silky flesh.

He watched her movements for a moment, the flame in his eyes deepening. He reached, popping the catch on her bra. The full mounds strained against the now gaping fabric.

Elizabeth placed her hands just so, holding the heavy cups together, her look a seductive one.

“I would give quite a bit to see...” he motioned accordingly to the work of art before him, “I mean, if you are strapped for cash or–”

The witty retort turned to ashes in his mouth as Liz gripped the straps, slowly easing the lace down her arms, watching Red’s reaction as she bared herself to him.

One simple look, and her breasts swelled and tightened under his lascivious gaze.

She didn’t think she had ever felt this beautiful, this empowered before, in her entire life.

The man stared openly, completely captivated by her gorgeous breasts.
“My God,” his head shook minutely, the man unable to take his eyes off the woman. Nor could he prevent himself from touching the alabaster flesh. His hand reaching out, his fingers tracing the supple curve of one breast.

“You are like a Grecian Goddess.” He raised his head, nuzzling the full mound, his lips teasing the tight peak tentatively. He wrapped lips and tongue hungrily around the rosy tip of her breast.

The puckered flesh felt amazing under his tongue’s languid strokes. He suckled her and the woman pressed closer, filling his mouth with the succulent flesh. The sounds she was making... lustful, arousing, passionate sounds, enchanted the man.

He never thought he would be privileged to hear his name being said like that.

Lizzy liked her nipples suckled. Which was fantastic, because he loved them in his mouth. She tasted so sweet, smelled so fresh. Her skin was like silk under his roughened tongue.

He could stand the tension no longer, artfully dislodging the young woman, delegating her to a position he preferred for the moment.

Running a hand up her spine and palming her tiny ass, he rolled her beneath him.

He leaned, placing a small kiss directly over her belly button, his tongue flicking once into the tiny indentation. The man used the subterfuge to divert attention as his fingers caught the edge of the lacy strap of panties.

He eased the fabric down the shapely hips, slightly amused as the woman lifted to helpfully assist in their removal. He kissed a path down her legs, following the route taken until he flicked the offending clothing off her ankles.

Red’s eyes ran the length of the thigh high nylons meeting her naked thighs, his finger running beneath one lacy edge.

“These are amazingly sensual, but...” his eyes sought hers, “I want to feel you.”

Liz lifted her own hand, stroking his erection boldly through the cloth of his slacks. “And this is very... evocative,” she lifted a sensual stare, “but I want to feel... you.” she countered.

A slow smile spread across the man’s face. “You do, huh?” He was more than pleased, catching her thigh highs with deft fingers, pulling them agonizingly slow from her shapely legs. “Well, let’s see what we can do to honor my lady’s wishes.”

He reached between them, pulling at the leather of his belt, watching the woman as the latch clinked lightly to signify the completion of the act. Liz’s brow puckered, her breathing increasing at the sound... the implication of which, heightened her excitement and quite frankly, his.

This wasn’t playing out exactly how he planned it. There wasn’t romantic music, flowers or candle light.

But damn, they were both so ready.

He was so fucking hard he could drive nails with is cock. And she so wet, he could feel it through his slacks.

He needed to fuck her so badly.
To claim what was rightfully his.

Red ripped the belt from it’s loops, snarling harshly when he could not get the button on his pants undone quickly enough. For the first time in as long as he could remember, his fingers would not cooperate.

He finally released the damned thing, shoving at his pant waist, dropping them around his thighs simultaneously reaching into the night stand, fumbling in the drawer.

A growl worked it’s way out of his throat, as he hung his head in open dejection.

At the sound of pure frustration, Liz asked the proverbial question.

“What’s wrong?” she looked from the man to his dilemma.

“I’ve never brought anyone here...” he rasped the confession. “I didn’t bring anything.” he gritted through his teeth.

He had forgotten in his eagerness to get between her beautiful thighs... that he had never had female companionship in residence and hadn’t thought to stop by a store to gather supplies...

And now, it was biting him in the fucking ass!

She pushed at his chest, scrambling up.

“Son of a fucking bitch!” the man snarled angrily at his own fucking stupidity, hitting the mattress with his fist as hard as he could, falling face first into the pillow, growling his aggravation.

“I have some!” Liz turned over quickly, bending face down over the side of the bed, her pert bottom, raising in the air.

“What?” Red raised his head out of the pillow, finding that gorgeous ass waving around, showing him her assets in all her glory. “God damn...” The man’s mouth fell agape at the succulent sight. His nerve endings suddenly alive and straining.

“I brought some with me.” Liz leaned into her forearms, “Because I did want and expect... hoped this would happen.” She smiled happily back at him. “Honestly, Red. You bought sex toys, but not condoms.” she tsked playfully.

She snatched her purse off the floor, literally spilling the contents on the bed up by their pillows.

Red stared raptly at the couple dozen condoms laying scattered haphazardly on the sheets, and then to the totally nude woman who was carefully placing her purse on the opposite night stand, her back still turned.

“Lizzy, I fucking love you.”

She giggled at the proclamation, totally missing Red’s face as he realized what he’d just said... out loud.

The woman moaned as she felt the man lean in over her, brushing his chest against her back as his hand cupped her breast. She closed her eyes when his calloused fingers pulled at her nipple and his hardened length pressed into her backside.

He grunted shakily, his hand petting her soft skin, his fingers dancing between her ass cheeks teasingly.
She jerked at the contact, raising her bottom higher. His fingers touched her swollen lips.

He pushed at his boxers, his heavy erection springing free. He delicately brushed her ass cheeks with the heavy object, teasing her methodically.

Her breathing accelerated.

Red laid over her back, his one hand supporting them both, as the other enfolded her small waist. His muscled thigh moved her legs farther apart, spreading her slowly.

He allowed his erection to slide along her sodden folds. The soft damp muff raked across his cock, making the crown glisten with it’s own moisture.

His hand fell heavily to the bed, landing on hers. He gripped her fingers to steady himself.

He grasped his cock, rubbing the head several passes over the steamy little hole he so coveted.

“I have waited forever to give this to you.” his voice was low and deep, stirring the embers of desire relentlessly. He moved back ever so slightly and the woman felt the chill of his withdrawal and his movement off the bed, her mind screaming in denial.

“But I did not envision making love to you the first time without seeing every nuance on your lovely face...” his voice dropped even lower, “turn around and face me.”

Elizabeth slowly turned, her movements halting all together as she watched the man undress fully. She was enthralled by the slow deliberate movements he exhibited.

She reached out, her fingertips grazing the soft pelt of hair tapering off into his light pubic hair framing his heavy thickness.

The sight was arousing as hell.

Not only was he big. Larger than she was used to, in length and width. The impressive erection weighed down, instead of upwards towards his belly like the men she had been with.

She grasped his warm flesh in her tiny hand, and he pushed into the touch, groaning brokenly.

He was so hot, so hard. His soft skin, the rigidness of his flesh, felt so good. She shook with anticipation, wondering how that heavy weight would feel dragging in and out of her body.

But first, he had to spread her with that cock head that was shimmering with wetness. Red ran his thumb around the engorged crown, the sight making her thighs quiver. His thumb didn’t even begin to cover even half of throbbing bulb.

“Lay the fuck down...” he instructed tightly and at her compliance, his eyes raked her young ripe body possessively. “Show me what I want.”

Liz blushed slightly but was too turned on to play the part of the modest maiden at this point. She slowly complied, opening her legs for him, watching the man’s face religiously, finding him staring darkly down at her.

“Give me that fucking thing.” he pointed to the condoms laying scattered beside her.

She plucked one off the bed, eagerly handing it to him.

Red tore at the package, as she watched him expertly rolling it over his hard length. It molded to his
impressive size in seconds.

There was no awkward fumbling or hesitation on his part. She on the other hand, felt her anxiety ratchet up a notch or two.

“I need you so fucking badly.” His voice thrilled her no end as did his brooding stare. “Do you want to make love with me?” he asked tightly, needing to know without doubt, this was what she wanted. Because he was damn well craving it.

“How can you doubt that?” she was appalled.

She needed him to fuck her so badly. She was unable to control her erratic heart or still her chaotic brain.

He stepped once, his weight indenting the bed. She felt his warmth engulf her as his body blanketed her now cool flesh. Laying his erection along her folds, he pressed against her clit, stroking the throbbing flesh. The pleasurable torment was too much for her to assimilate.

Her stomach dipped pleasurably, the high more intense than any thrill she’d experienced before. Each jolt of adrenaline thrummed deliciously in her sex, leaving her feeling swollen and tingling in anticipation of his entrance.

His girth teased her, brushing her thighs. She reached, grasping the underside of her knee, spreading wider for his intrusion.

Red dropped his eyes, hypnotically entranced, as his shaft was embraced between her tight, slick folds. Though he couldn’t feel her as he wished, the sight of the condom, stretched tightly around his erection was enough to stimulate his psyche to new heights.

The visual itself, a reminder he was a breath away from being intimately coupled with Elizabeth Keen.

A connection he had often dreamed of building.

Leaning slightly, he took his cock in his hand, placing the sensitive head directly against the giving lips of the healthy pink pussy which beckoned him forward. He pushed gently, breaching the incredibly tight opening. Her body caught the large bulb, grasping the tip in her heat.

The man issued a heartfelt groan of appreciation, popping the large crown a bit further, sinking another inch into the molten depths.

He dropped his mouth to her breast, suckling her taut nipple as she felt him slowly penetrating her.

She gasped, her eyes closing in ecstasy, as she cried out piteously. The man stilled.

His eyes were full of concern as he studied her face.

“If you stop now, I will finish the job myself.” her expression did not bode well. She pointed meaningfully to the night stand full of the promised toys he had previously offered.

“I would pay to see that,” Red’s mouth quirked slightly. “but not tonight. I finish what I start.” he pushed slightly, the quivering tunnel pulling his senses into it’s succulent depths.

Red’s eyes fluttered shut, the sensation incredibly intense. Her body quivered around him, drawing on the rounded head, pleading for more. Which he more than gladly provided.
Liz’s fingers curled into his shoulders, exhaling shakily as she felt Red’s erection spreading her open. The exhilarating pressure grew the further he slid into her warmth, opening her slowly to his very welcomed invasion.

*Oh, God.*

They were really doing this.

They were actually making love.

She concentrated on the hardness, the ripples, the thickness of his cock head. She could feel him spreading her wide... taking possession of her and it felt... unbelievable.

Red released a shaky breath, slowly pushing against her as she grasped him tightly, wrapping her arms around his neck, kissing him feverishly the more he ventured forward.

“*Jesus...*” he groaned, watching his shaft sink deeper and deeper into her welcoming body.

He was going to savor every damned minute of this, he didn’t care how long it fucking took.

He could literally feel her body giving into his, allowing him to take control of her.

It was an overwhelming emotion. One that left him feeling powerful and possessive as shit.

Even wrapped in the thin sheath, the man had never felt anything so wonderful in his life.

He was going to mount her every fucking chance he could, knowing it was a feeling that would never fade.

“This feels phenomenal, baby.” Red praised the woman lavishly in a more than giving frame of mind.

Cupping her face with his hands, he brushed his thumbs against her cheeks, watching her expressions as he entered her body inch by inch, damned glad he had turned the lights on.

It was safe to say, Liz was enjoying this as much as he fucking was. He couldn’t recall the last time he had been with someone so wholly invested in the act they now preformed.

“God, baby. Open for me, please.” He pleaded as she opened her legs wider for him, “Yes...like that.” he moaned as his shaft slid further inside. “Oh, shit...” he cursed vehemently. “Shit...”

The further his mushroomed head spread her, the more she moaned her delight, releasing the sweetest sound he’d ever heard from a woman.

He had missed this, so fucking much.

“Does my cock feel good, baby?” he actually needed the confirmation in this instance.

“Y-Yes...” she moaned breathlessly, her body rippling around him as it tried to accommodate his girth. “*Oh, yes...*”

“Fuck... you’re so damned tight.” he growled his satisfaction, giving one last push into her body. He strained further, rubbing her clit with his pelvis, snarling as the cushioned walls of her pussy contracted spasmodically, squeezing him tightly in the wet heat in response to his tease.

The realization hit Red head on.
His cock was deep inside Lizzy. He was making love to Lizzy.

Liz tilted her hips, driving him deeper. She could not wait for the large organ to begin the ancient rhythms of lovemaking.

God, this was perfect. Better than she had ever imagined.

The connection between them was heated and growing in intensity. The way she was feeling, this interlude would be over long before either of them expected.

He cupped her face, dropping soft kisses against her lips, watching her face as he drew back slowly, dragging along her swollen clit. The woman’s blue eyes fluttered shut, her body trembling in his arms.

Liz’s face glowed with the ecstasy she was experiencing. Red’s heart rate increased along with the hardness of his erection.

“I like what I’m doing to you.” he cocked his head, watching the proceedings unfold.

Liz wrapped her legs around his back, hooking her feet together, rolling her hips towards him on his down stroke.

“Lizzy...” he gasped, tightening his ass cheeks, increasing the speed of his strokes. His thighs bumped against her silky ones.

Her soft moans and the steady rhythm of their flesh meeting filled the room. Red’s primal grunts equaled, if not surpassed Liz’s melodic sighs.

“D-Deeper.” she breathed the request tremulously.

He pressed his lips against hers, tonguing her mouth open, catching her whimpers of delight, feeling them vibrate along his tongue as he increased his depth.

“That feels so good...” he rasped the realization.

The small hands brazenly cupped Red’s ass, squeezing the tight muscle in time with his thrusts.

The woman’s touch silently encouraged him. Red wrapped an arm behind her knee, pulling it up beside his shoulder, as he dragged his pelvis across her clit repeatedly.

“Oh fuck...” her stomach knotted deliciously.

There was no longer any need for words.

As their arousal increased, the primitive sound of the wet slide of Red’s thick hard shaft filled the woman’s ears. Liz’s impatience grew, as she felt her need increase.

The man changed his angle slightly, bring her closer to the edge of completion.

He dropped his mouth against the swollen peak, suckling her feverishly. In response, she cupped his head, stroking him lovingly, holding him to his excruciatingly pleasurable past time.

He reached out, grasping her hand, threading his fingers with hers. His mouth became an extension of his own. Sharp spikes of gratification shot through his body. He was thoroughly enjoying the woman’s feeble cries of surrender.
“F-Faster.” she begged, her kiss deepening, the pouty mouth drawing him into a world of sensual delights. “F-Fuck... me.”

“Is that what my baby needs?” he crooned softly against her lips. “Because that sure is hell what I want.”

Elizabeth fought for breath, the emotional onslaught the man caused wrecking havoc with her equilibrium.

Tightening his fingers with the more slender ones, he cupped her ass with his free hand, drawing her up into his quickened thrusts, feeling his own orgasm nearing. Her long drawn out breathy moan shivered along the man’s nerve endings, rippling into the very tip of his cock.

*Damn...* he loved that sound.

Her cries of passion were escalating with each passing second.

Her thighs trembled violently as she worked hard for her release. Soft sounds of distress escaped her throat. He reacted involuntarily to the feminine whimpers, wanting desperately to give her the relief she craved.

“Fuck, baby... he panted shakily, “fucking come, baby.”

Her fingers curled tightly around his, as she tensed, her pussy fluttering wildly.

“Oh...God!” Liz’s body arched with the intensity of her release. Even through the condom, he felt a hot splash of wet warmth encompassing his cock before he pushed it out with a powerful thrust, the thick cream wetting his thighs.

“Holy shit...” he snarled gruffly, enthralled completely by the sight of the beautiful body surrendering itself to the powerful rapture of her orgasm.

“That feels so fucking good.” he gritted as his shaft was massaged by the gratifying waves of her climax. “Don’t stop, baby.”

He sat back on his haunches, grasping her hips as he went. Whipping his pelvis quickly, driving his drenched shaft into her willing body, furthering her along. He watched the gentle bounce of her breasts, the sight pushing him over the top.

Liz gripped the headboard frantically, bouncing hard and fast off his driving thrusts.

“Fuck baby,” his voice shook unsteadily, a raspy hoarse declaration escaped his lips... “I’m coming.”

Working on instinct the man dropped his fingers against her clit, massaging the peak of her sex with determined strokes.

Liz’s ragged breaths melded with his own. It took only seconds until the woman was once again on the same level of sexual intensity as her lover. Her moans allowing the man to surrender to his baser needs.

He dropped his head back, totally immersed in the turbulent euphoria which staggered his mind, shattering his usual self confident composure.

“Fuck...” a throaty growl issued from his parched throat. His cum exploded into the condom, filling
the latex quickly, the friction of his thrusts eased slightly by the hot cream.

He slowed the rhythm, coming down unhurriedly from the incredible high on which he had just been.

Red leaned over Elizabeth, his mouth devouring hers lazily. He felt her arms come about his neckline, as she weakly returned his affection.

His finished the kiss to his satisfaction, searching out those baby blue eyes with their dusky dark lids. He leaned back slightly, cocking his head to one side, holding the mellow stare.

His lips parted in a soft grin, which widened into a throaty chuckle. “Look what we just did...”

The lovely full lips pulled into a reluctant but indulgent smile for his mood. He returned to her embrace, neither wanting to break the spell as yet.

They cuddled close. Red closed his eyes, savoring the contact. Liz nuzzled the crook of his neck, reveling in the masculinity encompassing her protectively.

Minutes passed, and finally the man felt his erection wane. He shifted slowly, only to be stopped by the pressure of her thighs holding him stationary.

“No...” she muttered, cuddling closer to him.

“Houston...” he kissed her lovingly, “we have a problem.” he smiled warmly at his own wit, knowing she would not understand at the moment.

She frowned, tightening her legs around him, wiggling closer still. “Stay...”

He smiled affectionately, his mouth grazing hers seductively, as he reached between their still intertwined bodies. In doing so, the back of his hand inadvertently brushed against her clit. The woman clenched involuntarily, moaning softly.

“Lizzy, don’t fucking move.” he quickly ran his finger along his shaft, touching the top of the condom. He pushed up to his elbow, unable to accomplish the task he needed.

“Son of a bitch.” he grunted as he slid free of her quickly.

“What’s wrong.” she lifted to her elbows as well, his tone alerting her.

“The condom slipped.” he replied without hesitation, spreading her legs wider, gently slipping his fingers inside her vagina.

She felt Red’s thick fingers delving deep inside, closing her eyes to the sensation. It felt so good.

“Baby, you have to relax.” he urged, his hand pushing further into her wet flesh.

“Can you get it?” she asked breathlessly, inhaling sharply as his knuckles brushed her swollen lips.

“Yes.” he replied, pulling the object free. “Not that it does any good.” he grimaced, holding up the spent condom.

The woman stared at the deflated condom, her mind stagnating.

“Lizzy, I’m clean.” Red stressed quickly.
“Huh?” she shifted her gaze to the troubled one.

“I’m tested monthly.” he explained. “You looked...”

“I wasn’t... I’m not worried.” she replied quickly. “But thank you for telling me.”

“When’s your period, baby?” he asked, suddenly drawing a blank on what day it was.

“Oh...” she glanced about aimlessly, “in a couple days, isn’t it?”

“There is no way in hell I could do math at this moment.” He confessed. “Let alone remember what day it is.”

She chuckled quietly at his honesty, then giggled. “You don’t want me to have your baby?” It was her turn to quip. “The song assured me you did.”

The man fell silent instantly. Liz sought him out, hoping she had said nothing to offend or transgress his feelings.

“I think the better question is,” his eyes bore into hers as the man leaned in close, his face hovering very near, “do you want to have my baby?”

She knew that was a loaded question. He was asking, if she’d had any further thoughts on exactly how far their relationship might progress. Would they get to a moment when having a child seemed a natural progression to make, as a couple.

She was shocked to realize, just how exciting such a thought was.

But more importantly, right now, he was asking... if she had any regrets.

She reached a tentative hand out, threading her fingers through his chest hair. “I’m not opposed to the idea...” she replied evenly, her eyes his earnestly, “if you aren’t.”

His eyes were carefully guarded.

He was older. He had already had a child. Maybe he wasn’t interested in such things any longer?

But he answered her questions in the next breath by capturing her lips in a passionately searing kiss.

“I’m happy to hear that it’s open for discussion.” he replied, his voice thick with emotion.

Just for a split second, Liz wondered what it would be like to be with the man protection free. To feel that hard, hot shaft moving freely inside her. She flushed slightly.

The man chuckled lowly. “What’s that for.” he teased.

She smiled, shaking her head. “You don’t have to know everything, Red Reddington.” she scolded.

He nodded agreeably, shifting more comfortably against her. “Well, I do know one thing,” he advised readily, his eyes dropping to the bare breasts, “laying here next to you,” his gaze traveled the naked form appreciatively, “my rocket boosters have reactivated.” he lifted a somber gaze. “So if you are agreeable, we can resume docking procedures anytime in the near future.”

She giggled retroactively, her mood suddenly high. “I can’t believe that turned me on.” the man chuckled his amusement into her neckline, nuzzling the soft skin.
Liz moved her body, her abdomen melding to his. She felt the gush of his fluid wet her thighs. It eased out of her opening, enthralling the woman.

Red Reddington’s cream was inside her. She wondered if any other woman besides his wife could claim such an achievement.

Red shifted artfully, his arms about the small waist. Liz squealed, not having expected the move, finding herself soundly deposited across the muscular thighs.

She looked down to Red’s smug features, the man’s eyes dancing devilishly.

“I thought, on this outing...” he held his smile with difficulty, “you could do most of the work.” his gaze heated as he raked her lovely breasts, his hands cupping the heavy mounds experimentally. “I’m easy, so it shouldn’t be too difficult a task.”

The woman’s eyes rested on his already engorged penis, her interest already caught and held.

“And if I don’t want to?” she flirted openly.

“Humor me.” his finger lightly traced the outline of her clit. The confident stare took her breath away.

“Do you always get your way?” she was curious.

“I don’t know,” his thumb joined his fingers in their sensual dance over her overly sensitive flesh, “do I?”

Out of nowhere, he produced a condom. He waited patiently for her decision.

Liz rolled her eyes, reaching for the protection, then leaned over, her lips parting his smirking ones seductively. The man gave himself up to the churning emotions she could evoke.

Red had a sinking feeling he had won the battle, true... but he just might just lose the fucking war.

The feeling became more prevalent as he watched Liz slowly unroll the condom over his turgid dick.
I would like to thank you all for your patience and understanding, and most importantly, your personal messages to me during my recovery from surgery.

The kind words, well wishes and hopes for a speedy recovery really meant more to me than I can express!

Beta and I feel terrible that we haven’t been able to get as many chapters up as we had wished during TBL hiatus, but with things calming down now, I can only hope that Beta and I get back on track and start pumping out the chapters as we did before.

Thank you again for being such a wonderful support team. You truly made this easier to get through.

Daniel

May 5

Red awakened, finding himself wrapped around Elizabeth’s naked form, her breast cradled warmly in his hand.

Tightening his embrace, he pulled the woman closer, smiling softly as he recalled the previous evenings activities.

Her soft perfume filled his head with visions that stirred his nether regions. He could not believe how erotic the woman had behaved in their lovemaking session.

He had allowed her to take the reigns at one point, laying back, watching raptly as she used him for her own gratification.

His thumb lazily eased over the coarse nipple he fondled, remembering the supple breasts as they had bounced against his hands. They had felt so full and heavy, a very sensual experience indeed.

It had been a hell of a show.

He hadn’t left the cradle of her thighs until they finally reached the point of exhaustion. Not that he had wanted to, even then.

She was addictive as hell. The whole evening had been raw, sultry and a release of pent up desire. The culmination of weeks of foreplay reaching its maximum peak, leaving them both sweaty, breathless and spent.

Laying in her arms afterwards, the anticipation of taking her again, making her come, made his dick fill fast and hard.

She was so damned beautiful to him. Her skin so soft, her breasts so full and voluptuous and that treasure between her legs was not only captivating...
But in his opinion, *his* territory now.

He may have not marked her in his preferred method, but that time would come. He could afford to be patient now.

After each session of lovemaking, one would think he would have his fill. But then she would move a certain way, or a certain part of her anatomy would touch his, and the cycle would begin again.

She had told him at one point, she could feel how hot he felt inside her.

Usually Red was not a silent lover, quick to praise or encourage at the slightest provocation. With Elizabeth, he often found himself at a loss for the proper words to describe the emotions she could stir inside him.

The man hoped he made his feelings manifest in his actions.

He wasn’t ready to share her with the rest of the world as yet, that much he could verbalize. He hoped when he did, she would feel the same.

Red moved slightly, gaining a better perspective. He watched Elizabeth sleep.

He vowed he would allow her to rest, but the sight of her partially naked form, for the covers had fallen slightly askew... waylaid all his good intentions.

His hand slid down her tummy, his fingers playing over the soft tuft of pubic hair he so loved to play in.

The woman stirred, turning toward him, her legs parting slightly. Red took the opportunity presented. He rubbed her little clit, gently awakening her passion. Elizabeth arched like a graceful feline, a secretive smile playing about that pouty mouth.

Her hand covered his, encouraging his ministrations.

“Best date ever...” she whispered roughly, the blue eyes opening sleepily, her body suddenly attuned to the man’s every demand.

She didn’t think anyone had ever awakened her in such a manner before. In this instance, she hadn’t minded the wake up call one bit. This was much more pleasant than her asshole ex-husband’s method of throwing open the curtains and letting the dog run all over her.

Red chuckled, dropping a kiss to her neck before grudgingly removing his hand from it’s exquisitely warm nest.

“Where are you going?” she pouted, noticing the man’s very impressive erection, as he rolled out of bed.

“Nature calls.” Red replied honestly, walking around the corner of the bed, only to stop in his tracks. She lay there, partially covered, looking exactly like an Edgar Degas painting.

She was wet, sated and naked.

In his bed.

It was all he could do, not to retrace his steps, to follow his instincts and spend the next few hours hopelessly lost in the passion she could arouse.
The truth of the matter was however, while he knew what he wanted this morning, women often had different notions after a night of heated lovemaking.

Red knew, it was best to follow her lead in such a case. It did not help the throb in his cock, granted. But in the long run, perhaps his decision would net better results.

He determined to do his business and get about the activities of the day.

The man did not plan however, that Elizabeth would pad into the bathroom, stark naked and begin going about her usual routine... sans clothing.

He shaved absently as he watched the woman’s every move. Her breasts were absolutely breathtaking and that cute little ass drew his attention as none before.

She brushed her hair, the long fluff falling in cascades around her shoulders. The movement was almost hypnotic, the dark strands catching the light just so.

Before he knew it, Red had stepped behind the woman, his hands engulfing the slender hips. The blue eyes met his in the mirror, instant communication passing between them.

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He watched the woman hungrily attacking the plate before her. “Did we work up an appetite last night?” he teased gently.

“Well, I had to do most of the work.” she lifted playful eyes.

“I can take constructive criticism.” he shrugged, enjoying the turn of the conversation.

“I can’t.” she didn’t think she could at least, at this point. “So change the subject.”

“Just let me state for the record,” he topped off their coffee, sitting back, “I have absolutely no complaints.”

Liz felt infinitely better, reaching over taking a piece of bacon from his plate, then another.

He watched her devour the meat which was somehow oddly sensuous in nature suddenly.

“Baby, if you wanted protein...” he offered magnanimously.

“Still eating...” she ate the bacon with a relish, “and still my shirt.”

Red held his amusement, steering the conversation elsewhere... for the moment.

“What are you plans for the day, sweetheart?” Red asked buttering a fresh piece of toast.

“They finished with the last Blacklister you gave them, so I have a free day.” she carefully cut into the delectable omelet the man had prepared.

“I thought you had the files from the BAU coming?” Red sat back in his seat, stretching his legs out comfortably.

“Not for a day or so.” she shrugged. “They said they were prioritizing them.” she waved it off.

“What are you doing today?” she asked, sipping her orange juice, glancing around for his phone.

“Nothing...” he shrugged nonchalantly.

“Dembe hasn’t spoken to you yet?” she was a bit shocked.

“My phone is off.”

Was this his subtle way of telling her, he wanted to spend the day with her?

“Would you like to spend the day together...” he asked quietly, “alone.”

She felt a smile work it’s way across her face, “Whatever would we do?”

“Is there anything in particular you would like to do?” he asked. “We could hop on the jet and go to Italy or...”

“Nothing...” she interrupted happily.

“Excuse me?” Red wasn’t sure he had heard correctly.

“Let’s do nothing.” she pushed out from her seat, settling herself across his lap. “Am I hurting you?” she looked down to his injured thigh area, making to rise.

The man’s hands ran along the legs straddling him, more intent on the silky flesh than any supposed wound.
“No...” he muttered, “though I am starting to feel a slight ache in one my of my joints.” his eyes held hers steadily.

Liz felt the slight beginning bulge against her mound. “That’s not a joint.” she corrected coyly.

“We’ll discuss that in a moment. Please, continue.” he was interested to know her thoughts.

“Let’s lay around and snack, watch movies, read the paper...”

“I don’t have the paper...” his eyes twinkled.

“...Make love?” she questioned innocently.

“Are you a nymphomaniac?” Red questioned, pulling the straddled woman closer. “Even if it’s a lie, please tell me you are.”

Liz’s lips trembled with her open amusement. “Given the right incentive,” she brushed her lips against his, “I can be.”

“Promises, promises.” he muttered slightly disgruntled, then continued. “While I find no reason to disagree with your day plan...” he began, “I should point out that we are running low on supplies.”

“Condoms?” she questioned instantly, much to Red’s amusement.

“A among other things, yes.” He cupped her small bottom in his hands, squeezing the bare flesh. “But we have more than enough for right now...”

He stood, taking his giggling passenger along with him as he made his way to his chosen destination.

Readjusting his hold on the firm little bottom, Red smiled indulgently for her mood.

Elizabeth tightened her arms about his neckline, her mouth parting his hungrily. The man stopped his steps, responding fully to her ever growing demands.

They had made it only as far as the formal dining room, when all his good intentions evaporated in a haze of rapacious requirement.

Laying her into the dark wood of the shining mahogany table which was the centerpiece of the large room, Red pushed at the decorative arrangement in his way. The ships lantern with it’s azure blue candle gracing the center of the glass lined object, crashed to the floor at the man’s rough handling.

“Red!” Liz protested vehemently for she had loved that display.

His mouth worked diligently, his teeth nipping her breasts through the fabric of the shirt she wore. “Don’t worry,” he nudged insistently into her vulnerable mound, his hand holding her thigh wide, “I got it at the Pottery Barn.”

Elizabeth laughed infectiously forgetting about the mess he had made in the next instant.

Red pushed his pants down, the material sliding down his well defined thighs. He freed his erection from it’s confinement, instantly seeking out her wet warmth.

He fumbled for the foil packet which was housed in the pocket of his pants, which were unfortunately now, slid down to his calves.

He cursed his stupidity in every language he knew until his fingers latched onto the elusive item. He
sheathed his rampant erection, simultaneously flipping the buttons on her top.

Red slid Liz easily forward, having grasped her hips, the shirt aiding his efforts.

Like a homing beacon, his cock found that succulently drenched target of hers with little assistance from himself, sinking in one long continuous stroke, until he was deep inside her amazing little body.

“We are definitely going to have to make a store run...” Red panted, thrusting tirelessly into her receptive orifice.

“God, yes!” she agreed wholeheartedly, her hands restlessly fondling her breasts, running down the taut stomach occasionally to feel his hardness as it pounded against her swollen lips. Red’s coarse pubic hair felt so good scratching against the sensitive area.

The man’s hand joined her smaller fingers as he kneaded the plumpness of her mounds, his thumb and forefinger gently pinching the dusky rose nub.

He continued his rhythmic assault, his eyes pure flame as he watched Liz play with her own body.

He lifted his knee to the hard surface, pushing up onto the shiny tabletop, driving deep inside the quivering little hole. His hungry mouth latched onto the luscious peak, suckling vigorously.

Liz frantically searched for an opening, his shaft blocking any avenue. She needed desperately to touch the throbbing hood of her sex.

“No fucking way.” the man pushed her efforts aside. “That’s my job.” he stated gruffly, moving even closer, as he fixated on the area in question.

He pumped her faster and harder, flexing muscles he hadn’t used in a while. He would probably regret this later, but he sure as hell was not holding any regrets at the moment.

“This is so f-good.” she panted heavily. “I can’t believe this is so good!”

“Like I said,” he closed his eyes to the rising emotions cascading through out his mind and body, “that’s my job.” He lifted her perfect ass up into his thrust.

“Yes, shit...” she moaned sharply, raking her folds along Red’s erection, “don’t you dare stop.”

Liz clenched hard around the driving shaft. The man’s head dropped forward as he completely lost himself in his pastime.

“Why the hell would I.” he was dumbfounded. Stopping was the furthest thing from his mind.

“H-Harder...” she demanded vehemently.

Red stared down at the woman, his eyes taking in the visual beauty. He felt his own orgasm nearing having suddenly reached the point of no return.

Holding her legs wider for him, Liz lost all inhibitions, giving herself over completely to the overpowering sensations driving her body.

“Oh...oh...” she panted shakily, “oh God...” She arched off the table, her entire frame trembling from head to toe.

The raw unfettered sounds of her cries of release, drove the man crazy.
“Shit...” Red hissed his lost equilibrium, the show she performed for him captivating him as nothing before.

“Damn...” he groaned brokenly, pummeling into the bruised, volcanic depths until his entire body tensed in preparation for what was to come.

“Elizabeth...” he whispered hoarsely, feeling the first hot release of cum coat the crown of his shaft. He answered in kind, an animalistic grunt escaping his throat.

He rode the ebbing waves, as the lovely crest faded into oblivion.

Locking his arms on the solid wood of the table, he panted harshly above her. Lowering himself, he kissed her lovingly as they slowly came down from the passionate high to which they had ascended.

Red lay against her, snuggling the woman close. He took a moment, allowing his body to adapt to his present surroundings. He gently kissed her, feeling her body go lax, then shiver with contentment.

She settled back against the cool surface, her legs easing apart slightly.

He quickly grasped the woman’s hip, stilling her... but it was too late. “Son of a bitch!” he grumbled.

Lizzy pealed with laughter as he slid free of his entanglement. She helpfully opened her legs wider as he slid his fingers in deep searching for yet another lost condom.

“You know, if it just keeps slipping off,” she stated the obvious, grimacing slightly for the discomfort, “why keep wearing one?”

Red raised dark eyes, looking up from between her legs. “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear you say that.” he muttered moodily. He searched aimlessly for a good disposal spot for the used prophylactic.

“Why?” she asked quietly, unable to take her eyes off the man’s handsome face. He had hastily replaced his pajama bottoms, so that area of scenery was now off limits. But the woman never tired of looking at the myriad of emotions which could play across his features at any given moment.

“Because if I don’t,” he threw her an impassioned glance, “we’re not leaving this fucking house... ever.”

Red leaned into her, capturing her lips in a warm embrace, in the next second, playfully slapping her bare bottom as she slid from the table. “Go take a quick shower.”

She took a step only to feel Red’s hand grasp her wrist, pulling her back, flush with his frame. Her bared breasts pressed intimately into his chest.

Red gripped the back of the loose shirt, pulling it free from her body, leaving her gloriously naked.

Stepping back, he openly swept her womanly curves in the soft light of day, a smile working it’s way across his face.

“You are beautiful,” he stated, his eyes raking her body possessively, “so amazingly beautiful.”

The woman’s flesh flushed under his scrutiny, before her brow arched, a thought occurring to her. She crossed her arms beneath her breasts, lifting the plump mounds, unabashedly presenting them for his viewing pleasure.
“You took my shirt.” she lightly accused.

“I most certainly did.” he cocked his head, his gaze totally approving of her nudity.

The woman gave the matter up for loss, turning to flounce cheekily away.

Red watched that beautiful ass swish saucily past, chastising his wayward cock for reacting.

Eventually he followed to the bedroom, the sound of the shower kicking on, alerting him to her location.

He stood very still for a moment, indecision wracking his mind.

He had just made love with her. Why then, was he wanting to go into that bathroom and have another bout with her? Was he pushing too hard?

Red determined to allow the woman a moment’s privacy. He would set out his clothes for the day, wait patiently to use the shower and try very hard to ignore the fact that Liz evidently now felt very comfortable in her own skin.

He was a mature male well accustomed to the female form and all it’s infinite beauty. One hot little number running around naked in front of him was just one more challenge he would overcome.

“You know Red,” that sweet little voice raised over the hiss of the shower spray, “I think there’s something wrong with this shower head... could you come and take a look?” she asked innocently as she continued soaping her breasts.

Red’s head jerked around, his senses reeling. “Well, I’ll be damned...” he whispered his awe. He stepped towards the shower, then hesitated, grabbing a condom off the counter, just in case...

The billowy steam felt good on his now naked form, the only sheath of clothing he wore, now laying discarded on the floor behind him.

The spray hit his front as he stepped further into the large walk-in cubicle. His eyes watched the suds skirt down the plains of the woman’s back. He felt himself harden in response.

He looked down in shock at his stirring cock, slowly but surely raising to the demands of it’s owner.

“I’m too old for this shit...” he muttered his belief.

He stepped in behind Lizzy, letting her feel what he had to offer.

She giggled appreciatively stepping back to rub enticingly against the large shaft.

“Apparently not...” she turned, her arms lifting about his neckline. The blue eyes watched him in open anticipation.

Red glanced down to where their bodies melded. “What’s this about the shower head?” he played his part expertly. “You know, if you set it on ‘pulsate’, you might just get the desired effect.”

She pouted up at him. “Could you show me how that works?”

He took the wand from her unresisting fingers, sighing heavily. “Neophyte...” he disdained, pushing her gently up against the heated wall. “Assume the position.” He used his best Command Voice.

She brightened considerably. “Oh, I know how to do that.”
Red held his amusement, dialing the wand to the appropriate setting.
May 5

“They say the little black dress is good for any occasion,” Liz absently towel dried her hair, “but not really suited to a grocery store. What am I going to wear?” she frowned, glancing down at the oversized towel tucked between her breasts. “I suppose I could make a dress out of the drapes.” she lifted amused eyes.

“Well, Scarlett,” he motioned with his head, splashing a small amount of cologne to his face, “there are clothes in the closet, lambikins.” Red used his very best Southern accent.

Liz found herself enchanted by his abilities.

She went to the directed place, finding what he said to be true. Clothes lined one entire side of the closet and as she examined them, some dresses, jeans, t-shirts... which were all the correct size, she marveled at the man’s abilities.

Searching further produced drawers full of lingerie, stockings, socks, any and all paraphernalia any woman would ever need.

“What the....” she gaped, rummaging through the amazing assortment.

“In case of emergency.” Red stated, coming up behind her.

“Emergency?”

He shrugged nonchalantly, crossing to his own side of the closet. “It’s bad enough leaving on a whim, but not to have anything with you when you go...” he sighed, “it’s a terrible feeling. One I hope you never have to experience.” He glanced her way, continuing.

“I have a ‘go’ bag for you with some basic essentials to hold you until our next destination.” he blithely informed, choosing a light cream shirt with small blue striping.

“Knowing you, it will have everything but the kitchen sink.” she stood in the midst of the closet still reeling from all the choices afforded her.

“I had the kitchen sink,” he quipped, grabbing a matching pair of cream slacks, “but Francis needed it for his camping trip.”

Liz chuckled sensually, but to the man, everything the woman did these days held an undercurrent of sensuality.

“I have one in the car.” he jerked his head towards the front of the house replacing the tie he had automatically picked up. He threw the offending object back to the rack.

“A kitchen sink?” she half joked, because you just didn’t know with this man.

It was Red’s turn to chuckle. “No, but I have a dust buster.”

The woman looked at him oddly, but let it go.

On the way out the front door, Liz noticed, he picked up his phone, dropping it in his pocket. She also noticed, that he had not turned it on.
She wasn’t about to question her good fortune. She watched him disarm the alarm, following him out the door.

“Hey, ladies first.” she reminded him of his manners.

“Larger targets first.” he corrected, almost sternly.

“Oh well, in that case.” she motioned for him to proceed.

“Aren’t you going to turn it on?” she gestured to his unseen phone, the question having nagged her all this time.

“No...” he dismissed airily, not pretending to misunderstand.

She bounced down the stairs, a spring to her steps. Red matched his steps to hers, slipping his arm around her waist, his mouth tickling her neck.

“Hey, hey!” she pushed him slightly. “Get in front of me.” she chastised. “Target here!”

Red’s laugh was genuine and throaty. “What happened to the good old days when people like Bonnie and Clyde made a suicide pact?” he questioned the validity of the world in general, taking his place in front of the suddenly wary woman.

“I’m too young to die.” she could barely contain her glee, when the man pulled up short, casting her a malevolent glance over his shoulder. “Well... I am.” she batt ed her eyes coquettishly at him. “And admit it, you could never play the part of Romeo.” she once again, took a shot at the ‘age thing’ which she knew rankled him slightly. “While I, on the other hand,” she spread her arms out aimlessly, “would make a perfect Juliet.”

“Yes, you would.” He smiled pleasantly at her, leaning in the car, producing a small bottle from the glove compartment. “Here, drink this.”

Liz laughed musically, seeing the offering. “Where did you get that? You have your own private jet.”

“What’s your poison?” He motioned to the liquor she held aloft. Liz had taken the miniature sample, reading the label absently. “Lucrezia Borgia has nothing on you.” She had to admit. “Jack Daniel’s at ten in the morning could kill the stoutest of men, arguably.” It was shrugged.

The woman threw the bottle back into the glove compartment as she took her seat, waiting for Red to traverse the auto. He slid into the comfort awaiting, firing the sports car to life, a smile still lingering from their previous exchange.

“It’s in the trunk.” he muttered, changing the subject, his eyes on the road.

“The dead body?” she cast him a carefree look, nothing was going to spoil this day for her.

“Next to the dead body... your ‘go’ bag.” It was supplied. “So before you go spending my money, check it.”

“Francis was right.” she glanced at the beautiful scenery around them. “You are cheap.”

Red tried very hard not to smile, but in the end, he lost the battle.
As they drove into town, the man listened to the weather report. He continually glanced at the other occupant of the car who was relaxing in the warm morning sun. Lizzy’s hair blew carelessly in the wind from the rolled down car window, giving her a disheveled look which he found most becoming.

“Would you like to go out on the water today?” he asked, pulling the sleek car into a convenient parking spot.

“On a boat?” she pulled her thoughts from the quaint little town they had just passed through.

“Contrary to popular belief... I do not walk on water.” he smiled. “Yes, on a boat.” he chuckled.

“I haven’t been on a boat in years.” she beamed, nodding. “Yes, I would love that... Jesus.”

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, “I’ve been demoted. Last night it was, ‘God’.”

She rolled her eyes expressively, exiting the car.

“Target.” he reminded jovially.

Liz hesitated visibly, checking her surroundings hastily before casting the man a disparaging glance.

With their day plan in mind, the cart was loaded with snacks and a cooler, which amused Red greatly. “I don’t think we really need...”

“I have been on a boat before.” Liz interrupted, throwing more Dorito’s into their cart.

Red nodded sagely. “I can see that.” he glanced at the loaded down basket.

He looked over the at the various selection of beverages, smiling his amusement. There was no wine here over twelve dollars. He suddenly realized, he had become a snob.

He picked up a twenty four pack of beer, adding it to the treasure trove.

He hadn’t done this in so long, planned for a relaxing day on the water... he found the task very enjoyable.

Of all the things he could offer her, Elizabeth wanted to picnic on a boat.

Elizabeth...

He looked up, not finding her anywhere, a frisson of panic overtaking him. He navigated his way through the small store, feeling that rising terror clutching at his chest until finally finding the woman scouring an aisle.

“Lizzy?” he breathed out shakily, calming his heart as the apprehension eased.

“Now which ones do you think?” she asked, holding up a couple different boxes. “This one says it’s ultra thin, but this one says it has the most natural feeling.” she held up another box, her mouth quirking at the corner.

Red’s hand fluttered to his temple as he tried to assimilate the light hearted feeling overtaking him after such a disturbing adrenaline rush.
“Or a female condom. I’ve never used one but...” she looked down at the other in her hand, sighing, “and this one is ribbed for my pleasure, but you don’t seem to need help in that department.” she shrugged, tossing that package back.

Red looked up the boxes she was holding and the serious, indecisive expression on her face, feeling his heart strings pull.

The woman had no idea the fear he just felt, looking up and not finding her. And she wouldn’t know. He was being silly. He knew that.

But after the time they had spent together, he knew he would do anything in his power to protect her. Not that he would not have before, but now it was entirely personal, and more.

Pushing away all thoughts of everything except this moment and their plans for the day, Red took the boxes from her hands, looking them over. The man tossed the female condom aside without thought. He hated those fucking things.

“I think this one would be best.” she tapped the box of lambskin. “It’s the closest thing to not wearing anything at all.” she nodded decisively, having read the box and it’s promotional proclamation. “If we get these instead...” she gestured to some spermicide behind her, “you don’t have to wear anything at all...” she looked up at him hopefully.

Red tossed the box of lambskins in the cart along with the rest of their purchases, chuckling softly at her fallen face.

“Baby, they don’t taste that great.” he gestured to the spermicide.

“Well, you aren’t supposed to really eat...” she hesitated at the look on Red’s face, a flush covering her own.

Red laughed quietly as he watched understanding dawn.

“Oh...” the vivid red of her cheeks brightened.

“Why don’t we try a sampling of different types,” he gestured to the display beside them, “for now.” he consoled. “When we get more comfortable in our present circumstances, we will revisit this discussion.”

Liz fought the indecision plaguing her, staring back and forth between what would allow her to feel Red naturally, to the dreaded condoms.

Red wrapped his arms around her waist, pulling her against him. “Don’t think for one minute I don’t want to go that route,” he cupped her bottom, drawing her closer, “I am not saying that at all.” he traced her full lips with his fingertip, wondering how long he could wait to use one of the objects of their present discussion.

“A condom is one step. I slip it on and make love to you. Those,” he gestured to the other boxes, “I may have to wait up to ten minutes to be with you. And I just don’t have that will power right now.”

She giggled quietly at his honesty, then nodded her complacency. She looked back over the selections, picking small packs for them to try, before throwing another large box of the lambskins in the cart.

Red looked down at the dozen different brands, “You have great faith in me, I see.”
She threw him a quizzical look before heading for the checkout.

Once on the road, the woman became so interested in the good company and fascinating storytelling, Liz had lost all sense of direction and time, until she saw an approaching sign.

“Annapolis?” her eyes widened anxiously. “Red, my God.” she whirled her head jerkily about, seeking out the calmly serene man.

“Don’t worry.” Red soothed quickly. “They’re too distracted by their toys to pay me any real attention.” he gestured to the hundreds of boats lining the pier. “Besides, it’s not as if I’m going to the Academy itself.”

Liz relaxed somewhat, sitting uneasily back into her seat.

“Though, I did visit an outpost, last year.”

“You, what!” she bolted upright, her face incredulous.

“You needed assistance on a case.” he shrugged, turning the car onto the pier. “When Cooper was held by The Judge.” he reminded.

“And what happened?” she was still aghast by the news.

“Nothing.” he lifted noble brows. “I went in, got what I came for and left.” he almost seemed put out by the fact. “Again, they were too preoccupied to notice who was among them.” he sighed. “They really need better security.” he rolled his eyes as they pulled up to a dock and parked.

His face took on a tranquil expression, his smile genuine. “There she is...” he almost cooed.

Liz looked up, finding the most beautiful... “Red, that’s a yacht.”

“I guess so, yes.” he sounded proud, climbing from the car.

“I thought you said ‘speed boat’.” she said clamoring out of her own side, coming up to meet his arrival.

“She is a speed boat.” he grinned. “She’s very fast, actually.” again the pride was in his tone, but at her expression. “...Is something wrong?”

“No, I assumed it would be just us.” she was a little crestfallen to be honest.

“It will be.” he assured readily. “She’s only one hundred and sixteen feet long.” he began, following up with specifications she didn’t even begin to act like she understood.

“Trust me. And I can handle her just fine.” he helped her onto the back deck when he felt her hesitate. “What?”

“You christened her...” her words trailed away as she read the embossed nameplate.

“What else would I name something so beautiful.” he questioned seriously, guiding her across the gleaming deck.

Liz’s mouth fell open at the opulence. It was just gorgeous. Hard wood and soft furniture dotted the deck. Decorative doors led to the inside. The Captains chair was more like a lounge, the plush leather seat looking as if it belonged behind the helm of a business empire. To the left was a wet bar, stairs led up on the opposite side to a deck she could not as yet make out.
Red pushed through to the inside cabin, showing an open floor plan of hardwood floors and comfortable seating, plus a full kitchen that shined of stainless steel and ultra modern appliances.

“Holy shit...” Liz muttered under her breath, following after the man. “Jennifer...” she said after a few moments silence.

“What?” Red stopped in his tracks, slowly turning to face her.

“You could have named her, ‘Jennifer’.”

“I have a boat docked in Italy named after Jennifer, well, it’s the Cordelia II.” he replied. “I lost the first one with the...” he sighed.

“Cordelia?”

“It means, daughter or Jewel of the Sea.” Red sat his bags down, smiling softly at the woman across from him, clearing his throat. “We’ll stow this and get out of port then I’ll finish giving you the tour.” he grinned, taking the bags from her hands. “I’ve got this if you want to look around...” he offered.

She smiled back, nodding her understanding. He needed a minute.

Liz walked around the spacious quarters, taking in all the nooks and crannies. Occasionally looking back at the man, finding him busy with his preparations.

She shouldn’t have said anything. She hadn’t meant to hurt him, the day had been going so well and she had to go and bring up painful memories.

After assuring himself that all was ship-shape and having double checked the condom supply, he located the woman standing beside the large hot tub, her expression more than bemused.

He stepped up behind her, his lips caressing her neck.

She motioned helplessly to the gigantic spa before her, then to the surrounding area. “You have a hot tub and God gives you an entire Bay.” she sought his eyes plaintively.

“God didn’t heat the Bay.”

The woman lost her mood quickly enough, replaced by her previous one.

“It’s all right, Lizzy.” he said softly, reading her like a book.

“I’m sorry.” she apologized instantly. “I always seem to...” she hesitated, unsure of how to state it. “I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know you didn’t.” he soothed. “And you didn’t.” he assured. “I just worry for her. Wonder if she’s all right.” he confessed readily. “Sweetheart, I may hesitate when it comes to my previous life, but it has nothing to do with sharing it with you.” he reached up, stroking her cheek, “Nothing is off limits with us, do you understand.”

She nodded grudgingly, before being pulled into his chest. “It’s just hard to talk about sometimes.” she thought she understood, “especially when you’re blind-sided by it.” she winced.

“Sometimes I just need a minute to gather my thoughts.” the man replied. “It has nothing to do with you having brought it up.”
“If I ever ask anything too private, I want—”

“Nothing is too private, not when I’m speaking with you.” he stressed “Never feel like you can’t talk to me about Jennifer or even my first wife.”

Red leaned in, kissing her sad little mouth until he finally felt it tilt into a hesitant smile.

“Now, come with me.” he took her hand, leading her to the front. “You need to learn how to work the controls and navigate your way around, in case something happens.”

“What could happen?” she pulled up short.

“It’s just a precaution, Lizzy.” Red soothed expertly. “I taught my ex-wife and daughter the same thing, just in case of emergency.”

He lead her to the controls, showing her how everything worked and what their uses were, before gesturing her to come closer.

“And you can handle all this...” she faltered visibly, resisting his beckoning. “It’s so... big.” What the hell was she saying? He had been in the Navy for heaven’s sake.

“You handled bigger last night.” he quipped.

She hit his shoulder, truly aggravated. “I’m going to kill us... we’re going to die.” she was relatively positive.

“Come on.” he slid her gently between himself and the controls. “Let’s take her out.” he leaned to whisper seductively in her ear. “And if you’re a good little girl and don’t kill us...I’ll give you an extra special reward.”

Liz waved such prattle aside, her eyes scanning the multitude of buttons and screens and telephones and gadgets that didn’t even have a name in her head.

“We’re going to die.” she was totally resigned to the fact.

Liz listened carefully to all of Red’s instructions as they were given, and as soothing as his voice was and no matter that the man was standing right behind her, she still felt her hands shaking as she maneuvered the very long, very expensive boat from the dock.


“I saw the Titanic... this is just like it.” her voice quivered as her eyes darted to and fro, the harbor seemingly closing in on her from all sides.

“Not at all, honey.” Red reassured. “I have plenty of lifeboats.”

Under Red’s careful guidance, Liz turned the boat out to open waters, finally able to breathe as they cleared anything she could possibly run into except a very few boats entering the harbor which were few and far between.

“You did great, baby.” Red beamed his pride. “My first wife ran into the pier.” Red’s brow crooked. “Actually, she broke the deck off, scratched a gouge in the hull and hit the neighboring boat.”

“Well, can you blame her!” Liz yelped. “This thing is...” she gestured wildly, then frantically grabbed the wheel in a death grip again.
“That boat was only about twenty five feet long.” Red corrected. “Just over the size of her SUV she was driving at the time.” he shook his head woefully. “She wasn’t the best driver. Land or Sea, she was a menace.”

Liz had to admit, she suddenly felt proud of herself. That she had handled this boat, twice the size of Red’s other boat and didn’t put a scratch on it, by the Grace of God.

She looked down quickly, tapping the wood counter beside her for continued good luck. Her eyes flying back to the open sea, as they navigated past other boats in the harbor, ruminating on his choice of words.

His first wife. He had said that twice. A label he had never before used when speaking of Carla... Naomi... whatever name she was using these days. Always his ex-wife.

Was that to imply he was now thinking along the lines of another wife? A second wife. He had indicated he wanted to work towards that goal with her but Liz found herself doubting, just a shadow, if she could ever fulfill such a man’s needs.

She did know however, that she wanted to try with all that she was. She moved closer to the man in question, feeling better.

They coasted down the open waters, as Liz listened to what Red had to tell her about the navigation and other technical side of the boat until they hit the end of Chesapeake Bay.

And she suddenly felt even more nervous than before. It was one thing to coast down the bay, with land all around you.

Another when you hit the open sea.

“I don’t remember you having a fear of water before.” Red said conversationally.

“Well, I wasn’t at the helm of a boat before either.” she countered.

“You’ve done an amazing job.” Red bolstered. “And you know I would tell you if I thought otherwise.”

She reluctantly admitted that he would. Besides the whole, not lying to her, thing. She felt that regardless of what he said, a little bit of his Naval training stuck with him, taking over any time he was in the water.

“I’m going to grab a beer, you want one?” he asked lightly.

“Excuse the hell out of me?” she gripped the wheel in her hand nervously, her knuckles suddenly white.

“You can do this, sweetheart.” he squeezed her around the waist lending support. “Just follow the course I told you, and you’ll do fine.” he kissed her forehead. “Besides, I’ll be gone just a second.”

“Yeah, did you see Galaxy Quest?” she asked. “They had a gizmo that allowed them to relive thirteen seconds, just long enough to correct a single mistake.” she babbled.

“You’ll do fine.” he reassured, patting her waist as he backed away.

Her eyes fell to the gauges quickly, following the course without blinking.

“Baby...” Red chuckled, “you have to look out once in a while.”
She lifted her eyes instantly, only to have them widen when she saw a fishing boat just ahead.

Red watched her steer the boat smoothly, changing course easily around the other boat and breathed a sigh of relief that she hadn’t panicked, before easing back into line.

“I’ll be right back.” he held his smile with great difficulty.

Looking back and forth between the gauges and out to the open waters, Liz felt her shoulders loosen finally the further she went. But she could not truthfully say she was not happy when she felt the man come up behind her, holding up a cool can and glass.

“You want me to take her for a while?” he offered.

She jerked her head agreeably, more than ready for a break as she took the pre-offered alcohol, stepping aside hastily.

Red took a swig of his own beer, smiling. “Let’s see what she can really do.”

Liz smiled as she watched him play. The boat sped up, gliding over the water as though they were on a sheet of ice.

She’d been on boats before, with Sam when they went on vacation, but had never felt anything as smooth as this.

She relaxed into her seat, stretching away the kinks. Twenty minutes later, Red slowed the boat until they came to a stop.

“Are you hungry?” he asked.

“Getting there.” she pushed off her seat, following him into the kitchen.

He went about preparing their steaks, wrapping them before setting them aside. “I’ll let them marinate a few minutes.” he shut the fridge door, grabbing their bags. “Would you like to see the deck below?”

“There’s another deck?” she shifted her eyes this way and that. “I thought I had seen everything.”

She followed him down the small flight of stairs, opening doors Red gestured to, finding a bedroom, a bathroom, even a small exercise area.

At the end of the hall, the man threw open an expansive door with a flourish.

Liz eased forward, peering into the spacious room.

“Oh, Red...” she gushed, “it’s just lovely!” she smiled happily, taking in the soft muted colors in the master suite. “It’s very nice.”

Red had brought their luggage down, tossing one in particular, on the bed. “And very private...” he muttered softly in her ear.

Liz shivered at the roughened tone, her body humming in response.

“It is, isn’t it?” she smiled back over her shoulder at the man.

“Very...” he stepped up behind her, brushing his groin against her bottom. He turned her towards him, dropping his mouth against hers ravenously, gently backing her towards the large bed.
“The steaks...” she said breathlessly.

“Will keep...” he muttered, “I won’t.”

His arm snaked around her waist, lifting her back on to the bed. He followed closely, his hands deftly catching the bottom of her blouse, tugging it over her head. The dark hair fell loosely about her bared shoulders.

“You know what I want.” he stated quietly, removing her bra with a expert flick of his fingers. “Give it to me, Elizabeth.” he mumbled against her breast, taking the perk nipple in his mouth, suckling the warm flesh lovingly.

Liz felt her center heat to vivid life. She did not resist as he pulled at her shorts and panties, removing them quickly.

At this moment in time, she was not adverse to giving the man anything he wanted.

“This is my favorite place in the entire universe.” he whispered roughly. “It’s so beautiful,” he stroked her swollen lips, teasing the smattering of hair, “so damned welcoming of me,” he slid his fingers inside, slowly pumping the already quivering hole, “I bet it tastes so fucking sweet,” he slid down the bed, parting her legs, a warm palm aiding his endeavors, “Let’s test that theory, shall we?”

Liz’s hand dropped between her legs, a myriad of doubts plaguing her. She had not showered. She had not prepared... down there. She had not expected this so soon.

“Stop thinking.” the man demanded her undivided attention.

He had planted himself between her thighs, his broad shoulders opening her wide. He gazed longingly at the sight before him, tracing her pink lips with his fingertips.

Dropping his face, he scented the soft pubic hair, just nipping the peak of her sex. He breathed heavily, the hot breath brushing across the sensitive tip.

Liz tensed at the sensual sweep.

“Relax...” He mumbled, gently licking the crease of her leg.

“Y-you don’t have t-to...” She moved into the soft touch of his tongue unconsciously.

“I don’t have to fuck at all,” He bit gently into her thigh, kissing the love bites until he pulled back, staring openly at her, “but I rather enjoy the sensation.”

His stare made the woman shiver uncontrollably. But she was also as nervous as hell.

Was she pretty enough? Did he enjoy what he was seeing? Would she taste as good as he anticipated?

Red made himself more comfortable for he intended to stay here for a while. He could not believe he was privileged enough to be in such a situation. He intended to take full advantage while he could.

He ran his thumb up the side of the pouty little opening, smiling secretively as he noted her response to his touch.

“Such a pretty little pussy...” his tone traveled into the pit of her stomach, eliciting a heartfelt moan.

Liz remembered the man had said the same thing in her dream.
He tilted his head, his gaze remaining fixed and focused on her little muff.

He preferred women who did not shave completely. There was something disturbingly primitive about that dark patch which aroused and titillated. The sight had always turned him on and he enjoyed the way it felt. He could not wait to feel the downy texture scrape along his shaft.

Red focused on her tight folds, her clit becoming more pronounced under his ardent gaze.

It was like being denied water that was right in front of him. And he felt as if he hadn’t quenched his thirst in months

“Let me taste you, Elizabeth.” She felt his hot breath and rumbling voice brushing against her tingling lips.

She looked down at him, as he stared longingly at her center.

He lifted a sultry gaze, holding hers compellingly directly before he lowered his head, placing his hot mouth against her vulnerable flesh. He was unwilling to wait one second longer.

Red sighed contentedly the minute his lips touched her. He had been waiting to do this since he had first seen her walking down the stairs at the Blacksite. And if he had known how good she would feel in his mouth, he would have never let her out of that box.

Not that she would have wanted to go. He would have made sure of the fact.

Just after a few seconds, her tiny pearl clit was pulsing, begging for attention. Red flattened his tongue, massaging her, tasting her arousal on the tip of his tongue.

“Oh dear God,” she mewled softly, lifting her bottom for him, “that feels so g-good.”

She tasted fucking amazing. Her salty sweetness reminded him of either freshly made saltwater taffy or creamy butterscotch.

She truly was breathtaking. She was so delicate. So appealing. Her taut rosy lips glistened in the low light and that adorable clit peaked out for him.

He lowered his mouth, kissing it adoringly before tonguing it gently.

If she wasn’t an artists dream, she certainly was his.

He kissed the small tuft of hair, looking up at her through hooded eyes. “I could spend all day exploring—”

She moaned softly, quickly reaching down, directing his face back to his pastime.

Red chuckled, the sound vibrating along her core causing the woman to moan melodiously. He loved that she was enjoying this, because he couldn’t think of anything he’d rather be doing right now other than making love to her in the most intimate way imaginable.

She lifted against the mouth pleasuring her, her fingertips moving erotically over his head as she totally relaxed under his ministrations. She could not stop the contented sighs or sharp intakes of breath as the man worked his magic.

Wrapping his hands around her hips, he grunted carnally, unable to quench the insatiable desire flooding his body.
Red apparently adored this part of foreplay. She had never had a better lover, and not because he made her come so quickly. It was because he cared enough to try anything which might please her.

“Please...” she asked breathlessly, “don’t stop.”

She was so close to climax, her thighs were quaking with the intensity.

She pushed harder, her head falling back into the lush coverlet. She refused to allow him any reprieve, her fingers clutched tightly against the back of his head.

“K-keep doing t-that.” her voice shook.

Red smiled against her wet flesh as she rode his face, loving that her natural inclination took over. In fact, she was damn near smothering him. And he couldn’t think of a better way to go.

He was proud he could bring her to this stage of excitement. She sought only her pleasure and knew instinctively, that he could provide what she needed.

“Oh shit, oh shit....” she could not catch her breath, buckling into him, “oh shit!”

Son of a bitch. He’d never heard sweeter damn words in his entire fucking life because he knew what they signified.

Reaching around her hip, he cupped her breast, rolling her nipple as he dropped a slick finger against her ass, pushing against the taut skin.

“Fuck...” she cried out, her hips swiveling on their own accord. No one had ever done that to her before. It felt so fucking good. “Don’t s-stop... God don’t stop!”

And then he was suckling the bundle of nerves which immediately put her over the top.

A burst of vibrant brightness exploded behind her eyes, a feeling so ethereal... so deliciously pleasurable, she was at a loss to actually find words to describe it. Instead she simply... enjoyed the hell out of it.

She had climaxed with Tom, but it was never this intense. Her entire body had responded to Red’s expertise. He had touched her soul in a manner she had never experienced before.

“Oh my...” the raspy exclamation was torn from her throat as she tried unsuccessfully, to calm her hammering heart, her thighs still quaking uncontrollably. “Oh, fuck...”

Red pulled back slowly eager to see the look on her face before she had a chance to mask her true emotions. She was literally radiant, a soft glow emanating about the beautiful features.

Red lowered his head, dropping a kiss to her still throbbing clit.

“I love watching you come.” his voice held a measure of reverence.

She arched up into him, her back coming off the bed with a sharp jolt from the last embers of her orgasm.

Red stripped himself of his shirt, as the woman blindly grasped for the bag beside her.

“The lambskin, baby.” he urged, dropping his pants hastily, kicking the offending material aside.

Liz tore at the box, sending one shooting towards him. He grasped the square mid-flight, his reflexes
in perfect working order. He tore at the foil package before rolling the sheath into place. Red crawled slowly forward, his eyes boring into hers.

The woman was electrified by the way he looked at her. Her tummy flipped, adrenaline coursing through her veins.

“I’m going to fuck the hell out of you.” he wasn’t above a little boasting.

Elizabeth fought her blush and won. Slowly opening her legs in open invitation. She motioned him forward, her eyes seductively beckoning him.

The man’s light eyes filled with raw desire. As he continued his trek, a new determination apparent on his face.

Reaching the woman, he bent slightly stroking his thickened shaft against her wet center, before sliding slowly inside her welcoming body.

“Oh, fuck...” he drew out the exclamation, his eyes closing rapturously after just that first push. “So much better...” he breathed out his relief, this condom his favorite so far.

He could feel her heat so well, it was almost as if he was wearing nothing at all.

Liz moaned her delight, opening herself more to him. “I can feel you.”

“I wanted to do this to you, so many times in the past.” Red sighed as his pelvis met hers intimately, yet again. “The ache became unbearable.”

Liz tightened her hold, her arms embracing him tenderly as she lifted into his slow slide. Listening to the words he whispered intimately into her ear, left an ache in her heart when she thought of how much time they had wasted to get to this point.

In only one day, Red had managed an emotional connection that she had never felt in her marriage with Tom.

The man’s lips parted hers provocatively, making Liz wish to give everything she had held back for so long with others.

And she truly understood what had been lacking in her relationships, for lack of better terms.

Admiration. Respect... Love.

Did Red love her?

He seemed to hold a great affection for her. It felt like something she had never experienced before.

And she loved the sense of fulfillment.

Red Reddington was deeply incased in her body... it felt so good. So right.

She was making love with... Red Reddington.

His thick shaft spread her deliciously wide, filling her cavity to capacity and beyond. His mouth suckled her breasts adoringly.

He looked down where their bodies joined, watching his bulging shaft disappear between her legs, his lighter shade of hair meeting her darker.
Liz relaxed, basking in his lovemaking. Her silky legs caressed his hips, her hand stroking his back caressingly.

Her breathy voice repeated his name over and over.

A couple months ago, the woman barely tolerated him. Now, he was buried in her body to the hilt, loving her as none before.

It was surreal. Yet, it was the most natural feeling in the world.

“Damn, Lizzy,” he praised lavishly, meaning his words, “you feel so incredible.”

“Deeper...” she keened happily, loving the feel of him inside her.

“You want to see?” He wanted to share this with her.

Liz struggled to her elbows, anxious to see, as Red lifted away slightly. She was instantly riveted by the sight of the man’s hard length vanishing back into her body.

“Oh my God...” she gaped, avidly watching the show.

Red took his time, inching slowly forward allowing the woman to feel the sensations he himself, was experiencing.

Red Reddington’s cock was the most amazing thing she had ever felt.

“Isn’t it amazing...” he watched the show himself, fixated on his wet shaft pumping her heated body.

She reached out, laying her fingers on her own lips, feeling his penetration glide along a deep, probing path before sinking into her opened depths.

He bounced his shaft, only withdrawing an inch or two. Liz dropped her head back into the pillow, groaning loudly as overwhelming sensations flooded her core.

Red increased the tempo of his thrusts, his movements intensely calculated. He was deeply gratified when he felt her lift into his physical adoration.

“Yes, baby...” Red hissed, “I like when you do that.”

His hand bunched her silky curls in his fist, his mouth devouring hers fiercely.

She had forgotten how much she missed this. She knew instinctively, that the man was just as invested in the moment as she herself.

Add to that, Red was a hell of a lover. All his attention was focused on her. She could honestly say, this was by far, the best sex she’d ever had.

It... he felt fantastic. His words were... so sensual. That wonderful raspy moan he emitted... made her tummy react chaotically.

The urge to dominate this woman was suddenly overwhelming. And Reddington knew how to get he wanted in life.

“I need you Lizzy.” He uttered, his tone guttural in nature.

Red gripped her hips, sitting back on his haunches, driving his shaft harder into her drenched cavern.
Liz watched his erection pummeling her body, feeling her depths ripple with pleasure.

“God,” she gritted, the heaviness between her legs feeling like an old welcomed friend “right fucking there...”

“Come on, baby,” he crooned softly, rubbing his thumb against her clit, “come for me.” he whispered enticingly.

Reaching, she grasped the headboard, curling her fingers tightly around the wrought iron, riding out the explosive release.

Red engulfed her in his arms, feeling her tremble with the intensity of her orgasm. “Shit, Elizabeth...” his voice was filled with awe.

Raising her hips, she met his demanding thrusts, eliciting those sounds she so loved.

“Jesus...” his voice shook with intensity. "Lizzy..."

Smoothing his hand over her tight abdomen, up between the valley of her breasts, he watched hypnotically as the sides of her luscious mounds brushed against his hand with their movement.

Liz she cupped the pliant flesh, trapping his hand in the warm alcove.

Suddenly, the vision of fucking her breasts, coming on her white skin flashed in his mind. It was a fantasy he had for days.

A few of his fantasies had been fulfilled just in these short few hours. He knew he could make this one, tit fucking her, a reality. But he had to wonder how long he could hold out before pushing the boundaries of established decorum.

Red could not take his eyes from the woman, completely enraptured. She was so impassioned, so fucking sultry. Her heavy breasts rocked gently with the motion of their lovemaking.

A delicious shiver settled at the base of his spine, as his cock swelled with fluid. She cried out, her pussy fluttering around his thickness as he pumped his steamy load into the condom.

He trembled as she clenched tightly, the thick ejaculate warming his cock head instantly. For a fleeting second, in an illusive flight of imagination, he could almost feel her cum heat the crown of his shaft.

Already having lost more than enough condoms, Red quickly grasped the top, pulling free. He smiled softly at her groan of dismay.

“Don’t sound so disappointed,” he rasped roughly, “It’s not like I won’t visit again...soon.”

Liz giggled quietly, seeking the warmth of his embrace. “You mean, you’ll come again... soon.”

“That too...” he delicately smoothed her disheveled hair, his eyes gentle on her face.

“I like your sex voice...” she smiled contentedly, snuggling into the crook of his neck.

“My sex voice?” he chuckled his amusement.

“I love your voice, any time of day.” she explained. “But right now, it’s deeper, sexier...” she tried to classify it, “you sound very relaxed...” she smiled impishly, “like...”
“I’ve just fucked the hell out of a ravishing woman.”

She blushed slightly. “I was going to say,” she corrected demurely, “like you just finished one of those fabulous cigars and drank a glass of your favorite scotch.

“I enjoy nothing more in the world than making love to you, to be quite honest.” he pecked her nose affectionately. “The other pastimes are nice, but nothing compared to what passes between us in such a moment.”

“You don’t say.” she loved the sentiment, planting a suggestive kiss on his mouth.

“Oh, hell yeah.” he reached between her legs, petting her velvet slit. “I dare say,” his teasing voice tickled her ear, “this is the best pussy in the entire world.”

“Are you about to come again?” she played openly, licking her lips invitingly.

“No,” he smiled knowingly, rubbing her in just the right spot, “but you are.”
May 5

It was late afternoon when Red awoke after a nice catnap. A gentle lapping of the sea against the side of the boat reassured him that all was right with his surroundings.

Slipping quietly off to the bathroom, the man rinsed his face with cool water in the double basin which lined the north wall of the yacht. He smiled into the palm of his hands allowing the water to trickle between his fingers as he heard Lizzy pad barefoot into the bathroom.

Turning his head, his smile widened as he grabbed a nearby towel to dry his face. His eyes took in the visual beauty afforded him.

Liz scratched at some imaginary itch, her hair more tossed and wild from the action. Her lips, swollen and red, reminded the man of a sweet berry. The love bites and beard burn on her neck, breasts and thighs, were a pleasant reminder of time spent in his arms.

Tousled was a good look on her. As was the dreamy, far away look in her eyes.

“You look,” his gaze swept the luscious body, hesitating on certain feminine curves, “...sated.”

“Do I look hungry too?” she yawned the suggestion aside.

“Are you implying that I’m slacking off in my hosting duties?” He tossed the towel on the counter, watching the woman step closer. He looked down at her rosy complexion, his eyes mellow.

She pressed her warm flesh against his, tip-toeing to kiss him softly. “I’m saying,” she corrected the misconception, “you better feed me before this becomes the ocean version of the Donner party.”

“That wasn’t much incentive.” Red mumbled into her neckline. “While I would love to dine on you once again... I have absolutely no objections to you returning the favor.”

“I fell right into that one...” she muttered quietly, nodding sagely, “didn’t I?”

“You did, yes.” Red agreed, pleased with his own wit. He patted her bottom affectionately, walking back to the bedroom. He grabbed his bag off the floor, pulling some light clothing free.

Liz followed him, watching as he slid a light blue cotton shirt onto the muscled arms. She glanced around for her own bag, rummaging through the interior.

She found a couple sets of clothes, some basic toiletries... and photographs. The woman sifted through several images, one of her with Sam, making her hesitate. The blue eyes shifted to the next in line. Her entire team smiled happily out from the crisp memory.

She looked up, seeking out the man, her mouth agape.

He frowned over at the winsome features, finding the woman near tears. Closing the space between them quickly, his troubled eyes held her wet ones.

“What’s wrong?”
Unable to find the words, Liz gestured to the case and it’s contents, her lip trembling visibly as she tried to master the conflicting emotions she was experiencing.

“I’ve been through this countless times...” he had glanced at the photos dangling in her unresponsive fingers. “Uprooting from familiar people and things can be... painful.” he motioned absently. “It may only be a short while, until we get things straightened out...” He offered a noncommittal shrug, hesitating visibly before continuing, “But it could be...longer.” his heart hurt for her. “Whatever the time frame, I want you to have something from home.”

She suddenly felt the gravity of their situation, like never before. And while it was scary, that he had done this for her... that he had the forethought, cared enough...

“I will do everything in my power to make it right, Lizzy.” the vow was in his tone and manner. “You won’t be alone, I promise.”

Liz wrapped her arms around the strong neckline, squeezing it tightly. Knowing that Red would be there with her, each step of the way...

She knew the decision she made last night, was the correct choice. Red gently kissed her tear stained cheeks, before wiping the evidence of her emotional state away. “Now, we’re going to eat, enjoy each others company and relax.” he quickly changed the direction of the conversation.

Laying her head into his chest, Liz listened to the reassuring rhythm of his heartbeat. “I don’t want you to think anything more about it.” he soothed. “All right?”

She took a steadying breath, then straightened. Her hesitant smile became genuine the more she witnessed the unwavering support behind the eyes which regarded her so solemnly. And for the first time in her life, aside from her Sam, she felt an unrelenting trust in someone else. Liz finally, truly believed... that this man would do anything to support her in every imaginable way.

Hugging him again, she cuddled into his warm embrace. That feeling she always got when he held her, of safety and protection, was there. But along with it, was a new type of intimacy. Which admittedly, frightened her. Was she becoming clingy, too fast? Relying on him too much after just half a day.

“I feel it too, Lizzy.” Red’s deep voice washed over her comfortingly.

“Feel what?” she mumbled evasively.

“Holding you feels different.” he replied honestly. “But it’s a difference I like, very much.”

She relaxed in his embrace, feeling much better knowing he felt the strangeness as well. Lifting her chin, he forced the blue eyes to his. “I will always be there when you need me.”

“If this doesn’t work out—”

“Nothing will stop me from protecting you.” Red shook his head, brushing away the thought. “Do you believe me?”
Even after this short amount of time, it hurt like hell to think of...whatever this was between them,
not working out. She wanted to make it happen, to make something of this thing between her and
Red.
“You know what I think?” he asked, his fingers lightly tracing her lips. “I think we’ll be just fine.”
“You do?” she asked hopefully.
“Yes...” he replied without hesitation. “We’ve been gravitating towards one another for a reason,
Lizzy.” he continued. “I think for a very good reason.”
“Which is?” she wasn’t sure she wanted to question anything at this stage.
“We’re supposed to be together.” he stated, as though it was obvious.
She had to confess, hearing the man say that with such belief, made her feel less awkward. She had
to wonder if she should be feeling this deeply so short into the relationship, which in reality, had
been such a short period of time in the making.
“Call it fate or God’s Grand Plan...” Red began, “but there had to be a reason I was placed in your
life and you in mine.” he thread his fingers through her hair, cupping her small head in his palm.
“Time, fate, God...” he continued, slowly rubbing his fingers into her scalp, making the woman sigh,
“He knew I needed you, and you needed me.”
“You need me?” she questioned quietly.
“You keep me sane.” he replied easily. “One small smile, laugh or touch from you...” his lips grazed
her forehead lightly, “and all is right with the world.” Red held his expression, letting her see the
truth behind it.
Liz tilted her head, looking at the man curiously. “I feel that too.” she only just realized the fact.
Her tummy rumbling hungrily broke the spell, but brought a small smile to Red’s face.
They had a lifetime to explore their feelings for one another. They didn’t have to hit on all of it in one
day, but this had been a start.
He kissed that little mouth he so loved, then smiled.
“Come along my little cannibal, before this situation gets out of hand.”
♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~
“We should have picked up some take out.” Liz said, dropping the sliced tomato into the bowl.
“I like cooking.” Red smiled, dropping a kiss to her shoulder. “Especially if it’s for two.”
“Why, because it’s easier.” Liz asked, tossing the salad with a flourish.
“No, because it means we’re alone.” his tone had dropped suggestively.
Liz’s mouth pulled at the corner as she sat the bowl in the fridge to chill. She sought out the man’s
position, wrapping her arms around his solid bulk from behind.
“Are you always like this?” she questioned, settling her chin on his shoulder watching him prepare


their steaks.

Red blocked a pop of boiling grease, turning down the flame. “Like what?” he was curious.

“Romantic.”

“I like to think so.” he chuckled. “Though honestly, I don’t see myself as that.” he sat a lid down on
the grill, leaning into the counter beside it.

“It doesn’t matter how you see it,” she informed him, “it’s how the woman sees it.”

“That’s the way of the world.” he muttered to her amusement. “If the female is content, then the male
has done his duty.” he glanced her up and down, taking in the faded blue jean shorts and the already
tanned legs. “Have I done my duty to you?”

“To some extent.” she let him know the way of things, an up and under seductive glance added as
she walked away, careful to swish her hips just so. “I’ll let you know when your next shift begins,
Sailor.”

“I’m the Captain here.” he reminded pseudo-peevishly. “I get to call the shots.”

“Not if you don’t want a mutiny on your hands.” she smiled sweetly.

“I would have you keel-hauled...but it went out of fashion in Medieval Times.”

“More is the pity?” she questioned playfully. “You could have me walk the plank.” she brightened.
“They did that to Captain Jack Sparrow.”

Red straightened the position of his own ‘plank’, the conversation having taken a different turn for
the man. “I wasn’t thinking about you ‘walking’ the plank, per se.” it was reluctantly admitted.

Liz giggled appreciatively, pointing to the now smoldering food. “Your plank can wait.”

Red sighed heavily, pulling the steaks off the grill. As they sat, Red poured wine he thankfully, had
onboard.

A light hearted conversation ensued thereafter.

Liz told him of a trip when Sam had taken her to Louisiana and they spent an afternoon on a fishing
boat. After twenty long minutes, Sam had finally reeled in a huge fish only to have it fly on board,
smacking him in the face so hard, it made him fall from his seat.

Red laughed quietly, shaking his head, sighing. Much like he did when Francis spoke on any
subject.

“Idiot...” Red muttered jokingly.

“Have you ever had anything exciting happen while on a boat?” she corrected hastily. “Or do you
call it a ship?”

Red had more than his fair share of excitement on board boats and ships alike. None of which he
thought were stories to be shared during a romantic outing. Most, if not all, were mood killers since
the majority of them contained killing incidents.

Granted, most of those tales happened when he was in Service and legally within his rights. But
then, most of them were from his time as Red Reddington.
Really, both topics in his opinion, were for another time.

Not today. Not when they were still lethargic from a tumble in bed. Which actually was an answer to the question. And a truthful answer at that.

“My most exciting moment on a boat has been... today.” he lifted confident eyes, holding her gaze steadily. “Being with someone I have wanted in my life, for a very long time.” he reached across the table, curling his fingers around her smaller ones.

She blushed prettily, squeezing his fingers in return. “I know there was truth behind that.” she allowed. “But I also hear a cop out.”

“Maybe,” he granted, “but it is the truth, for the most part.” He sipped his wine, letting it settle on his tongue for a moment. “Everything that has ever happened to me on the water is nothing but a jumbled mess, but you...” he raised her hand, kissing the delicate flesh, “and what we shared, that will always be a very vivid and incredibly memorable event.”

She couldn’t disagree. This was turning into one hell of a day, a day she wouldn’t soon forget.

“What’s your favorite color?” He jarred her from her pleasant thoughts.

Liz lay down her knife then chuckled. “Red...” she answered without hesitation.

“Before I went down on you, what was your favorite color.” he sat back in his chair, supremely confident.

Liz giggled quietly, really enjoying the carefree and open conversation. One of which she had never experienced before.

“Purple.” she shrugged. “You?”

“Blue.” he replied, staring directly at her eyes.

Her lashes fluttered under his attention, a small smile overtaking her face. “Favorite food?” she lifted an intense gaze.

“Italian.” he said, inclining his head awaiting her own response.

“Italian, with Mexican a close second.”

“Your most embarrassing moment?” he took a shot in the dark.

“Just one?”

He knew that was her way of saying, not yet.

“What do you dream about?” he tried another route.

“Walking planks...” she held his eyes steadily, inclining her head minutely.

“I dream about that too...” he teased. “A recurring dream.”

“What’s your favorite type of music?” she got things back on track, hopefully.

“Hip hop...” he managed straight faced until she gave him an old fashioned look. He shrugged slightly. “You probably don’t know it... Big Band.”
“Glen Miller, Benny Goodman.” she scoffed. “I’m not a complete plebeian.”

He chuckled sensually.

“I like hip hop.” she answered the unasked question.

“No you don’t.” he was relatively certain.

“My tastes are eclectic.” she had to admit.

“My most favorite sound in the world is a soft, melodious sigh coming from the lips of a completely aroused, blue eyed brunette who answers to the name... Elizabeth.” he licked his own lips as the memories surfaced. He read her face like a good book.

“You’re so full of it, but don’t you go a changin’.” She had loved the compliment in spite of her better judgement.

“Favorite author.” he persisted, a twinkle in the light eyes.

“Tolstoy.” Liz replied quickly, taking a bite of her salad, saying what was expected of her.

“Tolstoy...” Red repeated knowingly, his head bobbing slowly. He stared at her a moment, his lips twitching as he fought his amusement. “Charlotte Brontë.” he corrected quietly.

Liz sat a little straighter, her brows furrowing. “Your favorite author is–”

“No, she’s your favorite author.” he interrupted. “Or... she’s at the top of the list, anyway.”

“How did you...” her mouth fell agape.

“It was the book on your shelf with the most wear.” he replied. “Jane Eyre.” he made the connection. “She’s strong, independent, passionate...” his eyes softened, silently finishing the comparisons to Liz’s heroine in his mind.

_Orphaned..._

“She introduced me to a whole new world.” Liz admitted. “It was difficult to understand sometimes, but as I grew older and revisited the story, it made more sense.” she fell silent, then looked at him and smiled. “Plus, the romance wasn’t bad either.”

“You went from Brontë to romanticized porn.” he tsked playfully.

“Oh, hell yeah.” she agreed vehemently. It was because of that romanticized porn that she had seen Red in a different light. Not that she would tell him that.

Not yet anyway.

“I now have a thing for older more sophisticated men.” she teased. “Especially those who wear a fedora.”

Red’s tongue ran around the inside of his cheek, the look he gave her sending shivers of delight down her spine.

“What about you?” She questioned. “No, let me guess.” she looked off into the yachts canopy, lost in thought a moment. “Orwell, Faulkner... Dostoevsky?”
Red ran his finger around the rim of his glass, smiling as she listed some heavy hitters, that he did admittedly enjoy on some level.

“It’s actually a toss up between...” he began, gaining her complete interest, “Jules Verne or H.G. Wells.”

Liz sat down her utensils, actually at a loss. She would have never guessed Red would prefer science fiction over the deeper subject matter covered by the other authors.

“Really,” she leaned into her fist, intent on the man’s every utterance, “why?” she was more than intrigued.

“They were the first ones to stir my imagination.” Red proclaimed. “They made me want to travel and see new people and places.” he remembered fondly the feelings the stories had evoked.

“And you have traveled, extensively.” she pointed out the obvious. “Was it because of the books?”

“Partly.” he admitted. “And as I may have mentioned before, I hated being idle.”

“So I take it that I won’t be getting many quiet nights at home with you?” she teased.

“I don’t feel that with you.” he divulged.

“Don’t feel what with me?” she was ready to take umbrage.

“The restlessness,” he pushed back his seat, his look oddly serene. “...You calm my heart.”

He arose, crossing the immaculate deck. Turning on a radio, he let the soft sound of “Moonlight Serenade” wash over them. Red held out his hand, pulling her from her seat when she took the offering.

“How are you still single?” she gaped as the man swayed them slowly in beat with the low music.

“Well, I’m not now....” he glanced down into the beautiful eyes. “Am I?”

“Well... no.” she sighed, then hastily stiffened slightly. “I mean--”

“I know what you meant.” he turned her, smiling as she followed his lead without thought. “I was waiting for you.”
Dancing in the Moonlight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 5

Liz looked out over the horizon, her head laying on Red’s shoulder. They danced quietly getting lost in the sensual sway. Their silhouettes cast a dark image against the setting.

Brilliant hues of red, pink, blue, and soft yellows streaked the calm skies as the sun set lazily behind them.

The music playing transported Elizabeth back to another Era. The dreamy melody was at once both nostalgic yet timely. A song for all ages. The haunting refrain touched the hearts of generation after generation.

Liz was torn between watching the hypnotic sunset and closing her eyes to better feel the sensations the moment evoked. She wondered how many couples fell in love to this very song. It certainly wove a spell about the two figures highlighted on the deck of a boat seventy five years after it’s original recording.

The man’s large hand encompassed her back, stroking her spine in a slow sensuous rhythm. Her arms lay loosely about his neckline as she took in the smell of his cologne and the sea air about her.

The warm southerly breeze coming off the bay whipped her hair playfully. The fine darkened strands caught on the new growth shadowing the man’s cheeks.

The song ended but immediately segued into another romantic piece which predated Liz’s knowledge of any known composer.

Nat King Cole always put Red in a particular mood, and “Unforgettable” was one of his favorite all time recordings. He smiled slightly, “Before your time?” he questioned lightly.

“I know Natalie Cole.” Liz took exception.

Red chuckled his amusement. “Do you know her dad?”

Liz’s brow furrowed slightly, “He was the guy in the video with her.” she was proud she knew the answer. “I like this song.”

Red leaned slightly, his fingers spreading over the gauzy linen of her blouse, his lips nuzzling her neckline. “And I like you...”

Tightening his embrace, he stepped decidedly closer. She felt his erection through the soft cotton of his pants, leaning into the wondrous sensation. His hand slipped beneath the light fabric of her top, teasingly dancing along her skin.

His free hand glided effortlessly downward, curving to the roundness of her bottom. His lips gently captured hers in a kiss that was light and evasive, leaving the woman wanting more.

“We’re alone.” he assured quietly. “No one around for miles...” his clean breath fanned her face. Liz
was momentarily startled from her dream state. She absently scanned the area of open water surrounding them.

He was right, there was no one in sight. The blue eyes returned to his, he seemed to be waiting for a response of some sort.

“It’s very nice out here.” Was all that came to mind. She knew instantly she had disappointed in some way.

The penetrating gaze shifted momentarily before returning somberly.

“Make love with me, Lizzy.” he whispered softly in her ear.

Something told the woman he was not asking for the normal mode of interfacing.

“Here?” she gulped uncertainly, her head swishing about her surroundings anxiously. She never had sex outside, let alone in the open like this before.

“But if someone should come...” was her first thought.

“The only people I care about coming... are you and I.” Red muttered intently.

Liz studied the academic features religiously for a long moment, weighing the pros and cons of the situation.

He pulled at her top, slowly lifting it, giving her the chance to bolt if needed. He was pleasantly surprised when she lifted her arms, allowing it’s removal.

“That’s my girl.” he praised seductively, removing his own shirt, tossing it carelessly as he artfully guided them to the place of his choosing.

“Did that just go overboard?” she giggled, suddenly feeling light hearted and free. Something she had never felt before. His hands pushed at the band of her shorts and panties, easing them off the shapely hips. They fell in a heap around her bare feet.

“Who the hell cares.” he muttered gently into her neck, smiling as her giggling increased.

His arm stretched across her back, holding her waist close to his abdomen. His mouth parted hers libidinously. He pushed hard into her mound, rubbing persuasively to and fro, the friction adding incentive to his already powerful proposal.

“I am having such impure thoughts.” his fingers ran along the plump ridge of her bottom, massaging intimately.

“You should be ashamed of yourself.” her hand worked its way down the front of his slacks, her fingers easing around the hardness of his flesh.

The man unzipped his pants, giving her more room to play. “I am...” his hand covered hers, encouragingly, holding it to its antics, “I will go to confession... later.” his tongue melded with her more timid one, as he spoke directly into her mouth.

“Are you Catholic?” she pulled away slightly confused, her hand halting its excruciatingly pleasurable pastime.

“No.” he replied bluntly, forcing her hand back into the slit between his stomach and trousers. She smiled appreciatively, returning her interest where it was due.
He shoved the offending material down his legs, his erection bobbing free of all restraint.

The sudden touch of his hardness against her naked flesh, very much reminded Liz of where they were and what could be seen. She looked around nervously once more, only to have her chin caught with thick fingers.

“Look at me.” he commanded roughly.

“Stop letting them come between us.” he held her face gently, his gaze boring into the azure depths. “For the next hour... no one exists but us.” he said, sitting into the lounge behind him, his shaft more than visible in the rising moonlight.

She looked at the large straining organ, forgetting all about her earlier worries, suddenly too intent on the possibilities the night held.

“I want you to enjoy yourself.” He patted his thighs, grinning.

“I always enjoy myself with you.” she tried to adopt the same ‘fuck it’ attitude.

Moving forward, she took his pre-offered hand, awkwardly maneuvering around his muscled thighs. She settled comfortably across his thighs attempting to ignore the obvious impairment between them.

Red’s sultry gaze swept her flushed body. The man’s eyes darkened watching the woman hesitantly lean back as she opened herself to his inspection. Liz felt the lovely sensation of the fresh air on her exposed vaginal area. It felt deliciously sinful.

Red’s fingers tightened methodically into the velvet flesh of her thighs taking in the visual portrait she presented.

He lifted his hand to touch the warm smooth flesh, pressing his palm between the valley of her breasts, his thumb easing over the beginning of a plump mound.

Liz loved the masculine possessiveness of his touch. She surrounded the thickness of his wrist, her fingers lifting insistently as she guided that touch.

Red’s hand engulfed her breast, lifting the heavy weight, kneading gently. His thumb skimmed over a nipple, bringing it to life.

Liz leaned into the administrations, encouraging such familiarity. She gasped approvingly as his tongue teasingly flicked about the taut peak.

Closing her eyes, she basked in his adoration before drawing her short nails over his length. He groaned against her nipple, sending an electric jolt to her center. Grasping his stiff flesh in her hand, she set a slow tantalizing rhythm before swiping the creamy fluid at the tip around it’s pulsing head.

“Baby...” He groaned piteously, nipping the pink bud, having enjoyed the contact of the heated skin pressed so intimately to his arousal. Seeking her lips, he parted her mouth expertly, drawing a response instantly.

At the conclusion, the woman’s breath was coming in short gasps of compliance.

Reaching between her legs, Red traced the very edges of her opening, refusing to escalate his efforts one iota and after a few seconds of such torment, Liz was literally squirming with need.

Her grip tightened on his shaft, urging him to her way of thinking.
“Permission to come aboard, Captain?” She panted heavily, her arms embracing him eagerly.

Red chuckled appreciatively for the unconscious display of wit. The sound causing her tummy to flutter tremulously.

“Permission granted.” the man sheathed himself with practiced ease.

“Where the hell...” Liz hadn’t even seen where he had pulled that from. He must be somewhat of a magician.

“I was a Boy Scout.” Red lifted her hips, directing her movements. Liz felt the heated tip of him at her entrance.

“Go slow.” His hands grasped her hips, waiting.

Liz sank down unto him, his thick head stretching her tightened muscles proficiently. She sighed happily feeling the stretch only he could provide.

She trembled with anticipation, wanting to shove his whole length inside her. But he was right, she should go slow, adjust her body to his thickness. Her brow puckered as she dropped lower, the spread uncomfortable for a moment.

“Easy...” He had felt the resistance.

She opened her eyes, staring into his. “...For you to say.”

Once again the throaty chuckle met her efforts. “Am I hurting you?”

She leaned forward, capturing his bottom lip with her teeth, suckling the pout. “Deliciously...” She lowered herself an inch, her breath catching, “I ache... and it feels so damned good.”

His fingers circled her clitoris, relaxing her muscles, opening her wider. She dropped the last couple of inches, drawing a deep grunt from the man.

“Did I hurt you?” her voice trembled, full of arousal and a little discomfort that was gradually easing. She had remembered his wounds too late.

“Fuck no...” He panted his breath fanning her breasts. Her tunnel fluttered helplessly around him, adjusting to his sudden intrusion. The experience was mind altering.

There was something very carnal about watching her assume command, feeling her barriers completely vanish minute by minute.

“Experiment.” he growled his instructions. “Do what feels good to you.”

Last night, she had been more open and relaxed with him. The position they now held, was something new and exciting for the woman. He wanted her to explore her options.

He wanted to watch her, learn her likes and dislikes. Each woman was different. Each unique. The best part about sharing intimacy with a female was just that... with this woman it was imperative that he know each and every nuance of which she was capable.

Liz put one foot on the floor, rising up only a few inches at a time. Red could tell it felt good and it seemed like the place she wanted to be for the end result. His shaft sank deeply, sliding along her clit perfectly.
Settling back on her shins, she raised high off his penis, sinking back down slowly. Her face told him, something was lacking in this technique. Tightening her inner core, she rose again, “Oh...” keeping her muscles tight, she lowered in agonizing increments, “Ohh...”

“Like that one?” he liked it as well, even more so knowing the movement had elicited that low, sultry moan.

“Mmhmm.”

Bracing herself on his shoulders put her breasts within kissing distance of his mouth. The man took full advantage of the fact, nibbling the dusky pink tips languidly.

Liz dropped her hands back to his knees, leaning her weight on them, undulating her hips in such a manner as to bring the man almost to full climax.

He steeled his mind, refusing to escalate matters at this stage.

“What do you like best?” she managed between gasps for breath.

“Watching you.” His eyes scanned her lithe body. She moved like an exotic dancer, and his body was responding of it’s own accord.

She blushed, though continued her motions. “I want you to enjoy yourself, too.” she glanced down where their bodies intertwined. “Does any of this feel good?”

He jerked his hips into hers, his erection just as hard as when they started.

“Baby, watching you get off is just as arousing as you stroking my cock.” he cupped her bottom, aiding her in her endeavors. “Now, ride.”

After a few miss-strokes she finally gained a rhythm that satisfied them both.

Her head fell back, the tips of her hair grazing his hands which supported her back. But his hands could not stay idle. He found himself exploring her body, cupping her breasts, touching her ass, his fingers stroking the peak of her sex, gripping her hips, tracing her thighs.

The man caressed her. Loved her.

Giving her the affection she damn well deserved from her lover, the adoration she damned well was earning.

Red stared at the woman sexually pleasing herself, totally fixated by everything about her.

The little frown on her brow as she concentrated, fascinated him. Her pouty lips quivered when she hit a most delicious spot. The agile tongue wetting her lips, excited him. She unconsciously touched herself, her breasts and sex. The whole picture was encapsulated by how unashamedly she took to her activity, which was breathtakingly beautiful.

She sat forward, capturing his lips. The kiss was wet, messy and undeniably sexy.

What a complete fool Tom Keen had been, for not experiencing all she had to give.

He didn’t think she knew how truly sensual and provocative she really was. The movements of her body mesmerized him. Watching her was watching an Art form come to life. Graceful beauty in motion.
He felt her breasts dragging across his chest, her slim hand at his neck which clenched in rhythm with the gentle sway of the boat and her hips as she rode him. Red realized fully just how damned seductive Elizabeth Keen could be.

The moonlight cast a soft halo which surrounded her dampened skin. Her hair danced about her shoulders, kissing the alabaster flesh intimately. She looked like a sea nymph breaking free of the ocean spray.

A sea nymph that beckoned him to a most certain peril. A danger and uncertainty that seemed well worth the risk when given a gift such as this.

There were just some things in life worth fighting for.

He would give his life for his child. He had always known that.

And now, for this woman, he was willing to make the same sacrifice.

Some may see him as insane, to gladly give his life for Elizabeth.

But then, they would never see her as he did.

Elizabeth was his lover. That they would see, that they would understand.

But he saw her as his future wife. Possibly, even the mother of his children.

His soul mate.

If he had his way, he’d marry her right this minute.

He knew he wanted her. He knew the life they could make together would be a good one. He knew they would have a wonderful marriage.

Now, he just had to wait for her to catch up to his vision of what they could be.

She slowed, rutting against him. Her swollen lips kissed his feverishly, sharp little exhalations beat erotically against his own mouth.

The man breathed his excitement, glancing down where they were joined, his eyes deepening. “You’re so damned enthralling.” He found himself needing to praise her efforts, “...enchanting...addictive.” he was loathe to admit.

He grasped her hips, helping her bounce that little body off his erection. “No one has ever captivated me as much as you.”

He drew his head back, watching the woman nearing orgasm, completely entranced. His need growing for her every second spent under her influence.

Liz gave into her own need, increasing the tempo of her movements two-fold. Red groaned, losing himself in the breathtaking sight.

Liz reached back, clutching his leg, as a counter weight, her free hand gripping his shoulder for support. A long drawn out moan escaped her throat, as she felt his large thumb rub her slit just where she needed it.

“There...” Her eyes squeezed tight feeling the stirring in her sex, spark with electricity. She shook visibly, as her core tightened convulsively around him.
Red’s jaw clenched tightly, his eyes smoldering pockets of irrepressible desire.

Words escaped him for once, so intent was he on the beautiful woman quivering in his lap. Her unbridled passion was accompanied by a feral moan of release.

Finally collapsing into him, Liz rested her head against his shoulder, her mouth issuing small heated bursts against his neck, heightening his own pleasure.

Wrapping his arms around her, he pivoted, keeping himself encased in her warmth, laying his pliable lover against the soft cushion.

His need for her grew exponentially and at this moment, a pervasive urgency overtook him. For the first time in his life, Red’s baser instincts overrode his normal tendencies for temperate behavior.

The intensity of his lust was uncontrollable, watching the woman open and relax for him, her teeth catching a swollen lip erotically as he pushed against her... hard.

Red gripped the side of the couch, his knuckles white as he found the rhythm he needed to establish, easily bringing her along with him as he strove for his own release.

The man readjusted his stance, hooking her leg over his arm, lifting her into his invasive thrusts. He purposely tapped that swollen nub inside her, bringing her along on the tumultuous ride.

Red had never been this rough before, surprisingly, Liz found she did not mind in the least. It was almost as if, he had forgotten himself completely, acting on instinct alone.

Lowering his foot to the floor, he released his hold on the couch, his fingers searching out her mound. He massaged the sensitive lips relentlessly, building the woman to her pinnacle of release.

“Oh, shit...” he closed his eyes, the vertex of his climax hitting him full force.

Bunching her hair in his fist, he drew her into a bruising kiss. His mouth dominated hers effortlessly.

The woman clutched the soft cushion above her head, arching into his next thrust, convulsing around his driving shaft just moments before she felt his heat through the thin condom.

“Oh, shit...” she whimpered brokenly.

He grunted laboriously, his body jerking hard, the last of his release filling the condom full.

“Soon, baby.” he vowed his conviction more to himself than the woman. “These things will be out of the fucking picture.”

He suddenly disdained the thin sheath which separated them.

He knew she could feel his essence so much better with these condoms, just as he could hers. But their instinct to feel one another naturally, was an overwhelming force against which they were fighting a losing battle.

They had to find a common ground, and soon.

He slowed, gripping the offending material as he slid free from her warmth. Discarding it quickly, he pulled the woman from the bench, embracing her tightly.

Liz smiled softly at the man, brushing her fingers gently over his face as they slowly came down from the high upon which they had ascended.
“I’ve never done that before.” she confided in a husky whisper.

“Did you enjoy it?” he enquired, kissing her fingertips gently.

“I’ve always wanted to, but...” It was so easy to talk to this man. “But you make me feel like... it’s okay.”

“It is more than okay.” she was stoutly assured.

“...So, you enjoyed it too.” There was always, in the back of her mind, a little insecurity. But more and more these days, she felt the playing field evening up.

“I loved every minute of it.” He replied without hesitation. “I’ve loved every minute I’ve spent with you.”

“You have?” she beamed her elation.

“Very much so.” he admitted earnestly, his hand covering hers in a warm embrace. “I have never wanted anyone as badly as I have you, Elizabeth.” he brought the small hand to his lips, lingering over the fragrant flesh. “No one...” he lifted sincere eyes.

“Let’s get some rest, hmm?” his roughened voice soothed the woman. “Come on...” he cajoled, “I want to cuddle you.”

Her lips quivered slightly, before lifting into a smile. “You are a professed criminal... who likes to cuddle.”

“Francis borrowed my teddy bear for the weekend.” he grinned, brushing a finger over her smiling lips as he tugged on her unresisting hand. “You’ll have to do.”

“I’m learning new things about you all the time, Red.” she tried to keep the amusement from her reply. “Some of them are downright scary.”

She did not see the quick grin cross his handsome features. Nor did he miss the fact that she hadn’t balked as he walked her across the deck, totally naked.

Chapter End Notes

We’re easing into some more sexually explicit areas now. The scenes will probably become more graphic as we go along, depending of course, on what you all have to say about likes and dislikes.

Hope you enjoyed this one. It was actually a lot of fun to write.
Elizabeth Keen tossed about aimlessly in her sleep, the dream she was having a disturbing one. Her eyes popped open, fully awake finally, her mind filled with vivid, crystal sharp images.

She searched about, finding her bed partner peacefully asleep and unaware which upset her all the more. She reached out instinctively, slapping the man’s bare chest angrily.

Red Reddington jerked awake, his mind a little fuzzy.

“You idiot!” Liz raised her hand again, her intention quite clear.

Reacting without thought, Red reached out, grasping the hand coming at him. He pushed at the hand and the person attached, easing his bulk over the unsuspecting foe. The man blinked the sleep from his brain, finding Lizzy under him and fuming.

“What the hell!” he released her only to have the woman attack him immediately once again. He caught the attempt easily, his brow furrowing darkly.

“I know I’m on drugs,” he hissed his annoyance, “what’s your problem?”

“You actually think I fucked Ressler!?” she snapped peevishly.

“What?” he drew back, startled at the accusation. Was she even awake? Was she dreaming?

“How can you think I’d sleep with Ressler!” it boggled the mind.

“In New York, when Francis caught you fooling around.” she began the explanation. “I bailed us out, told him I slept with Donald and you got pissed.” she admonished heatedly. “You think I slept–"

“Did you?” Red had caught up now, the anger resurfacing post haste.

“No!” she pulled against her restraints for he had yet to release her captured wrists. “I told you I don’t think of him like that!”

“Then why did you chose him!” he snapped right back.

“Because I thought you would remember it, if need be.” she bit out the retort. “And maybe find it amusing.”

Red let her know in no uncertain terms, “Well, I didn’t.”

“Of all the asinine things for you to...” she shook her head, the aggravation she felt coloring her judgement. “You didn’t hear me bitching about your little fling!” The fact still rubbed her raw, were she honest with herself.
“How many times do I have to tell you,” he released her abruptly, sighing heavily. “I didn’t have sex with Ariana!”

“I wasn’t talking about her!” she disgusted. “I was taking about the one in Italy!”

“Lizzy, we weren’t even involved then.”

“It doesn’t negate the fact that you were pissed off at me,” she was only too happy to point out, “for supposedly having sex with Ressler.”

Red knew what he had said would come back to bite him in the ass, he just didn’t know it would be completely out of the blue and at three o’clock in the morning. And while completely naked.

But then, he should always expect the unexpected when it came to this woman.

“Francis...” she was unable to believe that accusation. “You accused me of sleeping with your best friend.”

“He isn’t my best friend.” Red disdained, although admittedly the younger man was in the top five of what he considered his most trusted allies, but she did not have to be made aware of that fact at the moment. “He’s at the house all the time, and I mean... all the time!” Red was happy to air his grievances. “What else could I think?”

Once said, the words sounded petty, even to the man’s own ears.

_For heavens sake_ Reddington, the man chastised himself. _Why can’t you learn to keep your mouth shut?_

“You think I–” she gasped audibly.

“Have you?” His jealousy outweighed his common sense in this situation, however. “You two seem taken with each other all of a sudden, to my way of thinking.”

She struggled under him, fighting his grasp. “If I were a man, I’d punch your lights out!”

All right, so he was escalating the incident, but then, she hadn’t answered the question either.

“Why won’t you answer me?” He baited artfully. “Because you have? _Did you fuck Francis?_”

“He’s your friend! He’s my friend!” the woman was aghast. “I can’t _believe_ you would think I–”

“You’ve had ample opportunity to sleep with him.” It was debated moodily.

“I wouldn’t do that, for a host of reasons!”

“Name one.” Red could name fifty to the opposite direction.

“I...” she stammered, trying to filter through the hundreds of reasons why she wouldn’t, before blurt out “I wouldn’t abuse your hospitality.”

Of all the reasons she could have picked, that’s the one that she blurs out? _What the hell?_

“Nice to know you wouldn’t fuck my friend in my bed.” Red was at his best when he was being sarcastic. “So where did you do it? The entertainment room?”

Liz fell back into the sheets, rolling her eyes expressively. “I liked _you_, you moron!” she snapped,
averting her eyes. “Past tense!”

The room fell suddenly quiet as the man processed the words. He had arisen in the bed, turning to face his foe but now, relaxed slightly, as he contemplated her mood...but more importantly, his own.

She refused to look directly at him, focusing on the Seascape painting on the opposite wall.

“You are so incredibly stupid.” she sighed, deflating a little, “How could you not know that I was attracted to you? That I was hoping for...”

“What?” he questioned yet again, looping it over and over in his mind, trying to make sense of it. She wanted...what? Him...okay, in what capacity?

“What did you want, Lizzy?” He exasperated.

“Well, if you don’t know, I’m not going to tell you.” She was relatively sure.

The man fell back into the mattress, his hands lifting in mid-air to signify...women!

“I wanted you to touch me...” She yelled at him, having arisen to her knees, and once again, lashed out, hitting his shoulder...hard. “Intimately! As in, slip tab A into tab B...insert repeatedly! Do I have to draw pictures?”

_Holy hell..._

“Is that why you didn’t?” Liz had her own point of view on the matter. “Because you thought I was having sex with Ressler and Francis!”

“No!” he grated brusquely. “I didn’t think–”

“Why Francis of all people!” she interrupted, not giving him time or opportunity to answer the question posed.

“I was jealous dammit!” Red exploded furiously.

Liz was taken aback by the statement and emotion involved. “Jealous? Of Francis!” she squeaked. “Whatever for?”

“Because, you accepted him!” Red was on a roll. “You enjoyed his company. You laughed with him. You touched him. You snuggled up to him.” Bitterness edged his tone. “Two years I tried to get a genuine smile from you. And Francis got it in two days.” He held up the fingers to prove as much. “I try to help you and get the third degree and distrust. Francis gets your gratitude and a hug.” He disdained. “I get scorn, hatred, and coldness. Francis gets playfulness, teasing and affection.” He slowed his diatribe. “...You tolerate me. You love Francis.”

Red squeezed his eyes shut, turning sharply away, pushing off the bed putting distance between them.

The quiet of the room was deafening. The man felt the alienation he had caused. He stared briefly at the same wall with the Seascape, not seeing anything but his lack of finesse. Falling back into his pillow, he cupped his forehead, scratching at an non-existent itch, sighing more than heavily.

_Fuck! Good job, Red._ The man ran his hands over his face. Less than one day in and he’d already fucked up the thing he wanted most in this world.

He had been making love to her and now, she sat quietly beside him.
Stone silent.

And it had taken him less than a few hours. He was efficient if nothing else.

First the anger. And after that, the scorn would follow. The hatred. The distrust would return, in spades.

The usual emotions she had held for him would be back in place.

He hastily sat, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, hiding his face.

His pain.

He thought he knew what it felt like to hurt before, in regards to Elizabeth Keen.

But he hadn’t, not fully.

This was gut wrenching.

To have been so close to having more with her. Loving her, in every way conceivable to him.

His whole body ached with the loss. His throat felt like it was closing off, leaving him without oxygen, choking the life from him. Though his heart beat rapidly, it felt empty and cold.

He felt her move on the bed behind him and wondered where she’d go tonight? Would she find another room? Or was she putting distance between them before telling him to leave?

“Francis was easy.” she whispered. He turned his head slightly, surprised to find her on her knees just behind him. He could only see a sliver of her silhouette, but she was there.

“There was no past, no hidden agenda. No secrets.” she explained quietly. “He was the only one who didn’t want anything from me, but to know me.”

“I didn’t want anything from you, Lizzy.” he replied just as quietly.

“You wanted the Fulcrum.”

“I don’t want the Fulcrum.” he gripped the mattress, leaning into his rigid arms. “They do.” he snarled softly. “And in turn, you.” he shook his head, “And that is not going to happen.” his face fell into his hands, exhaling heavily. This was going nowhere fast.

“Personally, I wish I never heard of the fucking thing!” his fingers pushed into his temples, easing the sudden tension headache.

“There were so many secrets, Red.” the woman wanted to reach out, touch him... but she didn’t. “I didn’t know who I was or who you were. I thought you and my mother had...I thought what I felt was... wrong. I couldn’t get close because...”

“If I had made love to your mother, been in love with your mother.” he followed the train of thought. “Could I really be in love with you, or was I transferring how I felt about her onto you.”

What had he just said? Was he in love with her? Focus! One thing at a time.

“Yes...”

“Well, you know the answer to that question.”
“Yes, for all of five days.” it was reminded. “God Red, if you had just told me...”

“If it wasn’t for Kate threatening me that she would do it herself.” he lifted his head, staring off into nothing. “I don’t think I would have.”

“Don’t you get it!” she moved slightly, needing to be near him. “Learning about the scars, brought us closer. You telling me about my mother, brought us closer.”

“And what if it had done the opposite? What if it had hurt you?” he turned his head. “If it had gone the other way.”

“Red, you can’t protect me from everything.”

“Maybe not, but I’ll still try.” he vowed sacredly.

“What the hell happened to her that makes you carry this overwhelming guilt?” she had to ask the question.

“Elizabeth...” his tone warned, “don’t.”

“After two years, I know better than to ask for what I want to know.” Liz slipped into her profile mode. “So let me take an educated guess instead.”

Red cradled his head in his hands, just wishing it would all stop.

“You promised her that you’d help her get out, and you did.” she began. “But the government didn’t hold up their end of the bargain and sent her back.” Liz watched his reaction and got nothing.

“You promised to help my mother hide, but they found her.” He tensed slightly, making her heart hammer in her chest. She was close to something.

“You worked together, maybe even defeated who they sent, but she knew they’d keep coming no matter what you two did. They wanted the Fulcrum.”

Red’s fist curled painfully into the bed, the color draining from his fingers. “Did she run away from you? Hide where you couldn’t find her? Turn herself into them and accept her fate?”

He kept the same pose, not moving one iota.

“Did they kill her?” she tried again.

Still nothing.

That left... oh God...

“She knew they’d never stop looking for her.” it was the only logical explanation. “I’d always be in danger...”

“No more.” he stated succinctly.

“She killed herself.” the horrible realization had dawned on the woman.

Red curled his fingers so tight, she swore she heard them pop under the pressure, confirming her hypothesis.

“She thought her death would throw the scent off. Freeing you. Freeing me.” she laughed
Red stared off into the hardwood floor sightlessly, his mind’s eye too full of visions... painful memories.

“And so do you.” Liz stated quietly.

He looked over his shoulder slightly, silent. Waiting.

“When you trust me. Open up to me.” the woman placed her hand on his shoulder, the warm fingers lightly touching his flesh. “I think we’ve proven time and again, we work better as a team.” She inched even closer.

“I don’t expect you to start spilling your guts, Red. But as you can see,” at least she hoped he did, “I found out about my mother and didn’t wilt.” she slid up behind him, pressing her bare breasts into his back, wrapping her arms around him. “I found out that you saved me, not my father and it didn’t crush me.” She lay her head on his shoulder.

“And if the next revelation does crush you?” he dreaded, knowing secrets he wished he could keep forever.

“Then you’ll be there to help pick up the pieces.” she lifted her head, studying his profile. “Won’t you?”

“Do you want me to be there?” his eyes finally met hers, a depth of pain so deep contained within, it took her breath away.

“Will you stop thinking I’m sleeping with everything in sight?” she smiled softly at him.

“Yes.” he stated so simplistically, it served to nullify any and all former animosity.

She crawled beside him, slipping into his lap, facing him. “Will you start talking to me more, being more open to me?” she read the hesitation on his face. “Not everything, Red. I just need you to–”

“I’ll try, Lizzy.” he negotiated.

Well, it was better than what he normally said which was either nothing or a complete change of subject.

Red felt her soft lips press to his, then her breasts tickle his chest hair before flattening against his pectoral muscles.

She still wanted to try. Still wanted him...

They had their first real disagreement and had come through it, nothing but a little worse for wear.

He still hurt inside, determined to get past the feelings. But he had to wonder, if next time, he would be so fortunate.

He’d give anything to just go away with her, leave it all behind and whisk her off to a secluded island. Hide her away.

She’d be alive at the end of it all, at least.

Or better yet, just use the Fulcrum, get the ball rolling and end all of this shit. Once and for all.
And while he technically could do that, he really wanted more allies to make sure no harm came to her when the shit hit the fan.

But he needed this time with her before he could face what his gut was telling him to do.

“What started all this shit anyway?” he tightened his arms around her, enjoying the embrace they shared.

“I had a dream.” she sounded like Martin Luther King Jr., even in her own mind. She shook the notion, continuing. “I guess I was replaying what you said in New York, though it actually made sense this time.”

Red chuckled softly, “You had a dream, woke up and hit me?” he reaffirmed his hold, his palm resting on her thigh. The woman shrugged, slightly embarrassed now. “What if what you had been dreaming didn’t really happen?”

“But it did.” she countered quickly.

“I’m asking if it didn’t.” he persisted.

“Then I’d have to make it up to you.” a soft smile highlighted her face. “Wouldn’t I?”

“Well, I should hope so.” He stood, letting her slide to the floor before heading for the bottled water. “Given that I had just been minding my own business, peacefully asleep.”

She playfully rolled her eyes, disappearing into the master bath.

It was only three thirty, but he was pretty much awake now. Maybe if he laid back down for a little bit, he might get lucky and gain an hour or two of sleep. If not, he could always read upstairs. He was no stranger to a sleepless night.

He always enjoyed the quiet of the ocean, it calmed his soul.

Though, he wished his sleepless nights had more to do with the naked woman who now walked towards him and not because his mind wouldn’t shut down.

He rolled to his side, watching her come closer until she was at the end of the bed. She stood silently, her eyes staring into his openly. She turned, heading for her side of the bed.

“I want to touch you.” he rumbled, stilling her in her tracks.

If they were really okay, she’d let him.

He extended his hand in open invitation to come to him, giving her the option. And she did.

The woman crawled up the bed, sliding under his arm, her nipples grazing his skin. Red dropped the appendage about the feminine indentation of her waist, drawing her closer.

He grasped a handful of fragrant tresses, dragging her mouth gently forward. He kissed the soft full mouth fleetingly, as she tilted her head to better feel the sensation of his lips.

Her small hand crept in between them, touching his rib cage, her slim fingers curling into his flesh. His hand kneaded her cooler one suggestively, his eyes staring into hers boldly, his free fingers caressing the soft skin of her bottom.

“Have I told you how attractive I find this?” his expression was as innocent as the driven snow, as
those deft fingers elicited a decided wetness from her center.

The woman slid her hand over the round perfection of his own derriere. “Back at ya...” she lifted stylish brows, enjoying Red’s sensual chuckle to the fullest.

“You hussy.” the chuckle died a natural death. “I like my women brazen and bold.” those eyes deepened in intensity. “I find myself hoping your intentions are less than honorable.”

“Quid pro quo...” she murmured seductively.

“You’re really turning me on.” he advised readily.

“Oh, I can do better than that.” she lifted slightly, bracing her hands against his shoulders. The beautiful full mounds were presented for his pleasure. Liz’s head fell back as the heat of his mouth engulfed her nipple. She moaned melodiously as he suckled the tiny nub.

His palm spread over the small of her back, gently pushing her closer. She felt his hardness fall between her thighs as she shifted, her leg hooking over the depression of his waistline as she lay her weight upon his body.

Her clit rubbed along his length increasing the strength of her arousal. A rush of heated fluid wet her center.

Red could smell the delicious aroma of her excitement. He reached around, inserting his fingers into the sodden cavern.

His length slid along the fine hair of her lips, the bulbous head bumping against his wet fingers as they played.

He parted her mouth eagerly, his tongue slipping into the hot hollow, melting erotically.

Flames leaped to vivid life inside Elizabeth’s body. She whimpered in distressed anguish, pressing ardently to his warmth, feeling the hard muscles of his thighs against her velvet ones.

Red flicked his tongue leisurely about the sweet mouth, his stomach reacting to the erotic stimuli.

Blindly rolling the sheath in place, the man wasted no time, pushing against her opening, sliding easily into the molten depths.

He watched her face as he connected fully with her, getting lost in the hazy blue eyes blinking languidly back up at him as he completed their union. He moaned his pleasure.

Elizabeth returned his kisses wantonly, her senses straining. She was not thinking at all, just feeling. She was drowning in the sensual delight of his touch, his nearness... the very essence of the man.

Red growled his appreciation of her efforts, his hands running about the soft curves and delightful plains of her form whenever the mood struck him.

“Fuck, you smell so good...” He grunted, settling into the heated valley he so loved, his strokes strong and vital.

Liz’s mouth connected ferally with his neck line as she marked him repeatedly. The man closed his eyes, savoring her antics.

He unhurriedly made love to the woman. Taking his time, enjoying the rhythmic sway of her hips meeting his lunging ones.
She was still his and it amazed him that he could share this intimacy just because he could.

Because she allowed it. Because she wanted it just as much as he.

He hadn’t felt this unwavering devotion to someone since he had been with his first wife. And regardless of what anyone said or his reputation as a ladies man...

All he ever wanted... was this.

Commitment. One man, one woman. And the devotion they shared.

His deepened breath mingled with her own as their bodies connected once more. It became difficult to articulate anything but a deep gratifying sound of his eternal contentment.

The man rolled artfully, settling atop the slight form, taking control of the situation. He sank deep inside, moving this way and that in a sedate tempo. The hot moist surface of her pouty pink lips colored his judgement.

“This is how matters should be.” he voiced almost gruffly, continuing his deep even strokes. “And so seldom are.” he knew as much. Arguments sometimes cleared the air and paved a way for a better understanding. Communication was the key. “It’s my hope that we can always find a way to bridge the gap.”

“Find a way to bridge it now...” Elizabeth panted, “right now.” It was strongly suggested.

He chuckled, appreciating her wit, even though at this moment, she did not know she possessed any. He kissed her swollen mouth, nudging her nose adoringly, “I just want you to be happy...”

“I am happy...” she rasped, moaning when the man slid in deep, bumping the peak of her sex.

Red’s lips quivered gently, “Are you now.” he questioned lightly.

“So very...” her voice quivered as the man sped up, “very happy.”

“Are you even listening to me?” his mouth pulled at the corner, his finger tracing her pursed brows.

“Yes...” her lips pursed, accepting the kiss bestowed upon them, “fill the hole, make me happy...” she moaned appreciatively.

“Well, we got that hole filling thing down pat.” he glanced downward. “I believe I said...”

“Yeah, yeah...” she waved a dismissing hand about, “I’m hanging on every word. Could you go a little to the right.” It was not a request.

Red gave the matter up for lost, concentrating his efforts where they would most be appreciated.

He quickened his strokes, filling the room with the sounds he had quickly become addicted to hearing when making love with this woman.

The soft impact of his body against hers and those panted whimpers as he pleasured her, pushing her to the brink of climax.

“I’ll always give you what you need.” his thickness convulsed sharply, the electrifying response he received, most gratifying.

Liz’s fingers curved tightly into the sheets at his words, as he pumped faster into her, pushing the
sound from her throat in sharp bursts that tickled his neckline.

Red’s eyes glazed over, her lust filled cries echoed softly in the room, releasing a measure of the frustration he was experiencing.

“Only I can give you this, Elizabeth.” he thrust heavily into her, fucking that little body just how she wanted... just how he needed.

His muscles strained from the exertion of the act they preformed and he knew he would regret it in the morning. But he had no regrets at this particular moment in time.

“You’re mine.” he stated simplistically, grunting hoarsely as an overpowering urge to possess her became too much to assimilate. “I’ll do whatever I feel is necessary to ensure that end.”

Normally Liz would not have enjoyed such a proprietorial attitude, but coming from a man like Red Reddington, it only made her feel more confident in their relationship. But at this moment, the need to release the forces converging in her body was overwhelming.

His own release came upon him unexpectedly, his body trembling over her writhing one, both lost in the throes of passion.

Liz felt the expansion of his girth as he gave into the ecstasy. The pulsing heat and sudden spread of his shaft opened her invitingly and the woman was able to finally experience the exquisite rush of completion.

The quiet of the room was somehow reassuring. It was beginning to feel comfortable and familiar to be held in Red’s arms.

Red returned his attention to Elizabeth, his thoughts very private as his eyes took in the visual beauty afforded him.

She stretched her leg into a more comfortable position, jostling his penis in the process.

He sighed more than heavily, reminded of the duty he had yet to preform. He slowly slid his length out of her warmth, maintaining eye contact with her the entire time.

Elizabeth watched the proceedings, a small smile gracing her lips. “You aren’t gonna bitch this time?”

The man disposed of the offending object returning his attention post haste.

“I’m living for the day that you seriously ask to have nothing what-so-ever between us.” he tilted his head ever so slightly, his gaze almost making her blush.

“You want to be with me like... that?” She had so many questions she wanted to ask him about... that. When was the last time and with whom? How long had they been dating? What were the circumstances that led to it happening?

At the height of orgasm, what would it be like to feel Red’s warmth fill her?

“More than anything in the world.” he confessed. He was of the Old School Way of thinking on the matter. “It is the most intimate moment a man and woman can share, in my opinion.”

“I agree.” she was excited at the prospect.

“When you are ready to share that with me,” he stated, “I’ll answer the questions rolling around in
“Yes, I’m psychic.” he teased. “You didn’t know?”

Liz looked at him askew for he always did seem to know what she was thinking, but in a larger sense, how much really did anyone know about the man. He was a very mysterious individual.

Red was very pleased that she seemed so intrigued by sharing that particular intimacy with him. Damned intrigued.

He couldn’t wait to play with her a little, get a reading to see if what he hoped was correct, was in fact a reality. If he happened to have his cock buried in her while performing his research, it would be all the more fun.

It had been a hell of a wonderful day in retrospect.

He and Lizzy were still together and they had made love repeatedly.

And it had been really good sex. Damn good. He loved how uninhibited she was becoming. How she got lost in the moment.

But more importantly, there was a lot of emotions running beneath the surface as yet to explore.

While he had not told her his true feelings for her, because that would put way too much pressure on the woman. He had been able to convey those emotions for her physically.

“I love how this day turned out.” Liz smiled, snuggling closer to him, lacing her fingers through his, settling his arm back around her waist.

“For a moment, I had my doubts.” He confessed. “But let me tell you something...I will always do my damnedest to ensure that every day we spend together... will turn out just fine.”

Chapter End Notes

It was suggested in a Facebook PM that I add my email address for readers wishing to make anonymous story suggestions. I guess I'll add this in every couple chapters for quick reference for you guys. :)

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Facebook PM: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978
May 6

After a relaxing morning and breakfast on the deck, the satellite phone had interrupted their quiet time. Red’s hushed tone alerted Liz to a problem.

“What’s going on?” she was naturally curious, sensing their time together was at an end.

Red sighed, his fingers dancing along the mahogany of the table. He hesitated uncharacteristically as if attempting to put the problem into acceptable words.

“Mark’s been shot.”

In the end there had been no acceptable manner to deliver the news. The woman’s gasp was cut short by a reassuring, “He’s out of danger for the moment.” he held up a stilling hand. “The particulars can wait.”

He arose gracefully looking down into the troubled blue eyes.

“How long will it take us to...” she was naturally concerned for his friend.

“Nothing we can do for the time being.” An odd look came over his face. “Mark is in good hands.” He took both her hands in his, kneeling, his forearms resting on his thighs. “Can I be perfectly honest with you?”

She was slightly taken aback. “When have you not?”

“This might put me in a difficult light.” he realized. “While I see the necessity of ending our time here, I have to tell you... I wish things were different.” A dark scowl crossed his brow. “I need more time. I know it’s selfish, I know it’s insensitive...”

Liz brought his hand to her lips, kissing the back of the virile appendage. She stood, holding her hand out.

He took it, the strong fingers intertwining with the slender ones as he arose.

They eventually gravitated back towards the bedroom, eventually falling into a mess of trembling and tangled limbs.

They made love, each feeling the bittersweet melancholy lovers feel, knowing their time together would shortly end. Lazily stroking one another afterwards, his fingers danced along her spine as they slowly came down from their high.

Liz’s thoughts were varied, as she gently played in the soft down covering his chest.

“Spending time with you, is of the upmost importance to me, Elizabeth.”

The deep rumble of his voice thrilled her. The words, pleasing her beyond measure.

“You don’t have to say anything else.” her breath tickled his chest.

He enjoyed her touch more than anything these days. “Had the damage not already been done...” he
still tried to explain what surely must seem a callous gesture on his part. “Our taking the time to make love wasn’t going to make a difference, one way or other.”

She glanced up at him, sighing, before grudgingly nodding. “I feel the same way.” she did. “And I feel the same guilt.” she smiled at him. “But I don’t regret one minute of our time together.”

Red had needed to hear those words.

They lay together, quietly relaxing in their sated bliss until the lethargic feeling tapered, leaving them both rested and calm.

The woman reluctantly put an end to their idyllic moment, arising begrudgingly. She sighed heavily, forcing a smile.

“I have to pee...” she wrinkled her nose playfully.

“I will never get tired of these romantic moments.” the man rolled himself out of bed, beginning the arduous task of readying themselves for what lay ahead.

He watched the woman disappear into the adjoining bath, realizing he felt a sense of contentment with their new found emotional and physical connection.

Pulling up the driveway, Liz noted a contingent awaiting their arrival. Dembe and Silas met them as they rolled to a stop.

“What happened?” Red asked for the particulars as he opened his door, before heading to the other side of the car.

“Francis arranged a meeting between Mark and the O’Sullivan’s.” Silas watched the man help the woman from the vehicle. “When Francis arrived, he found Mark, along with some of his men, wounded.”

“You didn’t say anything about the men.” Red threw Dembe a questioning glance for the oversight.

“We didn’t know at first.” Silas went to bat for his friend.

“They are in good hands.” Dembe reminded. “Although admittedly, it was touch and go for a while.”

“They’ll make it, Red.” Silas assured.

“Did Mark say what happened?” Red threw his hands out to his sides, exasperated.

“They were discussing the deal and the next thing Mark knew,” Dembe relayed, “Francis was standing over him.”

Silas’ jaw worked irritably. “He got it in the back.” his tone was grim.

“In the lower back, mainly muscle.” Dembe corrected, checking with the large guard to confirm his facts.

“And Francis? Where the hell is he?” Red snapped.

“Looking for the O’Sullivan’s.” Dembe replied, his eyes locking with Red’s conveying a certain
“Is the idiot alone?” Red demanded, knowing how short the young man’s fuse was when he felt betrayed.

“His guys are there.” Silas shrugged apologetically. “Joe and David went along with them since Liz wasn’t here.”

“Well, she’s here now.” Red said, ushering Liz up the stone path. “Tell them I want them back.” The man’s intense eyes focused on the head guard, a look that told Silas things had changed in Red’s world.

“I understand.” Silas replied to the unspoken demand.

Red dipped his head quickly, content in the knowledge Lizzy was cared for before turning his attention to Dembe.

“Get Francis on the damn phone, please.” he stilled on the first step. “I want to make sure he doesn’t shoot himself or worse yet,” the man felt a tension headache beginning, “start World War III.”

Red gestured for Liz to head for the house, and made to follow her until he felt a slight tug on his sleeve. He hesitated, finding Dembe holding up a couple of envelopes. The large dark man’s eyes darted towards Elizabeth’s back.

The woman was blissfully unaware of the exchange for the simple fact Silas had maneuvered his bulk between the pass off.

Red sighed angrily, taking the offerings, shoving them into his inner lining of his jacket before continuing on his way.

While they were burning a hole in his pocket, he was already very aware of what the content would be. He just wondered what transgression was a point of interest this time.

Until he could read them for specifics, he was secure in the knowledge that no one could get within a hundred yards of the woman.

“What do you think happened?” Liz asked, as the man closed the door behind them shutting out the rest of the world for the time being.

“I haven’t the faintest idea.” Red admitted. “It’s pretty much a rule, that anyone can turn on you in this business in the blink of an eye.” he shrugged such concern away. “But sometimes, moments like this happen and it doesn’t make any sense, at all.”

“What do you mean?” she was more than interested.

“I can’t think of one reason why the O’Sullivan’s would turn on Mark.” And he couldn’t. “Let alone shoot him in the back.” he stated distastefully.

“Was there bad blood between the two?” she questioned.

“No, nothing.” Red was genuinely at a loss. “They have been doing business for years. There has never been a problem. It’s not adding up.”

“But you just said, anyone can turn on you in the business.” she shrugged. “Whose to say that Francis wouldn’t have—” Liz trailed off, realizing how stupid the remark was.
“The last person to turn on you would be Francis.” Red had picked up on her meaning. “And even if he was going to, he would have mentioned it to me first.” he shook his head at the absurdity.

“Whatever for?” She was totally stumped.

“Loyalty.” Red stated succinctly.

“I don’t think Francis would do anything... like that. I don’t even know why I...” she hastily attempted to correct any misconceptions.

“Francis will never turn his back on me.” Red said with absolute conviction.

She wanted to know more about this blind faith he had in Francis, but was waylaid by Dembe’s arrival.

The man’s expression was actually readable for once as he held the phone out.

“Where the hell are you?” Red snapped before he even got the object all the way into position to speak. “...Chicago?” he questioned, a frown on his face. “Don’t you dare go in there alone.” he warned. “Stay back and I’ll be there in an hour or so.” he took a deep breath, his head shaking back and forth as he listened impatiently to the agitated young man.

“Francis....” Red chewed the inside of his cheek, a nervous habit he had formed long ago, “don’t make me kill you when I get there.” he gritted. “Just watch them and I’ll be there as soon as humanly possible.”

Red nodded again, his shoulders losing a bit of their tension. “Watch your back.” he reminded before hanging up the phone, tossing it to Dembe. “Ready the jet, please.”

Dembe inclined his head, raising the phone as he walked from the room.

“Should I...” Liz hesitated wondering at her part in the situation.

“No, not yet.” Red shook his head, walking to the closet. “Let me see what the hell is going on first.” he said, pulling down a couple articles of clothing. “If the Feds are needed, I’ll let you know.” he threw the clothes in the bag, zipping it shut.

“I’m sorry.” he stated simplistically, turning to her.

She shook her head, perplexed.

“We needed more time.” Red crossed to her, his arms embracing her. “If the circumstances were...” he pulled back slightly, searching the lovely face.

“Mark got shot.” she frowned. “Of course you have to deal with this.”

“It’s still a piss poor ending to our time away.” he disgusted. “Don’t you think?”

“For Mark, maybe.” Liz replied seriously. “I’m perfectly happy with our time away and... you know.”

Red’s eyes lit with an inner lightness that was not there a second before, “No, I don’t know.” he leaned in, brushing his lips against hers. “Why don’t you expand on that for me.”

Liz fought the smile creeping it’s way across her face, to no avail. “I think your ego is big enough without me stroking it.”
“Baby, you can stroke anything you like... ego aside.” Red teased. “But I have to tell you,” he inched steadily closer, his gaze anything but neutral, “you are very praise worthy... ego aside.”

Liz felt that ‘ego’ lift by degrees. She tiptoed slightly placing her mouth suggestively to his. “I hope,” the blue eyes held his steadily, “we can pick up where we left off when you get back?”

“Of that you can be sure.” she was assured. Hell, he’d take a shot at her right now, if he wasn’t worried about Francis getting killed.

He walked to a closet shelf having released her reluctantly, checking the contents of another bag before closing it tightly shut.

Liz had seen a Glock, some clips and another couple weapons she did not have time to categorize. She watched contentedly as he changed into a suit.

Dembe gathered the bags, heading to the car to await his friend’s arrival.

Trailing after Red carrying his book satchel, Liz listened intently to the information he gave. The man’s steps tapered off as they reached the front door, a comfortable silence falling over them.

Red watched the woman absently twisting the ring on her finger, wondering over her thoughts. He had a few of his own that he would like to share but he wasn’t sure if this was the time.

“I'll miss you.” Liz confessed quietly.

Red broke from his thoughts, a small smile twisting his lips. He should have trusted his gut apparently. That was the exact thing he had just been about to say. He hadn’t wanted to appear too zealous after so short a time.

“I'll miss you too, sweetheart.” he dropped his bag at his feet, wrapping his arm around her as she willingly came into his embrace. “I'll call...”

Liz raised her mouth, capturing his lips in a sweet kiss, holding it for a moment. “I'll talk to you then.” she smiled softly before hugging him tightly.

“Please be careful, Red.” she muttered quietly in his ear.

“I’m always careful.” his hand squeezed the indentation of her waist possessively.

“Oh, really...” the doubt was apparent.

“Yes, really.” Red grinned against the side of her neck. “There’s so much left to be explored with you, I can promise with absolute certainty... that I have no intention of not returning to you.”

His mouth coaxed her lips into a warm passionate response. The moment was thwarted when the man heard the car fire up outside the ornate entrance doors.

“I'll be back soon.” he whispered, his tone rough against her kiss swollen lips. “If you go out, please take the guys with you.” he instructed. “And don’t overwork yourself.”

She nodded silently, accepting his mouth in a bittersweet kiss before the man stepped back. Dropping a kiss to her wrist, Red turned for the door, his look a rather dour one, before closing it behind him.
Liz sat at her desk, booting up her computer. She glanced over at the untouched sandwich, her appetite nonexistent since Red’s departure.

“Nora, I love you.” she muttered dispiritedly. “But I think your efforts are wasted today.”

Sitting aside her sandwich, she blew out a breath, opening the first of many emails awaiting her. Aram relayed that he had begun setting her up to receive files via a secure network. She had to contact him to finalize the setup.

During the call, while Aram completed the link, they caught up on office gossip. Ressler had a new girl, of course. Everyone was placing bets on how long the relationship, for lack of a better term, would last. Samar was still having showdowns with Moore, many of which, Aram had caught on camera, just for Liz.

“I’m taking over your computer for a minute.” the man said just seconds before pages with scrolling code started filling Liz’s desktop. She watched her mouse move about the screen erratically.

“What’s new with you?” the computer specialist enquired as he typed happily away.

Liz sat up, smiling brightly, excited to share her news. “Well, I...” she hesitated haltingly.

Could she tell anyone of her relationship with Red? She wasn’t the least bit embarrassed by it. But, what would it mean to the Task Force? Would they try to split them up?

If she wasn’t part of the team, Red would leave. It was as simple as that.

It was a stupid idea to try and break apart the team anyway. Which meant, that is exactly what the higher ups would do.

Red hated Bureaucracy and all the red tape that came with it. And quite frankly, so did she. It wasted so much time and effort focusing on the wrong issue, while Blacklisters roamed free.

A part of her was dying to yell it out from rooftops... that she and Red were now an item.

She would talk to Red about it first, get his point of view, then take it from there.

“Agent Keen?” Aram questioned.

“I have to finish off my PT and re-qualify before I can come back to work.” she stated brightly. “Which shouldn’t take too long.”

“Oh! That’s wonderful news!” the man beamed. “I can’t tell you how much we miss you around here.” Aram had lowered his tone, glancing hastily about to ensure no one was listening in.

“I heard...” she chuckled.

“It will be nice to have things back to normal.” he confided. “Speaking of which, how is Mr. Reddington?”

“I...” she hesitated, “what do you mean?”

“Uhm,” the man looked off across the bullpen, controlling a sudden need to stammer. Anytime he
thought of the older man, his natural nervousness arose. “We haven’t seen him in a couple days. Just wondered if he was all right?”

Liz steadied herself, blowing out a long, controlled breath. Aram was just making small talk, that’s all. She would have to stop being so paranoid.

“Oh... yes.” her lips pursed into a small smile. “He’s all right. Just away on business.” she confirmed. “Should be back tomorrow, I would think.”

“That’s good to hear.” the man gave a genuine smile. “Okay, I believe you’re all set up.” she was informed. “If you could input your user ID and password to make sure everything is operating correctly.”

“What is my user ID?” she asked.

“Whatever you want it to be.” Aram replied. “Well, it has to be at least six characters.” he quickly corrected. “Random alpha-numeric are the best, if that’s helpful.” he suggested. “Just make sure you can remember it, of course.”

She thought for a moment, choosing something simple to type. She chuckled quietly to herself, flashing back to high-school when she wrote her boyfriend’s name on her notebook as she typed out... LKRR504.

“All right, and now your password.” the computer genius prompted.

Liz thought long and hard for a moment, wondering what to choose. So many people knew so much about her. She couldn’t use what normal people might. A family member’s birth date, anniversary, or even the day she joined the FBI.

She looked about the room aimlessly then smiled rather coyly, quickly typing out, R069172R.

Even if they did know her, it didn’t mean she had to conform to any set rules about password entry.

“Well, there you go Agent Keen.” Aram smiled into the phone. “You’re all set up.”

After ending the call, having promised to meet for drinks later that week, Liz dove into the files handed over by her team. An hour later, she had signed off on each, then moved off to the BAU files.

It had been a while since she profiled a regular, run of the mill, psychopath but after a few minutes reading over the notes, she quickly fell into the groove and completed one outline before she knew it.

Quickly submitting it to the BAU, she sat back, lifting Nora’s scrumptious sandwich to her mouth, absently reading the next file.

Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad after all.

A couple hours later, she sent off another completed profile. This was actually going a lot faster than she thought it would. Much faster than her first year with the Bureau.

But then, she had been hanging around with a Criminal Mastermind for almost two years, having learned a lot more about how the human psyche worked.

More to the point, she had learned to think ‘outside the box’.

It was funny to think how much Red annoyed her in that first year. He called at the most inopportune
times. He was flirtatious. He pushed, prodded, poked...

He had driven her crazy, but what he had actually been doing was... pushing, prodding and poking at her... to think, which she had been doing all afternoon.

And that was to look beyond the straight and narrow.

He had believed she had the capability to be more... she was so glad he had encouraged her to take the fork in the road, off the beaten path.

“Well...” a voice slightly startled her from her reverie.

Liz turned, finding her guard swaggering into the room. Silas never entered a room, he dominated it.

“Well... what?” she rolled her eyes, already knowing where this was heading.

“Did you enjoy... your time away?” his look told her he had wanted to say something more crass.

“Yes....” the woman felt her cheeks flush embarrassingly.

Damn, that was annoying. Something else she had to work on.

Silas chuckled, pulling an ottoman between his legs, sitting leisurely. “You do know that your security will now be increased, yes?”

Liz tilted her head, confused by the divergence of conversation. She had been positive the man was going to ask what sexual positions she and Red had assumed.

“Yes?” she scrunched her nose.

“It’s one thing to be under Red’s care,” the man began, “another to be his lover.” He had a knack for stating facts all too bluntly.

The heated flush returned with a vengeance, though this time, Silas held his smile.

“I just wanted to warn you of what was coming.” the man said seriously. “Your life will change,” he shrugged the massive shoulders, “probably for the better.”

Liz took a deep breath, resigning herself to the fact. Then took exception. “Hey, my life,” she began, second guessing what she had begun to say, “well, maybe... a couple times...”

“I also want it made clear, the added security, in no way means... he doesn’t trust you.” Silas interrupted.

The woman frowned deeply, needing further explanation.

“Red has a lot of enemies that will stop at nothing to take what he cherishes in this world.” he stated in that matter-of-fact way. “And you, my Little Charge, are what he treasures most.”

Her cheeks took on a rosy hue, this time not of embarrassment, but pleasure. She had forgotten how much she enjoyed being with someone, being part of a couple. And if she were honest, she suddenly felt rather territorial herself.

“He feels it’s his right now, to do what is best in regards to you.” it was put succinctly. “Do you understand?”

She mulled over the news silently, trying to visualize what life with Red would entail. Processing the
reality took a few moments, but in the end she nodded thoughtfully. Though, she was sure she was just seeing the tip of the iceberg.

“How do you feel about Red?” the man enquired candidly.

“I...” she hesitated, unsure how to answer the question. Her feelings about Red were private and if they were to be shared, they would be shared with him first.

“I’m not asking you to declare your love for the man.” Silas sensed her reluctance in discussing her feelings, at this time. “I only meant, do you fear for his safety?”

“Yes, of course.” she nodded.

“How has that feeling changed in any way?” he prodded artfully.

Elizabeth focused on the feelings in her heart. Visions of her time with Red flashed in her mind’s eye, a warmth encompassing her.

As their day had progressed, the touches had become more affectionate... comforting. The talks, more personal.

She felt a smile form on her lips, recalling how they had cuddled in bed this morning after having made love.

She hadn’t realized until just now, how important it was to Red to have that moment, regardless of the fact that he was needed elsewhere.

“Spending time with you, is of the upmost importance to me, Elizabeth.”

For the first time, in as long as she could remember, her feelings, her happiness, had been a factor in someone else’s choices. Put above anything else.

She felt an overwhelming surge of affection, her heart constricting painfully as she fought back tears, for the man’s actions had touched her deeply. Red had wanted to give of himself, to her.

And with that, came a sudden fear that it... he... would be taken away.

Liz sat up straighter in her chair, her fingers curling tightly around the armrest.

“...Yes,” she admitted freely, “my feelings have changed.”

Visions of having watched the man take two shots to his body. The blood that had poured from him had been startling and very real.

“He’s in just as much danger as I am.” her voice shook with the realization. “Even more so.” she declared. “He should have extra security.”

“I agree with your assessment.” Silas had watched her body language, already sensing how she would react. “Which is why I came to you now.” he stated one of the reasons. “I’m not sure how aware you are... just how scared shitless Red was when that... man broke into your home.” Silas had his reasons for bringing up the past. “He was powerless, unable to get to you fast enough, which bothered him for days.” he understated. “Then Carver happened...”

Liz tensed at the name, a sudden rush of adrenaline seizing her up tight.

If she felt like this now, safe in her own room... what had Red truly felt at that time? She felt the
physical pain and emotional upheaval. And Red must have felt... responsible. That he had the ability to stop it and had been hindered by his decision to keep the peace with her, which had almost cost her, her life.

He must have felt very conflicted.

“I want to explain about that night.” Silas had been meaning to for some time now.

She waved the issue aside, but he continued purposely.

“We had been given the night off.” he had remanded himself countless times. “Red assumed... hoped, you would be going back home with him.”

“I was going to...” she replied quietly. “I wanted to...” it was getting easier to admit such things, especially to this man who never seemed to judge and accepted what was so readily.

“He knew something was wrong.” Silas further explained. “That’s why he turned around. He had been looking for an excuse, and found one, but I think his gut was gnawing at him. He would have found a way regardless.”

“But he still blamed himself, didn’t he?” she now realized as much.

“He did...” Silas nodded. “I don’t want you to experience that if you don’t have to.” the man shrugged nonchalantly, though Liz could see the truth behind the flippant attitude. “At some point we will probably be out-manned, out-gunned. We won’t win every time. No one does.” He had to be honest. “But I can at least give you both some assurance, that there will always be a fighting chance.”

She had to admit, when Red’s guys had shown up that first time with the intruder into her home, she had slept peacefully knowing that they were there and someone had her back. And of course, Red had been right there beside her, so to speak, on the phone, which was equally as comforting.

“Let’s do this.” Liz made an executive decision, then second guessed herself. “How much will it cost? And how many guards will he need to be safe?”

“I think we can work it into Red’s budget.” Silas grinned.

“I can do it.” Liz scowled unsure in her own mind if her budget could cover such an expense, truth told. She had savings however.

“Why should you?” Silas was at a loss. “Take advantage of Red’s corrupt way of life... I know I do.” he patted her knee, standing abruptly. “I will see to the details, immediately.”

He hesitated at the door, having promised himself that he wouldn’t give her the business. “Was it everything I said it would be?” the man laughed quietly at the woman’s brightened features. “That good, huh?” he seemed overly impressed. “The old guy’s still got it.”

“You know,” she straightened papers to hide her fluster, “we could have just talked.”

“That is not the face of a woman,” he pointed to her rosy cheeks, “who spent the day just... talking.” he grin widened as her blush deepened. “...I’m happy for you, both.” the man replied seriously, to her surprise. “I’ll get to work finding your guards.”

Liz watched Silas go, a little thrown by the change in atmosphere. Something seemed... different.
She couldn’t put her finger on it but it made her happy.

That sense of accomplishment she had been feeling since the early afternoon, suddenly flourished and she realized, while she didn’t need Silas’ approval... she did appreciate that he seemed genuinely fond of her now. He had taken one of her decisions seriously and actually acted upon it.

The day had not been a total loss even though Red was not here to share it with her.

She would have preferred the man’s presence of course, but she felt a new found strength realizing the source... Red Reddington’s absolute encouragement and his constant belief in her abilities.
Reflections

May 6

We lost track of Reddington, then found he had gone to New York
What was surprising was that you went with him.
What was unbelievable was that you stayed with him in a single room suite.
And then you were seen kissing him.
What the hell is he turning you into Liz! What other evil has he corrupted you with?
I never thought you would become his whore.
We have to get you away from him. He is filling your mind with lies...

What were you thinking!
Why the hell did you shoot back?
We could have been rid of Reddington with that next shot.
Your mind has been distorted from staying with him too long.
Or perhaps, you didn’t know it was the assistance that you needed to escape.
Maybe all you saw was a threat?
Forgive me angel. Of course you fought back.
You were not forewarned of the attack.
You only did as your training demanded.
We will try again. And when we do, you take cover while we dispatch his evil from the world.

Red scanned the letters once more, before tossing them to the ledge beside him.
Shaking his head with annoyance, he lifted his drink, sipping the liquid. He felt his blood pressure lower as the alcohol burned a warmed path down his throat before settling pleasantly in his stomach.
“Does he still sign his name with an ‘X’?”
“Why would you assume that?” Red inclined his head to the pages. “Reading his endless blathering grows tiring.”
“Silas?” The man’s tone said it all. “The man who still signs his name with an ‘X’.” A disconcerting brow was lifted.
“I’m sure that is for security reasons.” Red was relatively sure. Then second-guessed his statement. “He does it for a lark…” No, that didn’t sound kosher either.
“Do you want Silas to secure him?” Dembe asked, sipping at his tea.
Red shook his head, getting lost in thought. There was so much more to take into account now, besides the usual precautions.

He and Lizzy were... dating. What an archaic word. A couple. He tried again. No, that sounded vaguely... what century was he from exactly?

Whatever the label, much had taken place since he last read one of these ‘loon’ letters as he was beginning to categorize them in his mental processing.

Made very apparent by the events that had taken place between them.

He had made love to her. Finally.

Repeatedly...

And it had truly been worth the wait.

She was... beautiful, amazing... responsive to his touch, to his affection.

He felt at peace. A part of him had been missing and had suddenly been given over to him, leaving him feeling whole... complete.

When he’d been married, there had been a certain component missing. And he hadn’t been aware of what it was, until just now.

There hadn’t been a sense of unity. He and Carla had never been... a team.

He had done his thing. Worked, moved up the proverbial ladder, provided a comfortable living for his family. She had raised their daughter, made a comfortable home, made daily life run like clockwork.

But there hadn’t been any real passion. Over the years, he had wondered if there had ever been any love, to be honest.

About the only thing they agreed on was Jennifer. Their daughter.

Other than that, in retrospect, he thought maybe Carla married him because it was expected. She was supposed to get married, have children and be Susie Homemaker.

And while he had been fine with that, providing for her and doing what came natural to him, which was taking care of his wife and child.

He had to admit, he had craved sensuality, passion and affection from his wife. He knew they couldn’t make love in every room like he wanted, not with a small child in the house, but it was sometimes weeks before she would be intimate with him.

Understanding that she was tired from housework or taking care of the baby, he had hired a sitter and housekeeper, to take the load off... but still, she didn’t seem receptive.

Until that is... talk of making another baby was laid on the table.

He wasn’t opposed to another child. What he had been opposed to, was that he had been relegated to sperm donor and not lover.

He had been so angry, so hurt. Not to mention Red had a rough couple days at work, enough that his CO had noticed.
The man had pulled him aside and pushed until Red had snapped and let loose, ranting about how pissed off he really was with the matters at home.

His CO had smiled, gestured for him to sit and in the course of talking with the older gentlemen, had ended up with an appointment to see a marriage counselor.

Carla had grudgingly attended, and the relationship had strengthened somewhat overtime. Instead of focusing on sex, they’d cuddled, held hands and made an effort to reconnect over a couple of months period.

It had been hard not making love to her, not pushing the issue, but the adult time was appreciated. Then they had been given the clear to make love... which ended in a heated argument.

She wanted to go bareback, he wanted to use a condom.

They were not in a place to have a baby brought into the fold.

All the hard work they had done, had been thrown out the window in one split second.

Even the psychologist had asked if Carla had placated Red, to get what she wanted. He remembered Carla’s face very vividly when the Doctor, a female herself, had asked his wife if she loved Red anymore or was she simply doing what family expected of them.

The questions had been met with silence.

A silence that said enough.

Red had moved out that very night.

Not with the intent to divorce, but to give space, to really focus on what each wanted out of the marriage. The plan had been to spend time just communicating on every subject under the sun, not just their sex life.

It had been working well. He saw his daughter over dinner, played with her, they had bath time and then he’d read her a story while his wife got ready for their date before the baby sitter would show up, leaving them to spend the rest of the evening together.

They’d been dating somewhere close to four months, when after their date that night, they had gone back to his apartment to retrieve Jennifer’s book bag he’d forgotten after he’d picked her up from school.

In the course of gathering Jennifer’s things, they had made love.

And it was just as it had been in their first year of marriage.

Not only had it felt amazing, touching her again. They talked to one another throughout. Not words to arouse, but of affection. The touches and kisses were affectionate.

Needless to say, he was very excited by their future dates. They’d had two dates a week and over the next two month period, everything was working splendidly. Until their planned date in the second week of November.

Which turned into a disaster.

Both had forgotten that they were expected at a family dinner for the holidays, but went with the flow, agreeing to go, have dessert and coffee together afterwards in lieu of their dinner date.
In the course of the evening, there was a smattering of talk between the sexes as there always was, until Jennifer had spilled milk on her dress.

Going off in search of his wife to find the baby bag, he’d come upon her talking with the women, asking if she was pregnant yet.

She said she was trying and hoped the next test would yield a positive result.

Something about the way she had said it... set off warnings in Red’s head.

Pulling her outside, she’d confessed she took the birth control for a month, then stopped... and hadn’t told him.

It had felt like such a betrayal.

It was not so much that Carla had stopped taking the birth control. It seemed to him, that her only goal, her true goal... hadn’t been to make their marriage work, but to please everyone else but her husband.

He had turned around without another word, kissed Jennifer goodbye and left.

He continued the routine established with his daughter, but that was all. If anything, Red had gone out of his way to take Jennifer to the park or library, anywhere that was away from her mother.

He had spent Thanksgiving with them, wholly fixated on his Jennifer. He made sure to be there every night to have play time and read her a story before leaving, all without having said a word... to her mother.

And then he was informed that Katarina was in trouble.

On his way to the airport, he stopped by the house, telling his daughter that he loved her and that he couldn’t wait to see her dance in Swan Lake before kissing and hugging her goodbye.

She had skipped off to her room to play, leaving him alone with his wife.

They had stood in silence for a moment, before Carla sighed, sharing her thoughts. She thought a baby would strengthen their relationship.

His response had been to ask for a divorce.

He could still remember the look of shock on her face. She hadn’t been expecting it, at all.

Which to him, said even more about their relationship. The woman seemed obsessed with the fact that telling the family such a revelation would not only be embarrassing but that everyone would know their marriage was not the happy one she had presented it to be.

That Carla had just assumed that he’d live with it... to live without love or at the very least, admiration, left a very bad taste in his mouth.

Red quickly outlined visitation with Jennifer, alimony and child support ideas he had in mind, advised her to speak with an attorney, saying they would discuss the details further when he returned.

He wanted to be as amicable as possible, if only for Jennifer’s sake.

Over the course of dealing with Katarina, he had kept in contact with his lawyer and finally agreed to
stipulations just before he returned for downtime. He had an early Christmas with his daughter and had loved spending the time with her. Before he set out to leave again, he met with his wife and signed the papers with out a second thought.

Surprisingly, Carla had hesitated.

“You don’t love me.” he had said. “I don’t think you ever did.” he sighed. “But we love our daughter and that’s all that’s important. When you’re ready, sign them.” he had given her a nod, before walking out of the office, intent that day on getting Jennifer from school.

It wasn’t until all the dust settled, and he was completely assured that everybody was in secure, though separate locations, that he learned Carla finally signed but hadn’t filed the papers.

He had offered to file them himself, when Carla had the gall to ask if he was having an affair.

At that time, Red had let her know, in no uncertain terms, he had never strayed in all the time they were together, and hadn’t even now, considering they were still married.

She looked so stricken, that he had a momentary lapse. “Okay, I will make a bargain with you.” he was willing to actually reconsider his position. “If you can tell me, to my face, if you can say the words... I love you Ray,” a part of him couldn’t believe he was still willing to make such a compromise, “we will go on as before with the understanding there will be no additional child at this time.”

But she couldn’t. Couldn’t even form the words that she may have loved him at one time. It even appeared she was choking on the thought.

By that time, the pain had lessened and watching her fighting to attempt to voice her affection for him, didn’t hurt him at all. He already knew what he was to her. All that was left was loving his daughter, and he was more than fine with that.

He never saw either again until a chance case with Lizzy and a meeting with Berlin. His ex-wife had grown even more cold and bitter, than he remembered.

All that mattered now was that through her childhood, Jennifer had been safe. He was glad Carla and she had been placed in WITSEC.

If only for his daughter’s protection.

He may not have any idea where the hell she was, but she wasn’t tied to him in any way, shape or form which meant she was completely off the grid.

One day he hoped to find his daughter. One day he would. But in the meantime, there was Lizzy.

He was very excited to see where their relationship would take them. She was like him, in a sense.

She may have been married at one point, but all she had been was an assignment. She wasn’t loved. She wasn’t shown true affection.

She may have thought Tom loved her, but was slowly coming to the realization that she had loved Tom so much, she had unconsciously, been filling the gaps in their relationship to make it seem as if the love was there.

But she would find out soon enough what it felt like to be the center of another’s universe, via him. Because Red loved Lizzy, whether she was aware of it or not.
She didn’t love him yet, that had to grow. But it would be nice if she was fond of him, which he sensed she was.

He was waiting for her to catch up to the intensity of his own feelings.

They had grown closer over the last few weeks.

He sat up, zoning off into the bulkhead, thinking back over that time.

He had been preparing for a trip to the frozen tundra, and in the midst of packing, Lizzy had given him a new pair of leather fleece lined gloves and a scarf because she knew it would be cold.

She said she had purchased them for a Christmas gift and had forgotten in the course of the very hectic week, to present them to their new owner. Regardless of when she purchased them, she had still thought of him. And a Christmas gift, at that.

On his return home, he found Lizzy had changed the bedding from a jewel toned to a soft blue quilt and fleece blankets that he thought were comfortable as hell.

He realized the reason which became more important because she was finally comfortable where she was. She felt like she was... home.

She had not only purchased the quilt because she knew he hated comforters, she had specifically bought him a new pillow with cooling properties because she had seen him rubbing his neck quite a few mornings. It felt amazing and his neck pain had eased considerably.

He loved that pillow.

To him, even though they hadn’t been dating per se, that one change alone was the equivalent to exchanging keys in his opinion.

And then it dawned on him.

_Had_ they been dating and hadn’t been aware of doing so? Not in the conventional sense, but had they turned a corner somewhere, even before New York, and didn’t even realize it?

“Oh my God...” Red muttered quietly.

“Raymond?” Dembe snapped.

Red blinked, finding his friend staring in that thoughtful manner Dembe had about him.

“I called you three times, you didn’t respond.” Dembe explained. “Are you unwell?”

“No, no. I’m fine.” he waved off the concern, then leaned into his thighs, lacing his fingers between his knees.

“Just woolgathering,” Red assured, “it’s nothing. Where were we?”

“I asked if you wanted me to instruct Silas to pick Tom up?” the man replied slowly, somewhat amused by his friends preoccupation.

Red shook his head, “Not until we get back.” he squeezed his hands together tightly, cracking the tension from the long thick fingers. “I want to be assured of Lizzy’s security before they do anything.”
Dembe nodded slowly, as if comprehending the words before a small smile worked it’s way onto his face.

“What?” Red sat back, taking another sip of the amber liquor.

“Has Elizabeth not been secure all this time?”

Red rolled exasperated eyes to his friend, knowing very well what the man meant. He was also fishing for confirmation.

“Okay, you meddlesome voyeur.” He sat the tumbler down, straightening his vest before leveling his eyes with Dembe’s. “Lizzy and I are dating... a couple...” he tried again, each adjective sounding so juvenile. “We’re together.”

Dembe smiled slowly, “Yes, I know.”

“Francis told you?” Red grumbled, knowing the young man couldn’t keep a juicy tidbit like that to himself for very long.

“No...” his friend grinned, his brow lifting as though waiting for Red to make the connection.

No, of course Francis wouldn’t have said anything, since he already thought they were engaged. Then understanding dawned on him.

“How long Dembe?” Red asked quietly.

“I think I first noticed the changes after the guards fought in the foyer.”

Red sat back, bouncing once against the expensive leather, staring at the man in bewilderment. “Why didn’t you say something?” he exasperated.

Dembe chuckled into his tea glass, tickled by not only the question, but the higher tone in Raymond’s voice.

“I thought you knew.” he chortled as he watched his friend lean back into his elbows.

Red dropped his face in his hands, muffling his voice. “That was a stupid fucking question.”

“Yes.” Dembe confirmed. “You are excited.” it was stated placidly. “Perhaps a little frightened of the future.”

Red sighed, “Yes,” returning for solace to his drink.

“It wasn’t solely your fault your first marriage failed, Raymond.”

“I hate when you do that.” Red grumbled when Dembe smile knowingly, further irking him that the other man had followed along easily with his esoteric thought

How Dembe knew what he had been thinking, he’d never know. Though, they had spent enough time together, and the subject matter at hand, he supposed, was easy enough to guess.

But it didn’t lessen that he hated the man’s ability to read his mind.

“You are aware of your flaws, and own up to them. You also know your strengths and how to apply them best to serve her.” Dembe bolstered. “You have both done this before.”

“Tom Keen...” Red scowled.
“You are not Tom Keen.” Dembe stressed. “You love Elizabeth.” he stated the facts as he knew them. Facts that Raymond didn’t deny. “You also respect her, care for her.”

Red nodded silently, listening.

“She needs your support, understanding and patience.” Dembe said.

“I will always give her those things.” Red stated without hesitation.

He knew that it wasn’t always going to be picture perfect. He would face the obstacles when they came. He was very adept at overcoming obstacles.

“But she also needs the romance, affection and love only you can give her.” Dembe added.

Red fell silent, so many thoughts crossing his mind. He felt comfortable voicing the most condemning to this man. “Dembe, how can she ever love the man I have become?”

Dembe frowned, setting his tea on it’s saucer, staring at the man in confusion.

“She already does.”

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The plane had fallen silent after Dembe stated what he believed to be a fact, knowing very well, Raymond did not yet believe it to be so.

But then, Elizabeth may not have come to that conclusion herself.

Though her actions spoke louder than words, if anyone asked him.

Red felt the plane begin to make its final descent just as he finished off his drink and locked his thoughts away for the moment, getting his head back in the game. Readying himself for what came next.

Finding out what the hell happened, and why.

He needed to get home to Lizzy. He had promised he would come back.

And this was one promise he intended to keep.

As they hit the runway, he glanced out the window, finding Francis there waiting for him, as requested. Much to his surprise.

He would have thought he’d have to hunt the boy down, he had been on such a tear earlier, wanting to enact revenge on those who had hurt his friend.

They coasted to a stop, and as per their usual procedure, Dembe headed for the door while Red gathered his bag. Both men made their way down the stairs.

“Tell me what you know...” Red said as he fell in step with the younger man.

“The O’Sullivan’s claim they had nothing to do with it.” Francis gritted.

“And they left Mark there, why?” Red asked, before taking a seat in the back of the car.

“That’s what I wanted to fucking know!” Francis snapped.
Red set a steadying hand on Francis’. “Calm down. We’ll figure this out.”

“Whatever the outcome, I will no longer be using their services.” Francis seethed.

Red side glanced the young man. “Keep your perspective.”

Much like himself, Francis didn’t take kindly to back stabbers. Only time would tell how Francis would handle what he considered a great act of disloyalty.
May 7-8

The next couple days passed in a flurry. Liz whittled down her case files while Red, Dembe and Francis worked to find out what happened with Mark.

Liz had visited Mark herself, seeing if he needed anything in particular. She found the man affable, amusing and in good spirits despite what had happened.

It was late afternoon when Red had called to inform her that they were close to settling matters once and for all.

Liz hadn’t wanted him to go, but knew he had to. Red’s sense of loyalty would allow nothing less. Word had spread he was on the hunt for these men, he would lose face if did not follow through on the perceived threat.

Even with assurances from Silas that a team was now following Red, the woman felt uneasy when Red reached his final destination. Especially listening to how pissed Francis was in the background, despite Red’s calming influence.

Adding to the dilemma, she hadn’t known what to say or do before they had ended the call. There was an awkward silence for a few seconds on both parts. Simply saying that she’d see him later, didn’t seem enough somehow.

“You have that fedora on?” she questioned lightly, an under hint of sexuality in her tone.

He laughed throatily, “What?”

“I really like you in a fedora, so bring it home as soon as humanly possible.”

The man’s smile softened as did his tone. “Is the fedora the only thing you like?”

“Yeah, so don’t get it messy or anything.” she tried for flippancy, but her heart constricted slightly and instantly dismissed the images her statement had conjured. “I’ll expect you soon.”

That intimacy she had been missing, had come back with a vengeance.

There were no words of adoration, but it had felt personal, private. Something just for them.

There had been a moment of silence, before he gently severed the link that had both worried and calmed her. Had he been as reluctant to end the conversation as she?

Liz had wandered restlessly through the house for a little bit, wondering what was happening on Red’s end of things.

“You can’t do this.” Silas stated quietly, making her jump out of her skin, his bulk suddenly barring way of her incessant pacing.

“Do what?” she frowned, rubbing the cell phone in her hand methodically.

“Let the worry eat at you.” his expression darkened. “Red knows what he’s doing.” she was informed. “You pacing the floors isn’t helping him or you.”
“...I know.” she looked up at her guard, hiding her shaking hands, folding them beneath her breasts. “But this is the first time I...”

“There’s a different dynamic now.” he acknowledged.

Liz sighed heavily, leaning back into the wall behind her, nodding. “Yeah...”

“Have you ever dated someone in the Service?” the man enquired, bracing his arms on a table behind him, relaxing into his newfound stance.

“No...” she shook her head.

“Well, you need to get it in your head, that you are now.” It was advised. “Red may not be in uniform, but what he’s doing is no different.” he tilted his head slightly. “He’ll go out on an operation and come back when they’re finished.” his brows raised slightly. “It’s as simple as that.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if I could be like other girlfriends and write to him, to pass the time.” she strived for lightness.

“Who says you can’t?” the man’s brow furrowed.

“Doesn’t it seem a bit redundant.” she half laughed. “He will be home before I could send anything.”

“No, because you’re getting something off your chest,” he spoke slowly as if to speaking to Francis. “I’m not angry with him or...” her brows crinkled, showing her confusion.

“Think of it as a diary, it’s just in letter form.”

Liz hadn’t thought of it in those terms. She had never been really good at keeping a diary, but she was really good at writing letters and it would be an outlet to express her feelings at any give time or situation.

“He feels the same about you, you know.” Silas broke her reverie. “He just expresses his emotions in another outlet.”

“You mean, he worries about me too?”

“Well, you are younger, not as experienced.” he allowed. “We all know that.”

She couldn’t argue with him, though she very much wanted to. She had been afraid a couple times, granted. Unsure what her next move should be in a dangerous situation where seconds counted.

Wondered if she was going to die.

It all happened within the span of a split moment. But it still happened. Seconds of distraction.

“He doesn’t writes me letters,” she allowed a teasing smile to touch her lips, “so what does he do?”

“He calls to hear your voice.” Silas hesitantly confided.

Though Red had never divulged any personal information such as that, after the man had assured that Liz was alive and well, Red had smiled every time he glanced at the phone the rest of the day.

Silas was a trained observer and he had observed such things.
“You’ll figure out the balance between home and work soon. Don’t worry.” Silas bolstered. “Do your job, go on with your day... Red will be fine.”

“And if he’s not...” she questioned softly.

“We’ll handle it.” again Silas’ brows took on that disapproving ‘look’. “We always do.”

She startled visibly when a trilling sound came from her phone, a sound which usually annoyed her. But right now, it was the most beautiful sound in the world.

She looked down at the screen, tensing. “It’s Dembe.”

Silas stood straighter, readying himself to take action if need be. “Answer it.”

Taking a shaky breath, Liz brought the phone to her ear. “Dembe?” she heard her voice shake, chastising herself.

“Baby...” Red’s low voice eased her panicked heart, her breath escaping in a tremulous rush.

“...Red.” she lifted relieved eyes to her guard, setting a bracing hand on a nearby chair. “Are you okay? Is everyone—”

“Yes, we’re all fine... for the most part.” he glanced around the dockyard at the heavily armed men. “We’re in the process of cleaning up and—”

“You’re not telling me something.” she narrowed her eyes, her hand gripping the phone tighter.

“Then you don’t need to know.” Silas piped in helpfully.

“He’s my boyfriend.” she snapped.

The man’s throaty chuckle tickled her ear, instantly making her press the phone closer to hear it more clearly.

Red was really enjoying this new aspect of their relationship. She seemed truly relieved, for once, to hear his voice.

“I miss you.” that voice dropped into a sensual caress.

Liz’s eyes softened, her shoulders relaxing as a slow smile graced her lips.

“Whatever you said,” Silas called out loud enough for Red to hear, “just turned our resident FBI agent to a pile of gooey mush!”

Though Red’s soft laugh returned, Liz shot the guard an evil glare, throwing a pillow at him, which he caught easily much to her annoyance.

“I know something isn’t right.” she stated emphatically, shooting the guard another dirty look.

“Francis got a flesh wound.” Red chuckled.

“It is not a flesh wound!” the younger man groused in the background. “A tank could drive through this thing!”

“You couldn’t even get the head of a needle into ‘that’ thing.” Red corrected.
“Is he really okay?” Liz wanted assurances.

“He’s fine.” Red grumbled. “Because it is just a flesh wound.”

“Look at this!” the young man had obviously stepped closer to show off his boo-boo, “Look at this!”

“What happened?” she asked, having heard Red’s melodramatic sigh.

“The O’Sullivan’s were being framed by the Ashcroft’s.” Red turned his back on Francis who was clearly favoring the minor wound.

Red secretly thought the boy was more upset by the fact the bullet had ruined his new, expensive leather jacket. Francis was sticking his finger through the holes, wiggling it somberly, showing it to anyone who would pay attention.

“Another faction who wanted the business.”

“And now they are...” she winced physically, having a pretty good idea where this was going, but some morbid sense of morality made her ask the inevitable.

“Probably going to be facing ten to twenty in the Federal Penitentiary.”

“You didn’t...” she hesitated, unsure how to voice her thoughts, especially after how she upset Red in New York.

“Kill them?” he supplied for her. “No.”

Red quickly outlined what had happened, how they involved the police and were now cleaning up the mess left behind.

With no loss of life on either side.

“What can I say,” Red’s warm voice washed over her, “a good woman has a way of changing a man.” his voice muffled for a moment. “Just a minute, sweetheart.”

She frowned a little, thinking about what he had just said. Was he purposely changing his modus operandi to accommodate her feelings? If that were the case, it could prove disastrous for the man. It was an issue that must be discussed and hastily.

“When will you be home?” she asked quietly.

“Could be a couple hours, could be in the morning.” he could not give a definitive answer.

“You will keep in touch?” Liz needed him to.

“You know I will.”

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May 9

Red called again twice, once to update her and then just before she went to bed, to wish her goodnight.
A couple hours into reading the new files she and Silas had picked up from the Blacksite, Liz was surprised to hear the doorbell ring in the late afternoon.

Sliding the radio closer, she waited for Silas’ forthcoming information. She hoped the intruder in this instance, was the ever reliable pizza guy.

She was more than pleasantly surprised to hear Red’s voice echoing in the spacious foyer. It took only seconds for the familiar footfalls to resonate down the long corridor.

“You’re home.” she brightened as the man walked briskly into the bedroom.

“So I am...” he grumbled, rolling his eyes to find her sitting on the bed, going over a file, Keres in her lap. Crawling up onto the bed, he unceremoniously sat the cat aside. “You are not the pussy I’m wanting.”

Her smile widened as he flicked the brim of his signature fedora.

“Should I keep my hat on?” he teased, moving into the giggling woman’s sphere, gingerly kissing that smiling mouth, pushing aside her work files as he centered her on the bed.

He fixed her securely in his embrace, his knee subsequently pushing her unresisting thighs as he settled his weight half on, half off, the curvaceous form. “...I missed you.”

She lost herself in the passionate kisses for a brief moment before drawing back slightly, a frown on the pretty brow.

“Did you ring my bell?” she moved her head, allowing the man to kiss her neck to his heart’s content, before gasping as his large hand cupped her crotch.

“You can ring my bell... later.” she opened her legs wider for him to play with the area he seemed so intent on. “But I meant, my doorbell.”

“I did, yes.” he replied, nipping her earlobe.

“Why?” she drawled.

“Because it is proper etiquette when visiting someone’s home.” he mumbled against her soft skin, his fingers deftly plucking at the buttons on her top.

She rolled to the side, aiding in her shirts removal, scowling. “You’re my boyfriend... significant other,” she rolled the other way, losing the shirt completely, “...whatever.”

Red smiled against her mouth listening to her struggle, as he had, trying to label what they were. They really needed to find something that described them... their relationship. Whatever the hell was going on between them.

“Yes, I am.” his attention focused hastily on the sight of the newly bared flesh as he removed her bra.

“You know...” she sighed happily as his mouth engulfed her nipple. The woman gently removed the fedora, laying it aside, “you can just come in.”

“Oh, I plan to...” his gruff voice assured her as he pulled at her pants, revealing little blue panties to his view.
“I meant...”

“This is your home, it is only polite that I knock first.” he kissed her hip bone, as he artfully lowered one side of the offending object in his way.

“I don’t want those conditions between us.” she sighed softly.

“I don’t want anything between us at this moment.” Red pulled the skin tight pants free of her feet, tossing them carelessly. He bent, gently licking her ankles, kissing her shins, her knees... until he heard her giggling infectiously yet again.

He looked up, sighing heavily. “Really?” he questioned moodily. “Fucking cat.” he grumbled, watching Keres settle comfortably across Lizzy’s bare chest.

“Is this a new kink I’ve never heard about?” Silas asked from the doorway, his stocky frame filling most of the void. Behind the man, the soft light of the hallway filtered around his bulk.

Red snapped his eyes towards the wide open door and the large guard.

“Something you’ve never heard about...what the fuck...” Red gritted. “Don’t you knock?”

“Not normally.” the large man shrugged. “The element of surprise normally works better for my kind.” he clenched his jaw quickly, holding off his smile when the veins in Red’s neck bulged.

“In this case though, I was just making my rounds...the door was wide open.” he gestured to the open door as exhibit A. “Now I find my charge being... manhandled.” Silas again, gestured to exhibit B.

The woman in question giggled further when Keres flicked it’s tail, smacking her in the face.

Red scrubbed at his face hard, removing his jacket. He grabbed the cat off her breasts, tossed the jacket over her partially nude form before stalking towards the door.

He shoved the cat into the guard’s waiting arms. “Skip your checks... until summoned.” Red directed harshly through his clenched teeth. “She’s covered.”

“Well, she is now.” Silas laughed, backing up quickly as Red slammed the door in his face.

Red glared at the door, tossing the lock for good measure before heading back for little treasure awaiting him on the bed.

He lay beside the woman, who had unearthed her face, the blue eyes peering mischievously out from behind the stylish jacket.

“Well, that was embarrassing.” she winced through her smile. “How will I ever live it down?”

Red gripped the jacket, yanking it free. He stared contentedly at the half naked woman laying beside him.

He loved the way she caught her lower lip with her teeth and batted those enormous blue eyes, the demure appearance was sexy as hell. But when she breathed in, pushing her breasts forward... it beckoned him back to his original intent.

He forgot all about his ire, preferring to concentrate on more pleasant matters.

Their mouths connected, the rest of the world slipping away. His hands roamed the curves of her
body. He allowed her to remove his tie, his shirt, then felt the latch on his belt release.

He worked his hand under the rim of the skimpy panties she wore. Massaging her gently, he felt that little nub quickly respond to his touch.

“Did you miss me?” he rumbled deeply.

She nodded sharply. “Shit...” she lifted urgently into his hand, “yes, I missed you.”

He kneaded her breast affectionately, his eyes deepening involuntarily.

She wiggled into the touch, watching his head lower. “Say it again...” she whimpered breathlessly, her hand holding him to his excruciating indulgence.

“Say what again?” he muttered around the nipple in his mouth, not opposed to placating her in any manner.

“That you missed me.” she lifted to his intense exploration.

“Damn right I missed you.” he groaned, feeling the rush of wet heat on his fingers as he pet her opening. “You’re so wet...”

She gasped, her eyes flying open, as a realization hit her full on.

“Oh shit!” she struggled to move him aside, before hastily scrambling off the bed.

He rolled to his side, following quickly behind her, as she bolted for the bathroom.

“Shit! Shit!” she bitched, her movements quick.

Red stopped at the tiled floor as he watched her race to the toilet, dropping her panties in the sink as she passed, the answer to his questions more than apparent now.

“Please tell me I didn’t get anything on the bed...” she groaned.

Red walked to the sink, automatically running water over the stained panties. He left momentarily, checking her precious quilt and sheets and found nothing, not even a speck.

Hearing the toilet flush, he headed back to the bathroom to resume his task. He had just rinsed the remaining blood from light blue fabric when he heard the door open on the adjoining bathroom cubicle.

He glanced over his shoulder to find her standing there without a stitch on. Her flushed body, tousled hair and hazy, sparkling eyes captured his attention exclusively.

“Red, I’m so sorry.” she grimaced, having seen the remaining blood on his hand.

He frowned, then realized what she was looking at. “Oh, would you stop.” he flicked his hand under the running water, washing up quickly. “I was having a wonderful time. Were you?”

Their eyes met in the mirror, a slow smile overtaking his handsome face. He traced her body down as far as he could see, before returning a sultry stare.

Dropping the towel in his hands, he turned on her. “Well...” he walked slowly forward, his hand reaching out, snagging her bare bottom, persuasively dragging her closer.
The woman felt her naked body press intimately to his half naked one before relaxing into his touch. She placed her palms flat against his chest, enjoying the warmth.

“Admit it,” he prompted, his look more than confident. “Before this happened,” he glanced down in a perfunctory manner, “you were not adverse to having me between your legs.”

Liz wrapped her arms around his neck, burying her face into the crook of his neckline. Red settled his other arm around her back, embracing her tightly. He had his answer.

“Then, that’s all that matters,” he muttered, his breath fanning her temple. He lifted her face, his lips touching hers almost reverently. “Have you been taking those pills I gave you?”

“Yes, which is why I kind of forgot I...” she gestured lamely to her person, “I haven’t been...you know.”

“Cramping?” Red smiled.

She rolled her eyes expressively. “...Yes,” she shrugged it off, looking back towards the bedroom. “Did I get anything on the bed?” she questioned, then cupped her abdomen, wincing slightly, said pills wearing off.

“Nope...” his smile fell away, instantly replaced by a frown. Deftly grabbing the needed medication, he placed them along with a bottle of water in her hand, then jerked his head back towards the bedroom. “Shall we?”

She smiled at him, nodding eagerly. She reached for the cabinet for her supplies, only to have Red put a hand out, stopping her.

“Go...” He kicked off his shoes, urging her to the bedroom. “Go on, I’ll be right there.”

She looked at the tampons, then shrugged. She walked towards the bed only to feel a strong set of arms capture her seconds later. He pulled her into his body, letting her feel his naked skin.

“This seems so familiar.” she smiled, cuddling back into his embrace. “Do I know you.”

“Better than anybody I know.” he rubbed his hand over her abdomen, soothing her aches and pains.

Red drew back the blankets, laying out a towel before she crawled up on the bed. He closed the blinds, shutting down the lights, leaving the room in a soft comfortable glow. The late afternoon sunshine filtered along the edges of the wood slats casting a intricate pattern on the ceiling.

He slid in behind her, resuming his earlier actions, gently massaging her abdomen. She got lost in the hypnotic and soothing affection, relaxing totally.

“Does that feel better?” he whispered.

“Yeah...” she sighed languidly, feeling Red’s flaccid length rub against her bottom.

She suddenly became very aroused.

The thought the man had completely set aside his earlier need to wholly concentrate on her instead, was more appreciated than he would ever know.

She gripped his hand, directing it over the flat mound of her tummy, settling it on the top of her sex.
“Baby, we don’t have to do anything.” he assured quickly. “That’s not what this is about.”

She moved his hand lower, feeling his fingers instinctively brush at the trimmed hair of her mound, “I’ve been curious,” she brought the subject up for debate, “since our talk.” she moved closer to him in every possible way. “What all the fuss was about this period thing.”

She felt his lips curve into a smile at the edge of her hairline. His fingers dropped suggestively against her clit, picking up where they had left off.

She leaned back into his chest, spreading her legs a little to accommodate his probing, quickly feeling her body respond to his expertise.

“Is that how you like it?” he asked quietly, slowly working a finger inside her.

“...Yes.” she replied breathlessly, fixated on how his thick finger masterfully stroked her.

He established a gentle rhythm, his free hand lifting, palming her breast sensually.

Liz found herself moving in time with his efforts, her breathing heavier, her moans soft and contented.

Red moved his fingers in concert with her movements, inching the woman closer to release when she suddenly pushed at his hand, halting all activities.

Before he could question the abrupt cessation, she turned quickly, kissing the man fiercely.

“Well, don’t stop now,” she whispered silkily against his mouth, “it’s just starting to get good.”

Red’s breathy laughter made her smile widen, as he obeyed the request. He was more than pleased with the new position since it gave him better access to her mouth and breasts.

Picking up the pace, he vibrated his fingers in and outside her body. He was captivated by the woman’s new found free spirit.

He dropped his mouth to her breast, flicking her nipple before capturing it with his tongue, drawing eagerly on the crinkled flesh.

“That’s good...” Liz directed his movements, “so... so...so good.” she chanted, bringing another small smile to the man’s face.

He would never tire of watching this woman in such a moment. There was nothing more enchanting than listening to a woman when she was sexually aroused. He had dreamed of hearing Lizzy make these very sounds.

Yet, in all the fantasies he had about her, he never imagined he would have such a wonderful time. Oh, he knew it would feel amazing as hell.

But he had always visualized passionate and heated encounters. He had admittedly fantasized about her sexually after one of her turbulent exchanges with him.

He hadn’t been aware she could be so vocally open once she became comfortable or so... playful. It was a quite a delightful surprise.

Concentrating on keeping his movements steady and sure, he watched avidly, waiting for the right moment to give her the incentive needed. A moment that came shortly thereafter.
Increasing the speed and the pressure on her clit, pushed her to climax. She shuddered, falling back into the bedding, softly crying out her release.

He stared at the breath taking sight for a few seconds before breaking the spell.

“Feel better?” he smiled warmly.

“Getting there...” she smiled lazily, her arms reaching for him, pulling him closer.

“You’re just a little glutton aren’t you?” he settled himself between her open thighs. “I’ve always liked that about you.”

“Hey....” she raised her hips, groaning melodiously as his large shaft slid slowly along her wet slit, “still taking notes here.”

Red grinned, his mouth fitting to hers perfectly. He absently reached into the drawer. “I hope like hell you’re not expecting ‘cliff notes’,“ he pushed the crown of his shaft against the peak of her sex, teasing her mercilessly. “I so want you to get an ‘A’ in this course.”

She quietly giggled, enjoying this other side of Red, “I thought you promised I’d get an ‘A’, Professor.” she traced his collarbone aimlessly, taking on a wide-eyed, innocent quality.

Red lined himself up , pushing gently at her opening. “Did I?” he watched her transform into a gullible college student, right before his very eyes.

“I distinctly remember it.” she answered breathlessly.

“When did I say that?” he circled his hips, opening her to his intrusion, waiting with baited breath to hear what the woman would come up with next.

“When I was sitting in your lap and you removed my knee socks,” she mewled, the blue eyes searching his with open vulnerability, “you said if I let you see what was under my skirt...”

Red’s dick throbbed painfully, instantly visualizing Lizzy in knee socks and her bare ass poking out from underneath a pleated skirt, sitting astride his lap.

“Shit, baby. “ he grunted as he breached her, sliding into the molten hot body.

“Oh God...” she drawled, opening her legs wider for the man. Liz gasped, moaning brokenly as the man slid in deep, bumping her tender cervix and clit at the same time, making her thighs tremble.

He quickly established a workable rhythm, kissing her ardently between the raw animalistic sounds they emitted against one another’s kiss swollen lips.

“Am I pleasing you...” she panted, grasping his bulging biceps, the beautiful breasts prominent displayed, “P-Professor.”

“Hell yes...” the man groaned deeply, the relief in his face apparent. “Best student body, ever...”

“I...” she hesitated briefly, her fingers curving into his shoulders when he hit a sweet spot, “I like you... a lot, Mr. Reddington.”

“The feeling is more than mutual... Miss Keen.” he voice lowered intimately, curling his fingers around her hip. His large hand dwarfed the small area.

“Oh, I hope that’s true.” she smiled softly, her focus split between the man’s gentle eyes and touch.
“To the depth and breadth and height,” He quoted Browning, “let me count the ways.” he took a long deep breath of her sweet scent. “I love your scent,” he lingered for a moment, “I’m captivated by your intelligence.” he traced her temple adoringly, his eyes skimming the curves of the shapely form, “And what can I say about this that any poet has not already said more eloquently than I ever could.”

Liz traced his mouth with her finger, listening to the exquisite words, a surge of happiness filling her heart.

She embraced his neckline, gently stroking him with her fingers, “God please tell me you don’t say things like that to just anyone.” she would be crushed otherwise.

“I have never said that to... another living soul.” he was somewhat perplexed by the fact that no one had touched him so deeply before. “And don’t you think that’s a damned sad fact.”

Liz was suddenly lost in the man’s eyes, the emotion overwhelming her.

The game they played was suddenly set aside for the moment. Red became quietly introverted.

“I’d be content to just hold you the rest of my life, Lizzy.” he muttered distractedly. “But that I get to do this, to actually make love to you...” his eyes slid closed, a sound of contentment welling in his throat, “is something I will cherish... for the rest of my life.”

She felt tears prick her eyes, blinking them back.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to express the joy I feel,” he slid in, completing their connection, tightening his hold about her tiny frame, “that I’m the only one allowed to share this private intimacy with you.” He shook his head minutely, words escaping him for a moment. “My God, feel what I’m doing to you, Elizabeth.”

His stare dropped and held to where their bodies connected. He felt the small hands ease over his hips, her palms brushing along his flesh as he gently thrust against her.

The movement, the visual it conjured, was turning the woman the hell on.

“I’m the only person that will ever do this to you again...” he rasped roughly in her ear, sending a jolt of shivers down her spine.

Liz curved her fingers into the tight flesh of his hips as he increased his tempo, a sound of pure enjoyment escaping her lips.

She grasped his ass cheeks, raising her hips into his thrusts, loving him back.

He grunted, pushing hard against her. “I’ll make damn sure I’m the only one you will want doing this to you.”

Red’s brow furrowed as he felt her pussy seize tightly as it quivered around his shaft. Stroking her hair out of her face, he softly encouraged the woman to find her pleasure. She finally fluttered along his length, allowing him to join her in the intense feeling.

He caught her outcry in his mouth. Liz felt the intense warmth of his release, treasuring the unity.

Red smiled slowly, feeling the tension in her muscles loosen with each breath.

“That was so much better than Midol...” she whispered breathlessly against his neck line.
Red chuckled quietly, rolling to her side, grinning lethargically as she came along, snuggling into him.

“Maybe I should advertise my services?” he held his smile, his spirit soaring as the woman frowned up at him, her eyes sparking fire.

“Like hell you are...”

“All ready so territorial...” He lifted her hand, kissing her fingers, beyond pleased, hearing the possessive quality in her tone.

“Damn right I am.” She cupped his cock, stroking the length. He groaned, pushing into her palm. “You’re going to be too busy dealing with me to have time for anyone else.”

“Is that right?” He smiled when she nodded defiantly.

“Well, I mean,” she said suddenly unsure, losing her bravado, “if you want to, that is.”

He liked hearing the words himself, so he understood her meaning.

“I want to.” He leaned down, kissing her softly. He glanced at her rosy cheeks, brushing a gentle finger over them. “I hope, Miss Keen,” he brought their earlier play back to the table, “that you gathered enough information for your thesis.”

She stretched with catlike grace. “It was quite... enlightening.”

She raised up on her elbow, stroking his jaw line, smiling coyly back at him. “But I feel that more research is needed.” she continued, a meticulously manicured finger sliding the length of his dick. “When are you free for more... detailed instruction, Professor?”

Red’s brows quirked, his cock stirring much to his surprise. The woman’s slim fingers circled his crown teasingly.

“It just so happens that I have some time for a little one on one, Miss Keen,” the man consulted his expensive Rolex, “at this exact moment.”

Liz smiled happily taking his pre-offered hand as she assumed the dominant position, straddling his thighs provocatively.

“I never thought I would enjoy your class, Woodwind Instruments and Their Impact on Middle Class America, this much.” she seemed amazed by her good fortune.

Red’s throaty chuckle echoed cheerfully in the ensuing silence.

“I got something you can blow.”

After a quiet dinner, they retired to the sitting room. Liz had wanted Red’s opinion on a few of the more difficult case files the BAU had sent.

She was surprised that Red had known two of the men, just by the few clues in the case notes.

What was even more an ego boost for her, she had been moving in the right direction in her profiles on the last three, Red had just given her a good solid lead to follow on each.
She sent them through, before closing down her computer.

“You like consulting, don’t you?” he asked, settling into the couch, picking up his book.

“I didn’t think I would.” she admitted, sitting next to him. “But it hasn’t been half bad. I kind of enjoy it.”

Red tilted his head, looking at her steadily. “Are you saying that you would rather be working behind the scenes as opposed to doing field work?”

She edged the rim of her book with her fingers, sighing. “Would you be disappointed if I did?”

“No.”

She smiled softly, looking up at the man. “You don’t want me working in the field anymore, do you.”

Silas had implied, Red would not like the thought of Liz being in constant danger. Perhaps he never had.

“I didn’t say that.” he corrected her assessment. “I just want you to be happy, Elizabeth. If this is what you want to do, I will support you.”

“What about the Blacklist?” she questioned softly. “Would you still do it? Could you keep giving the names to Ressler?”

Red drummed his fingers slowly on his book cover, shrugging. “I suppose I could.” he replied, his tone vague. “It’s been etched in the back of my mind that our situation wasn’t permanent, that you would be back to work eventually.” he told the truth.

“And while I could continue to work with your team. I do have an objective…” he trailed off. “I would have to see how it would work without you before I could commit to a definitive answer.” he waved his hand about.

“Regardless of my decision, you have my complete support in what you decide to do from here on out.” he stressed.

She nodded understandingly. Like Red, she would have to give the matter serious thought. They both got lost in their own worlds, enjoying the quiet solitude for a goodly time.

Liz eventually sighed, laying back into the couch, settling her head on Red’s lap.

Red smiled warmly down at the woman, raising his legs to the ottoman to make her more comfortable. He moved the book to his other hand, threading his fingers through her hair, massaging her scalp soothingly as he read.

A short time later, he heard another sigh. Liz lay her book aside before rolling over, playing with a thread on the pillow beside her absently.

He sat his own book aside, taking a sip from his tumbler. “What’s on your mind, Lizzy?”

“I want to change my name.” she took his glass, sipping the warm liquid.

“Elizabeth is a beautiful name.” he pushed his fingers through her hair, his mouth lifting as she leaned into the touch.
“I don’t mean that one, though, now that I think about it, that’s not even my name.” she reached for the bottle beside them, pouring more liquor into his heavy glass. “I meant my last name. It’s a fake name, that belonged to a fake marriage and a fake man. I don’t want it.” she took another sip of the amber liquid, before holding it out for him.

“You’ve been Elizabeth far longer than you ever were Masha.” He took the offering, taking a quick drink. “As for Keen... if changing it is what you wish, then do it. What would you change it to?”

“You mean Sam’s name?”

“Yes.”

“I haven’t decided yet.” she laid her head back down, looking up at him. “What I have decided is that isn’t who I am anymore. And it’s a weight I don’t want to carry with me any longer.”

“Well, think about it and we’ll take care of it when you’ve decided.”

“You don’t have to do anything, you know.” she said, her brow raising.

“I know people who can make it happen quickly.” it was advised. “And I know you. When you get something in your head, you want it done post haste.”

She couldn’t argue. Especially about that.

“Okay, I’ll let you know.”

Red smiled, scratching his fingers through her hair, chuckling quietly when the woman purred happily, then yawned. Having voiced something troubling her, seemed to have lifted a weight because her eyes suddenly became heavy.

“I think it’s bed time for you.” He grinned, helping her up. The man guided her down the hall as Elizabeth yawned sleepily.

“You’re staying, right?” she threw back over her shoulder.

He halted their trek, backing her into the wall, “Was that an invitation?” his voice lowered huskily.

“I don’t know...” she played with the collar of his shirt, “do I get morning sex if you do?”

Red tugged on her hand, continuing their previous journey. “Does the rooster rise at dawn.” he replied almost cryptically.

Liz pulled up short, scowling, “Is that Navy code talk?” she scolded superficially. “Or was that just your way of telling me your cock rises to the occasion at dawn?”

Red’s gentle chuckle made Lizzy’s full sensuous lips curve into a responding smile.

May 10

The incessant jarring of his phone awakened Red at three in the morning. He groaned, moving to
answer, but was stopped by a light weight on his chest.

He smiled softly at the small body holding him down, stretching for the ringing telephone on the night stand.

“If that’s Ressler, I’m gonna kill him.” Liz bitched sleepily.

Red sniggered softly, opening the phone. “Hello?”

“Rogers here, Sir.” one of the new guards announced himself. “You told us to inform you of trespassers—”

“Is he still there?” Red interrupted.

“No, Sir. He bolted when we gave chase.” Rogers told his boss. “One of the men is following him now.” Red was informed. “He did leave some pictures behind.”

“I’ll be over...”

“Red...” Liz mumbled dejectedly.

His mouth pulled at the corner when she snuggled closer, her intent clear.

He wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’ll send one of the men to collect it shortly.” Red shut the phone and tossed it to the table, “Dammit..” he sighed.

“He got away?” Liz muttered into his chest.

“Yes.” Red grumbled.

“Let it go.” she yawned. “Go back to sleep.”

He looked down at her and chuckled silently when she dozed.

“Stop thinkin’...” she muttered. “Keepin’ me ‘wake.”

“I seem to do that a lot.” Red smiled softly down at the woman snuggling into him.

“I have my gun in my hand Red.” she warned, even as she rubbed her cheek against his chest, getting comfortable.

“Don’t drool on me.”

“I don’t drool...” she pouted.

“Yeah, and you don’t snore either.” the man rolled his eyes, his fingers lazily stroking her back.

He got lost in the repetitive motion, drifting languidly. The woman’s soft purring filtered through the otherwise silent room.

“So much for not snoring...” he laughed silently, his chest bouncing the small body laying draped over him.

Liz’s brow furrowed, her hand sleepily swatting the annoyance for the man had disturbed her.
Red clamped a hand over his mouth, hoping it would aid in holding his laughter until he finally settled.

He looked down at the little head settled on his chest, stroking a large hand over her soft hair, leaning his cheek into the fragrant tresses.

He inhaled her gentle scent, feeling himself getting drowsier with each breath, drifting into a peaceful sleep.

So very happy he stayed.
May 16

The last few days had been relatively quiet.

Liz was finally, medically released from her casts, though she had already gone without them most of last week. She had appointments lined up for more focused physical therapy to strengthen her muscles, a process designed to reinstate her to desk duty at the Blacksite.

In the meantime, she continued pumping out the profiles for the BAU and was pleased as hell to learn, that one profile had actually helped in the capture of a fugitive.

Francis had come over the day after their return and did indeed only have a flesh wound. A fact Red made a point of mentioning, when he gestured to the Iron Man Band-Aid the young man was sporting.

Shortly after having lunch together, Red had been called away on business. Liz and Francis watched some movies, then had dinner together. Liz fancied it was only so he could see his beloved Nora.

He also made an excuse, the fact that his wound, which clearly... Francis had pointed out, was far more than a flesh wound, was giving him trouble. He could not possibly drive himself home. Liz took it to mean, her friend wanted to spend a few days in house which was fine with her.

During the several days when Red would only occasionally pop in and out, Francis’s visits were always a bright spot. Liz had grown quite fond of his company.

As for Red... when he wasn’t handling his business. He would stay with her... in her new home.

The thought of leaving her bed after having made love, did not sit well with either of them.

The need to hold one another, to bask in the aftermath of their lovemaking, was an essential part of what they wanted from their relationship.

The outside world interrupted and demanded they do their jobs, so any private time was of the utmost importance these days.

In past relationships, Liz had never minded moments of solitude. It was a time to be by herself where she had room to breathe and examine the intricacies of any given situation she happened to find herself within.

Even with Tom, her space had been very important, but with Red... she was astounded to find herself missing his absence. She liked when he was here.

When she had started at the Blacksite... working with Red, Tom had become pushy, needy. The strain on them, on her, had become quickly exhausting.

She was now aware that Tom had been attempting to drive a wedge between her and Red.

Moments of sitting in the quiet of the living room, in the middle of the night, was well worth the loss...
of sleep because she was able to maintain her sanity.

Now, the solitude felt different. She still enjoyed it, reading a good book, taking a long bath, or simply letting her mind wander. It was good for her.

But she found she didn’t need it as much as she once had. Liz no longer felt like she was barely hanging by a frayed thread, ready to snap.

And she knew why. Tom had gone out of his way to push her off the deep end and hold her under, drowning her. While Red was wading through the muck to pull her back to the surface.

Which made his presence now so addictive. So many men before him had essentially been like Tom. Maybe not as manipulative, but damn near close.

She had been guilted into doing things so many times, she had lost count. They had never seemed truly supportive of her goals. And a little part of her had always felt dissatisfied after sex.

With Red, she hadn’t felt any of that at all. He was always supportive. And the sex. She in no way felt neglected in the bedroom. She never had a lover’s undivided attention such as Red provided. So much so, she suddenly wondered if perhaps she had neglected him?

She made a quick mental note to rectify that as soon as possible.

One thing she had put to rest was that she had felt a bit too clingy, but Red seemed to appreciate the time spent together just as much as she. He was as quick to cuddle and kiss. And in their quiet time, they shared an endless array of topics which ranged from amusing to the serious.

And when they fell silent, it was comfortable. They didn’t feel the need to fill the silence, their shared breathing and closeness enough to fill any void.

She hadn’t felt this comfortable... been this happy in so long, she honestly couldn’t pinpoint when it had happened last. If at all.

A tiny sliver of doubt, and she supposed it was only human nature, left her wondering if everything was too good. Would some horrible twist of fate take away that contentment.

Liz quickly dismissed such disturbing thoughts, refusing to dwell on the negative.

She would like to have a chance to spend more time with Red outside of work.

She was painfully aware that most of their conversations started on that particular subject.

But she really wanted to see if they could find that balance between home and work. If they could be like every one else and be... normal.

Red came in, phone to his ear, breaking her thoughts. He was nodding his annoyance, his head hanging dejectedly.

A small smile graced her lips, watching the man almost get to the point where he was banging his head against a wall.

She hadn’t realized his features were so expressive while on the phone. She wondered what ‘expressions’ he used when speaking to her in those private moments. Or did he keep his face perfectly neutral so as not to give away any unguarded secrets.

He was saying his farewells. She brightened, snatching up her own phone, dialing the man quickly.
She could tell when it rang through, his head turning a little at the sound.

“I’ll call back shortly, I have another call coming in.” he clicked the button without a care, switching the lines. “Yes?”

“Hi...” she smiled into the phone, hearing his gruff voice in surround sound. Her smile grew wider when his eyes instantly softened, a small smile taking the place of the frown that had been present for most of the day.

Is this what Silas meant when he mentioned Red had called to hear her voice? Is this what the guard had seen the man do?

“Hello to you...” he purposely kept his back to her just enough that she could still see his face in profile. She was amazed to see the tension bleeding from his shoulders.

“Is there something I can do for you?” his voice lowered sensually, making the woman’s cheeks plump with an enormous smile.

“You could walk that fine ass over here and kiss me.”

She watched his shoulders shake with silent laughter, but also watched him openly nodding at the request.

“What’s in it for me?” he asked, his tone even.

Liz’s eyes danced hearing the playfulness in the question, before adopting the same attitude. “I’ll let you stick your tongue in my mouth.”

She snickered quietly when Red’s forehead thumped into the wall in front of him, a low chuckling filling her ear.

“I can live with that criteria.” he snapped the phone closed, striding towards her, his face lit with undisguised happiness.

She loved that she could make him smile like that. That she made that tension he felt moments ago, fade away. It made her feel... really good. Like she was the only person who could get that honest reaction.

Especially since he was the only one who could make her feel that way, as well.

He pulled her up from her chair, delivering a kiss that made her toes curl before the need for air surfaced.

He peppered her mouth with little kisses, before settling his forehead against hers. “I have to go to Vegas shortly—”

“Can I go?” she asked, surprised by her own brazenness.

He stepped back, smiling down at her.

“Feel like gambling a bit, do we.” he stated, heading for the closet.

“Maybe...” she muttered, following after him.

If they couldn’t find that precarious balance she was so concerned about, what would it mean to them.
“What?” he called back over his shoulder sensing something.

“Nothing.” she smiled, walking into the closet.

“I was actually going to ask if you wanted to join me,” he returned his interest to selecting several stylish suits. “Aside from handling some business. I’ve been invited to an associate’s wedding.”

“How long are we going to be there?” she tried to keep the excitement from her voice.

“I would imagine about three days.” he replied, pulling down a smaller bag for her. “If it’s longer, we’ll go shopping.” he grinned.

“Those are the nicest words you’ve ever said to me.” she absently took the bag from his hand.

“Is something wrong sweetheart?” he halted his activities having noted a certain vagueness about her.

“No, just lost in thought.” she smiled, setting some shoes aside. “Oh, I did remember one thing I forgot to ask.” Red’s brows lifted, waiting. “What was that phone call about the other night?”

Since he had to leave unexpectedly the morning after for a quick trip, she had forgotten all about it.

Red’s mouth twisted disdainfully as he opened a drawer behind him, pulling out a manila envelope. Liz took the offering, finding a series of photos of the night Red was shot. They documented from the moment Red was first hit, to when Silas had driven them backwards down the road, exiting the perilous situation.

“Did you get fingerprints or...”

“All we could get... “ Red shook his head negatively, “was a trajectory of where the photos had been taken.”

“My old house, the rooftop?” A chill ran through her slight body.

“The neighbor’s.” Red corrected before handing her another folder. “These were delivered today.”

She opened another manila folder, extracting the photos. “This is the Blacksite.”

“It is, yes.” Red agreed as he looked at the pictures of her and Silas waiting in the car.

“Tom would know where the Blacksite is.” Liz stated the obvious.

“He would, yes.” Red nodded, taking the folders back. “Now, you finish packing and let’s not think another thing about it.”

Liz raised doubtful eyes.

“In the larger scheme of things,” he lightened their moods, “this new revelation rates about 134th down the list of things we should be concerned about.”

“What’s 133?” she was curious.

“If they really use MSG at Pei Lings.”

She bit the inside of her lip to keep from smiling.
Before heading off to what was formerly his office in this house, Red threw a cryptic remark over his shoulder. “Don’t forget the black lace teddy.”

“I thought you preferred the red one.” she pseudo pouted.

The man was extracting the infamous black phone surgically attached to his person, “I prefer you without either... but pack them anyway.”

Red was anxious to check the mail which had overrun the large desktop. He had a sinking feeling when he found the familiar type on the white envelope.

The letters were arriving more frequently of late, same threats, different day. Though this time, the idiot writer was demanding to know Liz’s whereabouts. Never mind that the fool had not given her a way to reply, even had she wished to do so.

If this were Tom however, perhaps they had adopted a ‘special’ spot which only they would be aware.

When Red had asked Carla to marry him, he had taken her back to the spot where they met. It had held special meaning for them, or at least it did, until things had fallen apart.

So maybe Lizzy and Tom had such a place. A place that Tom thought Liz would instantly go to meet with him. Red would have to ask her soon, if only to set up a sting to catch the rotten bastard.

Red tossed the new letter aside, having noticed the time.

“Silas, come to my office please.” Red had spoken into the walkie.

“Copy.” Silas reported.

A minute later, Silas tapped on the door before walking in. “Are you guys naked in here?” he queried, perfectly straight faced. “I did knock this time.”

“I’m going to the Blacksite in a few minutes. I want you to bring Elizabeth to me when I’m finished there.” Red was suddenly all business. “We’re going to test our security measures.” he sauntered around the desk. “And then we’re going to get naked.”

“Orgy?” the man brightened. “I get dibs on Agent Navabi.”

Red looked at him blankly.

“Or...” Silas altered his flippant reply, “if you meant you and the Old Ball and Chain... thanks for the warning. I get nauseous easily these days.” Silas didn’t miss a beat. “The men are on standby.” he hooked a thumb behind him. “We’ve been practicing. We’re down to ten minutes to get into position, but since you’ve given us ample time, I’d like to get there earlier and see if we can spot the fucker before your Old Lady gets on site.”

“That’s fine.” Red tossed something as he passed which Silas caught easily. “It helps with the nausea.”

The guard hid his amusement admirably as he fell in step behind the exiting man. “You think he’ll be there?”

“He was the other day when you visited.” Red reminded. “I think he’s trying to get a tail on her to follow her back here.”
“Not while I’m driving.” Silas’ deadpan delivery, while slightly egotistical, actually made Red feel better knowing the guard would go above and beyond, if only to keep his reputation intact.

“And if he’s not,” Red shrugged, “we were going to the airport anyway.” he headed for the master bedroom.

“What ever happens, you remember your first priority is to keep her safe. Don’t go taking off with them to catch Tom if he is there.”

“She won’t leave my sight.” Silas’ voice echoed down the corridor. “Even if she’s naked... especially if she’s naked.”

Red threw him a nondescript glare. “I’m going to hire someone to kill you one of these days.”

“You’re not gonna pay him more than me, are you?”

Red’s arm came back around the doorframe, his middle making his statement loud and proud.

Silas grinned infectiously before taking his leave.

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Red and Dembe stepped off the elevator at the Blacksite, raised voices greeting them, as they rounded the corner. They found Samar and Moore in each other’s faces.

“Cunt.” Moore sneered.

“You don’t know me well enough to call me pet names.” Samar countered. “So, kiss my ass, Moore.”

“I’m sure you say that to a lot of guys, Navabi.” Moore snapped his irritability.

“All right you two, back off.” Donald intervened, stepping between the two combatants.

“Frightened by the competition?” Samar baited. “I’m telling you now, Aram is mine.” The computer specialist perked up, smiling. “Keep your hands off his ass.” Samar needled.

Aram opened his mouth, then frowned, then smiled again, looking a little lost, but pleased.

“I’m not into guys, you bitch.” Moore was definitely on the defensive.

“The betting pool says differently?” Aram stated simplistically, pleasantly shocking Red. He grinned at the man’s gumption. He glanced over to ascertain Samar’s state of mind, finding the woman offering a rather rude gesture which pleased him even more so.

Dembe’s brows lifted slightly because the woman’s antics could only mean one thing. It was a very articulate way of saying, in the American vernacular... blow me.

Moore shoved Aram aside angrily, then all hell broke loose.

Samar stepped forward, her hands braced against Moore’s chest, pushing the man into a tall table. The computer and other objects on top, teetered dangerously as the two kept shoving against one another, shouting out obscenities.

Ressler tried to step between the combatants, attempting a voice of reason. Moore pushed at Donald, both men losing their footing on the slick floor.
In hindsight, Red realized, it had probably been an accident.

In their bid to gain dominance over the other, Moore’s hand broke free, catching Samar across the eye.

And that’s when he and Dembe got involved.

Red caught the woman around the waist, pulling her from the fray while Dembe manhandled Moore easily, literally setting him aside. Samar swung a good right hook, which almost landed on the wrong victim.

Ressler ducked as the fist came his way.

Red chuckled as Samar’s other fist lashed out, connecting soundly with the solid jaw of her enemy.

Moore’s knees buckled slightly and Red would have swore the man would have gone down except Dembe had placed him in a hold, his arms looped under Moore’s, his hands linked behind the other man’s neck. Even though Moore struggled valiantly, he was no match for Dembe’s strength so the guy sort of hung in mid-air, twisting about to no avail.

Red allowed the feisty woman her due, his continual amusement barring any real interference.

She kicked expertly, missing Moore’s crotch by a fraction of an inch.

“Samar...” Aram held up his hands to calm the woman, his earnest expression clearly concerned for her well being. He seemed relaxed, as though he knew with absolute certainty, that she wouldn’t hurt him.

Red was surprised to see the woman’s anger fade by degrees.

“What the hell is going on here!” Cooper barked, gesturing to the scattered papers and other miscellanea.

“A slight misunderstanding.” Red gently released his captive, ready to dodge if need be.

“What the hell kind of misunderstanding could have possibly caused... this?” Cooper pointed between both sides.

“A simple difference of opinion, Harold.” Red soothed.

“What happened to her eye.” Coop pointed at Samar's reddening eye. Aram unconsciously glanced back at Moore, glaring his disapproval.

“You did that?” Cooper questioned heatedly. He scowled deepened when Moore could not hold his eyes. “Both of you,” his tone brooked no defiance, “my office, now.”

“I don’t believe they should be sharing space right now, Harold.” Red could still see the fire in the beautiful Agent’s eyes. “Besides, I need to speak with Agent Navabi.”

“Fine...” Cooper sighed. “Moore!” the man’s anger seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds as he pointed a stout finger in the direction needed.

Dembe released the hold he had on the Agent, shoving him hard towards the stairs. Ressler scowled darkly at Moore before the men headed upstairs.

“Are you all right?” Red asked, pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, blotting the little split by
Samar’s eye.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Samar smiled. “That was fun.” She chuckled, then grimaced when Red pressed in on the small cut. “What did you need me for?”

“Nothing.” He smiled, folding the cloth in his hands before handing it to her.

Samar snorted under her breath, smiling. “Then why are you here?”

“Well, I did come to deliver a new name to Ressler, but it can wait.” Red shrugged.

“What am I? Chopped liver?” Samar questioned, waggling her fingers for the information.

Red smiled charmingly, giving her the name and all the information he had on hand at this point in time. He was just finishing up as Dembe approached.

“Did he give you any trouble?” Red asked.

Dembe looked at his friend placidly. Red smiled at the face, knowing that was as close as Dembe would come to scoffing in the presence of others.

“Dembe, call Silas. Tell him to bring her.” Red returned his attention to the lovely Agent. “I must take my leave.”

“When do you think Liz might be back to work?” Samar asked hopefully, trailing after the man’s retreating form.

“It won’t be long now.” Red replied. “She misses you too.”

He of course, remembered Lizzy’s conversation about a possible change in occupation, but kept that information to himself. First of all, it was not his news to tell. Secondly, Elizabeth had not as yet decided on any course of action.

“Raymond, they’re a couple of blocks away.” Dembe summarily reported.

Red pulled up short, his brow furrowed. “I told Silas not to leave until I called.”

“He took her around the park.” Dembe shrugged minutely. “She was... antsy. Wanted to get out.”

Red pursed his lips, both amused and annoyed. But no harm was done. It was a beautiful day out, of course Lizzy would want to enjoy it. And to her, moving around in the car, as aimless as it was, still put her a step closer to leaving for Vegas. He hadn’t been aware she would be so excited by the prospect.

She had been cooped up for the better part of a month, aside from the one small trip to New York.

“All right.” Red automatically checked his weapon. “You ready to go?” Dembe had already inspected his own gun.

“What’s going on?” Samar asked, ready to be invited in on any possible fun which might appear on the horizon.

“Nothing to concern yourself about.” Red said, sliding the weapon into the slot of the holster he wore on his back.

“Uh huh.” the woman’s tone said it all. “Something’s going on and I want to be included.”
“Really, it’s nothing.” Red smiled charmingly.

Samar checked her own weapon.

Ressler approached, halting mid-step when he saw her actions. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Samar replied as she re-holstered her weapon.

“Something’s going on and I want to be included.” the man demanded.

Red sighed theatrically, spreading his hands out slightly. “Lizzy is on her way here.”

“So...?” Ressler drawled. “She’s been here before.” he stated the obvious. “She even works here.”

“Where to begin...” Red headed for the elevator, Dembe and their two unexpected guests, tagging along. He filled the Agents in on all the gritty details as the doors closed, sealing them off from eavesdroppers. “...Now, these letters are coming. Saying things about purging my lies from her head and cleansing her soul.” he completed ruefully.

“That sounds, ominous.” Samar’s beautiful brow furrowed deeply.

“Yes, it does.” Red continued. “And we received a series of photos from when she was here the other day.”

“You should have told us.” Ressler was annoyed. “We could have set up a perimeter.”

They reached the ground floor. “Just act natural. Like you came out to say hello.”

They stepped out unto the parking lot, waiting as Dembe headed for Red’s Mercedes. “My men are all ready out here. They’re covering a couple block radius on roof tops and the street.” Red mentioned casually.

“Should we bring reinforcements.” Ressler tried hard not to glance around the secluded area.

“Your guys aren’t exactly stealthy.” Red advised. “They’ll be running around in their SWAT gear, throwing around hand signals and Tom’s on a rooftop watching it all happen.”

Red smiled and waved when he saw the large SUV come around the corner just as Dembe pulled up along side them in the gleaming luxury sedan.

Silas slid to a stop, exiting the SUV. Samar noticed that he moved with the fluid gracefulness of a panther. She also noticed that he looked really good in those tight jeans he wore.

The gray-blue eyes connected with her dark ones, the man issuing a sultry smile for her alone. Samar’s heart actually sped forward a bit before she chastised the reaction but she could not halt the returning grin which graced her beautiful features.

“Hi guys!” Liz smiled brightly, as Silas held the door for her exit. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

Samar and Donald smiled stiffly, covertly looking around.

“What’s wrong.” Liz was instantly alert to something amiss.

“Nothing we can’t handle.” Red took her arm, helping her to the other car. “They’re just looking for Tom.”
“Is he–” she snapped her head about jerkily, hearing the unmistakable sound of gunfire pinging off structures which towered above them.

She was unceremoniously pushed back into the alcove created by the door and body of the SUV. Red’s body blocked any access to her person. Silas’ weapon was drawn and aimed but as yet there was no discernable target. But the large bulk of the man sufficiently blocked any and all attempts to harm his charges.

“I guess that answers my question.” She called out over the suddenly loud barrage of gunfire.

Red lifted the slight body easily, pushing Liz into the seat of the SUV. She scrambled over to make room for the man.

Red lifted his leg, pulling a weapon from his ankle, handing it to her. He motioned for Samar to take his place as he made his way around to the other side of the vehicle.

He could see through the black tinted glass, both women poised and ready to return fire if indeed the occasion arose.

Ressler and Dembe ran across the expanse lot, searching for some sign of the shooter. Silas stood silently beside Red, weapons at the ready, both sets of eyes scanning the rooftops.

Red dropped his arm, his aim landing on a door being flung open, the sound alerting him. A shadowy figure emerged in a nearby alleyway, running in the opposite direction from where Dembe and Ressler had headed.

Trailing and aiming, Red let off a volley of shots, alerting the others to the man’s location. The one in question stumbled jerkily after one carefully aimed shot. The guy righted himself with difficulty after having slammed into a nearby brick wall.

He’d hit the prick somewhere...

Dembe and Ressler hurried down an adjoining alleyway hoping to block any exit the perpetrator might attempt. Silas stood like a Sphinx, his handsome features set in a darkly menacing scowl.

Only seconds had passed but it seemed longer. Liz was glad to see Cooper and a group of agents come bursting out various doors armed to the ‘T’.

“What the hell is going on!” Cooper quickly assessed the situation.

“Nothing.” Red called out, keeping his weapon trained on the building to which Tom had been heading. “It’s just a simple case of one ex stalking another.” Red leisurely dropped his weapon, opening the door of the SUV. “Say hello, Lizzy.”

“Hello, Sir.” She smiled wanly, she and Samar striving for a semblance of propriety.

“Keen...” Cooper nodded his greeting. “Now, what’s going on out here?”

“I just told you. Tom was here.” Red sighed heavily, helping Samar from the vehicle. “Honestly, Harold. Do you ever listen to me when I speak?”

“He was shooting at her?” Cooper was genuinely surprised.

“Oh, who’s to say.” Red philosophized.

“It sounded like a damn War Zone out here.” Cooper advised.
“My men are rather zealous at times.” Red allowed.

“Comes from all the sugar they consume.” Silas managed dead pan.

“We were trying to capture–” Red began the tale.

“Kill, you mean.” Cooper corrected.

“...Wound, Tom.” Red smiled pleasantly.

“Why is she even here.” Cooper glanced at a silent Elizabeth Keen.

“We’re going out of town for a couple days.” Red smiled cheerfully, like nothing untoward had happened. “Ah, Dembe. News?”

“He went down a grate in a drainage ditch.” Dembe reported. “We are still tracking.”

“You see Harold, everything’s under control.” Red spread his hands expressively before turning his attention elsewhere. “Sweetheart, are you ready to go?”

Liz smiled excitedly, nodding enthusiastically. Cooper was struck by the woman’s attitude.

“You do realize that your ex-husband just tried to kill you.”

“Well, these things happen.” she made reports on them almost daily. Liz tried to contain her smile but in truth, she had always wanted to go to Vegas. The prospect filled her with imminent joy.

“She’s excited because I’m footing the bill.” Red grinned at the happy woman.

“Oh, stop it.” she scoffed coyly, playfully hitting his thigh.

Cooper watched the interplay between the two, baffled. Donald came along side him, breathing heavily.

“I think you winged him. There was blood in the alley.” Donald panted.

“Well, that will make things easier.” Red’s mood was lifting. “We should take our leave. We’ll be late for our flight.”

“You have a private jet.” Cooper replied sourly.

“So I do.” he slid into the comfortable confines of the SUV.

“Have fun, Liz.” Samar called out before the door closed and the vehicle pulled away from the curb.

Silas trailed behind them in Red’s car. It was one of the perks he most enjoyed about this job. The array of exotic automobiles available for his use.

Before he squealed out, he sent a very purposeful ‘air kiss’ in Samar’s direction. She winked lasciviously in return her lovely brows lifting in open approval of the man’s sexist ways.

Silence met their departure as each individual stared after the rapidly disappearing motorcade.

“Was that weird, or was it just me?” Donald asked the rhetorical question.

“I’m starting to think abnormal is normal. And normal... so very boring.” Samar stated her opinion. “So, everything seemed okay to me.”
“She seemed so different.” Ressler searched for the right phrasing. “Toward him, I mean.”

“She’s just becoming comfortable with him.” Samar said. “It’s all that forced time together.”

“I guess.” Ressler scratched his head, something still nagging at him. “You don’t think they’ve, you know—”

“That is none of your business, Agent Ressler.” Cooper practically snapped.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Well, don’t…” Cooper trailed off, questions arising in his own mind. The man walked away, the issue closed to his way of thinking.

Ressler and Samar stared after the rapidly moving figure. “You got a right hook, girl.” Ressler’s mind had moved on as well. He glanced over, a grin spreading across the boyishly handsome face. “Remind me to never get on your bad side.”

“What makes you think you aren’t already.” the woman swished her hips saucily away leaving Donald to ponder her mood and statement.

♥

A half hour later the SUV pulled along the tarmac, as Dembe taxied up to the waiting jet. Liz was always amazed when other people appeared out of no where, seemingly, to do the menial tasks such as unloading luggage. She scrambled out of the seat fighting the guilt as she watched two large men lug her stuff towards the plane.

Silas skidded up with a screech across the way, exiting Red’s car with a big grin on his face. He tossed the keys to a waiting staff member before joining the others.

Liz shook her head in a scolding manner as their eyes met. “You are such a delinquent.”

“And I get paid to be one.” Silas was inordinately pleased with himself.

“I didn’t know you were going to be here.” a familiar voice caught her attention.

Liz swirled about, a big smile instantly gracing her face. She rushed up the stairs, hugging Francis at the top landing.

The man had a soda in one hand and a bag of chips in the other, but he managed to squeeze her tightly. “And you keep turning up like a bad penny.” she teased.

“Red thought my ties might help smooth the upcoming deal.” he shrugged. “And you know, without me, you would be bored to tears.”

“I had such an exciting time on the last trip…” she quipped as Red boarded the plane, casting her an oblique glance. “Flesh wounds abounded.”

“Is Mark on his way?” Red asked.

“He should be there by now.” Francis confirmed.

Red scowled, halting mid-step, turning about. “He’s already meeting them?” his tone was censored.

“No, he wanted to check out a property.” Francis handed Dembe his bag of chips because he had
already taken them anyway. “He wouldn’t meet them until you gave him the go ahead.”

“Where are we staying?” Liz squirmed in her chair finding a comfortable spot, the excitement shining in her eyes.


Francis chuckled, crossing to his own seat. Liz had a perplexed look on her face. “He hates the Mirage because of Nicole.”

“Nicole?” the woman frowned.

“The man we’re going to meet, Christopher, owns the hotel. He hired Nicole to greet his special visitors.” Francis grinned, glancing out the side window. “She has a thing for Red.”

Red sighed again, this time with a hint of annoyance.

“She grates on the nerves. Especially his.” he hooked a thumb in the older man’s direction.

That was unlike Red to be so ungracious. And it must have shown on her face.

“You’ll understand when you meet her.” Red grumbled.

“Hey,” Francis perked up, “maybe she’ll back off since Liz is with you?”

Red’s head tilted slightly, a disconcerting lift of the brow told Francis the other man harbored little doubt as to that eventuality.

“Yeah, I really didn’t think so either.” Francis shrugged. “Just thought I’d boost your spirits.”

“I’ll protect you, Red.” Liz reached over offering a consoling pat to the man’s thigh.

“I hope to hell you do.” Red replied seriously.

♥

They had been in flight for about an hour. Red finally sat back, half listening to the conversation happening around him. He had been too intent on business matters before to take much note.

Liz was laughing at whatever the hell Francis had said, but more so perhaps, Dembe’s reaction to it.

Silas snoozed happily away but Red half suspected the man was only pretending to be semi-unconscious.

Red was happy to see Lizzy integrating herself so well with his counterpoints. They seemed genuinely fond of her. Not that he gave a damn about what Mark or even Francis thought, but that their acceptance was so important to her, made it important to him.

Liz wasn’t even aware, he didn’t think, that she needed the approval of others still.

He understood that it was a product of her childhood and the feeling of abandonment which still troubled her subconsciously. It had carried over into her adult life. Her decision, her chosen profession into the Old Boys Club, was a result of those insecurities.

Females had integrated into the Bureau decades back, but they still had to prove themselves daily and yet, it still was never good enough. Which is probably exactly why Liz went for the job.
She was good at it. And even the smallest pat on the head was monumental... a big deal, to her.

And now since Red had entered her life, she had even more to prove.

Her own colleagues didn’t trust her, due to her relationship with him.

Ressler still gave her a hard time about it, friendly and supportive one minute, back stabbing in the next. Meera had seemed kind, but she was just as two faced as Ressler when it came to Lizzy.

Samar, Red could not pin down as of yet. Lizzy had grown to trust her, for the most part. He really hoped in the end, that Samar would not break the trust they had built.

The only one she had been able to depend on at work was Aram.

And at home, she had Francis. Her one true friend. Her only friend.

Liz didn’t have any girlfriends. Outside of the computer geek and Francis, she had no one.

The thought made Red sad.

Lizzy would always have him, no matter how angry she got with him. She could share anything with him, but she needed a confidant for certain things. Everyone did.

His ex-wife’s best friend knew Carla was pregnant before Red had. Back when he had a regular life, his buddy had known about him returning on a tour of duty before Carla did.

You had to have someone to share your fears and joy with besides your partner, someone to act as a sounding board.

Red shifted his eyes, watching as Liz shared a secret smile with Dembe. What ever the man saw, had him chuckling.

Maybe she had found that sounding board with Dembe?

Who better to understand her life or her current situation?

Dembe may be the only one who truly could understand. Red had watched the relationship grow over the last month. Dembe knew what had happened between them in the last week. If Liz allowed herself, got past her innate shyness, she could spill her guts to Dembe.

He supposed she could go to Francis in a pinch, but he wasn’t sure how much the young man could stand hearing, especially if Lizzy needed to speak about something intimate.

And Red knew she would eventually need to talk to someone along those lines.

Which made Dembe the ideal choice.

Given enough time, they would become thick as thieves. And Red was okay with that. If anything should ever happen to him, he knew Liz and Dembe would be together. The thought comforted him.

Lizzy stuck her tongue out playfully at Francis, and the man return the gesture, only Francis had cashews on his.

Red closed his eyes, shaking his head woefully, but in the end he knew such juvenile antics was just what the Doctor ordered for Elizabeth Keen who oft times took herself and the world, far too seriously.
Francis was inching his way further into Red’s life than he had ever before.

With a fatalistic aplomb, Red suddenly realized that even as independent as these three were, they would always look to him for guidance and support whether they were aware of doing so or not.

What they did not realize, was that they were just as important to him. They kept him grounded. Oft times preventing him from making rash decisions. Well...most of the time anyway.

But in hindsight, normally when he went ahead and did as his conscious dictated, it was only because he had done harm to whoever had hurt one of them.

That was one part of himself he couldn’t shut down and really had no desire to do so.

For those three, he would literally burn down the world.

He stared at Lizzy who looked so pretty and fresh today. To look at her, no one would have guessed of their late night activities.

She was so vibrant and alive. Laughing at what ever Silas had just said. Her face animated and relaxed. It seemed Red had been correct in his assessment. The guard had only been pretending to be asleep and was now sharing that charming side he could call upon whenever the mood struck him.

What a different side Liz presented here with these people as opposed to her coworkers. She was totally free in this atmosphere.

He had to wonder how the news of their relationship, when it became public knowledge, as it must eventually, would affect her general well being.

She would need his people to be supportive, because no one else would be.

He wasn’t ashamed of what he felt for her. He was older and there would be speculation. He could not protect her from people’s thoughts. He didn’t give a damn about anything but her and what she thought. He had her affection and she warmed his bed at night, and that’s all he cared about.

But Lizzy... the ridicule that was on the horizon, would hurt her deeply. But maybe Francis and the boys could cushion the blow.

And maybe, with him there to love her... it might balance the hurt she would feel.

He rested his chin on his thumb, curling his fingers against his mouth, staring at her... making no pretense of doing anything else.

She glanced at him, smiling prettily. He winked at her, his smile half hidden behind his fingers.

Her cheeks turned pink under his scrutiny as she smoothed her hair, a very feminine gesture. His smile increased slightly.

A couple weeks ago, she would have rolled her eyes at him.

Today, she had the memory of what he did to her last night... and this morning.

His eyes deepened and he shifted slightly annoyed that his penis reacted accordingly. He was however, becoming accustomed to the sensation.
May 16

Liz loved flying at night, but to see Vegas, lit up in all it’s glory was a sight to behold. As they came in for the final approach, she looked out the window, beaming.

The jet taxied for a while before they came to a final stop. Dembe opened the flight door, letting the dry desert air inside.

Liz inhaled deeply, almost swearing she could smell money, sin and Pina Colada in the air.

Red headed down the steps with her in tow. It was a new sensation, but Liz thought she could rapidly get used to him holding her hand. As they descended the narrow steps she watched as their luggage was transferred to the waiting vehicle.

“What are we doing tonight?” Francis asked as he slid into the limo, patting the seat next to him. Liz slipped into the spot. “Did they say?”

“We’ll have time to get settled in our rooms, then have a meet and greet.” Red replied, straighten into the rich leather seat beside Lizzy and opposite Dembe and Silas. “Then maybe play some tables.” he got an affirmative grin from all concerned.

Liz craned her head this way and that as they drove, taking in the sights of the Vegas streets, feeling her excitement grow. There was so much to look at, the buildings, the people...

“Or perhaps we should go sight seeing a little.” Red smiled softly at the woman’s apparent interest in the outside world. As they pulled up to the hotel, his smile dimmed a bit.

“Just don’t let go of Liz.” Francis cheered him on. “It’ll be fine.”

When the vehicle stopped, the valet opened the door. Francis nearly fell out backwards at the unexpected action for he had been examining the amenities inside the posh car.

“What ever happens in there,” Red coached semi-seriously, “just be yourself.”

Liz giggled at his mood, before taking his hand as they walked through the lobby.

“The dragon nears.” Francis muttered playfully, gesturing to a nearing woman with a slight jerk of his head.

Liz slid closer to Red, wrapping her arms around the man, laying her head against his shoulder. Out of the corner of her eye, she sized up her opponent.

A tall, svelte blonde with impeccable style and grace approached their party, a stylish brow lifted in a scolding manner. Nicole Master’s steps slowed, a crease appearing on the obviously Botoxed forehead as the woman took in the spectacle before her.

“If you keep this up,” Red mumbled aside, having seen the usually unshakable façade Nicole held in place, crack slightly to his amusement, “I’m going to buy you something really expensive while we’re here.”
Liz sensed her act was having the desired effect.

“Mr. Holbrook.” Nicole greeted the gathered group cordially enough. “...Mr. Reddington,” her voice cooled somewhat as her eyes shifted to Elizabeth Keen, “...and guest.”

“And guest.” Francis repeated sotto voce. Silas shrugged nonchalantly. He had never understood the workings of the female mind. Their bodies... yes.

“If you’ll come this way.” Nicole gestured elegantly to the front desk.

While Red gathered the itinerary left by their host, Liz didn’t leave his side, as per instruction.

Nicole seemed to have lost interest having crossed to greet another guest who had arrived at the door.

“I’m going to grab a couple of those pamphlets, for tomorrow.” Liz pointed to an array of leaflets which featured area attractions, now that the other woman was off the scene.

“All right,” Red kissed her lips gently before returning to the sheet of paper he perused, “stay with Silas.”

Liz crossed, leafing through of the brochures, suddenly distracted by a strong whiff of perfume as it wafted her face.

“We do not allow Working Girls in this hotel.” Nicole intoned evenly, the lovely eyes cold and disdainful. Liz thought she was seeing the real woman behind the ‘mask’ for the first time.

“I beg your pardon?” Liz hissed, ignoring Silas snickering behind her.

“If you leave now–” Nicole’s tone was pure honey.

“I’m not going anywhere!” Liz gritted, her shackles rising.

“I will call Security.”

“Call whoever the hell you want.” Liz’s voice dripped ice.

Nicole gestured to some unseen person, before staring back at Liz triumphantly.

“Something wrong Liz?” Francis asked, approaching the standoff, finding his friend throwing daggers at Nicole, much to his delight. There was nothing Francis liked more than a good old fashioned cat fight. Except maybe mud wrestling.

“No problems, Mr. Holbrook.” Nicole smiled. “If you would like, I can have someone assist you to your accommodations.”

“No...” he grinned, just knowing a fireworks show was on the horizon, “I’ll just wait here.”

Red slid the paper back into it’s envelope, just as Christopher appeared from one of the back rooms. He nodded his greeting as their host approached, hand out.

After quick pleasantries, Red gestured to the vicinity needed. “Come meet my fiancée, Christopher.”

He glanced over at Liz...

What in the...
He made his way hastily across the spacious foyer. Silas had come out of his relaxed stance, placing himself in front of Lizzy. He stared down the approaching Security detail, his presence emanating a certain type of danger.

“Baby, is something wrong?” Red had arrived on scene, asking the rhetorical question.

“We’ve been asked to leave.” Liz replied stonily.

“I believe I said, you need to vacate the premises.” Nicole corrected. “Not Mr. Reddington.”

“I beg your pardon?” Red enquired quietly, his manner and tone adjusting accordingly.

“Would you like to explain yourself, Ms. Masters.” Christopher’s own brittle tone made the already tense situation, that more unstable. “Mr. Reddington is a very special guest here along with his–”

“She thinks I’m a prostitute.” Liz interrupted, her tone more than chilly.

“...Excuse the hell out of me?” Red’s voice had iced over. He snapped a quick glare at Francis who was trying rather unsuccessfully, to contain his glee over the impending situation.

“She told me to leave, that they didn’t allow working girls in the hotel, I told her to stick it and she called Security.” Liz replied in a nutshell.

“I can testify to all of that.” Francis chortled happily. He checked with the other witness on site but Silas was admirably holding any emotion for the moment except one of exceedingly vigilant awareness.

“Why didn’t you tell her who she was?” Red indicated to his companion. Francis immediately took on an innocent air which at any other time would have been laughable.

“I shouldn’t have to explain myself!” Liz snapped angrily.

“No, you should not.” Red’s voice equaled her intensity.

“I am only doing as my job dictates.” Nicole defended herself.

“This is Red’s fiancée, Elizabeth Scott.” Francis gestured happily, for he was really enjoying this moment.

“Ms. Masters, go wait in my office.” Christopher replied evenly. “Now.”

The woman’s mouth pinched in open anger, the dark eyes flashing an inner fire. She pulled her frame erect, opening her mouth to offer a defensive retort.

Christopher gestured abruptly to the waiting Security. Nicole Masters was removed from the scene post haste.

Christopher turned quietly to his guests. “Please let me express my deepest apologies.” he stressed. “I am terribly sorry for the way you were treated.” he quickly tried to smooth over the embarrassing incident. “If there is anything I can do to make this right...” he honestly asked of the woman.

“Just keep her away from me while we’re h–”

“Fire her.” Red snapped. “That was completely inexusable.”

“Yes, it was.” Christopher concurred. “I will see to it immediately.” the man assured. “I’ve set you
and your entourage in the Villa’s for your stay.” he waved a staid looking gentleman forward. “Timothy will see that you are delivered there immediately, while I handle this issue.” he offered, before waiting to see if Red took him up on the extended olive branch.

The others waited to see what Red would do. “I do not want to see her again, is that clear?” Red responded quietly.

Christopher offered a curt nod, spun and stalked away.

“That was so much fun.” Francis slapped his hands together smartly. “This is going to be a wonderful adventure, I just know it.”

“Okay Peter Pan,” Silas reigned in the perennial man-child, “let’s get you back to Never Never Land.”

“That was one hell of an assumption.” Liz scrutinized her choice of clothing. “Granted, everyone has to make a living, and I’m not judging, mind you, but... come on.” she once again doubted her choice of clothing.

“Stop it, Elizabeth.” Red grumbled, leading her aside as they fell in behind Timothy, who in reality was their in-house Butler for the Villa’s.

“Well, I look just fine.” Elizabeth was partially sure.

“Nicole was just pissed off with me and took it out on you.” Red settled his hand on her back, ushering Liz to the car. “You look beautiful.” he leaned down, kissing her pouty mouth until she smiled. “As always.”

They slid into a sleek SUV, driving a short distance to a gated property where they were met with better hospitality, glasses of champagne and Mark Donovan.

The man smiled upon their entrance, holding out his hand in greeting, reserving an affectionate hug for Liz. Though, he had read some tension in the group, most specifically, from Red Reddington.

“Nicole...” Francis grinned in response to the unasked question.

“Ahh,” Mark nodded knowingly, “even with Liz here, she put the moves on him, eh?” he chuckled.

“No... well, not like she usually does, anyway.” Francis tittered his amusement, before recounting the story of what had just occurred.

Liz felt a smile working it’s way across her face the more Francis embellished the tale, until she finally giggled herself. She smiled up at Red, finding the man looking down at her with vexed affection.

“So, how are you?” Liz asked Mark, taking her place beside Red on a ridiculously scrumptious sofa.

“I’m better.” the man nodded. “Still sore, but since it’s an obvious indicator I’m not dead, I’m fine with it.”

After looking over the itinerary Christopher had left for them, some minor business discussion entailed.

“We’ll meet in an hour.” Red held out his hand for Liz, ushering her to their rooms.

The rooms were amazing. No, they were astounding. Liz could very well get used to traveling with
Red, if this was any indication of the luxury he was familiar with.

Not only were the rooms opulent, they had their own private pool, Chef and Butler.

Red guided her to the bedroom, a smile tugging at his lips when the woman hesitated at the doorway. A bright flush reddening not only her cheeks, but her entire torso.

“I hope we can make use of them.” Red muttered in her ear, gesturing to the mirrors above and behind the bed.

The woman let the implication set in, her tummy fluttering in anticipation. “Did Francis put you up to this?” she responded breathlessly. “I just couldn’t watch it happening... could I?” she looked at him hopefully.

Red felt his dick stir at the thought. He walked up behind the woman staring transfixed at the very inviting bed, wrapping his arms low around her waist.

“You couldn’t watch me make love to you, baby?” he rumbled intimately in her ear, enjoying the shiver traverse her body. “Watching me slide in this beautiful pussy.” he cupped her little mound in his large palm, rubbing her gently, watching her face in the mirror.

Liz’s eyes fluttered shut at the visual he painted for her, her bottom rubbing against Red’s crotch unconsciously. Then with added pressure as she felt his shaft strain against the zipper of his trousers.

He turned her around, latching hungrily to the woman’s mouth, enjoying her gasp of arousal as he roughly tugged at her skirt. Freeing her from the nuisance, he pushed her back into the bedding, wasting no time covering her body with his.

“You make me fucking crazy...” he snarled against her mouth as he curled his fingers in her panties, pulling them over her shapely hips, before tugging sharply, ripping the thin strings blocking his way to what he wanted.

Liz lifted, her eyes glued to the mirrors overhead, watching Red’s large hands divest her of her clothing.

He reached between them, pulling at his belt and zipper, releasing his throbbing shaft. Suiting himself up quickly, Red wasted no time pushing himself into her saturated tunnel.

“I crave this... you.” he whispered hoarsely, driving his shaft into her wet core.

Liz lifted her eyes, watching the man’s large erection disappear between her thighs. The sensation and the sight, mesmerizing.

His eyes closed, his heavy weight sliding part way from her body, before his large cock instantly missed her warmth.

“I need you so damn much,” he rasped the fact, “I ache when I’m not with you.”

Liz curled her fingers into the man’s shirt, drawing herself up to suckle his lips. Sliding her agile tongue into his warm mouth, she hummed as his danced erotically along hers.

“You are so good at this.” she mewled breathlessly, rocking her hips into his down stroke. “I don’t mean the sex, well of course I mean the sex... God, yes the sex.” she tried to explain her faux pas. “The talking, I meant the talking. You talk really good... well, you talk well, oh shit.” she sighed more than heavily, upset with her lack of communication skills.
“I speak the truth...” the man murmured intimately through his half smile, the woman’s ramblings endearingly engaging.

She lifted hazy eyes back to the reflection, watching the man fuck her. Working her hands under his waist band, she pushed at his trousers greedily, showing her a glimpse of his amazing ass flexing as he drove home. The sight sent a jolt of sexual awareness through her body causing her pussy to flex spasmodically around the thick shaft.

“The sex thing” she clutched at his ass cheeks wantonly, “...faster.”

A deep growl of satisfaction rumbled in the man’s throat as the woman’s warm breath brushed erotically against his neck before she bit into the sensitive skin in between her breathless pleas.

He broke away from her embrace, standing erect. He cupped her small ass in powerful hands, yanking her across the rich cotton coverlet. He tilted her hips upward, fucking her hard and fast.

Red’s eyes fell on her slender fingers, pulling at her taut nipples, massaging the sensitive little peaks methodically. The pink buds, reddened under the abuse.

“Touch your clit, baby.” he demanded roughly.

She quickly slid her fingers down to the swollen peak, rubbing herself. She moaned brokenly, enjoying the action immensely.

“I love watching you get off.” he encouraged, releasing one ass cheek to assist her. His large finger slid alongside hers, teasing the pink muscle covered in her creamy arousal. “There is nothing more beautiful in this world.”

She fluttered around him in response, the sensation making his knees buckle for a moment.

“....Damn.” he drawled shakily.

Liz bit hard at her lip, jerking up into his movement, tensing more with each passing second.

“That’s good...” he praised lavishly, “come on my cock, baby,” he urged as she tightened her core further, trembling beneath him, “let my beautiful little pussy come.”

She seized suddenly, her ass raising high off the bed, bucking hard against him. Her thighs shook violently as she cried out sharply, gripping the breast in her hand. Red slowed some, raptly watching the show.

“Don’t stop dammit!” she exclaimed, bouncing her ass harder against him.

Red readjusted his grip quickly, resuming his earlier speed... nailing the gorgeous woman laying in front of him.

He looked down at the sight of the give and take of her vulva as he pushed at her body with his glistening shaft.

The need to posses her made his blood surge. Especially when the woman’s responded so well to his demands.

Red leaned into her, as his climax neared. His parted mouth mingled with her breathy sighs, their tongues flicking about sensually.

“I’m gonna come so hard, Lizzy...” he breathed hotly against her ear, very much enjoying her cry of
arousal. “Come with me...” he nipped at her lip, and was pleased as shit to feel her tensing in preparation. “It feels so fucking good...”

Palming her head, he deepened the kiss. Reaching back, his fingers expertly teased her ass, as he moaned brokenly into her mouth as she joined him. His crown pulsed heavily, oozing jets of hot cream that warmed her steamy cavern deliciously.

Slowing the movement of his pelvis, Red eased some of his weight into the woman, smiling as she wrapped her arms and legs tighter around his body, hugging him close.

“Damn...” she released a shaky breath, brushing her hair from her face, as Red gently kissed her neck, “I love watching you work.”

The man’s muffled chuckle tickled her oversensitive flesh, making her giggle in response.

“With that said,” he sighed, settling his body comfortably against hers, “will I be afforded the pleasure of watching you?” he questioned.

She smiled up at him as the man cupped her breast, testing it’s weight. “Well, it is only fair, isn’t it?” she fought the blush for her own boldness not sure she could live up to such bravado.

“I will hold you to that.” His eyes told her, that in this instance, he would brook no argument.

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A short time later, after an invigorating shower, the conversation turned to the mundane.

Liz was contemplating her choice of evening wear, this time with extreme prejudice. She was having trouble deciding between the sedate blue and the always reliable ‘little black dress’.

Hearing Red’s deep chuckle from the other room, she stepped around the decorative door facing to see what humored the man.

“I do so enjoy ‘full service’ hotels.” Red picked up one of the items from his bedside drawer, examining the object critically.

“What do you have there?” She tried to see but his bulk was in the way.

“A variety of condoms, single packets of lube, some mints... a bible.” Red chuckled, dropping the condom back in the drawer, along with his reading glasses.

Liz came out of the bathroom, fastening her earring, before presenting the back of her dress to the man.

Red gazed at the long expanse of bare back, before grasping her zipper, pulling it up slowly.

“Is there anything I should know?” she asked.

He snaked his arm around her waist, pulling her back into his body when he finished. “We’re just seeing who’s involved tonight, for the most part. You need shoes.” he noticed, patting her bottom, sending her back to the closet.

She came back, holding her shoes. Red held out his hand, steadying her while she got one in place, then the other. “I can’t believe I miss heels.” she sighed, looking at the little flats she wore.

“You’ll wear them again.” he promised. “Then wish you could wear these.” he gestured to her
shoes. “As for dinner, have a few drinks, play a few tables. Have fun.”

She gave a little spin, confident she looked presentable as Red looked her up and down, smiling, before the man pulled her to the couch.

“I wanted to speak to you about something.” he began without preamble.

“Yes?” she was attentive.

“Are you pissed at me for what happened at the Blacksite?” he enquired. “You have every right to be, if you are.”

“I’m not mad.” she assured. “I want to find out just as much as you do who’s writing these letters. And the fact that Tom was there, says a lot.” at least in her opinion.

“I didn’t warn you because I wanted you to act normally.” he explained. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you, Lizzy.”

“I know that.” she dismissed the rhetoric.

“Are you upset, that he’s following you.”

“Well, I’m not pleased.” she pulled an endearing grimace. “I’ve kind of resigned myself to the fact.”

“He won’t get what he’s after and he won’t be your shadow forever. Trust me.” Red seemed to read her mind.

Liz smiled, reaching for her bag. Red’s hand covered hers gently.

“Lizzy, you do know that you can talk to Dembe about anything, yes?” He stressed.

She cocked her head, looking at him oddly.

“He would never betray your confidence, even to me.” he emphasized. “You need a confidant. Someone you can trust.”

“I don’t think Dembe would be all that comfortable listening to me go on about my feelings for you or about what happens,” She turned pink, smiling to herself, “...in our bed.”

“Dembe understands a lot more than you think.” He shook his head, when she went to ask what that meant. “I’m just saying, don’t discount him.”

“All right...” She nodded, not quite understanding his mood, but accepting it.

“I was thinking today,” he shared his concerns, “you don’t really have any friends to talk to, especially about us.”

“Francis would be supportive...”

“Francis is, yes. But he also doesn’t know who you really are.” Red reminded. “Dembe is the only one who knows our situation, fully.”

Liz stroked his cheek, smiling at the man. “Thank you for worrying about my well being and happiness, you dear caring man.” she teased to lighten his mood. “I’ll keep him in mind if I feel the need to have some girl talk.” She chuckled. “Though you know, I’ve been speaking with Silas a lot. And with his long hair... it’s almost like having a girlfriend.”
“Please tell him that.” Red insisted, pulling her up and off the couch. “And when you do... make sure I am there.”

They walked in comfortable silence into the casino to a private VIP room. Red and Liz took the lead with Silas and Dembe taking flanking positions on either side.

Red offered his arm, pleasantly surprised when Liz stepped closer, taking his hand instead. He looked down at their clasped hands, smiling when she readjusted her grip, taking two fingers instead of the whole hand. The fit, better in her tiny grasp.

He gave her a reassuring nod as they entered a noisy area, with people milling about in the foyer and dining entrance, chatting and drinking.

Liz straightened her posture self-consciously having scanned the room with all it’s beautiful jet setters.

“Relax.” his hand tightened systematically. “It’s just a bunch of criminals.” he grinned at his own wit.

She scanned the room, her eyes landing on a friendly face.

“There’s Francis.” she gestured to the table beside the large windows overlooking the city.

“Speaking of criminals...” Red voiced to himself. “Were you wanting to sit with him or avoid him.” he questioned. “I couldn’t quite tell by your tone.”

She rolled her eyes, dragging Red along after her as she made her way determinedly. The crowd parted, all eyes falling on her companion. A fact Elizabeth missed in her haste to find a safe haven.

“Who are they?” she pointed to the women beside Francis and Mark, as Red came alongside her.

“I haven’t a clue.” Red set his hand on her back, ushering her to the table.

Dembe and Silas seated themselves at a nearby spot. Both men instantly raised a hand, immediately gaining a waitresses’ attention who seemed only too glad to serve such interesting specimens.

“Oh, hey.” Francis smiled, standing as they neared. “I was wondering,” he leaned in, kissing Liz’s cheek, “when you’d get here.” he held out his hand to Red, shaking it. “Using the mirrors were we?”

Liz flushed a vibrant red, as Red chuckled quietly beside her, pulling out her chair, offering his hand to Mark Donovan as well. Always the gentleman, Red nodded discreetly to Mark’s companion.

“We were using them correctly, unlike you.” the man gently teased.

“I was using it correctly,” Francis corrected, his tone a rather haughty one. “I just happened to be using them alone.”

“Who’s your friend, Francis.” Liz grated hastily, hopefully directing the conversation to a more congenial subject.

“I’m sorry.” Francis apologized instantly, sincerely sorry for his lack of etiquette.

“Red, Liz,” he gestured to the couple, then to the woman beside him. “this is, Lia.”
Red shook his head, sighing. Leave it to Francis to find himself a girl after only two short hours... and a masturbatory session.

Mark made the compulsory introductions as well, clearly of a different mind set than Francis.

“Red... Liz,” the man forced a smile, “this is Amanda.”

Liz smiled at the new additions, welcoming them with a genuine smile. It would be really nice to have someone to talk to tonight while Red and the others did their thing.

Plus, she was enjoying how cute Francis and Lia looked together.

Francis was taller than Red who measured five foot ten, while the little brunette pixie at Francis’ side couldn’t be more than five foot three. They really were quite a striking couple with their dark hair, mischievous eyes and sly grins.

Aside from that, Liz finally got to see how Francis treated a lady. She knew he was affectionate as hell, always quick with a hug or a shoulder to lean on.

But with a romantic interest, Liz was pleasantly surprised to see how aware and attentive the man was with his date.

If he wasn’t holding Lia’s hand, he had his arm wrapped about her waist. Occasionally, he would whisper something to her, making the woman smile. He was constantly checking on her comfort every few minutes.

But Lia seemed to be holding her own well enough. She was very sarcastic, quick to deliver a wise crack and had a very infectious laugh. Even Red had warmed to her quickly, laughing openly at the good natured barbs the woman hurled at Francis.

While Francis looked at her winsomely, his heart stolen with each slice of Lia’s quick wit.

Which was more than they could say for Mark’s date. After Amanda excused herself to the powder room, for the third time, Lia accompanied her.

Francis’ brows knitted together as he sought out Elizabeth.

“What?” she questioned his rhetorical gesture.

“Don’t you normally travel in packs?” he indicated the women walking across the room.

“Maybe, if I had to pee.” she drawled.

Red shook his head at the candid conversation, before leaning back and wrapping an arm over the back of Lizzy’s chair. Liz scooted her chair closer, leaning comfortably into Red’s chest.

Francis turned his scowl elsewhere. “What’s up her ass?” he jabbed a thumb towards Mark’s retreating date.

“She doesn’t want to be here,” Mark sighed, “anymore than I want her here.”

Liz startled at the blatant honesty.

“I apologize, that was incredibly rude of me.” Mark tossed his napkin to the table, frowning. “Her Uncle set us up. Wanted my stay to be... pleasant.” He twisted his mouth distastefully.
Liz’s eyes widened at the implication.

“Antonio?” Red questioned. It didn’t seem like the older man’s style. Red had known the old mobster for ages.

“No, his brother.” Mark replied sourly. “I couldn’t turn him down, you know.” he explained.

“He’s Old School mob.” Francis piped in helpfully.

Liz looked to Red for an explanation.

“To offer her to Mark, suggests a trust.” Red muttered quietly. “A bond.”

“Sounds like a pimp to me.” Liz scowled.

“Did you tell her you have no interest in,” Red began, “...trade relations.”

“No...” Mark leaned into the table, his own interest piqued, “you think I should? I mean,” he looked over his shoulder, “I don’t want to offend her.” he shrugged. “Any other time, I would find her very attractive. But this...” he sought the word.

“Tell her exactly what you told us.” Red suggested sagely. “Takes the stress off.” he waved the man off, giving him the excuse he needed.

Mark pushed his chair back, rising diligently. “If you will excuse me.”

Liz smiled as Lia returned to the table, an instant camaraderie established once again between the young girl and Francis Holbrook. She stole a hunk of chocolate off the top of Francis’ dessert.

Francis grinned, running his finger through the chocolate frosting, swiping it across his upper lip.

Red and Liz chuckled quietly when the woman leaned suggestively, kissing the chocolate away.

Their plates were cleared shortly after, leaving them to enjoy drinks and quiet conversation.

Mark and his date came back to the table, hand in hand, smiling. The tension a thing of the past.

A few visitors stopped by to offer congratulations to Red upon hearing Lizzy’s status as his fiancée, though more than enough female associates made it clear that their congratulations were given half-heartedly.

Such two faced behavior had once troubled Liz, but now she could see a perverse humor in the situation.

The men arose shortly there after, making their excuses.

“This shouldn’t take too long.” Red brushed a gentle hand over Liz’s dark hair. “You have an account with the hotel. Just tell them where we’re staying.” he further added. “And if you want to play,” he pulled his wallet free, handing her a wad of cash, “...good luck.”

“Red...”

He stared down at her, shaking his head minutely, making her fall silent. His meaning clear.

The walls had ears.
She side glanced the others, finding Mark and Francis doing the same with their dates before coming to the head of the table, waiting on Red.

“Thank you.” she smiled up at him, kissing him softly.

Liz craned her head, watching the men stride purposefully across the room. Their matched steps and confident swagger, imposing.

And apparently, attractive. More than a few heads turned to admire the testosterone as it passed.

They were all very handsome, that was for sure. Add to that, they were powerful. It was a heady mix that really drew the attention of more than enough ladies.

Liz’s scowl melted away seconds later when Red turned back, his eyes for her alone. The intense gaze locked with hers for a brief eternity.

She smiled bravely for him directly before he disappeared into a glass enclosed room at the far end of the room.

The women settled into an easy fellowship. They loosened up by first, rating the dresses in the room. They shared a few laughs about the men in their lives, some men they had known and some they wished they had not.

It was not long before they gravitated to the slot machines to try their luck.

Francis came to join them a short time later, much to Liz’s confusion.

“I thought you were supposed to smooth things over?” Liz whispered.

“I did.” Francis leaned in, speaking only to her. “I made the introductions, vouched for them.”

“Vouched for Red?” she questioned, then smacked Silas’ hand when he tried to steal coins from her bucket.

“As I said, they’re Old School.” Francis sighed. “Unless you know a guy, who knows a guy...” he rolled a hand as if to continue the train of thought.

“But they’re safe?” she questioned. “Without you there.”

“Oh, yeah...” Francis nodded slowly. “My reputation does precede me sometimes in a good way.” the man shrugged. “Not always, but sometimes.”

Silas leaned in close to Liz’s ear, “Do you believe it?” the disdain was in his tone. “That woman has the same exact dress as you.”

While Liz was distracted, he dipped a large handful of coins from her bucket. Her mouth fell open, a little girl pout directed his way.

“That doesn’t work on me.” Silas set down at the next slot. “Save it for your Sugar Daddy.”

Liz hit his shoulder...hard. “He’s not my Sugar Daddy.”

Silas looked pointedly at her bucket of loot.

“Well, that’s different.” Liz defended herself... sort of.
“Let’s go play the tables.” Francis rubbed his hands together briskly before offering to lead the way. They bounced a couple tables, before finally settling at a Blackjack game with a witty dealer and a good waitress.

For the next hour, Francis sulked noticeably. The women won round after round... and he didn’t.

“How the hell did I...” he gaped, pushing aside his drink, refocusing on the new cards headed his way.

Liz chuckled under her breath, before checking her card, silently ticking off the amount in her head.

“Elizabeth?” a man’s voice interrupted her concentration.

Liz checked with Francis, amused to find him using her given name.

“Elizabeth Scott?”

The woman twisted around to find an oddly familiar face.

Silas appeared out of nowhere, in truth she had lost him in the excitement of the game. A silent shift of her eyes let him know everything was under control.

“...Yes?”

The man smiled, pulling up a seat beside her. “You don’t remember me,” he chuckled, “do you?”

Liz’s brow rose, suddenly remembering that laugh and the car salesman smile. “Brad Parker.” she sighed, smiling wanly.

“And who is this, Brad Parker when he’s at home?” Francis questioned flippantly, the game forgotten for a moment.

She looked at her friend then her guard, the same sickly smile on her face. “It’s all right.” she responded quietly. “An old boyfriend.” she confided unobtrusively.

Silas turned his bulk slightly aside, remaining steadfast however. He pulled his phone free tapping the screen quickly, running a check on the man.

“You look fantastic.” Brad smiled charmingly. “Is this your uh,” he gestured to Francis, “your husband.”

Francis snorted under his breath, tossing his cards back to the dealer.

Lia moved closer sensing something amiss and not above eavesdropping on occasion if the circumstances called for it.

Francis threw a nondescript glance at Silas, at which time, both men checked on the whereabouts of Red Reddington.

The man in question glanced casually in their direction, as he had done most of the evening, checking on Lizzy. He turned his head lazily back to the conversation at hand before offering a slow double take as if something clicked in his brain.
“No, this is a very good friend of mine.” Liz smiled at Francis, continuing the introductions. “Francis, this is Brad.”

“Hello... Brad.” Francis smiled all too pleasantly.

Silas sighed heavily and the younger man sensed the way of things. He turned to check his instincts, seeing Red had arisen even though having smiled at whatever the man across from him had said.

“Is this going to get ugly, because I have a hot date here.” Francis could see the night taking a turn for the worst.

“Why should it?” Silas seemed unperturbed by the developing situation.

Francis pointed a finger, “That is Antonio Crocetti. Do you know what he would do if his dame sat down with another guy? And now Red has been put in a rather precarious position. Don’t you think?”

“Dame?” Silas sized up the old man whose steel blue eyes were trained directly on Elizabeth and the man sitting beside her.

“Oh, shit...” Francis whispered under his breath, before straightening in his own seat, “we’re all going to die. And I’m not gonna get laid.” he looked wistfully at the cute little number beside him who had just hit twenty-one... again.

For a split second he wondered if that sweet little squeal of delight was how she sounded in that ‘special moment’.

“Are you here on business or pleasure.” Brad continued on mindlessly, settling in his chair, getting entirely too comfortable.

“I’m here for pleasure.” Liz smiled pleasantly, very aware of the vibes the men beside her were putting off. Red was watching. “My fian–”

“I’m here for a wedding, so I guess you could call that pleasurable.” the man interrupted. “Say, would you like to get a drink,” he gestured to the bar, “catch up on old times?”

“Lizzy, we should go.” Francis stood abruptly, pulling her chair back as he did so. “Now would probably be a really good...”

“Elizabeth...”

Francis grimaced at the sound of Red’s voice rumbling dangerously behind them, nearly jumping out of his skin. Francis checked hastily to see if Red was alone, ever so glad to see that he was, except for Mark Donovan.

Liz sighed quietly, arising hastily. “Honey...” she greeted Red brightly, “already finished?”

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” he questioned, his eyes unreadable as they swept the man behind her.

“Oh, yes.” she cleared her throat softly. “Ray, this is uhm, Brad Parker.” she looped her arm through Red’s, “he’s an old, uhm...”

“We dated.” the man filled in quickly, holding out his hand in greeting.

Red looked at the offering, hesitating briefly before extending his own hand.
“It was a long time ago...” Liz corrected. “College.”

Red remembered the little asshole well. If only because he had cheated on Elizabeth.

He waited patiently for her to continue the introductions, more than anxious to see how she would label him. And if she didn’t do it soon, Red would have no compulsion what-so-ever in fucking reminding all concerned of his place in the unfolding melodrama.

Gnawing nervously on her lip at the awkward silence, Liz looked up to find Red staring back at her silently... waiting. She winced inwardly, feeling the pressure of the moment.

“I’m sorry.” she smiled at the two men. “Brad, this is Ray, my fiancé.”

Brad’s brows furrowed darkly as he stared at the competition, then the sparkling diamond on her finger.

“I see...” he adopted a beaming smile once more, pumping Red’s hand more enthusiastically, “congratulations are in order then.”

“Thank you.” Red’s voice lowered dangerously as he systematically increased the pressure of the clenched hands seconds before Brad winced openly.

Francis looked from one man to the other men, scratching at his neck, grimacing. “Tension...” he muttered to the guard. “So much tension.”

“Grow a set, pansy.” Silas muttered moodily.

The younger man broke free from Red’s grasp, shaking his hand gingerly to get the blood flowing again.

“I saw Liz, thought she might like to get a dinner.” Brad smiled charmingly at the woman. “Catch up on old times, as it were.”

Francis rubbed his hand over his brow nervously when Red remained stoically silent. His gaze quietly introverted.

Which was a huge warning sign to Francis. When Red got like that, and his fingers twitched at his sides, as they were doing right at this moment... someone usually died shortly there after.

“Oh, I don’t think...” Liz stumbled over the words, the tension so thick she could feel her tongue drying up, making it damn near impossible to speak correctly.

“Actually, we have,” Francis stepped up, adopting the same charming smile as Brad Parker, “reservations, for dinner.” he heard Lizzy release a soft breath of relief beside him, beyond thankful for the assistance. “We really should get going.”

A group of men across the way, cheerfully called out to the problem at hand, waving him over.

“I gotta go.” Brad gestured, pulling his wallet free. “Here’s my number if you get a free moment tonight.” he handed her a card, smiling that ever present sleazy grin. “Maybe we can have breakfast in the morning.”

Francis quickly put his hand out, preventing Red from advancing on the unsuspecting male. Silas deftly reached under Red’s jacket, artfully slipping the pistol from the man’s holster. The weapon was discreetly disposed of in seconds.

Liz frowned at the strange request, “Did you just say–”

“Elizabeth will most assuredly be occupied with me in the morning,” Red interrupted coldly, the undertone of the statement, quite clear, “and has a full schedule for our stay.” he held out his hand, and was pleased when the woman reached for it, grasping it tightly. “Now, we must be going.”

“It’s been great seeing you again.” Brad leaned in, impulsively kissing her cheek.

“Fuck...” Francis whispered his awe.

Mark Donovan’s mouth fell agape at such audacity.

Red placed a restraining hand on the other man’s polyester shirt front, putting himself between the woman and her want-to-be suitor.

“I think you need to join your party.” Red directed frostily.

Francis and Mark, took an involuntary, unobtrusive step back at the icy tone. Silas impeded Francis’ intended escape, slyly gripping the young man’s sleeve, holding him in place.

“If I’m going down,” the guard murmured playfully, “you’re going with me.”

“I’m too young to die.” Francis pulled fanatically on his captured sleeve. “And far too pretty.” his voice held a hint of hysteria.

“Pretty stupid...” Silas corrected the misconception, holding firm.

“I’ll see you later, Liz.” Brad clearly had not taken the warning seriously.

“No, I don’t think you will.” Red replied, stepping forward menacingly yet again, this time with more intent behind the gesture.

“Red, we really should be going.” Liz stressed feeling the tension emanating from Red Reddington. There was something singularly disconcerting about the man. “We’ll be late.”

“Elizabeth...” there was a definite hint of warning in the low voice.

“Yeah, sure.” Brad smiled, giving a small wave. “We’ll catch up soon.”

Red followed Brad’s movements with his eyes, his face expressionless.

“What an idiot...” Silas declared sharply, also watching as the man joined his group. “Take a fucking hint, you twit.”

“Now hold that temper, Red.” Francis asked respectfully. “Liz was just minding her own business and the asshole...”

“I am aware.” Red intoned quietly.

“Why don’t we get something to eat,” Mark suggested quickly, the tension unbearable.

“We already had dinner, dumbass.” Francis rolled his eyes. “Let’s go to the bar,” he suggested instead, “have a drink... relax.”
“Come buy me something sweet, cinnamon roll.” Lia tugged on Francis’ arm, she too having felt the dynamics of the situation, having a natural instinct on how to smooth over a difficult situation.

Red transferred the all too quiet gaze to Liz before shifting a lazy stare to Francis.

“She thought I was sweet...” Francis shrugged, “so she started calling me cina–”

“Go away.” Red replied darkly.

“Okie dokie...” Francis had no problem with that suggestion. The young man extracted himself from Silas’ forceful grip offering a comical, ‘ha, fuckhead, I get to go...you have to stay’, expression.

“Pussy...” Silas called out after him, causing several of the ladies surrounding the gaming tables to glance over with a stern look which softened considerably when they saw who actually stated the crude remark.

Several actually smiled understandably at the handsome guard.

“Who was he?” Red asked stonily, his attention fixed and direct.

“I just told you.” Liz blew out a cleansing breath as some of the tension lifted. She wrinkled her nose endearingly. “He’s harmless.” she waved the subject aside.

“Lizzy, you forgot your winnings, didn’t you?” Red nodded toward the appropriate vicinity.

“Oh my God!” the woman was off immediately, excitement on her face with Dembe close behind.

Red directed his attention to Silas the minute the woman was out of earshot.

“Not much on his record.” the bulky man murmured, scrolling the screen of his phone. “But then, his daddy is a prominent Attorney, so who knows what may have been expunged.”

“I don’t give a fuck who his daddy is.” Red grated. “I don’t like the million dollar smile and over played charm.”

“Jealousy becomes you...” Silas jibed, “but I didn’t like him either. He wasn’t exactly the brightest bulb in the package.” he shook his head at the boy’s stupidity. “Plus, he acted like a sleaze ball.”

“You keep your damn eyes on her, you understand me.” he snarled quietly as they caught up to the woman. He gestured to the other girls who were at the bar, laughing with Mark and Francis. “I don’t want him around anyone in our party.” The cold eyes had not lost that ‘something’ that distinguished Reddington from another man. “Keep him away... period.”

“Yes, sir.” Silas replied seriously.

Dembe returned the woman to Red’s side at which point, they joined the others in the bar.

Red’s mood improved gradually as the evening wore on, though not by much.

“Were you jealous?” Liz murmured quietly, having gathered the nerve to broach the subject when the others got up to dance.

“I was...” Red admitted freely. The emotion easier to express now to the woman. “I am...”

“Well, don’t be.” she asked more than told. “Besides the fact that I have no interest in Brad what-so-ever, for obvious reasons.” she looked at Red pointedly. “There was a reason I dumped him.”
Red listened intently. “Which was?”

“He’s a bore.” she shrugged carelessly. Red narrowed his eyes, obviously needing her to enlarge upon the statement.

“He was... I don’t know,” she sighed unevenly, searching for the correct wording, “he was just smug, egotistical. He came from money and thought that was a big enough selling point...” her lips twisted up into a smile, “to make up for his other shortcomings.”

“If he comes back around,” Red said, knowing very well the little bastard would come sniffing around again, “you let Silas handle him.”

Liz rolled her eyes, “I can handle him on my own, thank you.”

“Elizabeth...” Red practically snapped.

“I don’t know why you’re letting him bother you.” she tried easing his worry.

“I recall a little brunette becoming a little ‘bothered’ when confronted by an old lover of mine.” Red suitably jogged her memory.

Liz straightened, her eyes narrowing a bit. “I did not get... ‘bothered’. ”

Dembe half chuckled under his breath, pulling the lever on the slot machine at which he sat, and had now for some few minutes. He ignored Liz’s meaningful look completely.

Silas sipped his beer casually, offering a minute shake of his head at her blatant lie.

“Yes, you did,” Red corrected.

“Well, I was supposed to be playing a part.” she defended herself.

“Are you suggesting that you wouldn’t feel threatened by a past lover of mine,” Red leaned in, lowering his voice, “now with the change in our relationship.”

“I trust you.” she replied stoically.

“My trust in you,” he locked eyes with her, “has no bearing on my wanting to cause Brad extreme physical pain.”

Liz lips pursed slightly, before quivering as she tried to squelch her growing amusement. “He just said hello, Red.”

Red shook his head for such innocence. Silas balanced his chair on two legs, laughing silently.

“What are you laughing at, you goon.” she scowled at the man.

“Your naïveté is charming.” the man’s tone almost held a chastisement “That man wanted more than just to say hello, you gullible little thing.”

Liz sighed heavily, rolling her eyes at her guard. “You are so jaded.”

“He was planning to fuck you tonight and have breakfast in the morning.” Silas cut to the chase, shocking the woman.

“He was not!” she gasped.
Red blew out a controlling breath, drawing the woman’s attention back where it belonged. “Yes…” he corrected, “he was.”

“Well, it’s not like it’s going to happen.” she scoffed openly.

“Damn right it won’t happen.” Red growled. “Don’t meet with him again, Elizabeth.”

“I wasn’t planning to.” she laughed merrily, hoping to improve Red’s mood, though it didn’t seem to help.

“Like you weren’t going to meet Tom.” Red’s jaw pulsed, another time coming to mind.

“Shit.” Silas’ head dropped back at the Liz’s sharp intake of breath. Her smile fell away, her mood falling drastically. “Was there really a need for that?” he questioned setting up to the table, his eyes holding Red’s easily.

And while it was true, she had met with Tom after promising she wouldn’t... Silas saw no advantage to bringing up the subject at such a time.

Red glared at the head guard, “Mind your own business.”

“I am minding my own god damned business.” Silas hissed under his breath, jabbing a finger at Liz. “Protecting her, is my business.”

“You did a fantastic job earlier.” Red snarled right back. “And she didn’t answer the damn question.”

“Stop hanging Tom over her fucking head.” Silas arose to his full height, having no intention of backing down in this instance. “And while you’re at it, stop being a major asshole.”

“Red’s right.” Liz whispered distractedly, just wanting the tension to stop this evening. She had hoped for such a good time tonight. “I did see Tom after I said I wouldn’t.” it seemed so long ago. “And how can Red not hold him over my head when he keeps interfering with our lives…” she hung her head, fiddling with the napkin in her lap.

Silas eyed Red angrily, his expression foreboding.

Red closed his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. He hadn’t meant to upset her to this extent. And it was all because he could not control his fucking temper.

“Explain why you do not wish for her to see him.” Dembe’s soft voice eased Red’s anger a notch, his hand aloft on the slot machine crank.

“I don’t trust that little shit anymore than I do Tom.” Red blurted his contention. “He’s up to no good, Elizabeth.” he warned.

It hurt like hell for Lizzy to have checked with Silas for confirmation, but then... he had only himself to blame.

Red had hurt her with his veiled accusations, and damn well knew it.

“That prick was purposely pushing Red’s buttons tonight.” Silas explained in his own inimitable fashion. “Most likely with the intention to cause,” he waved a hand between them, “…this shit.” he sat back down, leaning his burly forearms on the table. “You two argue,” he pointed between them, then to Liz. “You call a ‘friendly’ face... Brad consoles you over a few drinks, you wake up in a very
Liz scowled angrily, remembering that was almost the exact phrasing Brad had used when he had been caught cheating when they had dated.

“Elizabeth...” Red tried to find the words to apologize, “I shouldn’t have said–”

“No...” she held up a restraining hand, “it’s all right.”

“No, it isn’t.” he disagreed. “Tom was a rotten thing to have thrown in your face.” he had known it at the time he said it. “I could have handled it differently.”

She nodded quietly as she cleared her throat, accepting his apology. She hoped soon, things would be back the way they were.

She looked up, smiling weakly before sliding closer to the man.

“There’s no need to be jealous, you know.” she leaned over, kissing him languidly.

Red looked down at the little face, understanding what she was attempting. She wanted to replace the last few minutes with what probably should have happened, instead of the hurt they had just both felt.

“Is that right?” Red’s deep voice settled in her core, electrifying her pleasantly.

Liz took a deep breath, the anxiety she had felt easing gradually as Red tried to find the lightness with her.

“It is.” she brushed her mouth against his slowly. “I am far too invested in someone else to pay Brandon...”

“Brad.” Red corrected.

“... any attention.” she continued. “In fact, I’m hoping I can find someone else to keep me occupied while I’m here.” she reached out, adjusting his tie a little.

Red felt the anger dissipate by degrees at her veiled attempt to placate him.

“You wouldn’t happen to know anyone that’s available...” she scowled seriously at him, “would you?”

“Come here, baby.” She surprised him entirely by foregoing his intended ploy to cuddle her close, by moving sedately, sliding into his lap.

All the tension he was feeling disappeared as he now noted their present situation. His hand eased about the curve of her hip as he held her stationary.

“And how would you like to wile away the hours?” he asked, much preferring this version of events. She sighed her contentment, wiggling into a more comfortable position.

Liz stilled quickly, gasping quietly.

Red’s eyes darkened as her thigh moved softly over his bulge. He stilled her movements, centering her just where he needed her to be.

“Well?” he repeated the question softly.
“W-What?” she had lost her train of thought.

“How do you want me to keep you busy?” he whispered roughly in her ear. “Shall we go shopping? Or perhaps we could take a tour of the city?” an eventual smile played along his lips as the woman moved herself against the plumping organ in his pants, completely ignoring every word he said.

“We could go see the white tigers?” Red nuzzled the length of her neckline.

“Can’t we just stay in bed and have sex?” she whined softly.

Dembe paused in pulling the handle on the slot machine he was playing. Silas, while admiring the blatant honesty, would always be Silas.

“Get a fucking room.” he disdained.

“Or... we could do that.” Red smiled softly, gently kissing her jaw line, casting Silas an appreciative ‘thank you’ nod.

“I’m perfectly happy with what we have Red.” Liz ignored their surroundings completely. “I don’t want or need anyone else.”

“You don’t know what that means to me.”

They had tried and succeeded in rewriting what could have been a terrible evening, to make it better for them both.

He was also pleasantly surprised to find how open she was with her emotions. He was sure, in such a surrounding with the crowd of people, that she would be shy and introverted as in the past. But she had put his feelings above such rhetoric and now seemed more than content to be sitting here in his lap sharing intimate kisses now and again.

“I’m sorry.” he whispered softly in her ear. “Silas was right, I was a major asshole... don’t tell him I said that.”

“It’s all right,” Silas shrugged nonchalantly, “I heard it.”

Liz shook her head, smiling gently at the exchange before kissing Red’s nape gently.

The matter forgiven, all but forgotten.
Turn About is Fair Play

Chapter Notes

We wanted to thank:

Ka Mi
Silraen
Iheartloki
Brooklyn René

For their suggestions on making Liz and Red jealous. I sure hope I didn’t miss mentioning anyone!

May 16

“But Sugar Plum fairy,” Francis was earnestly confused for once, “I could have sworn you said you wanted an ‘Afternoon Delight’,” he glanced at the bartender who still held the offending drink aloft having tried to sit it before a slightly miffed individual.

“I said,” Lia corrected mournfully, “I liked ‘Sex on the Beach’.” her pout turned genuine.

“Oh,” the young man was suitably chagrined, “I’m sorry... I thought you were simply stating a preference there.”

Liz’s hand hastily covered her mouth and the grin the conversation had produced, swiveling around nonchalantly looking for something to take her mind off the shenanigans taking place at the bar.

She noticed Red, down the way, leaning casually, speaking with a man. He had been waiting for their drinks for a few minutes as the area was bustling and busy this time of night.

She watched the man for some few moments. He was comfortable in any atmosphere. Red could talk to anyone without issue. He made friends where ever he went.

She wondered what that was like? To have that kind of magnetism. To have people naturally drawn to you.

She had always had a hard time making friends herself.

Maybe people just knew a good thing when they saw it?

In the beginning, she had fought her natural attraction to Red Reddington. She had felt like a traitor, feeling so fascinated by a criminal. Evidently one could not lie to the heart just like it was impossible to lie to a child. They always saw through the bullshit. Her heart had known the truth.

Her heart swelled with emotion thinking of all the abuse Red had taken from her in the beginning, when it must have hurt him so much. It would have hurt her terribly.
Red rested his leg on the rung of a stool, leaning further into the bar, laughing at what ever the man next to him had said. She felt a smile spreading across her own face.

That smile quickly melted into stunned disbelief when two arms wrapped around Red from behind.

Feminine arms.

A dark scowl graced Liz’s forehead immediately as she leaned around Mark’s bulk to better see a beautiful blonde with a great figure moving into Red’s back, draping herself over the man like a silk kimono on a Japanese Geisha.

And Red Reddington was not doing one single thing about the unwarranted intrusion.

“Uh, oh.” Francis mumbled, having halted the bar pretzel half way to his lips. “Honey lips, I sense a darkness in the Force.”

Lia glanced over to see what all the fuss was about, her own pretty mouth tightening irritably. “Intruder alert, Princess Liz.” the woman leaned across Francis, her hand patting Liz’s consolingly.

Liz jerked her head to her companions, her scowl increasing before returning her interest to Red and the blonde octopus wrapped around him.

“I’m sure she’s just wanting to say... hello.” Silas innocently remarked.

Liz glared at her guard.

Red stiffened visibly as if suddenly realizing the woman accosting him was not the one he would have preferred. He instantly pulled at the arms around his middle, dislodging the contact.

Raising from her seat, Liz addressed the group in general. “Excuse me a moment.” She stated sharply.

“Lizzy, are you gonna kick some ass?” Francis stood instantly, digging for his wallet.

Liz turned back to him, shooting daggers his way before sticking her tongue out, softening the dirty look.

Silas and Mark instantly lay down a bet even as Francis had shoved the money over to a bipartisan party. The bartender counted out the money nodding his consent.

“That is just so tacky.” Lia snapped.

Amanda agreed, “You are absolutely correct... men!”

Lia slapped a twenty dollar bill that she had extracted from Francis’ wallet onto the bar, sliding it over. “On the brunette.” her eyes flashed excitedly.

“I am so turned on right now.” Francis admitted.

Approaching the bar, Liz heard the other woman whining quietly in a seductive tone. “...aren’t going to hold that little indiscretion against me, now are you?”

“Red, who’s your friend.” Liz asked the man sweetly, her smile one of astringent tartness.

Red glanced at the new arrival, holding his assailant at arm’s length. He released the woman, stepping back and away. He tried to gauge the depth of Liz’s emotional involvement.
“Lizzy,” he decided on discretion, “I’m sorry it’s taking so long with the drinks.” He was as pleasant as he knew how to be. “Natalia—”

“Red, are you going to come visit me later?” the woman in question reached out to touch his lapel. Liz’s arm snaked out, halting the effort mid-way, her grip vice-like.

“Only if he wants a painful castration...” Liz stepped slowly between the two, dropping the arm she was holding.

“Natalia, Elizabeth is my fiancée.” Red wrapped his arms around Lizzy’s waist, smiling benevolently.

The tall blonde looked her opponent up and down derisively, a slow smile crossing the lovely curve of her mouth.

“When you change your mind...” she purred sympathetically, “I’ll be waiting in the Penthouse.”

Liz’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

Red inclined his head respectfully. “As I said...I am otherwise engaged and have no plans to change my present circumstances.” he locked eyes with the woman, his meaning clear. “At all.”

“But if you should so wish to hold your breath until such time that he might have a change of heart...” Liz suggested sweetly, “by all means, do so.”

Red dipped his head, hiding his silent laughter.

Natalia took the slight graciously, giving Liz one last sweep of the violet eyes before turning on her heel without another word.

Liz artfully removed Red’s grasp about her waist, spinning to face his smug expression.

“What a bitch...” She looked over her shoulder at a slowly retreating antagonist. “I’m gonna kick her ass.”

Over at the bar more money was laid down as all concerned watched with eager anticipation.

“Let it go.” Red gathered her against him, molding his body to hers. “Look on the bright side, it didn’t happen in the ladies room.” He reminded her of her prophetic words.

“The evening is young...”

Natalia had made herself comfortable at the other end of the bar. She held Liz’s angry gaze easily, a slight smile curving the luscious lips.

Red ran his fingers lightly along Liz’s chin, turning her attention back to himself.

“You are a fiery little thing, aren’t you?” He teased to lighten the moment.

“Did you see that?” Liz hissed her indignation. “She acted like I wasn’t even here, like I wasn’t good enough for you or something.”

Red was fascinated by this side of Liz’s character.

“I can be just as pretty as she is.” Liz smirked her belief. “I could wear that dress she’s poured herself into just as effectively.”
“If you were going for the harlot look, I guess.” Red placated, hoping to get things back on a more positive track. “You’re more beautiful than she ever thought about being.”

“And I am so good enough for you.” She declared indignantly.

“It might amuse you to know,” he corrected soothingly, “You are too good for me.”

She pouted up at him, much as Lia had Francis. “Why didn’t you pull out of her choke hold sooner?”

“In my defense, I thought it was you at first.” he told the truth.

“I don’t have that fake rack.” her hands came to her hips.

Red chewed on the inside of his mouth a moment, controlling his amusement. “Well, she hadn’t pressed them into my back at that point. I noticed her perfume before anything.”

“Oh, the Musk o’ Slut?” Liz asked pleasantly.

“When I realized it wasn’t you, I immediately broke the contact.” he reminded. “That’s when she pushed—”

“Her cheap silicone...” the woman asked innocently.

“Closer.” he finished.

He found himself truly relishing this moment. This was the first time that Lizzy truly made him feel that they were a real couple and he was enjoying it immensely.

“And I’m sure you didn’t mind a bit...” Liz rolled her pretty eyes expressively.

Red silenced her, placing a finger against her pouty mouth. “I prefer how you feel against me.”

“Y-You do?” She sounded surprised.

“I do. You’re all soft, warm and natural.” He ran his hands over her curves, before settling them on her hips. “And she doesn’t smell nearly as good as you do.” He rubbed his nose along her neck, inhaling her delicate scent.

“Sir? Your drinks.” The bartender slid the full glasses across the bar, a cocked eyebrow indicating there were some dissident wage makers at the end of the bar.

Silas was shaking his head woefully which indicated he had lost a considerable sum because of Red’s meddling. Dembe’s face was one big smile, as he wagged his fingers expectantly. The large guard continued to count out the appropriate winnings with but one deadly glare in Red’s direction.

Lia and Francis were having a tug of war over a twenty dollar bill. The young woman lifted to her tiptoes, grazing Francis’ mouth with a sultry kiss. The man released his claim on the bill, the distraction having worked.

Mark and Amanda seemed the only congenial participants of the whole sordid mess.

“Thank you.” Red politely accepted the liquor. “Come with me.” he turned his attention elsewhere. “You’ll feel better after—”
“I’d feel better if I could punch her in the face.” Liz was pretty positive.

Red bit his lip to master his amusement, steering Liz to their table, purposely blocking her view of Natalia.

“Aww, why’d you stop her, Red?” Francis whined. “We could have thrown Jell-O or mud at them, made an evening of it.”

Lia nodded her agreement, sipping her drink delicately.

“You wouldn’t have had time, Francis.” Mark piped up. “Our little feral kitten would have ripped Natalia to shreds before you could make a Jell-O shot.”

Amanda piped up instantly, her hand lifting graciously into the air to signal a passing bartender.

“Jell-O-shot!” She pointed to the top of her head, holding up four fingers. Lia hastily put in a thumb for her order and the bartender nodded compliently, a grin gracing his face.

Francis shared an amused glance with his two cohorts. Silas was suddenly in a grumpy mood but Dembe was just the opposite.

“Breeding will always show.” Dembe allowed his approval for how the entire matter was handled.

“Why don’t you suck a fart out of my ass.” Silas suggested evenly. Dembe quirked his head, his amusement growing.

“As I said...” he iterated, “breeding will show.”

“You’re such a poor loser.” Francis observed.

“He is.” Lia agreed, sucking down the shot noisily, “but he’s also kind of cute.”

Francis was suddenly devastated.

“Oh, not as cute as you, my little cherry cobbler.” Lia hastily soothed any hurt feelings.

Red drew in a deep breath, exhaling wearily. For a moment it felt like he had a bout with Glen.

He could still feel Natalia’s eyes from across the room. He palmed the top of Liz’s head, swiveling her attention back to the table at which they now reposed.

Silas had the grace to forgo his mood in lieu of something more entertaining. He had watched Liz’s reaction for the past few minutes to the perceived threat across the way.

“My, how the tables have turned.” he philosophized.

“I know what you mean,” Mark nodded his agreement, “it seems only minutes ago that the shoe was on the other foot.” he glanced at Red meaningfully.

“Yeah, it’s like that ménage a trois thing.” Francis agreed whole-heartedly.

“Ooh, ménage a trois.” Lia’s eyes glazed over wistfully.

“That’s Deja vu.” Dembe corrected, his expression comically awry.

“Noo,” Francis said patiently, “that would be...” his expression glazed over, much as Lia’s had, “no
actually, you're right, Dembe.”

Red hoped that the end results would be as favorable as they had been earlier.

Liz abruptly pushed her seat back announcing unceremoniously. “I’m going to the restroom.” she groused, before stalking her way across the room.

Red arose hastily, waving Silas off before following the woman’s path.

He waited patiently outside the door for all of one long arduous minute before pushing against the door facing as he heard the click of the lock being disengaged, startling the woman into taking a step back.

“Oh!” Liz gasped as the man shoved his way inside, locking the door behind him.

“Are you jealous, Elizabeth?” he demanded in a low, rumbling tone, his eyes allowing no measure of escape.

She stood straighter, crossing her arms over her chest defiantly. “...And what if I am?”

Red’s mouth pulled at the corner, as he stepped closer into her space. “Are you mad... at me?”

“...No,” her chin jutted out stubbornly, “...well, maybe.”

“Well now...” he advanced closer, backing her into a wall, stroking his fingers down her arms.

“What can I do to make it better?”

She went up on her toes, kissing him softly. “You don’t have to make anything better. I’m a big girl.”

“What if I want to?” his hands went to her hips, his eyes devouring the low cut of her dress.

Liz’s mood mellowed somewhat as she lifted her lips for yet another sensuous kiss. She sighed happily, a soft feminine sound escaping her throat. She lifted her arms about his neckline deepening the kiss.

Time suddenly seemed a variant, the annoyance of the past few minutes fading into oblivion. The next thing she knew, one hundred and ninety pounds of aroused male was pushing her into a convenient wall.

She felt the cool surface filter into her clothing until his arms enfolded her in a cocoon of warmth.

“Lizzy...” Red breathed against her mouth, his voice rough and inflamed.

There was something incredibly thrilling about eliciting this sort of reaction from a man like Red Reddington. It was a powerful and exhilarating feeling.

“I love the scent of you.” he muttered tightly, running his large hands gently down her back, his fingers curving to the taut rim of her bottom.

His tongue slipped past the sweetness of her lips the very tip flicking hers erotically. Their breaths mingled, his smelling of scotch and cool mint... hers a fruity, earthy cinnamon mix the man found intoxicating.

It was astonishing to him, how each woman had her own taste.
He situated himself more comfortably between her legs, having lifted a slender thigh which now ran the length of his outer hip.

“I love the feel of your skin...” his fingertips eased over the revealed flesh of her leg, reveling in the silken feel of the thigh high stockings he had discovered. “So warm...” he squirmed his hardness against the heat of her panties. “So soft...”

Liz pressed closer, as the man hiked the dress even further. She could feel Red’s stare, sensing his total approval of her choice of undergarment.

The visual of the lace top of the stocking laying so delicately against her pale flesh was evocative of every Forties pin-up the man had ever seen. There was something inherently forbidden about those models that every man aspired to obtain.

“If I don’t get this dress off you soon...” Red growled his desperation, running his hand up her thigh, his index finger moving the lace of her panties aside, as he rubbed overtly over the nub of her swollen hood making Elizabeth gasp her appreciation, “I’ve been climbing the fucking walls all night watching that little ass tease me.”

Red stepped closer still, bumping his groin insistently against hers when she moved her leg higher on his waist.

“G-God...” the woman trembled visibly.

“I want you so badly.” he hissed brokenly.

His deep voice was so tinged with lust, it shook the woman to her core.

“...Yes.” she whispered wantonly, reaching between their bodies, her hand rubbing against the front of his pants.

His hand rasped roughly along the netting of her stocking, as he pushed provocatively into her touch. “Son of a bitch.” his hot breath brushed against her neck. He couldn’t remember the last time he had become so aroused, so quickly.

She went up on her toes, as Red lifted her bodily, bracing her legs about his waistline. The dress was completely out of his way now, and he wasted no time in searching out the front of his expensive trousers. His fingers hesitated as they slid the offending zipper down because the door behind him rattled jarringly.

He released a heartfelt curse, a sound both pained and enraged, accompanying the vulgar expression, for the man had despised the interruption.

“Dammit...” he gritted through his teeth, the moment broken.

He eased her down slowly, stepping back, deliberately cooling his ardor.

Liz’s cheeks were rosy and beautiful, her lips wet and swollen, her eyes bright with suppressed desire.

He was all about teasing the fuck out of her, but fucking her against a wall, in public, was not exactly his modus operandi.

A larger part of him was hastily revising his thoughts on the matter. A second ago he felt like nailing
her wherever the hell the urge struck, should be on top of his priority list.

Pushing against the prominent erection in his pants, he adjusted it before dropping his jacket, hiding the impressive bulge.

The blue eyes had watched him absently then lifted to allow him to see that he still affected her. She smiled softly for him alone.

Cupping her face, Red lowered his mouth slowly, parting her lips sensually. “We’re going to continue what we started...” she vibrated to the depth of his voice, “in our bed... as soon as humanly possible.” his brow furrowed critically. “Fuck everybody else, is that all right with you?”

“As long as you fuck me...” she nodded slowly in response.

Red grasped her hand in his, pulling her towards the door. “Oh, don’t you worry your pretty little head about that.” he advised crisply.

He literally dragged her out through the bar, Liz stumbling to keep up. The man threw a couple bills on their table as they passed, to cover the tab ignoring completely Francis’ eager enquiries about their plans for the evening.

Dembe had reluctantly pulled one last time on the handle of his slot machine before falling in step beside a glowering Silas... both men hanging back a discrete distance from the amorous couple.

Silas’ frown momentarily lapsed as he witness Liz’s sickly sweet smile of triumph and curt wave of her fingers to a begrudgingly brooding Natalia before the ensemble exited the hotel entirely.

The tension in the car was palpable, but neither man seemed to mind in the least. They far preferred their friend’s present state of restlessness to his usual quiet mode of introversion.

As the car slid to a stop at the entrance of the Villa, Red shoved the back door open, grasping Liz’s hand as he exited. She moved alongside him gracefully, muttering a quick goodnight to Silas and Dembe before being escorted through the doors.

“No interruptions.” Red demanded quietly, throwing a lethal glare over his shoulder before following.

Silas grinned, pointing lazily back at the hotel they had just left. “What about–”

Red’s look stopped the man in his tracks. “No...” he stalked off in a fine huff, “interruptions.”

Silas rolled his eyes towards Dembe. “No, interruptions.” Silas mimicked Red perfectly.

Both men chuckled appreciatively for such wit.

“I wonder what they’re going to do in there?” Silas turned a serious as he was going to get this night.

“Raymond always enjoys a good game of chess.” Dembe managed straight faced.

Silas turned his head questioningly. “Is there such a thing as, strip chess?”

“Only in your universe, my friend.” Dembe nodded sagely.

“This is way more entertaining than I thought it would be.” Silas slapped Dembe on the shoulder, before heading to the bar on the South wall of their accommodations to replace the drink he’d just left behind.
Dembe glanced off towards the back of the Villa, smiling his happiness, hearing the muffled giggle of Elizabeth and Raymond’s gruff rejoinder before the door slammed shut on the outside world.

“I am just glad he is finally content.” Dembe replied seriously, before taking the offered bottle of beer.

Both men sat at a table, dealing out cards for a quiet game of poker. Silas looked up suddenly, a gleam in his eyes.

“Strip poker?”

“You are so pathetic.” Dembe surmised.

“Just lonely.” Silas shrugged stocky shoulders.

Dembe’s throaty chuckle filled the comfortable silence of the room.
Red slammed the door shut, locking it behind him before turning on the woman. Liz found herself backing slowly away from the man, something in his eyes alerting her to possible danger.

She suddenly stopped dead in her tracks sensing the type of danger Red would inflict was the type she could absolutely live with.

Hundreds of visions of what he wanted to do to Lizzy flashed in Red’s mind, each one equally satisfying in their imagery. Though picking one in particular to chose from at this stage, proved impossible.

All he was certain of was that he wanted to sink himself in her body and fuck her until she trembled with desire.

Liz slowly pulled the dress over her head, leaving her in the tiniest lingerie imaginable. The blue eyes held his easily, a provocative look on the beautiful face.

Red’s previous thoughts suddenly became a god-damned need.

He reached out, snagging her small waist with confident fingers. He could not wait to drop his face into the fragrant ample swell of her cleavage, his arms encircling her small frame possessively.

He breathed in deeply, his tongue exploring the plump crevice on either side of her breasts.

The man reached around as he straightened his stocky frame, his eyes giving her that look that made her stomach lurch expectantly.

His arm tightened about her waist as he leaned ever so slightly, “Climb...” his palm smacked the firm little bottom smartly to ensure she obeyed.

Liz hopped on her tippy-toes, assisted by the man’s strength, quickly wrapping her legs around his waist. Her ass stung deliciously from the unexpected swat.

The man walked leisurely across the room with his burden, his knee indenting the lush bedding as he confidently laid her negligible weight across the spacious area.

He joined his lips to hers in a breathlessly passionate encounter. With one expert flick of his fingers, he unfastened her bra. The man broke the kiss because he needed to see his next action.

His thick appendages curved along the edge of the bra, as he tugged the material off the pale breasts. He tossed the object aside more interested in what he had revealed.

No matter how many times he saw her nudity, every time was like the first. He did not think he would ever get his fill of gazing upon such breathtaking beauty. For instance, this time he took note of a small grouping of freckles just beneath her right mound. He had never noticed the charming array before.

The woman pulled at the end of his tie indicating her preference. His eyes held hers steadily as he slowly tugged at the silk knot. He shrugged out of his jacket, holding the deep gaze stubbornly.
Red unbuttoned the top of his shirt his eyes lightning with amusement as the woman assisted from the bottom.

His eyes swept her form with masculine appreciation, his index finger traveling an agonizingly slow path from the slight indentation of her throat down through the pert little breasts, over the flat of her stomach before hooking into the lace of her panties.

He halted for one agonizing moment, his gaze dropping meaningfully once again. Red took his time in revealing the soft patch of down, his thumb raking gently into the wet curls to playfully tease her clit for a brief moment.

His tone was involved and husky as he stated his growing desire.

“...Lift.” the silken roughness washed over Liz like rolling thunder in a turbulent rainstorm.

She basked in the feeling until rudely drawn back to reality by yet another firm reprimand, the man’s palm a little more insistent in this instance, the smack a resounding one.

Liz gasped her appreciation of his technique, her hips lifting of their own accord.

Red lackadaisically removed the small strip of cloth covering the mystical valley he so loved to explore.

The large hands captured the crease of her legs tugging aggressively, until he was able to softly grind his ever growing erection into the wetness between her legs.

Liz drew in a sharp breath when he pushed her knees apart, his hands holding her open and vulnerable. Red was in no hurry to speed matters along. He leisurely went down into the giving carpet, getting into a comfortable position.

He blew gently, his hot breath easing over the tiny nub of her sex, drawing it out of hiding. He leaned, the tip of his tongue grazing it sensually.

He dropped small adoring kisses to the little peak, teasing his lover, but more so, perhaps... himself.

Inhaling deeply, he sighed his contentment, catching the delicate scent of ocean spray as her arousal grew with each tormenting flick of his tongue.

Rubbing his nose into the downy fur of her muff, he allowed the honeyed cream to settle pleasantly, savoring her as he did a fine wine.

His excitement, his need for more, grew with each passing second until the sound of his tongue pleasuring her quickly wetting center, eclipsed all else.

Tenderly scratching her nails over the short stubble of his hair, Liz raised her hips to aid in his efforts. The rapturous moment was rudely interrupted by the man’s total withdrawal.

Before she could voice a complaint, strong arms had lifted her bodily, turned her over, while two pillows were unceremoniously placed beneath her shapely hips.

Liz balanced herself precariously with her hands, as Red positioned her for his needs. Their eyes met in the mirror directly in front of the headboard.

“Does my baby need a good fucking?” his hands spread suggestively over the lace of her stockings, his fingers pressuring her flesh languidly.
He subsequently pushed his pants down around his muscled thighs.

His rigid erection hung thick and heavy between her legs, brushing the bare flesh directly above her nylons.

The dark gaze holding hers in the mirror hypnotically, demanded a reply.

She had never seen this side of Red before, the statement he had made had not really been a statement at all. It was a fact he clearly intended her to know and accept.

She found the low soothing timbre of his voice wildly exciting a side of her which she, until this moment, she had not known existed.

She did not know whether the man was playing a part for her benefit or it was just something inherent to his nature. It really didn’t matter because she found herself more than willing to play along and see where this fascinating facet led them.

“...Y-Yes.” she whispered hoarsely. “Yes, I want that.” she suddenly did with all her heart because he made her do so.

“Good, because you're going to get one.” he lifted noble brows.

Liz leaned back into his warm flesh, the soft down of his pubic hair gently scratching her vulnerable opening. She lifted her bottom in open invitation. The crown of his shaft grazed her hot hole, slicking his slit with her wet heat.

Red pushed against the enticement, just catching himself before completing his objective.

“Don’t do that yet, Elizabeth.” he warned more than tersely, his eyes deepening considerably.

He wanted so desperately to plunge himself into her tiny body and fuck her bare. His balls fucking ached. It was an incessant itch he needed to scratch, badly. And right now, he wanted it more than anything in the world for a host of reasons.

He forced himself to grab the required object, suddenly detesting the barrier between them. He rolled the offending material into place plunging instantly into her waiting depths.

He jerked his hips, driving into her heat, watching her face in the mirror as he did so. The look of pure ecstasy on her face, made his dick throb. She enjoyed being taken in this manner.

“That’s a good girl...” he praised roughly, wrapping his large hands around her waist. “Let me fuck you...” he grunted raspingly, stroking his thumbs along her spine.

Liz quaked visibly, grasping the bedpost one hand over the other, preparing her body for the onslaught she knew would be forthcoming. She released sharp, short cries as he pumped her body relentlessly.

Grasping his hand which curled around her waist, she clung to his fingers needing another type of physical connection.

Red readjusted his hold, hooking his fingers with hers. In an instant, what had been almost animalistic in nature turned decidedly intimate and erotic.

Though, it didn’t stop his quickened thrusts or the litany of things he needed to say to her.

After a time, he halted his strokes and the woman was devastated. “Do you know what this is all
about, Elizabeth?” he needed to share himself with her. He needed her to know.

Her brow furrowed sensually, pushing back against him, urging him to resume their lovemaking. “I only want you, Red.”

Yes, she thought she knew.

The silence was deafening, so she tightened her hand on the bedpost, trying again.

“Some jerks try to come between us tonight.” she growled breathlessly. “They don’t mean anything...” she whispered, pushing herself into his searching fingers, “you know that.”

“No, I don’t know that.” he was loathe to admit. “And that’s what this is all about.” he hated the part of him that was so weak. “I want to be the one... the only one to experience you,” his eyes dropped to where his body connected with hers, “in such a way.”

“I know that.” she nodded jerkily.

He didn’t think she did know in reality, how could she. He himself, was having difficulty putting it into words even in his own mind.

“I didn’t like the way that bastard looked at you.” a little of the animosity he held so carefully under wraps, emerged. “The way he insinuated that he could have you anytime he wanted... pissed me off.”

Liz’s anger surfaced, “How do you think I felt when that blonde bitch acted like she owned you.” she moved from his vicinity as best she could, severing all connection.

Red felt the moment slipping away, a certain desperation setting in. “No one owns me.” he snapped. “But I will tell you one thing,” he would give her that much, “you are the only one I want to share myself with... willingly.”

Liz’s anger melted by degrees. Her body lost it’s rigidity and some of the tension she had felt.

“I don’t want to fight about this... I don’t want it to be an issue and if you tell me right now,” his eyes held hers masterfully in the mirror, “that it is not, I will believe you.”

The woman’s face softened as her mood. “... That guy pisses me off.” she told the truth. “Not as much as your little ‘past indiscretion’, but damn near close.” she tried to harden her eyes and her heart but the feeling was just not there. Not when they were so close, the possibilities so endless.

“Do you know what it’s taking for me to sit here, when we are...” he dropped his eyes meaningfully to the bare little backside, “and not fuck the hell out of you?”

Elizabeth’s face allowed her own pain. “Then why the hell are you hesitating.” she had no clue.

A reluctant smile touched his lips and eyes. He leaned closer nuzzling her nape. “Because I’m a fucking idiot.” he admitted his fallacies, his arm encircling her waist as he moved into that fabulous ass. “Grab that fucking pole, because you’re gonna need it.”

Red Reddington was a man true to his word.

He nudged the inside of her knee, forcing the arc of her legs wider, his arm tightening about her waistline as he held her stationary.

He grasped his shaft gently easing it back into its warm home, breathing a sigh of relief. He thrust
determinedly once again, establishing a workable rhythm.

Red looked up at the woman in the mirror, watching the gentle bounce of her breasts and the look on her face as she inched closer and closer to orgasm.

Skirting his hand up her spine, he cupped her shoulder pulling her back into his deepened thrusts. “I wish you could see this, baby...” his breathing was becoming more shallow and thready. “It’s fucking amazing.”

Liz could feel it, she didn’t have to see it.

“Take what you need...” she suggested heatedly, wishing with all her heart that the man would put a stop to the torture he was putting her through.

Red’s darkened eyes traveled up the bare expanse of her back, watching her dark tresses swish slowly with their erratic movements. He reached out, bunching the soft mane in his hand, gently tugging on the strands, increasing the tremor in her body as he gave her what she wanted, deepening his heavy thrusts.

“Is this what you need.” his deep voice rumbled intimately.

Liz jerked her head, nodding sharply.

“You want to belong to me...” he purred, driving his fat length in deep, “and me, alone?”

“...Yes.” She gasped, blindly grasping the bedding, focusing on the heated slide of his erection.

They had been having a pretty active and energetic sex life, but right now, the man’s apparent urge to take what he needed, was a hell of an aphrodisiac. Only she could give him this depth of pleasure. Which made her feel incredibly desirable.

She tugged at his hand, moving it up her rib cage.

Red followed the directive, leaning into her back. Cupping her breast, he gently kneaded the warm flesh, thumbing her swollen nipple. She looked up quickly, meeting his eyes in the mirror.

“I can’t wait to fuck you without anything between us.” Red whispered roughly in her ear. Her eyes fluttered shut, her soft lips parting with her panted breaths. Her tongue flicked out, wetting the pink lips sensually.

The sight made him wonder what her other lips would look like when wet with his cum.

“Do you want that, baby? You want me to warm your beautiful pussy?” his fingers clung tightly to her hips, holding her from movement. “Do you want me to claim what’s mine, Elizabeth.”

She nodded quickly, bowing her spine, arching her bottom to meet his frenzied thrusts. “Y-Yes...” she stammered, “do that...”

Liz lay her head into the bed post, feeling his arousal peak. To feel him in his natural state, had become such a desperate need, it puzzled her. She had been with men before and had never really paid it any attention.

But now...

“I want to feel that so badly.” she whispered in a heated rush. “I need to feel you...” she pleaded.
The very thought of his bare shaft pleasuring her, made her thighs tremble.

To think of him losing himself, inside her...

Liz tensed sharply, giving herself over to the orgasm. Quaking hard at the wonderful rush of endorphins, she let herself drift into the euphoric state that only this man was capable of achieving.

Looking down, watching his cock fuck that tight little hole, he felt his nerve endings implode.

“Son of a bitch...” Red slowed, his hips jerking without rhythm, shuddering from the tremendous high he was on. “Fuck...” he panted harshly as his hot cum easily filled the thin condom. He gasped shakily. “God damn...”

She had taken him to a place he had never been before and he found himself reluctant to leave such an inviting atmosphere.

Gripping the condom, he slid out at a snail’s pace, groaning brokenly as a rush of her arousal poured wetly from her body.

Red allowed his body to ebb from the emotional high, knowing the physical side would take care of itself. He eased his breathing, taking slow breaths, his head resting on her upper back. He turned slightly, his lips gently kissing a tiny mole just above her shoulder blade.

He felt Liz’s tremble once, before she too, was able to establish some decorum.

The blue eyes sought his as she turned her head, just as he lifted, straightening his form. He kissed her mouth passionately, the feelings still very much prevalent. At least for him.

The woman turned slowly in his arms, as they embraced in a mutual bonding moment as lovers through the ages had done for centuries.

Slipping his fingers between the swollen flesh of her labia, he massaged the slick skin purposely. The woman’s eyes lowered, a tranquil look on her face as he petted her soothingly.

Suddenly, the thought of anyone trying to do this with Elizabeth, besides him... made him feel nauseous. He had to make sure she understood the depth of that loathing.

“I want to feel you...” he continued, furthering her arousal, “I want my cum to warm you...” he reached back, stroking her clit expertly.

Gripping the man’s arm, Liz’s fought desperately to divide her attention between the man’s wonderful ministrations and the commanding voice.

She enjoyed how assertive Red could be at times. Some women would probably hate it, but after Tom, it was kind of nice to let Red take over once in a while.

Plus, Tom had barely talked to her, if at all, during sex.

But Red... she loved the things he said. And how he said them. She thought she might be turned off by the dirty talk, but Red made her fucking quiver.

And at this moment, there was something about how covetous he was of her affections that was incredibly stimulating.

“I want that intimacy with you...” he snarled against her swollen lips, his tongue fighting for dominance inside her sweet mouth, as his fingers increased the pressure on her clit. “Do you
understand what I’m saying?”

“Yes...” she practically snapped, pushing against the hand pleasuring her. He was letting her know, in no uncertain terms, he wanted, and was more than ready, to further their commitment.

Now all that was left was for her to take that step with him.

Red slid his fingers along her clit, bringing her to a shuddering high seconds later. The man moved slightly from her allowing Lizzy the space she needed. He arose absently from the bed.

Stripping himself of the last of his clothing, he took his time, his eyes watching her descend from that lofty, wondrous place.

He finally took his place beside Lizzy, wrapping his frame about her smaller one lovingly. Leisurely stroking her soft skin, he stared up at their mirror image, watching his fingers trace an invisible line along her side.

“Hold her breath?” the man chuckled quietly, his thoughts having relived a portion of their evening, one particularly amusing moment coming to mind.

“It was just a suggestion.” Liz stretched lazily, before resettling against Red’s warmth. “One I hope Natalia takes to heart.”
Days in Vegas do not start or end as any other city. It was hot and sweltering but it was only nine o’clock in the morning. At first Liz had felt a little self conscious as she glanced down at her attire. Silas had assured her that no one would turn a head or blink an eye, but to walk through a ritzy hotel lobby in nothing more than a sheer net cover over her bikini clad form... gave her pause for thought.

As she and Silas walked the short distance from the Private entrance, she noted that while she did receive some looks they were all pleasant enough, not to mention there were several other women scattered about who were dressed much more risqué than she.

The cool interior of the elegant space inside, was more than welcomed after the hot sun. She noticed Red off to her left, standing leisurely beside Mark, awaiting the arrival of a set of elevators.

The man turned his head as she neared, his eyes sweeping her bikini clad form, lasciviously. Liz inhaled shakily as she watched him look her over, damning herself as she felt a rush of arousal traverse her body.

Silas’ bemused expression told her he had picked up on the fact. He grasped her arm, breaking the spell, leading her away from the bad influence. She scowled up at the man, then grimaced when she realized, she had almost run into a large pillar directly in her path.

“Good job, Liz. Face plant into a wall, because that’s sexy.”

She glanced back at Red quickly, finding his eyes had dropped meaningfully... more specifically, to her ass.

He lifted those eyes, the heat contained in them, making her blush return post haste. His intense perusal of her suddenly slipped into a dark scowl, his eyes shifting beyond her vicinity.

Liz glanced over, finding Brad standing there giving her a once over which made her pretty face glower over with annoyance.

She listed slightly from Silas’ soft hold, aligning herself within the visual path of Red Reddington once again.

She smiled coyly back at the man, offering a flirty but almost negligible shimmy of her shapely bottom, pleased as hell to see Red’s attention focusing sharply back to where she needed it.

Mark laughed throatily, laying a hand on Red’s advancing form, casting a chastising glance at both Elizabeth and her guard. He waved Silas off, physically turning the older man back to the elevator which had opened as if on cue.

“What did you just--” Liz took exception to the graphically stated observation.

“You got Red’s attention back. Leave it at that.”
“I beg your...” she frowned.

“His mind is on you, not on that dumbass.” Silas shooed her away from the door. “To go back inside right now is only asking for trouble.”

Liz calmed instantly.

“Besides, Sugar Daddy has to work.” Silas waved a hand meaning, proceed forward.

“He is not my Sugar Daddy.” Liz stalked off to a shaded area, to a cabana which looked more than inviting, sitting her sunglasses down on the table.

“He’s mine.” Silas flicked his fingers, shooing her to the water. “You’re not the only one that benefits from that hard earned money.”

Liz sighed, shrugging her shoulders before letting the matter go.

She could, and would, play with Red later. She would just consider the time until then, as foreplay.

Finding the pool half empty, much to her delight, she stepped off into the water with Silas’ help.

“Don’t push it.” he warned. “Your muscles are weak.”

“Well, no shit.” she tested her ankle on the first step, finding it somewhat lacking but the water felt amazing, drawing her deeper into it’s cool depths.

“Hey, I’m having a good hair day.” Silas pointed to said hair. “I am not diving into the pool to rescue your ass and ruining this.”

Liz tried hard to control her smile. “Yeah you’re right, that doesn’t happen very often.” she flicked his hair with a tepid gaze, noting the man had forgone his usual ponytail today.

“I look good everyday, but some days, I’m like a God...” Silas shook his head woefully and for one brief second, he did sort of remind her of the Norse God, Thor. His muscled body gleamed in the sun, his hair flowed wistfully with the wind. She shook the image quickly.

“I bet you want your debased cult to sacrifice virgins for you.” she mumbled dejectedly.

“Why waste a good virgin when I can fuc–”

“Don’t you even...” she warned sotto voce, glancing hastily about their surroundings. Luckily no one seemed in hearing distance.

“Still up to your match of wills, I see.” Francis interrupted having come on scene, tossing his towel and a floral bag to the lounge.

“Of course.” Silas sat into the lounge, crossing his ankles, stretching out his legs, his fingers linked behind his head. “And yes, I’m still winning.” he frowned slightly at Francis, more specifically the bag he was rummaging around in. “Nice purse.” the man gestured to the very feminine tote Francis had.

“It’s a beach bag, numb nut.” Francis scowled. “And it’s Lia’s.”

Silas looked around, then back at Francis. “I don’t see her. So fess up.” the guard needled. “You’re switching teams right?”
“She’s getting a drink.” Francis rolled his eyes. “And I’m too valuable a male specimen to not share the goods,” he made a show of cupping his package, before heading into the pool, “...with the ladies.”

Liz dropped her face in her hands, hiding her enormous smile, finding a woman staring at her friend like he was another life form. A lower one, of course.

A short time later after a few laps, Liz broke the surface, wiping at the water in her eyes. She looked beside the pool, scowling slightly.

“What’s wrong?” Silas asked, knowing the problem could have nothing to do with him.

“Did you take my towel?” she half suspected.

“Yes,” the guard screwed up his face, “I’m holding it hostage until you admit that I am so much more intelligent than you.”

“Funny, asshole.” she crinkled her nose. “What’d you do with it?”

“I didn’t do anything with it,” he murmured around the long straw in his mouth, “because you didn’t bring it.” he shrugged, before leisurely sipping his fruity multi-colored slushy drink. He had not been without the large, foot tall concoctions since their first night at the bar.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” she scowled.

“I was hired to guard you.” the man drawled slowly. “Not remind you that you lack accessories.”

“Could you please go fetch me a towel.” she irritated.

“Do I look like a cabana boy?” he spread his hands expressively, the drink still held carefully aloft.

“No actually, you look like a Norse God.” a feminine voice carried over the wind to a very appreciative guard, who actually sat up searching for the source of such wisdom.

“I don’t know...” Liz snipped, looking around as well for such a delusional person, “go put on a speedo to give me the full effect,” she squinted hard at the man, “and when you do, can you grab me a freaking towel!”

Silas dropped his head back as though the weight of the world was suddenly upon him, sighing heavily.

“You’re so dramatic!” Liz whined.

“Oh, come on baby,” the voice pleaded her cause, “put the Speedo on.”

Silas zeroed in on a little blonde and her friend stretched out luxuriously several longue chairs down to his right. He cast them both a slow sensual smile.

They both giggled, delirious to have been noticed by such a fine example of the male species.

“I can watch her Silas.” Francis chuckled behind her, as he and Lia floated, wrapped around one another in a loose embrace. The woman pouted playfully at the man, kissing his Avengers bandage.

“If someone kills you while I’m gone, don’t come crying to me.” Silas bitched as he shoved his way up from his lounge seat. He tugged negligently at his shorts just where his package sat, the fabric straining over the ample bulge, care anyone look.
The action more than titillated his new found groupies which encouraged even more unconventional actions on his part were he of a mind.

He smiled lazily over, setting his drink aside. He motioned to the blue and pink confection as if to say, ‘keep an eye on it for me, ladies’.

The giggling and salacious looks made Liz want to gag.

“One of these days,” the woman grumbled, “I’m gonna haul back and punch him right in the mouth.”

“You sure you want to do that?” Francis asked seriously. “Sounds like he might think you’re flirting.” he cupped Lia’s bottom, hoisting her up higher around his waist as he floated them backwards. “That could be considered foreplay in his world.”

“Knowing that little bastard,” Liz huffed, “he probably would.”

Silas strolled past the women, to their great delight trailing a lazy finger over the sun kissed shoulders and napes.

“There’s nothing little about me, ladies.” he assured them boastfully as he continued on his trek.

The women literally swooned their approval.

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Red had passed through the elegant corridor, his mind still on the meeting they had just attended. Mark was expounding the virtues of several possible scenarios that had been discussed. The man listened attentively.

Pushing out the Private entrance to the pool, Red sighted Lizzy floating around on a raft, a drink in it’s holder, looking to be a breath’s away from passing out into a blissful oblivion.

*Or maybe not,* he thought wryly, having seen the outlined shadow stealthily approaching from beneath.

“Oh, oh. I see a potential victim in my sights.” Mark nodded knowingly having pulled up his steps alongside Red’s more stocky frame.

“I’ve seen this before.” Red mentioned in passing. “Spielberg, right?”

“It was in the opening shots of the movie.” Mark reminded. “Should I sing the theme music as warning?”

“No, I want to see what she does.” Red held his amusement.

“You’re sacrificing your betrothed to a possible watery grave... because you want to see her reaction?”

Red gave his own opinion. “I don’t think it’s Lizzy that will be visiting Davy Jones’ Locker.”

The two men watched the snorkeled man get closer before dipping down under the water, coming up under Liz’s raft. It was then, lifted high in the air, unceremoniously tilted, which dropped it’s passenger into the swirling water below.

“You little bastard!!” Liz squealed, directly before she fell into the dark depths.
Her assailant turned to flee but was not fast enough. She grabbed the plastic pipe sticking out of the water, snatching it off the man’s head, drawing him back into her sphere of influence.

Liz unceremoniously beat the man over the head repeatedly with the plastic straw.

“Francis!” she spurted, “I’m gonna drown your ass!” She grabbed Francis’ head, pushing it into the warm water, wrestling playfully with the flailing man.

“She hasn’t even seen him yet.” Mark was somewhat confused. “How did she know?”

“Only Francis would be stupid enough to do it.” Red grin widened as he listened to Liz giggling. “He probably wanted revenge for her winning so much at the tables... he can be a vindictive little bastard.”

“Stop it!” She shrieked, twisting and turning this way and that, splashing water madly. “That tickles!”

Red’s eyebrow rose, What exactly was he doing to her down there?

“Don’t you dare! Oooh!” She screamed as she was bodily lifted straight out of the water, then catapulted into the air, landing with a big splash a couple feet away.

Francis shot to the surface, arms raised triumphantly, whooping in victory. Catching sight of their audience, he gave a thumbs up, then glanced around quickly for his foe.

“Where’d she go?” He dropped the goggles around his neck, spinning around once more.

Red looked out at the water himself, actually getting a little worried. She’d been down there a long time, for her anyway. And in the shaded lagoon, he couldn’t see clearly into the pool.

“Where is she Francis?” Red asked, concern lacing his voice.

“Oh, shit!” Francis struggled with something unseen, before hastily ducking below the surface. He popped up seconds later, his powerful legs having bounced him upward.

“Get back here you little brat!” He reached out, snagging Liz’s top with deft fingers.

Red breathed a sigh of relief when Lizzy finally broke the surface, swimming straight for him. She waved something about in her hand.

About ten feet away from safety, she threw the hindrance at Mark and Red, both men side stepping quickly out of the way of the sopping wet projectile.

“Help!” She laughed gaily, continuing her trek frantically, as Francis rapidly gained on her.

Red came to the water’s edge, leaning down his arm, gripping her hand when she slapped it into his.

“Hurry!” She squealed. Just as Red pulled at her, Francis made one final swipe, his hand grazing her wet skin.

“Ohh!” She yelped just as Red lifted her out of Francis’s reach. Unfortunately his timing his had been a little off.

“Francis.” Red growled, his arms shielding the woman’s sudden nudity. The young man had managed to snatch Liz’s top before she had been rescued.
“Hey! She started it.” Francis lied convincingly.

Red sighed heavily, knowing a lie when he heard it. Not to mention he had actually seen the crime being committed.

Liz held tightly to Red’s chest area, glad his coat was shielding much. She briefly wondered how she would extract herself from this particular situation.

Red felt a grin spreading over his face, and it wasn’t only because of the half naked woman he held tightly against his now saturated body.

“Did they make this a nudist area,” Mark laughed, holding up Francis’s swim trunks, “and not inform me.”

Red grinned down at the wet little bundle he held in his arms, “You are a little brat.”

“I am not!” She pulled back ready to argue the point, then quickly clutched Red, remembering her present state of undress. “He dunked me first, then stole my top.” She defended herself. “Kill him, Red!”

“Now, baby.” Red held his smile. “If I kill him, it will render the pool useless. And you don’t want to spoil every one else’s fun.” he nuzzled her jaw line affectionately. “Do you?”

Francis waited patiently, and then not so much so. “Hey!” he demanded an immediate answer.

“I’m thinking!” Liz bitched.

“And why?” Red questioned. “You look quite beautiful the way you are.” he made a show of seeking out her full breasts which were pressed so intimately into his shirt.

“Other men are present, Red..” she countered, sensing his weakness.

Red thought about it a minute, reaching under his jacket for his weapon, his intentions clear.

“Hey man, what the hell happened to bro’s before ho–,” Francis hesitated visibly when Red actually curled his fingers around the stock of his gun. The man’s look issued a certain type of warning. “I mean... chicks.” the young man altered hastily.

“She has so much more to offer me...” Red replied smoothly, cupping Liz’s small ass cheek in his hand.

Liz batted her lashes flirtatiously up at Red, pushing her breasts into his chest more firmly. She looked down at Francis, sticking her tongue out.

“Push her in, Red!” Francis demanded as Lia floated up behind him, looking between the two sides squaring off.

“Now why would I do that after saving her from your evil clutches?” Red questioned.

“She took my drawers!” He gave Liz an evil glare as she crossed her eyes in retaliation.

She hugged herself tighter to Red when Francis made another grab for her, before twisting her face comically at the man.

“Baby, you don’t want your face to stick like that.” Red said conversationally. He chuckled when she dropped the pose immediately. Red leisurely returned his attention back to the troublemaker in
the water.

“Mark has your swim trunks now, bargain with him.” Red suggested a compromise.

“Ahh, man.” Francis whined, knowing Mark all too well. “Come on, be a bro! Give me back my
dignity.”

“As if you ever had any...” Liz wheedled causing Mark and Red to chuckle. “Give me my top first!”
she countered.

Lia floated up just behind Francis, stroking her fingers over the man’s broad shoulders and muscled
arms. Francis did not note her hand disappearing under the water, fluttering around his waist.

“I don’t have it.” Francis grinned maliciously.

There seemed to be a stalemate developing.

“Whoo!” Francis started visibly, then relaxed instantly, his head turning to the cute little brunette who
was pressed so intimately to his back now. Their eyes met and held, something intimate passing
between them.

Red rolled his eyes, having a pretty good idea what the woman was doing to Francis under that
water.

He could not say he did not envy the young man such a inventive partner. But he did have other
priorities at the moment.

“Cover yourself.” Red mumbled to Liz, stepping back slightly.

Liz gasped, bringing her palms up, covering her breasts before he pulled entirely away.

Red held out his hand, and Mark cordially placed the offending trunks into his waiting palm.

“Come on.” He winked playfully, taking the woman’s elbow, pulling her along.

“Wait...” Francis groaned, his hand covering Lia’s activities for a beat. Halting the intensely
pleasurable pastime went against his grain, but first things first...

“...Yes?” Red turned expectantly, his brows lifting.

Francis sighed, holding up Liz’s bikini top. “I found it...” He pouted.

Red walked over, snatching the object from the other man’s hands. He did not resist when Mark
jerked the trunks from his unresisting fingers.

“How am I going to get that back on?” Liz motioned accordingly, glancing around for prying eyes,
only to find her guard grinning over at her, the large straw of his drink dangling lackadaisically from
the corner of his mouth.

“Turn around.” Red directed, before looping the ties around her neck, then the one around her rib
cage. “Good? Not too tight?”

“No, it’s good.” she turned and pulled her hands free. Her ring caught the wet fabric, tugging it,
exposing her chilled nipple to his gaze.

He reached out, the back of his finger inadvertently brushing against her puckered flesh as he settled
the cup back into place.

She gasped, unconsciously leaning into his touch. There was something decidedly wicked about a such a public display that she found vaguely enticing.

Liz self consciously pulled the cups straighter when he dropped his hand, “Better?” she asked shyly.

“I wouldn’t say that...” he replied roughly, keeping his eyes on the tight nipples hidden from his view.

Liz blinked at the obvious sexual overtone. She felt her body respond under his unwavering stare.

Her tiny nipples strained further against the wet of her suit. He wondered if she had just wet her bottoms with a sweet rush of arousal. He swore he could smell her over the subtle hint of coconut scented lotion.

The woman startled, as a hand came out of nowhere, snagging her ankle.

“Come here, you little...” Francis grunted, stretching as far as his arms and modesty would allow.

Red had grabbed her quickly, pulling her free from Francis’s reach. When Liz settled on her feet, she spun around, doing her own little victory dance.

Red’s eyes shifted hastily to the swiveling little hips.

“Oh ha!” She rejoiced, grinning triumphantly. Francis jumped up out of the water once again, just grazing her feet but she rushed back to the safety of Red’s arms. “That’s what you get for flipping a poor defenseless woman off her raft. You naked pervert!”

“Defenseless?!” Francis’s voice squeaked. “You stripped me bare before I could even blink.”

“A first and most likely last time, that’ll happen for you, Francis.” Liz bent over, brushing her bottom against Red’s crotch, resuming her victory dance.

Red stared heatedly down at the woman bent over in front of him. He ran a territorial hand up her spine. He felt her skin erupt in gooseflesh in response to his touch.

He rested his hands lightly on either side of her hips, his gaze never averting from the sweet little backside.

The vision of how they were positioned made his dick ache.

“Ohhh, when I get out of here...” Francis shook his fist at a disinterested Liz Scott.


Red frowned, looking around beside them and out over the water. Where the hell did Lia go?

In all the distraction he had lost track of the young woman. He turned quickly in Silas’ direction, finding the man grinning, giving a ‘thumbs’ down’ gesture, before returning to his large straw.

Red searched the vicinity indicated chuckling his amusement. The slight form was gathered covetously around Francis legs.

“Can I please have my trunks back now?” Francis drawled before snapping his eyes towards the
water, staring disbelievingly into the sparkling depths below. He stood perfectly still, not wanting to disturb the rather satisfying activities taking place.

Lia slowly slithered her way to the surface, a beautiful grin on the beguiling face.

“Damn, girl...” Francis could not keep the admiration from his tone.

“Honey, no matter what he told you,” Silas readily informed the girl, “that ain’t no cinnamon stick!”

Mark dropped the shorts, plopping them wetly into Francis’ face. “More like a hard candy, you can choke on.” he quipped.

“You got that right...” Francis snorted, then scowled, “I mean, you know because I’m so impressive.”

“Oh my God...” Liz scoffed her incredulous disbelief.

Francis threw his best-friend a nondescript glare, before quickly returning his full attention where it was needed.

“We’ll continue that...” Francis sought out Lia’s unseen hand, “later... baby cakes.”

Dropping the trunks under the water, he quickly dressed, bracing his arms on the side of the oasis, coming straight out of the water. He reached back down, grabbing hold of Lia’s hand, pulling her easily to his waiting embrace.

He dropped a quick but meaningful kiss to the full little mouth before holding up a finger. He had business to attend to. “Hold that thought.” he stated. “And anything else that catches your fancy.”

He made tracks towards his foe for a challenge had been issued and he was one not to back down from a challenge.

Red’s hand lifted, halting any advancement, the man’s features formidably set.

“Are you kidding me?” Francis was flabbergasted.

Liz placed her chin on Red’s shoulder, crossing her eyes and sticking out her tongue accordingly.

Francis started forward again only to be waylaid when Red Reddington stepped forward himself, a dark scowl issuing it’s own certain type of warning.

Francis instantly backed down. “This is not over!” he warned Liz more than Red. “I have a long memory, uh...” he suddenly blanked on her name so many other adjectives filling his head.

“Elizabeth...” Silas helpfully offered, waving over a cute little waitress as he held his empty drink aloft.

“Whatever!” Francis swished the assistance aside moodily. “The war wages on.” he prophesied. reaching back, grabbing Lia’s hand as he stalked away peevishly. “Come on, little doughnut hole.” he pouted his best pout. “We have some unfinished business to attend to...”

Lia giggled approvingly, following docilely.
May 17

Red listened to Mark prattling on about the upcoming deal they were involved in.

In reality, he was only catching snippets of the conversation, too busy enjoying his drink and the soft scent of Lizzy in the warm breeze.

He sat in the shade, Lizzy lay beside him, basking in the warm sun. Her normally lily white skin had turned a healthy bronze, though her shoulders admittedly, were slightly pink in color.

Red had massaged the warmed sunscreen over her back and shoulders about half an hour ago but she definitely needed a re-application.

The woman sighed her contentment, lazily sipping her drink through a long straw which stuck up through the slats of her chair. She had adopted the signature drink of her guard.

She had reentered the pool several times when beckoned to come play with Francis, Lia and Amanda, ergo the urgent need for sunscreen.

Red had disappointed her earlier, having begged off joining the group in the pool. Her instant look of communication told him that his excuse of a headache after the tense early morning negotiations, had alerted him to her subsequent faux pas.

She had instantly understood his not joining her, had nothing to do with a headache, but the scarring on his back.

Everyone had their own insecurities, even Red Reddington.

Liz had changed the subject to a safer one, hiding her disappointment well enough.

The incident left him feeling slightly unsettled.

In his entire adult life, Reddington had never presented anything other than a secure, confident, authoritative presence.

Even after the accident that left him scarred, he had held tight to those qualities with everything he had, especially on the worst days. Without those characteristics, he felt he would have lost himself to the looming depression. To do less, would have meant resigning himself to his failures.

It had taken several months to gather his wits about him. After which, a plan was set in motion. A series of events designed to get back at those who had taken his life away, was put into play... a chain reaction which led him back to... Lizzy.

That fateful day, seeing her face to face after so long a period, Red was able to hold the façade he presented to the world. He zealously guarded that civilized veneer, even from the woman.

Of late however, he had noticed himself slipping into a complacency. He wondered if that was such a wise thing to do as Lizzy had proven to be quite intuitive concerning such matters.
After their discussion last evening, they were both more secure in their relationship.

Their trust in one another was solid.

But that didn’t negate the fact that Red wanted to beat the hell out of ‘Brad’.

Red had seen that type of personality so often in life. Good old Brad was more interested in one upping the competition than Elizabeth herself. Nor did he care who was hurt in the interim.

Brad saw a challenge and wanted to defeat his opponent. He believed himself to be better than Red and would stop at nothing to prove it.

Red’s instincts were to beat the bastard to a pulp, leave him stripped naked in the middle of Hoover Dam, handcuffed to the railing.

Even now as he scanned the pool deck, he found the asshole in question staring longingly at Elizabeth from across the way. He watched the scene unfold, as Brad’s companion urgently attempted to get the fucker’s attention.

Evidently, Red’s reputation had proceeded him. He sensed he had been recognized even though the guy was now desperately pretending not to have done so.

Red could guess the direction of the conversation as recognition dawned on Brad’s face. At first the man’s jaw had dropped, the beady little eyes wide with awe as he jerked his head in Red’s direction.

For a split second there was confusion and a little fear. Red enjoyed that second immensely having held the man’s eyes steadily. But then the inevitable kicked in, a sly grin crossing Brad’s smug face.

Brad grinned, pulling the phone free from the gaudy shirt he had chosen.

Red did not have to be psychic to guess the direction the call would take. Thankfully however, he had the FBI on speed dial.

He punched in a button, waiting patiently, smiling politely across the way. For one brief second, Brad’s expression slipped. He could not understand why Red was not intimidated in the least by his tactics.

“Ressler?” Red began. “You’re about to get a call on my location. I’m at the Mirage.”

“Why am I not at the Mirage?” Ressler enquired instantly.

“Get a suit, come on down.” Red magnanimously offered. “Bring the lovely Agent Navabi... it’s on me... the pool is amazing.”

“You make my mouth water.” the younger man sighed heavily for his lot in life. “So what’s going on?” Ressler questioned.

“We have had the misfortune to run into someone from the past who wishes to make trouble,” Red stretched out his legs, getting more comfortable, “and possibly collect the substantial bounty on my head.”

“Well who doesn’t want that?” Ressler quipped, closing the folder he had been working on. “I will alert the others to ignore any info coming out of Vegas for the time being.”

“That would be appreciated.” Red flicked an imaginary piece of lint of his slacks.
“So should we be worried about this informant?”

“At no point did I say this man was intelligent.” Red smiled brightly at his opponent across the way. “Let me worry about him.”

“Yeah, don’t go killing him or anything... or at least don’t make more paperwork for me.” he sat up straighter at his desk. “Oh, hey. You think Liz would mind getting me a coffee cup from Treasure Island? I broke my girlfriends cup a couple days ago and...”

“She doesn’t know.” Red surmised.

“No...” Ressler confessed his sins, “I told her I took it to work with me.”

“Because you treasured it so much?” Red finished the scenario. “Donald, I thought you were the sole of discretion,” he teased, “I thought you never lied, being a Fed and all.”

“So it was black with a 3D skull on it.” Ressler advised. “And if she wants to pick me up something else as well, that would be great too... I gotta go. Navabi just got word of a sighting of your Blacklister.”

Red clicked the phone off just as Mark came back to the cabana, handing Red’s refreshed drink over before plopping down on the lounge beside the man.

“Red, you want me to get rid of the problem?” Mark hooked his thumb to the one in question, before turning a more than intimidating stare to the ‘problem’ in question.

Brad’s companion made a hasty retreat to the safety of the hotel. The man himself, shifted his stare and Red noticed he swallowed visibly.

“You still have the touch, Mark.” he was proud, having sensed Brad’s instinctive fear cross momentarily over the handsome face.

“Boy, he’s just cruising for a bruising, isn’t he?”  Mark said, staring out over the pool.

Red sipped his drink, his attention caught. “Good old, Brad?”

Mark’s face pulled into a slight grimace as he motioned with his head. “...No.” he sighed heavily.

Red refocused his attention on Elizabeth instantly, sighing heavily as well. “I think he has a death wish. And I am the Reaper.” he stood, straightening his vest. “... Excuse me.”

“God, you’re so polite, I love that about you.” Mark saluted the man with his drink. “Cheers...”

Grabbing a bartenders attention, Red pointed behind the bar. “I need that.”

The bartender looked at him oddly, but handed over the requested item to the imposing man.

Francis stealthily crept up behind Lizzy, tentatively reaching out for her bottoms.

Red stood casually, tipping the large pitcher of ice water over the young man’s exposed head.

Francis shrieked his surprise, his body jerking with the sensation. “Shit!” he screeched loudly. “Cold!” He did a weird kind of dance, the small cup of ice water he had held, spilled all over the originally intended target.

“Francis, you little shit!” Liz hopped in place, rubbing her cold bottom briskly. She tried
unsuccessfully to recapture her breath.

Francis had recovered sufficiently enough to deposit a handful of ice cubes down the back of her bikini. The woman whooped her shock, digging about for the offending objects.

Reaching into the area, Red grabbed the ice cubes that had been poured inside, lifting her bodily, easing her into the warm pool.

“Better?” He smiled down at her, a loud scream of annoyance gathering both of their attentions.

Silas and Dembe were carrying a frantic dissident to the water’s edge. They swung Francis back and forth, ignoring his protests and threats completely, before letting him fly.

And fly he did.

Red rolled his eyes when the boy instinctively stuck his arm out, looking very much like Superman in flight, before he disappeared into the water in a enormous splash.

After a few seconds, Francis broke the surface, sighing. “Ahh, warmth.” Wiping the water from his eyes, he caught Red staring out at him. “Dude, that was cold, in more ways than one.”

“Be glad I didn’t drop it down your trunks.” Red needled the boy. “God knows you don’t need anything stunting your... growth.”

“Oh! Burn!” Liz snorted, enjoying Francis’ slight flush of embarrassment to the fullest.

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Things settled down after a spell and Liz was able to go back to the pool without retribution or retaliation since she knew Red was keeping a close eye on matters.

She was presently working on the exercises her therapist had suggested to strengthen the weakened areas of her body.

Taking a couple of deep breaths, Liz dropped under the water, swimming purposefully, for her stamina appeared to be returning over the past few days.

She felt a bit of relief that her muscle memory was still intact. She pushed off the bottom, coming to the surface gradually.

Wiping the water from her eyes, she twisted, finding Red staring straight in her direction.

For a split second, she wondered if he was remembering her time in the pool at home when she had needed assistance because she had pushed her body too far.

It suddenly hit her how winded she had become and how far from safety she actually was.

Upset with herself, she gently kicked her feet to stay afloat, waiting for her energy to return.

Red arose from his seat, totally disregarding the people sitting beside him. He walked to the edge of the pool, waiting patiently.

“Are you all right?” Francis swam close to her, having appeared out of nowhere.

She smiled wanly at the young man. She also noted that Silas had joined Red beside the pool deck.
“Just waiting for my next burst of energy.” she wasn’t sure one would materialize to be honest. “Really, I’m okay. You can swim... go, have fun.”

Francis gauged the situation, casting a hasty glance back to Red. “Uh, I think I better stay.”

“If Red doesn’t like it, he can come get me, himself.” she snapped knowing she was being waspish, regretting her statement instantly.

Silas ran his hand through the silk of his hair, a worried expression on the handsome face. Red shifted a cool glance in the man’s direction whereby the guard straightened his magnificent body awkwardly, altering his expression accordingly as if to say, ‘It’s okay boss, if I have to go in, I’ll make the sacrifice.’

“Your good hair days are going to be the death of you.” Red prophesied.

Silas had the grace to be bothered but he was more vexed than guilty. He spread his hands slightly, his features glazing over innocently.

“He will have Silas jump in to drown me, Silas’ hair will get wet and then I will end up sleeping with the fishes.” It was Francis’ turn to enlighten the brethren.

Elizabeth’s incredulous look said it all. “Sleeping with the fishes!”

“It applies in my line of work.”

“What is your line of work exactly?” she demanded.

“Trouble in paradise?” Francis frowned his concern, artfully changing the subject.

“More like a difference of opinion.” She tried to tame her mood, her stomach growling loudly. She flushed slightly, her eyes shifting to her friend.

Francis chuckled, glancing at his watch, finding it well past lunch time. “We should head on in and feed that thing.” he stated. “Before it takes on a life of it’s own.”

“Elizabeth...” Red called out over the pool.

“I guess we should.” she sighed. “My master calls.” she muttered playfully, ducking under the surface, pushing off the floor of the pool, slicing through the water before breaking the glassy top in a rush.

Running her hands over her head, she pushed her hair back out of her face as she bobbed effortlessly.

“You look like a mermaid emerging from the sea.” Red’s eyes were gentle on her. “I never did understand why sailors considered them bad luck.”

“Maybe it was because mermaids supposedly lured them to their deaths?” Liz pointed out, trying to temper her tone, wondering at her dark mood.

“You wouldn’t hear me complaining.” Red sauntered closer. “Beckoned by a beautiful woman after months of being trapped at sea with a bunch of men.” He grabbed her towel from the deck chair, waiting for her. “I would have gladly followed her.”

“Even knowing you’d die?”
Nodding, he smiled. “I always wanted to die making love.” He chuckled when she shook her head, exasperated. “It beats the alternative.” He shrugged.

“I suppose it does.” She reached the stairs, grabbing the provided handle. “Not very fun for your partner though.”

“I always deliver, whether they’re trying to kill me or not.” Red said straight faced.

Glancing down purposefully, his eyes lit with an inner flame. “Cold?”

Looking down at what he focused so openly on, she decided a bit of fun was to be had at Red’s expense. Perhaps it might dispel this damnable mood which had come out of nowhere.

“No, I’m not cold.” she dropped her voice seductively, lifting innocent eyes.

She chuckled quietly as the man’s eye twitched in response, before she tucked a towel demurely around her body, hiding from view what he seemed so interested in.

Red realized that he really needed to get laid.

Watching that little ass traipse around pool side all day, that bikini leaving little to the imagination plus the fact he had been awarded an earlier glimpse of Lizzy’s breast, all had left him a little hot and bothered all damn afternoon.

Fifteen minutes... that’s all he asked for. Maybe thirty...

They gathered her things in silence starting the trek back to the hotel. She suddenly reached out, grabbing his hand, pulling up short.

“Would you have come in for me?” the blue eyes held something he could not read. He tried for lightness.

“Now why should I ruin a perfectly good suit when Francis–”

“Would you?” she insisted he answer seriously.

“I would have, yes.” he readily did so.

“Fully clothed, no doubt.” she shook her head woefully.

“Well, I would imagine running to get my swim trunks when you’re drowning would be counter productive.”

“Come swimming with me.” she asked wistfully.

“Lizzy...” the man dreaded refusing her anything, but...

“I know you love the water, Red. I know you want to be in there.” she motioned back to the pool but more importantly the people gathered therein. “The scars aren’t as bad as you think they are. Just... think about it.” She tugged his hand, pulling him along behind her.

Red sighed, wondering why it was so important to her at this stage. Liz smiled at the others as they made their way across the spacious deck. He pulled up short suddenly, a thought occurring to him.

She wasn’t disappointed in him at all. She wasn’t even pressuring him to do something he was uncomfortable with.
She had been encouraging him. Giving her support, but had left the final decision up to him.

The thought of getting in a public venue with her, shirtless...

Red didn’t think he’d ever be ready to do that. Twenty years in and only a handful of people knew his scars existed, and even less had actually seen them. And he didn’t see that changing anytime soon.

But he had to admit, the disappointment he felt in himself for not being able to push past this obstacle, was a hindrance he felt deeply. He felt himself waver just the tiniest bit.

He wasn’t only denying himself the chance to be with Elizabeth, to touch her warmed, wet skin as they played in the pool.

He was denying himself a chance to spend time with her.

Red glanced back at the world they were about to leave, having enjoyed being a part of it. Seeing her in another setting relaxed and carefree, he momentarily wondered if this stumbling block was worth the time and effort he spent worrying over it.

It wasn’t so much what others would think of his imperfections but he did not wish to embarrass Lizzy in any, way, shape or form. It seemed an important issue with the woman. He would indeed, give it more serious thought.

♥

There was another issue the man had given serious thought to...

Once in the privacy of the luxurious Villa, Red fulfilled a need he had experienced all damned afternoon. He could neither explain nor truly justify his carnal tendencies these days. But neither could he deny them.

Having bent the woman over the nearest bed, he did what came naturally. He had never thought of himself as particularly debase in nature but he truly enjoyed these pleasurable interludes more and more of late.

And they were becoming spontaneous and definitely uninhibited. Elizabeth made him feel vital and alive and he was only too glad to express those emotions in his sexual escapades.

The woman lay now, breathless and spent after the spirited quickie. He stepped back to admire his handy work, amused that he had not even taken the time to remove the wet bikini bottoms which swirled around the woman’s bare feet.

He bent, unceremoniously nipping one bare ass cheek making Lizzy squeal her surprise. His smile turned into a low chuckle of amusement as he straightened his stocky frame. He watched her rub the offending spot, something singularly distracting about the action.

“If you still want to keep that shopping slash luncheon date...” his eyes had not once left the tight, rounded little cheeks, “I would cover that sweet little ass or I’ll take it as an open invitation that you would enjoy yet another round of ‘hide the Polish salami’.”

She laughed gaily, turning slightly to seek him out. “First of all, you aren’t Polish. But actually,” her giggle delighted him, “...I am kind of hungry.”

The man started toward her and she had one hell of a time kicking the bikini bottom aside that she
could make her escape all the while laughing hysterically for her own wit and playfulness.

Red allowed her escape with but one parting shot. “Come on baby...” he lifted his shaft with a confident hand, “you can bite on this all you like.”

His efforts were met with another round of laughter as the woman disappeared into the spacious bath.

While Lizzy was finishing her hair and make-up, Red headed for the bar in the other room.

“You’re still in a pissy mood?” Francis came alongside Red, having foregone the usual knock and greeting that most common people would offer. “You want me to solve the problem for you?” he offered magnanimously. “I don’t understand why you haven’t gotten rid of the bastard yourself.”

“I didn’t want the distraction right now.” Red muttered irritably. “We so rarely get to spend quality time together...” he sighed heavily.

Francis grinned as he headed to the bar to pour himself a drink.

“I think we should just kill him.” he quipped.

Red tipped his glass, remaining silent on the subject, though he wondered when he’d become so transparent since he had been thinking along those lines once or twice that afternoon.

“I don’t want to hurt her.” Red spoke his thoughts.

“Because you will hurt Brad.” Francis smiled knowingly. “Sooner or later.”

Red didn’t deny the words. He really didn’t know what he would do if faced with the bastard again. He truly didn’t...

“You know, we’re all taking bets on this.” Francis tried to lighten the subject.

Red lifted a sullen glance. “I would never have guessed.” he knew his people well, just as he knew he was be facetious.

“Bottom line here,” Francis motioned with his hands, “if you’re not happy, we’re not happy. Let us help you.” it was offered. “Your happiness... your peace of mind is just as important to Liz, as hers is to you... and it’s important to us too. What can we do?”

Red nodded silently, letting the words tumble around in his chaotic mind. But then realized, while he had good intentions, Francis did not know who Elizabeth really was or the situation which existed between them.

While Red was the ultimate law breaker... she was a FBI agent who swore to uphold the law. It was the contention with which he dealt now.

How could she possibly appreciate his usual method of dealing with his rivals. The question became moot as the subject of his contemplation appeared on the scene.

“We’ll discuss this issue later.” Red informed Francis.

The woman in question came out of the bedroom, smiling in his direction waving to a reticent Francis Holbrook.

Red’s expression carefully masked over as he welcomed the gentle kiss from the small mouth as Liz
leaned into his sphere.

Her soft kisses, intimate touches, laughter, moodiness, and that little body tucked up against his, made everyday life better.

Red honestly couldn’t remember how he had functioned before Elizabeth had come into his life. And he didn’t want to remember.

All he knew was he felt a sudden determination to be a better man for her...

For them.

Red sat patiently, absorbed in his surroundings until Lizzy came out of the dressing room once again, twirling about coquetishly.

She turned to the three way mirror, the new dress she was trying for the upcoming nuptials only her third choice so far.

She wrinkled her nose distastefully, tilting her head this way and that before turning towards him, waiting for his verdict.

“You hate it.” Red chuckled. “And rightfully so, it’s not your color.” he gestured to the odd gray shade.

“I’ll say...” she made a slight gagging face. “Why did she give me this?” she pointed to the unseen salesgirl.

“She’s apparently color blind.” Red shook his head, pushing out of his seat. “The style is fine.” he said of the tea length dress as he turned her this way and that, a gentle hand on her elbow.

It was a classic style. The off the shoulder lace lay softly on her smooth skin. It tapered in, highlighting Lizzy’s small waist. The skirt was full and moved gracefully when she walked. It was light and airy, perfect for the outside venue.

But the color was horrendous.

Red searched the merchandise available, finding the same style just to his right, hanging on a convenient rack. Snagging two in different colors, he shoved the dresses at Liz, pointing to the dressing rooms.

“Lavender?” she gasped her horror.

“Just... humor me.” he rolled his eyes for her lack of experimentation, shooing her off.

She reluctantly disappeared into the back as Francis came up out of nowhere as was his tendency, falling onto the bench beside Red.

“She find one yet?” he asked distractedly. “Hey, this couch is plush as shit, I’m going to put one in my bathroom at home.”

Red looked at him oddly. “This won’t take long.” He stretched his legs out in front of him comfortably. “Lia?”

“Yes, she found one.” Francis nodded approvingly. “She was just going to wear her dress that she
had for her friend’s wedding...” he said, “but where’s the fun in that?”

Red smiled, turning his attention to Lizzy as she walked out in the off white dress.

“That’s pretty.” Francis watched her walk to the large mirror, swishing the billowing skirt.

“I look like a bride, don’t I?” she cut rueful eyes to both men in the mirror.

“Yeah, I guess it could be used for a wedding dress.” Francis had to agree.

“It’s very lovely.” Red questioned the validity of such a decision. “But I think it’s considered a faux pas, when attending a wedding.”

Liz’s shoulders slumped a tad, before she trudged back to the dressing room. Her spirits a little low.

“What bee buzzed in her bush?” Francis chuckled as the door closed with a thump.

Red laughed quietly at the mixed metaphor. “I chose a lavender dress for the event.”

“Oh my God, you didn’t?” Francis said sarcastically. “So what exact commandment did you break?”

“Lizzy does not do girly.” Red supplied the answer.

The door opened once again and the woman emerged, her expression both sullen and accusing. She stomped her way to the mirror.

Red reserved his judgement. Liz scanned the dress in the mirror, her head falling dejectedly after a goodly spell.

Her alabaster skin looked healthy and glowing... ethereal. Her dark hair stood out against the soft color in a startling manner. The dress accentuated her in all the right places.

Simply put... she looked amazing.

Liz scowled at Red, their eyes meeting in the mirror. She turned once again without a word making her way stalwartly back into the dressing room.

Francis craned his head watching her rather dramatic exit then jerked back when the door closed with a resounding snap behind the woman.

“So,” Francis drawled in confusion, “she... hated it?” he questioned the validity of his state.

“No.” Red grinned, raising from the seat, resetting his hat jauntily on his head. “She loved it.”

“I’ll never understand women.” Francis admitted. “They drag you to these things, kicking and screaming and when you finally do something cool, they get pissed off.”

“They are infinite and enchanting.”

“Well, yeah...” Francis seemed momentarily waylaid. “But they’re also pains in the asses.”

“I heard that!” Liz’s annoyed tone came from behind a closed door.

Francis spread his hands as if to say, ‘my point is made’.

Red busied himself, scanning a multitude of shoe styles and handbags until Lizzy emerged. She shoved the dress into his chest, seemingly resigned to her fate.
She personally, would never have chosen such a color but begrudgingly knew it was the best thing she had tried on in a number of years. It simply chafed her that her choice for the wedding had been totally unsuitable.

Men were supposed to be ignorant about such things. She found herself pointing to shoe after shoe, however, waiting for Red’s opinion before reluctantly snatching up a pair he had given his silent approval on.

She unconsciously moved on to the handbags but found him lacking in support this time.

“Why waste time when you know you’re going to pick the right one?” she tried to keep the annoyance from her voice.

Red bit the inside of his cheek, enjoying the standoff.

Liz crossed her arms refusing to budge. Red finally reached around her, grasping a small handbag, adding it to the pile.

A salesgirl swooped in, eager for her commission.

“What’s wrong with this one?” Francis held up a rather gaudy, rhinestone trinket laced with orange inlay around the leather strapping.

Red was hard pressed not to laugh right in the woman’s totally incredulous face.

“You see...” Red asked innocently, “it could have been worse.” he pointed out helpfully.

Francis took exception critically examining his choice of accessories. “What?” he wanted to know. “The color just pops.”

“I’m gonna pop you right in the eye.” Liz hissed quietly. “You’re embarrassing me!”

Francis glanced around, glowering his annoyance. “Goes to show how much you know...” he disdained, “Lia chose one almost exactly like this.” he proudly proclaimed. “It made the outfit.”

Liz was left speechless.

“You picked it out, didn’t you?” Red surmised.

Francis beamed proudly. “She loved it.”

“I’m sure she did.” Red let him have the moment. Liz’s face still was frozen in the same horrific expression. She cut hopeless eyes to the older man.

As they made their way to the cashier, “It’s okay.” Red whispered aside. “I’ll fix it for her. It will be fine.”

Liz breathed easier knowing Lia would have an out from such a horrendous situation. She waited patiently now only with an occasional ‘look’ in Francis’ direction.

“Thank you...” Red spoke quietly beside her.

“What for?” she questioned.

“For trusting me.” he inclined his head slightly.
The woman glanced at the hideous handbag hanging so obtrusively from Francis’ hand. The man clearly intended to purchase the heinous object.

“Never again will I question anything you suggest.” Liz promised faithfully.

Francis looked over happily swinging his new purchase back and forth, blissfully unaware of any dissension among the troops.

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“That butterfly there is pretty, Francis.” she pointed to the object.

Red and Chris stepped off to a side room, discreetly disappearing into the darkened area.

“...Fancy meeting you here.” the voice was instantly recognizable.

Liz exhaled an annoyed breath, before turning reluctantly about. “...Brad.”

She lay a restraining hand on Francis who she had felt tense at the other man’s arrival. She also waived off a rapidly approaching guard who had held back all afternoon, as was his way until something he perceived as ‘danger’ beckoned.

She could handle this. Even as insistent as Brad was, she had absolutely no interest in the man. And didn’t think she’d have a problem verbalizing as much.

“I saw you,” the man smiled charmingly, “thought you might be interested in having that drink now.”

“Oh, I can’t, but thank you.” Liz begged off graciously. “I have to finish shopping for the wedding.” she explained with a wave of her hand to the display cases.

“Well, how about dinner.” the man tried again, persistent if nothing else. “There’s a romantic little bistro up the way.”

Francis’ jaw tightened angrily, before turning his ire directly on the intruder. “Man, she’s engaged.” he warned icily. “...Back the fuck off.”

“I just asked her out to dinner.” Brad laughed inoffensively.

“A romantic dinner.” Francis corrected, remembering the exact wording used.

“What?  Your old Ball and Chain afraid of a little competition?” It was innocuously joked.

“If there was any competition to be had.” Francis scoffed openly. “You’re so out of his league, it’s pathetic.”

Liz rubbed at her forehead, embarrassed by the whole thing. “Brad, I’m flattered,” she began, “but I think it would be best if we didn’t–”

“Look, just have dinner with me.” Brad prodded insistently. “Take a chance.”

“No... thank you.” Liz refused, all nicety aside. “Now, we must be going.” she took Francis’ arm, walking across the show room.

She could feel the man gaining on them, preparing to turn and do battle but at that instant, Red stepped out of the back room.

She was glad to see that the man was going to be civilized about the whole matter, his expression benign for the moment.

Red lifted his hand, taking her outstretched one as she got closer to him.

“Liz...” Brad demanded her attention.

Clenching her jaw angrily, Liz spun, stopping the man in his tracks.
“I said,” she bit out, “no.”

Brad drew back, a little shocked by the forcefulness in her tone. His eyes drifted past her, sensing the problem.

“I get it.” he nodded knowingly. “I’ll talk to you later then.”

Francis stepped forward quickly and Liz could see the powerful fists clenching with rage, “Hey man, why don’t you go fuc–”

Red grasped Francis’ arm, stilling the young man. “Is there a problem here?”

“No problem.” Brad smiled disarmingly. “Just asked Liz for a quick drink... maybe a little dinner.”

“A fucking romantic dinner.” Francis corrected again, his anger barely contained. Was he purposely baiting Red a little, hoping the man might knock the asshole out? He knew Red’s capabilities, he just didn’t know how far he was willing to be pushed in this particular situation.

Red remained stoically passive. “Elizabeth, would you like to have dinner with your friend.”

Francis turned away, shaking his head furiously but Christopher offered a sedate shake of his own head signifying ‘let Red handle it in his own way’.

Liz smiled softly, sensing Red’s ploy.

He was pissed. Clear and simple. Though he was trying to hide it, she knew the set of those shoulders very well.

The man was the epitome of class in her book. Her affection for him swelled to new heights.

“No. I do not want to go.” she gripped his hand tighter.

“You have your answer.” Red turned the all too quiet eyes elsewhere.

“Maybe because she doesn’t have a choice.” the man countered recalling his several attempts garner the FBI’s attention this very day.

Red remained moot on the subject knowing where all this was leading.

“My denial has nothing to do with Red, in any fashion.” Liz replied sternly. “As a matter of fact, I’m finding you rather conceited and rude.” she narrowed her eyes at the intruder to her domain. “Do not approach me again.” she snapped quietly. “Is that clear enough for you?”

“I don’t want to have to point out again... that we are engaged.” Red kept his tone even, just barely.

“But I have to wonder,” Brad countered musingly, “if you will make it to the altar?”

A certain type of rage filled Elizabeth herself at such an unforgivable slur. “Why you son of a–”

Red gripped her hand, gently stilling her outburst. He stepped once, putting himself between the woman and her antagonist. His eyes emptied of emotion.

“...Leave Elizabeth alone.” he gritted coldly.

Brad looked between the hostile eyes staring daggers at him. He sensed Elizabeth’s anger as well, before shrugging nonchalantly.
“Does she know who you are?” he questioned sotto voce before sauntering across the showroom. “I’ll see you later, Liz.” he called back over his shoulder, his smile a confident one.

Red was moving before he knew he had actually reacted but the woman’s hand held him back. He trailed after the son of a bitch with his eyes blazing hidden fury until Brad disappeared behind a large pillar.


Red turned a glacial stare to Dembe and Silas who waited unobtrusively aside. Silas lifted a brow signifying ‘do we kill the bastard now?’

Red offered a jerky gesture in reply. Both men were clearly disappointed by the man’s decision.

“Who’s the clueless idiot?” Chris asked the rhetorical question.

“Her old boyfriend.” Francis grated, sending Liz an accusatory glance.

“Let it go.” Red practically snapped before wrapping his arm around Liz’s waist, pulling her close to his side.

She smiled warmly at the touch, moving into it more than willingly.

Red took a deep breath, trying to control the urge to go after the fucker and do irreparable harm. He felt his rage easing with Liz’s calming presence, but it didn’t quell it completely.

He was trying so hard to not resort to his usual tactics, knowing Elizabeth would not appreciate it, especially since she would consider it her fault. The task almost impossible, however.

In fact, he hadn’t anticipated that it would bother him to this extent.

Lizzy was his. And to not fight for what belonged to him... was a very foreign concept in Red Reddington’s world.

He couldn’t help but ask himself if there was a small part of her wondering why he hadn’t. Did she think he was a coward for not strangling the asshole like he wanted to? Or was she proud of him for keeping his cool?

Liz gripped his hand tightly, dragging him along as she pointed out jewel after jewel to Francis. The young man was rapidly regaining his equilibrium, even making Liz giggle at one point over some nonsensical thing he had said.

To outward appearances, she had let the matter go. Had moved on from the exchange and was having fun.

So why was Red still stewing?

She tapped the glass repeatedly at one point until Francis gave in and gestured for assistance. She waited patiently in the interim, all the while wondering over Red’s quietness.

“Oh, look!” she gasped, pointing to a delicate necklace and earring set in diamond and amethyst. “It’s the color of my dress.” she traced her finger over the glass, looking at the pretty display.

Red waved a man over, pointing to the set.

“Red.” she hissed quietly. “I didn’t say buy it! I said–”
He cupped her face gently, working his mouth softly against hers, feeling the tension easing gradually from his shoulders. She sighed happily against his mouth, for a few moments before sighing in defeat.

“You’re impossible,” she shook her head slightly, “what am I going to do with you?”

“Are you open to suggestions?” Red asked instantly.

Dembe stepped forward, completing the transaction.

As they walked through the hotel, she realized that Red had said very little since the incident with Brad.

She began to feel very insecure.

Was he pissed off at her? And if so, what the hell for! She hadn’t done anything. She had been minding her own business when Brad invaded her space.

They came to the hall leading to the outside area where the car was waiting.

Red had been upset for some few moments. He had felt better after purchasing the small trinket for the woman but his anger had returned almost immediately thereafter. He hesitated, finding a safe object on which to vent his frustration.

Suddenly turning on the head guard who had walked quietly beside him the entire time, Red snapped. “Where the hell were you?”

“Shut up, Red.” Liz whipped around, her own anger surfacing. “I waved him off because I could handle it! You big jerk!”

“I didn’t ask what you were doing.” Red snapped right back. “I asked what the hell h–”

“I can take care of Brad myself!” she gritted. “I don’t need him to do it for me!”

“That’s his job!” Red jabbed a finger towards the conspicuously silent guard. “He’s supposed to protect you!”

“You mean, protect your property!” she bitched before turning on her heel, marching down the long corridor, continuing the trek to the car.

Silas watched her go, before slowly walking after her. He turned a few steps into the effort, glancing back at Red.

“You’re kind of cute when you’re mad.” Silas grinned at his own wit.

“Fuck off, Silas.” Red spat, gesturing for the man to ‘go’. “Do your job, dammit.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Silas saluted, resuming his trek.

Red dropped his head, blowing out his vexation before lifting his eyes, finding Dembe and Francis waiting.

“I don’t want to hear it.” he grunted irritably.

Silas trotted after the vexed woman, chuckling as he neared.
“Slow down there, firecracker.” he reached out, snagging her arm, ensuring she obey.

“I can’t believe he spoke to you in that manner!” she hissed. “Besides, I need you to—”

“He knows you don’t need me to ward off that piss ant.” Silas effectively silenced the pissed woman. “Technically, I should have ushered the moron to the door and none of this would have happened.” he was quick to fill in. “But just like Red, I know you can handle that dumbass.”

“He’s pissed off at us for—”

“Red’s not pissed off at you or even me.” Silas corrected.

“He yelled at you for nothing and—”

Silas sighed heavily, guiding her to a nearby hallway away from prying ears and eyes.

“Now, I want you to listen to me.” He held her fiery eyes. “There are two totally different issues going on here and you’re not going to understand it unless someone just maps it out for you.”

“I’m not stupid, you know!” she hissed.

“I know you’re not. But you know, it didn’t fully occur to me until early this morning what’s going on.”

“What are you babbling about?”

“Just be quiet for a second and I’ll tell you.” Silas snapped. “First and foremost, Red was not yelling at me. He was venting in a safe manner.”

Liz tilted her head questioningly. The man shifted his bulk into a more comfortable position.

“Honey, what just happened in there went against everything Red Reddington is.” he explained as best he could under the circumstances. “It was either he blew up at me, knowing full well I understood that it wasn’t personal... or he did what his instincts were screaming at him to do.”

Liz stepped in closer, listening intently now.

“He’s agitated because he went against his natural tendency to fight for his property,” he repeated her words back at her, gesturing accordingly, “but instead, he did what he thought you would appreciate and that was to keep his cool.”

Liz eyed her guard warily, but stayed silent.

“The idiot has probably got it in his head that you think he’s a coward for not fighting for you.” the man laughed at such a notion.

“I don’t think that at all!” she stated vehemently.

“I didn’t say you did.” Silas reprimanded. “Or that it made sense that Red Reddington would think something so stupid.”

“So besides him believing that,” she slowly worked out the problem in her head, “he’s also worried how I’ll react when he finally does blow his top?” she questioned.

“Yes, he is worried about that.” Silas confirmed. “But you and I both know, Red will handle Brad at some point.” he warned, just as a precaution.
She had to admit, she had expected Red to punch the man back at the jewelry store.

“Especially since the little fucker called the FBI and reported a sighting on Red.”

“He what!” she gasped.

“Red has already taken care of it.” Silas assured. “But you should know, Red will do something, at some point. So get ready for it.”

“So I should be...” she searched for the proper wording, “supportive?”

“I can’t tell you how to feel about that.” Silas shook his head. “Your morals are different than ours.”

Liz had to admit that she believed a different set of rules applied most times than she had witnessed with her current associates. Rule of law had been drilled into her for so many years now, that the lines were beginning to blur.

It felt wrong to support Red in this matter when she knew it was so easily handled in a different fashion.

But on the other hand, she had to wonder, when did she have to take a step back and allow Red to handle this his way?

“I told Red I wasn’t interested in Brad.” she confided. “I thought he believed me...”

“I’m not saying he didn’t believe you.” Silas was quick to reassure the woman.

“Then what’s going on?” she was so confused. “I mean, besides him wanting to beat the hell out of Brad.”

“This isn’t about Brad,” Silas shook his head woefully, “it’s about Tom.”

The woman’s frown deepened, having absolutely no idea how the two even connected.

“When he threw Tom in your face last night...” Silas reminded, “he was subconsciously worrying about you taking off with Tom... not Brad.”

“What?” she whispered her disbelief.

“Brad is just a convenient excuse.” Silas spread his hands expressively. “Red has been living a life of nothing but disappointment... right now, he’s desperately trying to find his place in your world and evidently he hasn’t found it yet.” It seemed simple enough to the man. “The foundation is shaky and he can’t find his footing.” ”

“He’s waiting for me to leave him.” she surmised quietly.

Silas nodded sharply. “So it would seem.”

“Have I done something to...” she shrugged.

“It’s not you. It’s just the way guys think, honey.” Silas opened the door, ushering her out when the car pulled up. “He hasn’t been able to make claim to you in any of the ways universally understood by the male species, loathsome creatures that we are... and it’s bothering the shit out of him.”

“What do you mean? What ways?” she questioned, ready to help Red in anyway possible to assure he be more confident of their relationship.
Red stepped through the door, stalking towards the pair, his face masked carefully.

“Fuck!” the woman was more than vexed for the interruption, her expression saying as much.

Silas laughed throatily before opening the back door, waving her gallantly inside.

“Talk to him...” The man suggested quietly, assisting the woman as she took her seat.

They drove the short distance to the Villa in complete silence. Red snapped orders to those assembled before following the woman into the front room, then stalked his way to the bar.

Liz watched him for a long moment, silently wondering how to start the dialogue needed.

“I don’t think you’re a coward.” she stated quietly, stilling the man’s hand directly before his glass reached his lips. “I understand what you did...” she continued quickly, “and that you did it for me.”

Red blinked, a little shocked by her insight, truth told.

“That’s the second time, that I’m aware, that you’ve done that.” she crossed her arms, hugging herself comfortably. “It goes against your nature...” she turned, walking the short path around the divan, “and I don’t...” she hesitated, absently running her finger along the edge of a throw pillow.

“You don’t, what?” Red questioned quietly.

“I don’t want you to do that.” she blurted out. “If you start second guessing everything you do, because of me, it can lead to a choice between life or death.”

Red scoffed disgustedly, “Brad isn’t—”

“I don’t mean Brad.” she scolded. “I mean at work and, yes, maybe even personally.” it was granted. “Two months ago, you probably would have killed the Ashcrofts for what they did to Mark.” she had no delusions in that area. “But because of me...”

“You think I didn’t kill them because of you?” Red frowned, unsure how to take what she was saying. But after New York, he wasn’t going to instantly assume. He would hear her out. “Did you want me to kill them?”

“No, I didn’t mean that.” she frowned, unsure how to put into words what she had actually meant. “You as much as indicated, it was because of me, you changed your method of dealing with them.”

Red thought back, suddenly remembering his phone call to her. He had said... *a good woman has a way of changing a man.*

“I don’t want you hesitating to do what you feel is best and possibly getting yourself killed because you think... differently now.”

Red stepped forward, understanding dawning. “I didn’t mean that I hesitated to...” he gathered his thoughts, “when I understood what was going on, there was no point in killing them.” he tried to explain, but by her confused expression, he wasn’t doing a good job.

“They purposefully shot Mark low, to *not* kill him.” he added. “They just wanted to make it so Francis wouldn’t use the O’Sullivan’s again.”

“They couldn’t just lowball the O’Sullivan’s?” she would never understand the criminal mind and she professed to be a profiler.
“The Ashcroft’s are a young bunch,” Red sighed heavily, “who maybe watched too many mobster movies.”

“Regardless, what happened today...” she looked up at him, “I know you did it for me.”

“I did.” he admitted. “Are you implying you would have rather I beat the hell out of him?”

“Is that what you wanted to do?”

“... Yes.”

“And because you didn’t, we got into an argument.”

“I wasn’t angry with you.”

“The point is, I thought you were,” she reminded. “Which again, led us to a misunderstanding.”

“Who’s to say we wouldn’t have fought if I had done as I wanted.” Red countered.

“At least in that scenario, you’re actually standing up for a cause.” she could see that much. “Fighting over some meaningless idiot is exactly what he wants us to do.”

Red couldn’t argue the point. It was the second time Brad had purposefully caused waves with the intention of driving a wedge.

“Plus you got angry with my guard, after I explicitly told him to not involve himself.” she practically pleaded her cause. “Negating my order to stand down.”

Red had told her repeatedly that Silas was to do as she directed, and he came in, in one fail swoop, erasing what he had essentially proclaimed. He vented his anger on the wrong people.

He sighed, nodding slowly. “I did.” he readily admitted again. “I apologize.” he pushed the drink aside, slowly. “I will apologize to Silas as well.”

She turned, seeking solace elsewhere, looking out the French doors, watching the guards make their rounds. “What do I have to do to convince you that I’m not interested in Brad.”

“I know you aren’t interested.” he assured.

“Then why...” she hesitated, unsure how to ask the question.

“I told you...” he walked up behind her, keeping a little distance, “I’m very territorial. It’s a trait that I am not proud of at times.”

For the second time that day, her heart filled with affection for the man behind her. He may be territorial and even possessive at times but that was just part of the whole.

“And watching him openly undressing you... pisses me the hell off.”

“I don’t care what he does.” she scowled.

“I do.” Red murmured quietly behind her.

“Because I belong to you.” she finished for him. “In your world.”

“No, he’s disrespectful to you. And that is something that I will simply not allow.”
And a little more than disturbing, Red thought to himself. Men who didn’t take ‘No’ for an answer were dangerous in his world.

“If it makes you feel any better...” she quirked her head slightly to one side, “I kind of wanted you to hit him... oh who the hell am I kidding? I wanted you to knock him on his ass.”

Red smiled shortly stepping closer, looking to her profile. “You did, huh?”

She sighed, nodding a little. “He’s so fucking annoying.”

“Then you understand that I may not be able to control myself at some point.” he questioned. “And that my actions are in no way a reflection of my feelings and respect for you.”

She looked up at the man, a slow smile tugging at her lips. She guessed if that bitch Natalia came sniffing around him... she would be pretty pissed off herself. Which was a totally foreign concept to her, she suddenly realized.

She fully understood finally, as odd as the emotion involved with Natalia was for Liz to experience, it was just as much an alien concept for Red not to act as his instincts demanded.

“I will not lie to you, Lizzy. He can only push me so far before I react.” he stepped in further as she stepped back. “I have a reputation to uphold granted, but when it comes to you... it’s personal.”

She smiled softly, looking up at the man, “This little territorial thing you’ve got going on is even more hot than I originally thought.” she reached out, stroking his collar. “Not that you have to prove your point by breaking him in half.”

He glanced down, watching her hand trail flirtatiously over his chest. Leaning his arm into the wall beside her, he effectively blocked any exit, not that she seemed to be wanting to go anywhere.

“I had something a little more violent in mind, but whatever...” The man dropped his mouth against her neckline, suckling on her pulse point.

“Are you marking your ‘territory’?” she leaned into his administrations.

“That is in the very near future.” he promised himself more than the woman. “I am well within my rights to beat the fuck out of him.”

“So I should consider myself ‘spoken for’?” she sighed, holding him to his pastime.

“Most definitely.” he muttered distractedly. “Yes, you are.”

“You sound pretty sure of yourself there, Sailor.”

Red looked at her with dark and hooded eyes, then reached out, popping the button on her slacks. Her breath caught in her throat as she stood there, stunned.

“With good reason.” He smirked as he pulled the top of the dark fabric, sliding the zipper open easily.

“Hey!” She gasped, then looked around nervously for the Butler, to make sure the door was closed. People were constantly coming and going unannounced around here.

Pushing her further into an alcove of the bar, blocking any view of her with his body, Red traced her belly button with probing fingers, his thumb hooking into the edge of her panties. “Do you want me to stop?”
“...No.” She replied breathlessly.

He slid his hand inside the fabric, touching her with his warm confidence.

“Are you spoken for?” he asked, playing with the fine smattering of hair covering her swollen lips, as he gently teased her clitoris.

“...Yes.” She spread her legs willingly, tensing a little for what she knew was to come.

“Who do you belong to?” He rubbed her clit quickly.

“Red Reddington...”

“I’ve heard of him.” he stated. “Seems like an okay guy.”

“He’s the best.” she sighed dreamily.

He chuckled sensually. “I’ve heard that too...”

She grasped the back of his neck, deepening their kiss, which he happily obliged.

He heard a couple male voices outside the room, possibly nearing their location.

“You better come,” He whispered seductively, “we’re about to have company.” He smiled, feeling her fight for release instead of attempting to stop his actions.

“Come on, baby...” Red rumbled softly against her ear, urging her on. He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the voices pass, as they headed outside to the deck.

He had no intention of halting this little interlude.

He really loved watching her come. Pushing her hard into the wall, covering her mouth with his, he rubbed hard against her swollen clit until she climaxed against his fingers, mewling softly, raspy gasps escaping her heightened body.

Red thrummed his fingers against her, bringing her down slowly. She relaxed in his embrace, breathing in his warm scent then sighed happily.

He slid his hand free, before repairing the damage he had done. “Are we all right here, now?” he stared down at her contentedly.

“You do what you need to, Red.” she lay her head back on his shoulder. Her eyes gentle and for the man alone. “I don’t like being at odds with you over something so trivial.”

“I don’t either.” he agreed, then smiled a moment later. “Though, I do so enjoy these little make up sessions.”

Liz laughed quietly, reaffirming her hold about his neckline. They stood in comparative silence, neither realizing that, as a unit, they swayed gently as if to some melodic tune.

The sounds of the outside world filtered around them. A masculine laugh echoed from the lush gardens outside the French doors. There was a sound from the kitchen of someone shutting the back entrance door.

“You’re too quiet.” Red murmured, unwilling to break the quiet solitude they had found.
“I was thinking about Tom.” she blurted, feeling the man stiffen hastily. “You don’t have to worry about him.” Liz lifted her gaze to the carefully controlled features. “I know it’s just words but...”

“I shouldn’t have said what I did.” Red shook his head for his own folly. “It was–”

“Warranted.” she interrupted. “I acted impulsively and really disrespected myself.” she admitted. “I didn’t think about it until a couple weeks ago, how unhealthy and sick that relationship was.” she was still troubled by her impulsive actions. “I needed to step away from that but...”

“He was comfortable.” Red supplied the reason.

“But he wasn’t.” Liz disagreed. “I thought I knew him... you know?”

“I know...” Red hated that she had felt that betrayal.

“I hadn’t let it settle in that the man I knew didn’t exist and never had.” she grimaced at the thought now. “I lived with a stranger for two years... then after he...” she shivered at the thought of the violence that had erupted between them.

Red absently massaged her tense muscles, comforting her. He allowed her the time to gather her thoughts.

“I slept with him...” she felt sick by the realization. “What was wrong with me?”

“Tom was a master manipulator.” Red nuzzled her forehead lovingly. “Even after everything that happened, it was hard to erase the good memories you had of the man.”

The people who handled Tom were almost Machiavellian in nature. There were times when Red even understood the desperation the young man must have felt. Caught between a rock and a hard place.

“You can’t just shut off your emotions, Lizzy.” that much he knew.

“I haven’t shut off my emotions.” she hoped he would understand. “I’ve learned to look at the situation from a distance. I know now not everything is black and white.” she stopped for a breath.

“But I need you to know, that with this needed separation from him... I understand how damaging the situation was.” she freely admitted. “And it will not happen again. I can’t let it happen...”

The words, while appearing sound and logical, still troubled him somewhat. He understood what she was trying to convey. He was glad to note however, that she was seriously considering her own happiness and peace of mind, which was very important.

One part of the man sensed that she was trying to soothe the small rift between them in her own way. He was also grateful for that element.

He could see her personal growth, both emotionally and physically.

Knowing that Tom had a ice cubes chance in hell of swaying Lizzy to do anything... felt amazing. He was so fucking proud of her right now... words failed him.

He never thought he’d see the day...

“I know what I said doesn’t magically fix anything,” she began, “and we’ll need to communicate more about such things...”
“But it’s a start,” he allowed. “I’m still sorry for being an asshole and for the crass approach last night.”

His sincere apology touched her deeply.

“I’m sorry I keep bringing up work.” she replied in kind.

“What?” His confusion was apparent.

She was full of confessions this afternoon it seemed, which amused the man. Red had to wonder, however, was there something deeper going on?

“What were you and Silas discussing earlier?” he thought he knew the answer to the probing question.

“Nothing of import.” she waved the insinuation off, sensing his meaning. “He did explain some things to me about Brad and stuff…”

“And you wanted to clear the air…” Red confirmed.

“Yes.” she nodded.

“I’m pleased.” and he was.

“I’ve been thinking,” she brought another troubling subject to light, “it seems like every conversation we have, I bring up work.” she felt her own insecurities. “I don’t mean to, it just happens.”

She shared her concern. It seemed that all they really had in common besides the phenomenal sex… was the Blacklist.

“I’ll find the balance… a normality, soon, Red. I promise.” She was determined.

“Lizzy…” the man chuckled slightly, “that is normal.”

“Really?” her mood lightened somewhat. Red Reddington was sophisticated, worldly… could the mundane really hold his interest for long?

“What did you and Tom talk about at the end of the day?” he queried, amused at her outlook on what a normal relationship should entail.

“I don’t know?” she tried to recall. “I guess, I asked how his day was, if he let Hudson out… did he take the trash out.”

“You asked how his day was?” he clarified. “Meaning, how was work.”

Liz was momentarily waylaid.

“I guess so, yes.” But that was just Tom she was dealing with, not Red Reddington, her insecurities resurfaced.

“Well, that’s all we’re doing.” Red smiled softly. “The only difference is we can discuss work freely, because we happen to work, together.” he pointed out the obvious. “You thought you couldn’t do that with Tom.”

Because things were classified in her line of work, they were off limits to Tom. She didn’t realize until that moment that a part of her had always sort of looked down on his profession. Not that a
school teacher was not a vital vocation. In Liz’s opinion it was the most important profession ever because it dealt with the future of children.

But secretly, she had always thought a lot of the more violent aspects of her chosen vocation would have totally turned him off, as most civilians, she supposed.

What a fool she had been.

“To do so now, so openly, is a novel experience for you.” Red’s hands dwarfed her waist as he unexpectedly lifted the slight frame unto the granite counter of the bar. “I should think.”

“It is rather freeing.” she had to admit. Not once did she ever imagine Red would be turned off by any aspect of her work.

“Trust me, Lizzy,” he smiled warmly, his eyes level on par with hers from her lofty position now, “aside from some minor little details,” she rolled her eyes, catching his meaning, “we’re like everyone else at the end of the day. We talk about work, the household bills–”

“How can we talk about the bills, when you pay them?” she twisted her mouth derisively. “Which brings to mind, that is also something we need to discuss, since it is supposedly my house... remember.”

“You asked if I paid the electric bill the other day.” he chose to ignore such logic.

“I did not!” she was relatively sure.

“You most certainly did,” he corrected, “over breakfast, when you were opening the mail.”

She was brought up short. “Well... did you? Pay it?” It seemed an important question after all.

“I did.” he assured her. “Before the due date even.” he replied straight faced, though his eyes were filled with merriment.

Liz giggled a little under her breath, seeing the humor in the situation finally, her manner and eyes softening on the man. “Gold star for you.”

“Are these gold stars redeemable in some fashion?” it was the man’s turn to brighten a little. Because after all, hope sprang eternal.

She loved when he used his wit against her but she loved more the undertone of flirting that had developed between them of late.

“Francis hasn’t received any gold stars, to date.” she mused pseudo seriously. “But Silas has redeemed several of his at something he calls the Muskrat Ranch.” she was delighted that she could produce that throaty chuckle whenever she put her mind to it these days.

“Muskrat love, eh?” he was thoroughly enjoying the conversation. “I believe you meant the Bunny Ranch.”

“Really, what is that?” she feigned innocence.

“I’ll book us a tour.” he called her bluff. “I think you’ll find it very enlightening.

“I’m taking it... this is a house of ill repute? And if so,” she lifted scolding brows, “how often have you frequented this establishment.”
“I’ve been like a monk.” he said straight faced. “But for you, I would renounce my vows.”

The cute little face blanked over for a goodly while and Red could see the gears turning. She was definitively intrigued by such a notion. He could not wait to see what came out of that sweet little mouth now...

“Why didn’t you tell me Brad called the FBI on you?” She wisely changed the subject, using his tactics, her expression an inquisitive one.

To say Red was disappointed would be an understatement, but he had other things with which to contend.

“Well, son of a bitch. I completely forgot.” He was genuinely put out with himself. “Ressler wants you to get him a black coffee cup from Treasure Island with a 3D skull on it.”

“What the hell does that have to do with...” she was a little vexed he had totally ignored the issue at hand.

“Ressler has his priorities straight for once.” Red hid his smile. “Did you know that everything out of that man’s mouth is a lie, but only if you’re his ‘current girlfriend’.” the man ‘air quoted’ the term.

“What are you talking about? Ress is the most honorable man I know... present company included.”

“Unless you’re his ‘current girlfriend’.” he once again, ‘air quoted’.

She held her smile for as long as humanly possible. “A skull mug, you say?”

“Yes, yes...” the man waved the issue aside, “back to this Muskrat Ranch thing...”

Chapter End Notes

It was suggested in a Facebook PM that I add my email address for readers wishing to make anonymous story suggestions. I guess I'll add this in every couple chapters for quick reference for you guys. :) 

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Facebook PM: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978
May 17

At dinner later that evening, Francis picked the correct time to present Lia with her surprise gift. Elizabeth enjoyed the moment just as much as the other woman. Lia’s reaction was totally priceless, much like the diamond necklace that had been chosen.

It must have been ‘priceless’ to see Francis actually choose a gift that was tasteful instead of the gaudy trinkets he had been bestowing.

It was later on that same night that Liz’s intense search for Red led her to all the activity taking place by the pool area.

She found Red and Silas, kicked back in chairs, lazily watching Dembe do laps, both sipping drinks.

In Red’s hand, she noted a stop watch, her curiosity piqued. The woman forgot about that issue for a moment, her real one coming to fore. She marched determinedly across the tiled slate area.

“Red Reddington,” she began her tirade most effectively, “you have got to stop buying me things like this.” she held her gift aloft the shiny bauble shimmering in the moonlight. Even now, as annoyed as she was, she could not help but admire the beautiful craftsmanship.

“Oh, you’re in trouble now.” Silas chortled, setting his drink on a nearby table, ready to turn his attention to a good fight any day of the week.

“You can’t just—” the woman dangled the jewels in Red’s face, needing to make this point hit home.

“I can and will, Lizzy.” Red turned his eyes upward, his tone a scolding one. “You liked it, you’re keeping it. End of story.” he held out an imperious hand, “Plus... what kind of fiancé would I be if I didn’t buy you jewelry and other little trinkets on occasion if only to remind you why you adore me so very, very much?”

Silas picked up his drink, his head shaking woefully. “So much for a good fight.” he grumbled.

Liz sighed heavily, knowing she wouldn’t win this argument. To the rest of the world, she was Red’s fiancée. It would indeed, look odd if he didn’t do what he had said.

“Sounds like bribery to me.” Silas did his bit to provoke the situation.

“You’re not helping.” Red shifted the man a lazy stare. Taking his pre-offered hand, Liz settled comfortably in his lap, the table they had chosen having only two chairs.

“Hey, did I say bribery was bad?” Silas questioned. “It’s got Francis out of some sticky situations, God knows.”

“Speaking of Francis...” Liz leaned into Red, wrapping an arm around his shoulders, “where is the little toad.”

“Ding Dong is with his little tart.” Silas chuckled into his glass.
“Your words I’m sure, not his.” Liz scolded. “And it’s not ‘Ding Dong’, it’s Cinnamon Roll and—”

“Lizzy, please.” Red pretended nausea, a playful hand placed to his stomach. “I can only handle so much saccharine in one day.”

“Well, I think they’re cute. I also think she’s just darling.” Liz added to her narrative, throwing an annoyed glare at her guard. “A lot more classy than the floozies you—”

“They prefer the term, call girls.” Silas corrected haughtily.

Red chuckled, ‘Try ‘escorts’.” He held up his watch, as Dembe pushed off from the end of the pool. “What are you doing?” She continued her visual reprimand of her guard, even though her interest had turned elsewhere by now.

“Timing him. He thinks he’s off his game.” Red absently swirled the scotch in his glass.

“Why would he think that?” Elizabeth was astounded.

“He ran this morning and was off his time by two entire minutes,” Red shook his head consolingly. “He’s getting old.” Silas commiserated.

“You’re older than he is.” Liz reminded.

“Oh, dig the knife in.” the large man cocked his head at the woman. “What is it with you and hotels, always stabbing someone... where it hurts.”

Red held his smile admirably for the less than gentle reminder of the incidents in the young woman’s life.

Elizabeth gasped irritably turning on the man. “I don’t always... those two times were simply...” she lost her train of thought because in reality, she could come up with no logical response.

Silas lifted a patient brow. The woman turned to Red for solace.

“Well, you do.” No help was to be found there evidently. He lifted his own brows slightly. “Stab people... in hotels.” he studied her wounded expression. “But for my part, I thoroughly enjoyed the experience.”

Dembe popped up out of the water just as Red clicked the watch. “Eighteen minutes, forty two seconds.”

“Is that good?” Liz mumbled under her breath.

“For someone who I believe just did a mile and was supposed to only do ten laps, yes.” Red’s tone was pure indulgence.

“He’s been practicing more of late.” Liz made note then glanced over meaningfully at Silas’ flat abdomen. “More people should follow by example.”

Silas waved such folly aside. “As if this body could be any better.”

“He’s preparing himself for the competition at Mark’s get together this year.” Red smiled happily at Dembe’s doubtful frown giving a thumbs up gesture.
“I don’t understand?” Liz stated. “I thought this was about rest, relaxation and entertainment.” She pouted, trying to ignore Silas’ snort of ridicule.

“I haven’t told you much about the event, have I?” Red mused aloud.

Elizabeth exchanged looks with Silas, his self satisfied, hers irritated.

“It’s an annual event, which I usually attend.” he began. “The only time that all rivalries and animosity is put aside.” he threw a warning glance at Silas. “Which is why your little friend here will not be attending this year.”

Silas seemed okay with exclusion.

“Call it holy ground, if you will.” Red continued. “There are competitions to eliminate any hostile aggressions which may be harbored,” once again Red’s eyes shifted to the innocent looking guard, “other challenges, which offer old scores might be settled in a more civilized manner. Fun is had by all.”

“So you’re saying that Dembe is training for one of these challenges, to settle a score?” she was dumbfounded because Dembe was not the type to hold a grudge, in her opinion.

“Dembe is competitive.” Red smiled. “You’ll understand when we get there.”

“But no one is really ever hurt seriously, in these little games?” she had to ask.

“Not permanently.” Red replied straight faced. “If you’re asking if we will be in danger, the answer is no. No more than normal, at least.”

“That’s not really encouraging.” she reminded. “You feel comfortable in the worst of slum areas.”

“True.” he acquiesced. “Then let me put it this way. Why would I take you if I thought you’d be in danger.” he patted her thigh consolingly. “I think you’ll have a nice time. Just keep in mind who you are, where we are and that there is always someone about.” he cautioned. “So remain cautious at all times.”

She tensed suddenly, her thoughts her own.

Red frowned at the sudden change, setting his glass aside. He stood slowly allowing the woman to regain her footing in her own time.

“Do you need me?” Silas placed his hands, linked together, atop his head.

“No, we’re staying in the rest of the night.” Red informed the head guard. “We’ll see you in the afternoon.”

Dembe waved from the far end of the pool before diving under. Silas stretched back, watching Red and Liz disappear into the darkness.

“Good, because I’m fucking bored.” Silas returned his interest to the dark man who was breaking the pool with smooth, effortless strokes. “Swim faster... like the time you did in the Florida Everglades when that gator was gaining on you,” he goaded.

Silas was in one of those moods.
Red opened the balcony doors allowing the fresh, cool mountain breeze inside. The drapes danced by the strong gust of air. Tossing back the blankets, he crawled into bed, relishing the comfort instantly. It had been a perfect day, just lazing around.

Aside from the whole Brad debacle that is.

He enjoyed purchasing things for the woman. What was money for if not to spend on something one enjoyed. They had ended an argument on a high note. Watching Lizzy have fun at the pool had been both entertaining and enlightening.

It had been a good day, indeed.

“What are you smiling for?” The woman climbed up into the bed, giving him an amazing view of her décolletage.

“Francis.” he shared his thoughts.

As she settled, he threw the blankets over her, turning on his side. Propping his head on his hand, he smiled down at her.

“The little troll.” She relaxed under the blankets, sighing happily. “Sticking ice down my backside.” She grumbled. “That was freaking cold.”

He nodded sagely, “How do you feel now?”

“I’m much warmer than I was earlier, I’ll say that much.” She turned on her other side, settling in to the cradle of his body.

Her cold bottom settled against his groin, instantly chilling him, and her feet were freezing.

“Why are you so cold?” He gingerly rubbed her hip and leg, generating heat.

“I think you’re used to me taking a shower before bed, but since I did before dinner...” Bunching the blankets in her fists, she snuggled under them. “Warm me up.”

Red felt his blood heat at the simple request. She couldn’t truly understand how much he wanted to... warm her up. But for now, he’d happily settle for cuddling her close.

“Better?” his arms embraced her in a loving cocoon.

“Hmmm.” She hummed sleepily.

The room fell silent, Red allowing the atmosphere to settle naturally. In less than a few minutes, the woman’s breathing out evened out somewhat. Reaching over head, Red hit the light switch, bathing the room in darkness.

After settling into the pillow, he sighed. “What has you worried?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know what you mean.” she evaded.

“Are you nervous about Mark’s?” he fished. “You’ve done a wonderful job here.”

“I’ve had to stop myself, twice, from saying something about work in front of Francis.” she had not confided in him as yet, and her lapses were weighing on her mind.
“How did that come about?” he sensed she needed to speak on the matter.

“We were reading the paper. I noticed two cases the local Bureau is handling and shared the information with Francis.” she flipped to her back needing to read his expression. “I got mad when Francis said the perps wouldn’t be caught because the Feds here were useless.”

“Well, they are.” Red tightened his arm about her, covering her lips with his finger, silencing her effectively. “Baby, half of the Feds and Cops are on Mob payroll here.” he explained his statement.

“What?” she gaped her shock.

“Believe me when I say, Francis has inside information on the matter.” he spoke in general terms. “Don’t get me wrong, we have the highest regard for the cops usually.” he gestured. “Here, you’ve entered a whole new world.”

“You’re speaking as if it’s the fifties.” she pulled a face.

He chuckled at such innocence. “Once the mob gets a foothold, they don’t let go no matter what the movies or papers say.” he settled in more comfortably, her body warmed considerably now.

“So, Francis didn’t mean anything by what was said.” he kissed her forehead. “He’s just not a fan of dirty cops.”

“You think you all would be.” she stated the obvious. “I mean...”

“You can gain a cop’s loyalty without turning him to the dark side.” Red lifted noble brows. “For example, I saved one’s life in Utah a couple years back, now he owes me one. And only one.” he held up his index finger. “The dirty cops, that are paid to be loyal, will turn on you in a second.”

“What exactly,” she had to ask, “are the dynamics between you and Ressler?”

“Are estranged.” Red shrugged. “Lizzy, Ressler only sees me as a CI. We have a working relationship, nothing more.” his eyes softened when she seemed hurt by the idea. “If it makes you feel any better, a lot of the people I met in the service are like that with anyone outside their platoon.”

“I don’t understand.” she was honestly confused. “You’re all on the same side.”

“Yes, but your first worry is getting your men home.” he stressed. “You get to know these guys, they’re your family.”

“I don’t think I could do that.” she confessed. “Choose sides like that.”

“You did.” Red corrected quietly.

She genuinely seemed upset by the accusation. “What are you talking about?”

“When I was being held by the King family.” he jogged her memory. “There were a lot of other people being held captive in that room besides me...” he let the intent sink in.

“But I didn’t care.” realization hit the woman full force. “I just wanted to get you out.”

She could explain it away in her own mind, saying that she knew the Bureau was on the way and would rescue those other people. Or that it was her priority to protect her CI. But the troubling fact was, she was beginning to know the truth as opposed to a lie.

Liz wanted to save Red. That was her only focus. If she hadn’t gone back, he would have... died.
Moving closer to him, visions of her walking into that room, finding him with a gun to his head... her embrace tightened about his waist and she buried her face into the warmth afforded her.

*The way he had said her name...*

“That does not make you a bad person, Lizzy.” Red consoled. “You just naturally save your team first.” His large fingers gently massaged her neckline. “You will always do your job to the best of your ability, sweetheart.” His lips grazed the scented hair. “Don’t ever doubt that.”

Red set his chin on top of her head, rubbing her back soothingly. She clutched him tighter, closing her eyes to what might have been.

They fell silent, lazily stroking one another before he finally felt her growing heavier against him. Thankful that she didn’t let their discussion weigh on her.

Throwing a leg carelessly over his thigh, she slid closer, lifting her face, dropping a soft kiss against his lips.

“Did I forget to kiss you goodnight?” Red smiled warmly, cuddling her close, his mouth descending sensually.

She kissed him back just as gently, her little tongue darting out, flicking his upper lip. His mouth parted to receive the offering, letting her guide the moment.

If this was all they ever did, kiss and cuddle... the man knew he would be oddly content.

Just to be in her sphere, to experience that which was Elizabeth Keen, would be all he could ever ask for.

The rest... was a gift from God.

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May 18

Red groaned irritably as he blindly reached for the phone, trying not to dislodge the woman sleeping so peacefully against him.

“Dammit...” He squinted blearily at the clock finding it nearing three in the morning. His fingers finally found the hard plastic of the phone, dragging it closer.

Lizzy mewled softly at the disturbance, her brow crinkling in her half sleep state.

“Shh, baby.” Red soothed, hoping he would not disturb her unduly. He flipped the phone open.

“What?” He hissed quietly.

He listened intently, his expression altering somewhat as the conversation proceeded.

He was silent a moment, then sighed more than heavily. “You what?” He bitched. “Where are you?” he bit the question out. He listened again this time, his expression speaking volumes. His hand fell
aside, the phone still held securely within.

Red took a moment to gather his patience. “I’ll be there when I get there.” he grumbled back into the speaker when his annoyance had lessened. He listened yet again, his fingers drumming angrily on the blanket. “Fuck with me and I’ll leave you there.”

Slapping the phone closed, Red dropped his head back into the pillow, shaking his head at the absurdity of life.

“Of all the stupid...” he muttered tightly, jostling her gently as he reluctantly accepted his lot in life.

“What’s going on?” Lizzy questioned sleepily, struggling to a sitting position.

“Go back to sleep, sweetheart.” Red whispered, kissing her bare shoulder before sliding from the bed, grabbing his pants.

Liz blinked, clearing the fog. “No really, what’s wrong?” she sat up straighter, rubbing her eyes watching Red step into his pants.

The man smiled softly as the sheet fell, exposing her breasts to his view. He knew, intellectually, that they had an intimate relationship. But to see her sitting there naked and comfortable in his presence... it was a very nice reminder of what they were.

Liz frowned softly, her hands dropping heavily to the blankets, in acceptance of the inevitable. “What did Francis do now?”

Red laughed quietly, slipping into his shoes. “Oddly, it’s not Francis...this time.”

Liz was stumped.

“Silas has gotten himself into a bit of a bind.” he grinned, pulling his shirt over his head.

Liz instantly threw back the blankets, wanting to help in anyway she could.

“Sweetheart, get some sleep.” he suggested, his expression benign. “I’ll just be a half hour at most.”

She slid her butt off the bed determinedly. “He’s my friend too.”

She hurriedly searched out her clothes, missing Red’s smile when she bypassed her panties entirely, having slipped into the tight jeans, commando fashion.

There was something decidedly sexy about her actions. He could now see the faint imprint of her vulva lips outlined by the tight fabric and he had thought it erotic before she had even worked the jeans up over her bottom.

Breaking his intent gaze away from the captivating sight, he waited patiently for the woman to find her shoes.

Minutes later they were crossing the living room area heading for the exit.

“Hey...” Francis nodded at them, biting into his snack from the kitchen, his arrival on scene not only unexpected, but to Red’s way of thinking... bizarre, “where you guys going?”

“Better question,” Red looked at the boy, “why are you in our Villa’s kitchen... at three in the morning?”
“Well, that’s just rude.” the man was clearly unsettled by such a question. “Now, what’s up?” he dismissed the sensation easily.

“Gotta go save, Silas.” Liz hurried Red along.

Francis rushed after them, quick on Red’s heels. “What did he do this time?” he bit into the sandwich, trailing after them to the car. “And can I go?”

“Yes, ‘you can go’.” Red mimicked the overly excited manner of Francis’ enthusiasm.

“Shotgun!” Francis shouted out, rushing for the front passenger seat.

“Dammit!” Liz tsked her annoyance, cursing her own lack of forethought.

“Baby, you can ride up front if you want.” Red not so subtly reminded Francis more so than the woman.

“No...” she sighed reluctantly, her pout affecting the man more than he wanted to admit, “he called it before I did.”

The way she said it, Red knew that the game had been played before and it made him wonder what the hell happened when he wasn’t at home.

Red headed for the driver’s seat, pulling up short as he noted Francis’ peculiar scowl, he frowned right back.

“What?” he snapped, this night was not going as he hoped.

“I don’t recall ever seeing you drive before.” the young man was somewhat mystified.

A hand came out of nowhere, smacking Francis across the back of the head. “Hey!” he turned around rubbing the spot gingerly, his expression sullen. “It was a legitimate concern.”

“Concern?” Red prompted peevishly.

“Seatbelt...” Liz grumbled from the back seat, still smarting from her loss of the favored seat.

Though both men faced death on a daily basis, facing Lizzy’s wrath was something both wanted to avoid if at all possible. Francis buckled his seatbelt.

“Silas is in a bit of a pickle,” Red slid into the interstate traffic, “as I understand it, while Dembe is somewhere in the vicinity, he is refusing any aid at this time.”

Francis, sensing their direction, grinned. “They’re down on Freemont?”

“At the Golden Nugget or The Four Queens.” Red confirmed, before whipping around a slow car, putting on the gas. “Silas couldn’t remember.”

“When that man lets his hair down,” Francis was visibly impressed, “he really goes for it.”

Liz turned her head, staring avidly at the new sights afforded her. She just loved all the flashing lights of the bustling city. The town literally never slept, leaving her feeling alive and energized whenever she saw it.

She peered over to her right, following Francis’ line of vision, taking in ‘Old Vegas’.
She would have love to have seen Vegas in its heyday, when Gangsters and Crooners ruled the city. When people dressed up to do everything from have dinner to attending a show.

Then, women were elegant in their tailored dresses, while the men wore suits and fedoras. Liz smiled warmly at the man in front of her, suddenly missing his trademark hat.

She had seen a small taste of what it might have been like with the access granted her in the VIP sections. While everyone had a fun time and shared more than a few laughs, there was also a sense of decorum and manners.

All day, when they had switched tables or sat down for a meal, gentlemen pulled out chairs for the ladies. They had stood as a woman would leave or return to a table. They held open doors.

It was a very foreign experience for her, but one she had enjoyed very much.

Nothing had changed much in the last seventy years, if what Red said was true about the city still being run by the Mob underground.

But the classiness of the city, aside from those private areas, was all but gone.

Now, everyone looked as though they literally rolled out of bed. Street performers invaded your space in hopes of a buck. And people on every corner handed out nude pictures of prostitutes available for hire.

Again, every one had to make a living, but it had been annoying a time or two. They had gone out last night to visit the volcano. She and Red had been sharing a very private moment when some variation of the before mentioned, had rudely invaded their space.

She had not appreciated their efforts or timing.

“We’ll hit the Four Queens first.” Red waved some pedestrians across an intersection before swinging up into the Golden Nugget valet area, on South Casino.

“Red, this is the Golden Nugget.” Liz gestured to the lettering on the doors.

“I know, but the Valet for the Queens is around the corner, down a block...” he rolled his hand, gesturing, meaning a long explanation was forthcoming, one he did not want to bother with.

Tipping the Valet, Red took her hand, the three of them walking across the street to the opposite hotel.

“Wait here.” They had entered the still elegant foyer, Red gestured to the elevators before heading to the front desk.

As he talked to the clerk, Liz glanced around her surroundings. While not as jaw dropping as her own accommodations, there was a certain charm she found captivating.

She watched as a clerk slyly slid something across the counter where Red was standing. The man turned and she noted a wad of bills laying in his wake. The clerk nonchalantly pocketed his prize.

“Did you get the access card?” Francis enquired. Red nodded pointing to the elevators, beginning their trek.

“Where are we going?” she followed along willingly.

“He’s in a Suite.” Red explained, sliding the keycard along the card reader.
“I saw how you got that.” Liz threw an accusing glance Red’s way. The man tilted his head at her, his expression saying it all.

“What room number?” Francis asked, stepping into the empty elevator.

“I have it.” Red replied. “It’s a suite... now we have to guess which hotel.”

“A description of the room would have narrowed it down.” Francis bitched.

“Hey, you wanted to come along, stop bitchin’.” Liz reminded.

“His phone was dying.” Red sighed. “Apparently, he’s been putting the video and picture features to use.”

Francis now nodded knowingly, “Ahh...”

They rode up to the top floors quickly, found the room number, and Red knocked discreetly.

The door flew open after a noticeable hesitation to reveal an older, pissed off gentlemen whose complexion verged on apoplexy.

“What!” the man snapped his fury.

“Wrong room.” Red took the moment in stride.

“What the hell... do you think your doing knocking on my door at–”

Francis discreetly lifted his shirt allowing the man a brief glimpse of the weapon that was always by his side. The man’s eyes widened with shock as he rudely shut the door in their faces, a distinct click of the lock and bolt of the door alerting them to the fact... the incident was closed and forgotten.

Francis grinned at Liz’s expression, “I have an open carry.”

“And why is it necessary—” she hissed.

“Well, not legally.” Francis admitted, cutting the inquisition short. “But I’m among friends, right?”

“So, the Nugget it is.” Red turned on his heel, having completely disregarded Francis’ handling of the matter.

They made their way back downstairs, Red slowing his stride to match Lizzy’s smaller steps.

“And Dembe isn’t hunting for our wayward friend... why?” Francis asked as they pushed their way out the hotel doors.

“Dembe told him he had to wait.” They crossed back across the street to their original destination. “He was on a roll...” Red cast a pointed look, his meaning clear enough.

“I’ll be right back.” The process was repeated again, another wad of money exchanged. Liz cast a disapproving glance the desk clerk’s way but other than that, held her peace.

“That is one big ass piece of gold.” she gestured to a display holding what was presumably the second largest Golden Nugget found in the entire world.

Francis crept closer, squinting at the shiny object. “I know people who would attach that to a necklace and wear it as is.”
Liz laughed quietly at the mental picture painted.

They found the room quickly enough. Red went to swipe the keycard, but Liz’s hand stilled his action.

“What if he isn’t here either.” she whispered anxiously. “Do we want to give another old man a heart attack.” she looked accusingly at Francis.

“He’s here.” Red swiped the card, hesitating. “Lizzy, you should stay out here.”

Liz shook her head vigorously. “No way!”

Francis chimed in, “You really should stay here.” he pointed to the spot. “Trust me on this one.”

“I am not going to stay here.” she was more than positive. Both men exchanged cryptic looks.

She followed closely on their heels as they entered the spacious suite. The city was laid out in all it’s brilliance behind a wall of windows. The dark looming shape of a mountain range silhouetted against a velvet blue background, the stars blocked out by the infamous neon lights.

Red got his bearings, his eyes lifting to the second landing, unmistakable sounds filtering down the winding staircase.

Francis cleared his throat, somewhat awkwardly suddenly interested in the décor. He looked anywhere except to the woman beside him.

“Lizzy...” Red’s tone held a hint of warning as the sounds above them became more pronounced. “I should really handle this.”

Francis’ face twisted as he tried to keep his perspective. He clenched his mouth tightly, the creased indentures along his handsome face suddenly more pronounced.

For the woman’s part, all she heard was the sounds of a slight struggle and the unmistakable clink of metal against metal which fairly alarmed her.

“Red why are we just standing here?”

The man sighed, taking the steps two at a time, hoping to arrive on scene well ahead of Elizabeth. His hand tightened slightly on the railing as he came level with the second floor.

Silas’ body held a thin sheen of perspiration, as he thrust heatedly forward and back. A woman’s shapely thigh held fast to his buttocks. Red could see a beautiful set of breasts bouncing enticingly between the space that sometime separated the two lovers.

The woman was upright against the back of a curved chair which sat beside the large master bed. The man’s arm was wrapped around her waist, easily lifting and lowering her into his pumping action.

His free hand supported the negligible weight easily for his purpose. Red said ‘free’ in the sense that the other hand was handcuffed to a lamp just behind the top portion of the makeshift sex surface.

Red stopped in his tracks, human enough to just stare for a second.

He was not staring at what was taking place, but rather a large feather plume, much like what adorned the Showgirls costumes, which was weaving hypnotically about. The apparatus sat proudly on Silas’ head.
He felt Francis come alongside him as the young man too, pulled up short, his mouth dropping agape.

The two foot tall mountain of feathers moved lyrically as Silas thrust into his very willing partner. The heavy headpiece staying in place even as he quickened his movements.

Silas dropped his head into the woman’s shoulder, groaning raspingly. “...Fuck, that feels good.” He cupped the woman’s ass, pushing her harder into his deepened thrusts.

“Come for me, baby...” Silas crooned. “Take me there.”

The woman nodded quickly, curling her fingers around the back of the man’s neck for added support as she complied with the raspy request.

He captured the woman’s mouth in a deep heated kiss. He bounced his partner hard and fast off his shaft while suckling her breasts hungrily as the cuffs clinked loudly against the metal base of the lamp.

It took only seconds before the amorous couple reached their peak.

Red heaved a sigh of relief because Francis had managed to block Elizabeth’s passage way up to this point.

Silas slumped in a sweaty, breathless tangle of limbs against the chair which cradled him and his partner.

“You couldn’t fucking wait?” Red snapped, advancing up the stairs, ignoring the gasp of indignation issued from the little blondes mouth as she realized, she and Silas had just put on a free show. “...I told you I was on my way.”

Silas kinked his body this way and that, yanking the sheet off the nearby bed, tossing it over the blonde’s nudity.

“You pass the time your way,” Silas glanced over to the new arrivals, “I’ll pass it mine.”

“Hide your balls,” Francis advised sagely, “there is a woman in house, oddly not interested in seeing them. Go figure.” he glanced back at a rapidly advancing ‘woman’.

Liz’s mouth dropped open, as she barely cleared the top of the landing.

Silas lay on his side in a swooping brown leather chair, a woman huddled beside him. Liz’s eyes widened at his nudity.

The man seemed have no qualms concerning his nakedness, but he did as Francis bid, none to subtly shifting his... things, from her view. Leaving her an unobstructed view of the man’s entire bare backside.

Red had opened a little pouch, fiddling with a tiny instrument. “Maybe next time, you will heed my advice.” he glanced over to a completely stunned individual. “You want to go downstairs now?”

Liz’s expression grew even more quizzical as she noted the large pink feather on top of a headdress which adorned Silas’ thick skull.

While this sort of... predicament, was nothing new to either Red or Francis. It was clearly a complete shock to Lizzy.
“The blanket, idiot.” Francis helpfully reminded, whereupon Silas leisurely pulled a portion over his lower body.

Red made his way around the cramped position, crouching between the wall and the chair in which Silas reposed. Pulling his lock pick free, he began the task at hand.

“Why didn’t you pick it yourself?” Francis queried. “It’s a lamp...” he gestured to the light object they were bound to, “not an anvil.”

Silas yanked at the tall gold lamp, not budging it an inch. “It appears to be bolted to the floor.”

“Oh...” Francis shrugged, before pushing at a lamp beside him, which was also stuck in place. “What the hell? Who steals a fucking lamp?”

“I heard some woman on Family Feud say something about taking a lamp from a hotel.” Liz muttered lamely, the conversation seeming odd to her own ears. Her eyes pulled to the naked leg of her guard before she hastily averted her stare.

Silas pointed, “I couldn’t reach mine.” His jeans lay on the floor across the way, his own lock pick set securely tucked in his back pocket.

Red shook his head, aggravated. “It’s going to be difficult to do this with all this racket.” he bitched staring moodily at the cuffs.

“Don’t give me that shit...” Silas disdained, “you could do this blindfolded.”

“And has.” Francis piped in. “Remember the time in Madrid when you and that little–”

“Shut up, Francis.” both Red and Silas spoke in unison. Silas motioned to Liz as if to say, ‘his girl is in the room’.

Francis took exception. “Oh like it’s fine that she sees your naked ass though?”

Liz tried valiantly to look everywhere but at the display, but her eyes continuously flitted back to the debacle. It was as if she were witnessing a car wreck in progress. One simply could not look away.

Red felt the give of a cuff, sighing with relief as it let go.

Silas yanked, breaking the cuff free of his wrist.

Red peered up over the chair, amused at Lizzy’s reaction to everything happening around her. Her complexion was bright red and she was striving so hard for sophistication. And failing miserably.

Perhaps had it been anyone else but her personal guard, she might have reacted differently.

Red popped the second cuff open.

“Oh, thank you ever so!” the little blonde gratefully acknowledged Red’s handiwork, taking the pre-offered handcuff as she slid to the edge of the chair, standing without a care as the sheet fell away from the very well endowed form.

Red kept his gaze on the pretty blue eyes as he watched the young woman flounce happily away.

Patting her bottom affectionately, Silas shooed her to the large bed all the while attempting to keep the sheet tucked around her body to little avail. He arose, following suit. Forgetful in his haste, to address his own nudity.
Francis hastily stepped, blocking Liz’s field of vision but not before the woman covered her eyes with a gasp of shock and dismay.

“Yes that’s right,” Francis saved the day, or did he, “he’s part Jewish. I’m sure we’re all pleased to note that.”

“I certainly was.” the girl piped up from the bed, smiling flirtatiously up at Silas as he approached. She shook her full breasts slightly, hoping to entice and entertain.

Red lifted a cautious brow, arising from his position grinning slightly at Silas’ rejoinder.

“Oh, I’m coming baby.” the guard promised, slipping in beside his little minx, laying the sheet over their bodies.

“Nice hat...” Francis remarked casually, hoping to remind the other man of priorities. “Let me guess, you’re a Showgirl?” he addressed the woman directly, making pleasant conversation.

She shook her head, a quizzical expression appearing on the pretty face “…No.”

Silas waved a hand across his throat, which signaled Francis to ‘shut his damn mouth’.

Liz gaped at Red, understanding dawning on her. Silas had slept with a Showgirl before he ended up with this woman.

How long had he been out tonight?! Red’s cryptic words came back to haunt her at such a moment. He had been right all along... Silas was a slut!

“Have you been wearing that the whole time.” Francis was curious.

“It tickles.” the woman giggled, stroking Silas’ chest, most specifically, his nipple. Her intent clear.

Red placed his hand on Lizzy’s back, guiding her towards the stairs. “I take it, you’re staying?” he enquired of the guard.

“You said I wasn’t on shift until the afternoon.” the man reminded, maneuvering himself over the now prone woman.

Working his thigh between the warm valley, he settled comfortably in the luscious cradle, grunting his contentment. The woman beneath him giggled as the feathers of his head dress brushed against her breasts and throat, as he assumed the position.

“Just checking...” Red called back over his shoulder, “come along, Francis.”

“Huh?” the young man blinked, breaking his attention which had been focused entirely on the couple. “Oh, right. Well,” he address the amorous pair, “don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“And don’t use the damn cuffs again!” Red barked back up the stairs.

“On her?” Silas called back, though his voice was muffled for obvious reasons when the woman’s giggle turned into a long, breathy moan.

Liz hustled down the stairs, as fast as she possibly could but she could discern the metallic click of the cuffs being engaged over the subtle sound of Red’s soft laughter despite all she could do.

“I’m not coming back, Silas.” Red warned as he opened the door, ushering Liz out into the silent hall.
“Speaking of coming...” the guard gritted, as the woman with him let them all know she was enjoying her evening just fine.

Red’s chuckle echoed down the hallway as he watched Lizzy book ass, jabbing the elevator button repeatedly when she finally arrived at her destination.

Francis shut the door behind him, blocking out the sounds of the amorous couple. He checked with his cohort in crime, “I wish I could relax like that.”

Red smiled at the quip, noting Liz had already bolted into the now open elevator, waving frantically for them to join her as fast as humanly possible. He pointedly kept silent the entire time it took to reach the Valet parking area.

“Dembe,” Red had thought to check on his other friend, “are you handcuffed anywhere in the city?” he held his laughter at the man’s reply but just barely. “Just be sure your pants are in reach.”

Liz and Francis exchanged quizzical looks. They returned to the Villa, each headed for their respective quarters.

“I don’t know about you...” Francis grinned lecherously, “but I think I’m going to see if Lia is up for a little–”

“We get the picture.” Red interrupted the narrative, jerking his head to indicate ‘get the hell away from me, I’ve had enough’.

Francis snickered as he walked away, “And to all a good night.”

“Good night, Francis.” Liz replied distractedly.

Red guided her to the room, softly shutting the door behind them. “Quite an eye opener, hum?” he asked of her mood in his own way.

“Yeah...” she shrugged, “I mean, it was weird, but we’re all adults here, right?” she hesitated in her steps, looking back at Red. “You know, it’s funny,” she crinkled her nose. “I knew he had cuffs of course. Why did I never think of him using them in such a manner.”

Red remained moot on the subject.

“Were they having sex in that chair?”

“...Yes.” he nodded.

“How does that work?” she questioned, then flushed. “I mean, I know how, I meant...” she sighed, “it looked... awkward.”

“No different than having sex against a wall or headboard.” Red pulled his shirt off over head, tossing it to the chair beside him.

Liz closed her eyes, visualizing how it could be done, only to open her eyes a moment later to find Red standing just a foot away. He unceremoniously dropped his pants, his eyes deepening considerably.

“Would you like me to show you?” he asked, as he pushed his boxers down, his erection bobbing free from it’s confinement.

He reached out, dragging her against his waiting chest. His thick fingers moved over the plump ass
cheek, as he greedily ground against her abdomen. His breath quickened as he remembered she wasn’t wearing a stitch of clothing under those tight jeans.

Liz sighed her contentment, feeling his straining shaft push against her body. The man slowly walked them backwards until her thighs hit the arm of the couch.

Red grinned, popping the button of her pants, seductively sliding the zipper over her flat stomach, pushing the tight fabric off, revealing her bare ass.

Liz startled slightly, feeling the cool leather meet her heated flesh.

Red tugged on the offending material. Pulling downward revealed that very secret place he loved so much. It’s fragrant scent called to him.

He played in the soft down of her pubic hair, his tongue sliding into the recesses of the hidden alcove as he worked her jeans further down her shapely legs.

She palmed Red’s head to steady herself. A moment later, he lifted her leg, settling it over his shoulder, his tongue delving deeper between her legs, expertly torturing her quickly throbbing sex.

Red felt himself harden with the first taste of her arousal. Flicking her faster, he was granted the sweet cream he needed.

Breaking the moment, he smiled softly as her groan of disappointment turned into the sweetest mewl he had ever heard, when his hardness brushed against her thigh, taking her breath away.

Sliding his stiff erection along her swelling sex, he removed her top with deft fingers.

“You didn’t answer the question?” he stated, even as he slid a condom on over his raging hard on.

“Yes, thank you ever so.” she replied breathlessly, pushing herself against his bulbous crown.

He chuckled his appreciation of her wit.

Liz clutched his arms as the man lifted her abruptly, sitting her ass on the arm of the couch. He ran his hands down her arms, deepening his kiss. She looked down quickly as she felt a slip of silk wrap around her wrists, binding them together.

“Just recreating the scene...” Red rumbled deeply.

Liz watched as he looped the last bit, tucking it securely.

“Do you trust me, Lizzy?” he asked, sensing her nervousness.

“...Yes.”

“Pull your hands apart.” he suggested.

She gave a gentle experimental tug, the tie coming free easily. Red caught it, securing it quickly back in place.

“It’s just an illusion.” the sensual quietness washed over her.

She trusted Red implicitly, but that trust suddenly soared to new heights.

She gripped the tie, allowing herself to get caught up in this wondrous illusion. Being bound, the
experience, heightened her arousal.

Leaning her back into the slope of the couch, Red dragged her ass to the edge as the woman’s slim legs found purchase over Red’s arm and a side table. The frantic movements displacing a vase to the carpeted floor.

Stepping into the space afforded him, his cock instantly sought out her heat, allowing him to ease into the molten depths in one long, slow continuous stroke.

“Good?” he groaned as his body fit perfectly against hers. “That feels... so fucking good.” he panted.

“Oh, hell yeah...” Liz whispered huskily, as the man steadily rocked his thick erection in a frenetic rhythm that had her legs already quaking. She scratched at his chest with her fingers, drawing a groan from the man’s throat. “So good...”

So good in fact, both instantly forgave Silas for his late night transgressions. There was something to be said about the primitive aspect of the mating ritual.

Red and Elizabeth were exploring the possibilities of such an outlet.

Chapter End Notes

I had a reader request that with Silas since she hadn't found such a scene with him yet. I hope you don’t mind that we played with him a bit.

And I'm sure none of you care... after having it imprinted in your mind of Silas having sex with a feather plume on his head. Or Red binding Liz...

But there actually is a big ass nugget of gold at the Golden Nugget Casino called, The Hand of Faith
Tourist Trap

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to give a shout out to the readers leaving kudos and following the story! I see you guys and thank you for your support!

May 18

The following day brought more than a few surprises.

They took a drive to a private residence where some of the pre-wedding festivities would be hosted within the sprawling estate, according to Red. The owner was a friend of the groom’s, having offered up the expansive venue as a wedding gift.

As Red escorted Liz through the gorgeous gardens, she tried hard not to gawk at her surroundings. The landscaping was lush and green, keeping in mind, they were in the middle of a desert. The surrounding acreage was peaceful and tranquil.

Liz inhaled deeply, relishing the sweet scent of foliage from desert cacti to the most delicate flowers imaginable.

Crossing a bridge which traversed a waterfall and babbling brook, she attempted to control her smile of growing excitement. A gigantic swimming pool wrapped around the majority of the entire house. It was the most amazing sight the woman had yet to see in Vegas. Such luxury stunned her senses.

The grounds were littered with tents and tables, waiters mingled with the large crowd of guests, carrying huge trays of delectable delicacies.

Fancy food stations lined the entire west wall of the massive structure.

It was quite a set up. The rolling hills were a gorgeous back drop for guests with every type of food one could possibly want, right at your fingertips. It all smelled so heavenly, Liz found her appetite returning with a vengeance.

The large open tents held arcade style games enticing the more adventuresome. Games of horseshoes, croquet and lawn bowling were intermixed throughout.

If it wasn’t for the women in light airy dresses, obviously of designer origins, Liz would have thought she was at a country fair. Men in summer suits, most of them having discarded their jackets of course, dotted the landscape for as far as the eye could see. Many guests also frolicked in the pool.

“I’m starving.” Francis sniffed at the air, focusing in on a tent offering Gyro’s.

“You just ate.” Red was astonished, his expression saying as much. He checked with Elizabeth to confirm his hypothesis that there was something definitely wrong with Francis, finding her too, eagerly checking out the passing food trays.

He chuckled, his opinion on the matter altering somewhat. Settling his hand on her back, he ushered
her over to a nearby delicacy, ordering up one for her... and himself.

The smell had been too damn enticing after all.

“IT’s all this fresh mountain air.” Red concluded.

Francis pushed his way through the couple before Red could order, holding up two fingers, signifying a ‘double’ order of the fare offered.

“Well, look who we have stumbled upon.” Red had ignored the young man’s rudeness, as was his way, having nodded in the direction needed.

Elizabeth sank her teeth into a scrumptious bite, obediently following his field of vision.

Dembe sat, looking really cool in a grey suit and sunglasses, at one of the nearby tables sat up for any weary guest. In his right hand, he sipped a cup of coffee, his left held aloft a copy of a J.D Salinger novel. A half eaten breakfast sandwich lay waiting on an expensive plate.

As they approached, Liz struggled to manage her own plate and heavy purse which she insisted upon bringing. “Haven’t these people ever heard of paper plates? I’m afraid I’m going to break this thing.”

Red laughed around his next bite of food. Stopping in his tracks slowly, having really focused on the black man who had stood with Elizabeth’s approach, he scrutinized Dembe’s demeanor and appearance for some few seconds without saying a word.

If the large man was uncomfortable, one would never have guessed from his manner.

“Good morning, Elizabeth... Raymond.” his accent always lent a charm to any moment. “And others.” the dark eyes twinkled as Dembe noted the late arrival of Francis Holbrook. “You are looking radiant today,” he returned his attention to the woman. “As usual.”

“Well, thank you, Dembe.” Francis managed around a mouthful of food.

“He meant me.” Red quipped, handing over a napkin to his young friend.

Liz chuckled softly for Red’s good mood. “Thank you, Dembe.” she cast Red an annoyed look. “You’re the only one to notice my new dress.”

“I’ve noticed other things.” Red’s eyes swept her figure appreciatively. “Dembe, you are looking somewhat radiant yourself.” he returned to his previous thoughts.

“I have passed a very relaxed morning.” was Dembe’s response.

Elizabeth sensed something pass between each man. “What are you guys up to? What did I miss?” she allowed Red to assist her with her seat, sitting the fragile looking china down ever so carefully.

“Something’s up.”

“Well,” Red lifted knowledgeable eyes to a placid Dembe, “not any longer.”

Francis guffawed, slapping the large man on the back. Dembe shifted a cool stare but allowed the unheard of action good- naturedly for once.

Liz was getting antsy, unaccustomed to being excluded from the moment.

“He got laid, twit.” Francis artfully supplied the missing piece of the equation, his plate tinkling
dangerously as he practically flung it on the unforgiving surface of the table.

Elizabeth gasped her shock, watching Dembe saunter across the wide space to refill his coffee cup. “Oh, my...”

Dembe was an attractive man. Why it surprised her that he might be interested in such things, she could not have said at the moment.

Dembe was Dembe, an extension of Red Reddington. He was an enigma. Silent, seemingly brooding, but she knew how infectious his laugh could be, how quick the dark eyes could find amusement with the slightest provocation.

Liz was suddenly so pleased. “Oh, I’m so glad.” that Dembe had found a little happiness in life.

“So is he.” Red grinned around the coffee cup Dembe had brought him.

“You are speaking of me, I presume?” the man found his seat, his expression benign.

“We were telling her you got laid.” Francis hurried over the faux pas, ignoring Dembe’s annoyed glance. “Hey, we all got lucky in Vegas. It’s my kind of town.”

“That’s Chicago... according to Sinatra.” Red hummed the tune to Liz’s amazement, his tone very pleasing to the ear.

Dembe cast a scolding glance around the table.

“It’s okay Dembe,” Liz defended her friend, “they’re just being crude.” She threw Red a questioning glare for his cavalier behavior.

“I can just tell, Lizzy.” Red defended his stance, still attempting to annoy Dembe somewhat. “It’s in how he walks, the set of those broad shoulders...” he motioned accordingly, his eyes twinkling mischievously, “I can smell her perfume.”

“I bathed.” Dembe took offense with Elizabeth’s presence, his tone censored.

“I lied about that one.” Red granted.

Elizabeth could not be anything but content. Red seemed totally relaxed today. He would sometimes tease Dembe, more so than any other of his friends, but Liz was beginning to know it meant, his mood was light and carefree.

“What the hell are you?” she grunted around her Gyro, turning on the man anyway though. “You have the ears of a bat, the nose of a blood hound... super human powers, huh?” she questioned. “Let me guess, you can see through my dress.”

Red stared over at the woman’s torso, making her fidget under his intense scrutiny. “You’re wearing...” he mused thoughtfully, “a matching pink bra and panty set, trimmed in white lace.”

“Ohh.” Francis cackled his delight for the woman’s mouth had fallen agape once again, her astonishment complete.

Red discreetly placed a hand over his mouth, to hide his smile, for the woman had automatically looked down at herself, as if checking his facts before lifting shock filled eyes.

“I most certainly am not.” she lied.
“Hey Red,” Francis wasn’t buying it, “be honest with me, she’s a natural blonde.” He took a sip of his wine. “Am I right?” his own eyes were gentle with good natured teasing.

“That is a question, son...” Red playfully warned the man, “to which you will never have the answer.”

“Not if you live to be four thousand, which you won’t.” Liz snapped. “Because I’m going to kill your ass.” her fists clenched, her temper flaring but she lost the mood as quickly as it had arisen. “If there weren’t so many damned witnesses about.”

Dembe laid a gentle hand over the woman’s small fists. “You are picking up on the ways of our world.”

Red’s chuckle felt good as it washed over the object of his affection.

Liz settled instantly. “Francis, stop being such an asshole... as difficult as that may be for you.” She suggested strongly, swiping her hand out, smacking him across his arm, directly over his ‘flesh wound’.

“Ohw...” Francis rubbed the wound. “No offense meant, just curious by nature... and that hurt.”

“Good.” the woman sat back, satisfied for a moment but something was still irritating her. She cast Red an annoyed look.

“I didn’t say it.” Red reminded, knowing the ‘look’ well.

“She’s still wondering how you knew the answer to her probing enquiry.” Francis sensed, leaning in as if to confide in Liz alone. “You didn’t think maybe, he saw you getting dressed this morning? A guy notices such things.” he drawled.

“I knew that.” she half-heartedly defended herself.

Francis wasn’t buying that one either.

“You are charmingly naïve concerning a few subjects.” Red corrected. “A fact I personally, find very...” his eyes deepened considerably, “endearing.”

“Good save.” Francis approved, returning to his food with a relish, the matter ended to his way of thinking.

“I saw your lingerie laid out this morning.” Red ended the woman’s torment, holding his smile admirably.

“I knew that.” Liz pulled an endearing face, dismissing the man in the next instance, her attention taken by all the activity about her. “...What’s going on over there?” she craned her neck as a crowd was developing across the way.

Red adjusted himself in his seat, even as the rest for a better look.

Large targets were being set up down the long stretch of lawn at the far end of the green expanse. Several men were looking over the laid out equipment, testing the weight and balance of the compound bows.

“Archery?” Liz was fascinated by the diversity exhibited.

A large umbrella shielded the group from a mild early sun as they watched the proceedings.
“It’s my understanding this was how the bride and groom met.” Red offered a lackadaisical explanation.

“But any form of rivalry is welcomed.” Dembe explained the deeper meaning behind the gathering of such diverse individuals.

The minor competitions grew as the different personalities of those competing emerged.

“Hey,” a thought occurred to Liz, “where’s Lia?”

Francis reseated himself, having half arisen for a better look as a female took position at one of the first starting lines.

“She’s wasting her time.” he concluded.

"With you? Most assuredly." Red quipped.

"Not Lia..." Francis huffed, drawing a smile from Red. "Her." he pointed out to the woman archer.

“A chauvinistic viewpoint.” Dembe pointed out.

“Nah,” Francis reassured, “I’ve just seen her shoot, she’s worse than me.” it was dismissed. “Lia is with her girlfriends.” Francis yawned, stretching out the kinks in his neck. “They’re getting some last minute things for her friend’s wedding. I’ll pick her up shortly.”

Liz tugged on Red’s sleeve, leaning to share a confidential moment with him. “Were we supposed to bring a gift to this thing as well as the formal...”

“I have a gift.” Red patted the outside of his jacket over the padded wallet within.

“Oh, Red.” she chided. “Something personal.”

“The larger the denomination, the more personal thought attached.”

Liz sighed heavily.

“Today was just to give guests something to do that will keep them from killing one another in the interim.” He delivered blandly.

“So they give them sharp objects?” Liz screwed up her face comically.

“We’re a competitive lot.” Francis beamed happily.

“Take these two for instance.” Red gestured to the two present players, taking their place at the ‘shoot’ line. “John, the man in the blue shirt,” he motioned accordingly, “lost his boat to Andrew in their last poker game. John is trying to win it back.”

The man in question released the arrow, getting damn near to the center of the target.

“And he seems to be doing well in his endeavors.” Red lifted impressed brows.

“Is this what you meant about personal grudges being fixed during these competitions?” Liz asked. “It all seems so...” She hesitated, searching for the correct term.

“I think the word you’re looking for is, civilized.” Red shrugged, checking with the new arrival on scene. “We’re speaking about your place.” he filled in for Mark Donovan, who sat in an empty seat,
making himself comfortable.

“So... winner takes all, no hard feelings? No fighting?” Liz was skeptical, nodding her hello to Mark.

“Well... there was a scuffle a while back.” Red shrugged, then looked at Mark. “When was this... I’m thinking last year.” he checked with Mark, but the man was vague in his reply. His own memory faulty on the subject.

“Don’t leave me hanging here.” Liz leaned eagerly into the table, waiting for the story to unfold. “What happened?”

“This guy, Paul Wise, didn’t know when to quit. Kept betting. His car, house, plane.” Red settled into the story. “The other man, Bill Schaffer, tried backing out gracefully with each wager, allowing Paul to save face but he was a sore loser with a hot temper.”

Mark nodded recalling the incident, finally.

“When Bill went to leave,” Red continued, “Paul pushed for double or nothing.” he shook his head disgustedly. “Bill, being tired of the game and Paul’s poor attitude offered an unfortunate remark concerning Paul’s not having much else to wager, except maybe his wife.”

“Which intimated Paul would have no compulsion about making such a bet.” the distaste was apparent in Mark’s statement.

Liz’s attention was rapt. “What happened!”

“Fists flew, poker chips went flying, as did my drink all over my hat.” Red was still perturbed, that had been his favorite hat after all. “It took six of us to break them apart.”

“You got in the middle of it?” Liz was somehow not surprised.

“It was either that or offer them a seat in my lap.” Red waved to the object in question.

“You were a participant at the game?”

“No, a spectator.” he mused. “But I had ring side seating, apparently.”

“Was that the end of it?”

“Paul wouldn’t back off...” Francis shrugged, sipping his drink. “So Dembe knocked him out cold... one punch.” the young man demonstrated, by punching Dembe in the arm in open camaraderie.

Dembe shifted a menacing glance which stated succinctly, ‘don’t touch me’.

Liz gaped, sharing her new reverence for the individual. “Look at you...”

“Dembe’s up.” Red pointed out the fact. The man inclined his head regally, rising slowly. He made his way to the ‘starting’ point.

Francis and Mark arose from their own seats, eager to take in the spectacle.

“This should be fun,” Red mentioned offhandedly, “he’s never done it before.”

“Have you?” Liz was curious.

“I enjoy archery.” Red responded, his interest still with Dembe.
“Then why aren’t you playing?” the woman asked.

“I wanted to relax today.” Red chuckled because Dembe’s arrow had gotten away from the man, hitting entirely outside the target.

Red held his amusement. Dembe’s next attempt slowed mid-way down the course, falling into a drooping arch, sticking straight in the ground, a foot away from the target.

The large black man turned his frustration to Red, holding the bow out, arms wide, silently asking what the hell?

Red and Francis respectively gave the man a golf clap in open support. Mark on the other hand, gave an enthusiastic thumbs up. Dembe gave them a two finger salute in response... an obscene gesture he had picked up in Europe.

He loaded his next arrow, oblivious to the gentle laughter erupting throughout the gathered crowd.

Red could see the humor in the situation, as he fell back into his chair his shoulders shaking with mirth, “Speaking of sore losers.”

Three arrows later, none of which hit their target, Dembe conceded defeat of sorts, rejoining them at the table. “There is something wrong with that bow.”

“The user, perhaps?” Red quipped.

“Hey, we didn’t see you up there.” Liz defended Dembe.

“I can’t win at everything, Lizzy.” Red remarked, tongue-in-cheek. “It wouldn’t be fair to the others.”

“You’re so full of shit Reddington.” Liz rolled her eyes.

Red sat his glass down, standing. “I know doubt when I hear it.” he proclaimed.

He walked up to Christopher, the man in charge of the event, gesturing meaningfully. He then confided something that had the other man laughing easily.

Red made his way through the spectators, receiving back slaps and gentle chides of camaraderie as he made his way back to the group.

“I’m up after these guys.” he pointed to the men now shooting.

“This would be an ideal time to wager for something you really want, Red.” Mark remarked innocently, not so subtly jerking his head in Liz’s direction.

“You think I need to make a wager to get what I want?” Red questioned.

“He’s so cocky.” Francis stated to any and all.

“Never mind about my cock.” Red snapped. “And what is it with you people wagering on every little thing under the heavens.”

“I’ll bet you.” Liz sat up, ready to take him on.

Red looked at Liz, his face expressionless. Dembe discreetly lowered his own head.
There was a part of the man that wanted to make that bet. But what he wanted most in the world from her, he wouldn’t make a wager on. It was far too personal a subject for such frivolity.

“Well, what’ll it be?” Liz leaned forward, her hand held out, ready to shake on it.

Red looked at the hand, his eyes softening considerably.

Christopher whistled sharply, catching Red’s attention, the moment broken. It was his turn to shoot.

Red gripped her fingers, turning them in his large hand, placing a kiss on the soft skin.

He sat his fedora upon Lizzy’s head. “Hold that.”

Francis and Mark looked after the retreating man, nudging each other knowingly. Dembe only settled more into his chair, his face just as expressionless as Red’s had been, when the ‘bet’ had been called into question.

“I think he was going to shoot for that ever elusive anal sex.” Francis remarked pseudo seriously. “What say you, Dembe?”

Dembe smiled, then quietened. “He’s been wanting a new boat.”

Mark scoffed, drinking from his tumbler. “That was not the face of a man after a new boat.”

“A new dock to park his dinghy, maybe.” Francis cackled.

“You guys disgust me.” Liz finally having found her voice.

“That man wanted to do something to you.” Mark shrugged nonchalantly.

“But was too much a gentleman to wager on it.” Francis had his own opinions. “Mark my words.”

The young man had been ribbing her all morning. Having fun. And Mark had been playful too, having become more comfortable with her since their time together in DC. So this time she would let it slide.

But there had been a silent communication that transpired between Red and Dembe that she had not understood. Liz had learned some of their body language and eye contact since she’d been staying with them, so she was sure something had been said.

She wasn’t going to ‘rock the boat’ today with any insecurities. But her curiosity was piqued.

Liz looked out after the man, watching Red choose a bow, then set his first arrow.

“Yes well,” she replied, clearing her throat of the slight quivering she heard in her own voice, “it just meant he didn’t think he’d win.”

“Yeah, that’s it.” Francis commiserated. “You just remember, when he wins, you could have ended the day twisted up like a pretzel in a German...” the man appeared momentarily lost, “…pretzel factory?”

Mark and Dembe exchanged quizzical glances.

“An excellent metaphor, Francis.” Mark championed. Dembe rubbed the middle of his forehead to ease the slight ache behind the area.
Taking his stance, Red drew back, aimed, took a deep breath, released it and the arrow along with it. It flew through the air, shooting into the target. Just an inch from the center.

“You’ll never hear the end of this...” Francis muttered, watching as the next attempt struck just to the right of the first arrow.

The following shot traveled in the same pattern, looping around the center of the target. Red drew back on his last arrow, hesitating. He took two deep breaths, exhaled, held his posture and let the arrow fly.

They watched it zing down the greens, thwacking loudly into the paper target... dead center.

Liz turned to the man, finding Red’s eyes locked on her, his gaze unwavering. Even from this distance, she could see the heat contained within those amazing orbs, feeling her body respond accordingly.

Red finally broke the lock, his message conveyed, before turning his attention to Dembe. He waved the man over.

Liz glanced over at the men beside her. Their looks were superfluous.

“I don’t know what he wants from you,” Mark smiled, “but that look was enough to make me break into a sweat.” the man waved himself with a napkin.

“This not knowing may very well kill me.” Francis proclaimed loudly. He looked Liz over speculatively. “Hey, narrow it down for me.” he poked at her arm relentlessly. “What have you done?”

Liz’s swatted at him, but he side stepped the effort. “Stop it you little pervert.”

Thankfully their attention was momentarily diverted.

Red stood just behind his friend, speaking to him...instructing. Dembe pulled the bow back, halting when Red touched his arm.

Red adjusted the aim then tapped Dembe’s shoulder. Liz watched the dark man inhale then exhale like Red had done then he released the arrow. It cut the air, hitting just to the left of Red’s centered one.

He smiled his pleasure, laying a hand on Dembe’s shoulder before glancing to the small group, now all standing, surrounding the table he had only just left.

He waved the woman over.

Liz glanced about aimlessly, then pointed to herself. Red’s grin widened and he waved again, this time more emphatically.

She held up her arm to remind him of her weakened muscle state and those compound bows were very difficult to shoot. Red nodded that he understood her hesitancy but motioned yet again, his expression more adamant.

“You’ve blown him, right?” Francis, on the other hand, had other priorities. “I can tick that off the list?”

“I’m gonna blow a hole in you if you don’t be quiet.” she hissed, then rolled her eyes when the men
fell into each other’s shoulder, laughing hysterically.

Liz offered a scathing glare before stomping across the way, self-consciously straightening her dress. She ignored the stifled chuckles behind her, turning her focus elsewhere. “...I don’t know about this, Red.” she approached, her expression a wary one. “I don’t think I can pull back on that...”

“When have I not been here for you?” the man teased, guiding her into the sphere of his arms, lifting the bow into position. “Put your hand just here.” It was directed.

Liz attempted to pull the heavily strung string to little avail. Red’s fingers curved a little above hers, easily accomplishing the feat. “Line up with your target.”

Liz marveled for she knew what strength it was taking for the man to hold the stance, so she quickly obeyed.

“I’m there.” She focused on the target center determinedly, well aware of the large crowd of onlookers judging her performance.

“Three count...” Red moved very much closer and she was wrapped in a heady scent of his cologne, the heat of his body doing all sorts of nice things to her system.

“Inhale.” He dropped his eyes to her breasts, enjoying the visual. “...Exhale...” A small smile graced his lips as the lovely mounds moved hypnotically to his commands. “...Let go.”

The raspy tone washed over her and she felt herself mechanically obeying, her eyes closing to the erotic sensations erupting involuntarily within her body.

The arrow shot down the green, puncturing the target just to the left of Dembe’s shot.

“Good job.” The praise delighted her, even more so than the spontaneous eruption of applause from those that had watched the display. Red smiled down at her, and her world fell into place.

She beamed him a special grin. “Just you wait until my arm gets stronger.” She tried not to notice the knowing smiles of several faces in the crowd which returned her sweep of the arena. “Now, there will be something to bet on, Fella, trust me.”

“There is only one thing I want from you at present.” Red confided, his tone low and meaningful, as was the heated stare he offered. “I only bet on a sure thing...and I would never take you for granted.”

Even in the warm spring air, Liz felt slightly chilled with the withdrawal of his arms. He handed the bow to Dembe who had waited patiently for another turn at bat, so to speak.

“Go get ’em, Slugger.” Red smiled in open affection to the other man. “Stop embarrassing the group.” he motioned slightly to Francis and Mark. “You’ll never hear the end of it, otherwise.”

Dembe seemed to accept his fate, stepping up to the marked out chalk line. “I can always turn the weapon around and accidentally shoot them in the ass.”

Red chuckled appreciatively. “I like the way you think.”

They returned to the table, Red’s good mood still high, it was apparent.

“So, did you win?” Mark’s eyes drifted down the course. “You’re the only one, so far to hit dead
center.”

“So far.” Red chided. “The day is young, besides, my shot won’t be counted.”

“That’s not fair,” Francis was incensed, “I bet on you.”

Red sighed lightly. “When the hell did you have time?” he waved the issue aside. “It won’t be counted, so go recoup your losses elsewhere.” he lifted a graceful arm. “I hear they are racing cockroaches over by the chocolate fountain...I personally, like the one in the little yellow jacket.”

“They are not.” Francis was truly disappointed, it was clear. Liz held her smile of sympathy. “...Are they?” He lifted his head, second-guessing himself.

“Hope springs eternal.” Mark laughed easily. “They wouldn’t allow cockroaches at such an exclusive shin-dig, Francis.” The man pooh-poohed such a notion. “They do, however...have a nude ‘Miss Minus a Swimsuit’ competition that starts,” Mark consulted the expensive watch on his arm, “…in about twenty minutes.”

“Holy shit!” Francis felt decidedly better. “I’m there!”

Liz sighed. “We know you are, Francis.” She patted his arm consolingly.

“Remind me again, why we hang with this crowd?” Red flicked the brim of his hat which still sat jauntily on Liz’s pretty head, tipping it back a fraction to plant a light kiss on the full mouth.

“Because no one else will hang with you.” Mark answered for her. “A high-profile criminal would be just too conspicuous for this crowd.” He swept the area, and Red could see his point.

In that small sweep alone, a crooked judge...two mobster associates, a questionable politician and a big-time swindler all smiled happily back at him.

“Besides, with that infamous temper of yours, one can never be quite certain if one will be alive at any given moment of association with you.”

“I’m carrying right now.” Red lifted his jacket meaningfully, enjoying the exchange in spite of himself but he managed to keep a straight face.

“I know you are.” Mark’s remark was said in much the same vein as Elizabeth’s when she had remarked to Francis. “But then...who isn’t.”

Red let it go.

Francis returned to the food tent and Mark left to meet Amanda who had been seen milling around like a lost puppy. The crowd was growing and she was searching for her party in vain.

Elizabeth watched the reunion with a gentle smile. “I’m glad they seem to have worked out their problems.”

“Love will find a way.” Red smiled down at her.

“Well, not sure that is love.” she made mention, returning his smile. “But, they seem happier now, thanks to you.”

“What did I do?” he questioned.

“What you always do,” she stated. “Make everything better.”
The man held no recollection of the event in question. “I will take praise any place I can get it.” he shrugged stocky shoulders. “Especially from such a lovely source.”

She glanced at him askew. “Do you think you will always speak to me in that manner?” she teased.

“Well, the new wears off.” he teased right back. “If you mean, will I always remember to be grateful for what God has granted me? I hope the hell so, Elizabeth.” he turned serious for a beat. “But if I fail in that endeavor, you have Dembe or Silas kick the shit out of me. Knock some sense back into my addled brain.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” she watched Dembe graciously hand over the equipment to the next competitor. “...Looks like you have some competition.”

Red stepped closer. “Point him out.” he deliberately misunderstood. “I’ll kill the son-of-a-bitch on the spot.”

Liz lifted a stare. “Dembe just shot a bull’s eye.” she explained her meaning.

Red spared the man a glance. “And after all I’ve done to him.”

She grinned. “You’re competitive, don’t lie.”

“About some things.” His eyes told her more than he was saying.

“Must be killing you, not to be competing this year.” She pushed the envelope.

“Not everything is about winning, Lizzy.” he tilted his head, removing his hat, setting it on it’s proper place. “You’re hair is too lovely to hide...but it did look damned cute, sitting there atop those adorable little curls.” He indicated his meaning.

“You must be thinking about the other end.” She mused. “My hair is straight, for the most part.”

“I’m always thinking about ‘the other end’.” She was summarily informed. “There is fun to be had.” the crowd was getting rowdy, which is just how Red Reddington like things. “What are we standing here for? I’m mildly interested in that nude ‘Miss Minus Swimming Suit’ pageant which is about to begin, if my inner clock is still functioning properly.”

“I have a feeling,” Liz did, “that when it comes to ‘nude’ this or that...you will be functioning to perfection.” She allowed herself to be maneuvered. They headed out into the sun, looking for adventure.

“Well, shit.” Red’s annoyed statement caught Liz’s attention. They had been moving through the crowds, checking out the competitions here and there, meeting new people that enthralled the woman.

There had been world renowned authors, noted celebrities, even a few world leaders popped in from time to time.

Liz was dazzled by the intellect and variety of those who knew Red Reddington.

“What is it?” She was alerted by his tone that all was not well.

“I see Antonio Crocetti.” Red turned to Dembe. “Tell them I will meet them in the Blue Room.” He drew in a cleansing breath. “Duty fucking calls, baby.” He searched about for Francis or
Mark. “Can you spare me for a few minutes?”

“Is there a major proble...”

“I got it covered.” He kissed the tip of her nose, grinning down at her.

“Red, would you tell me if there was anything really wrong?” She held on to his sleeve for he had found Francis and Lia in the crowd, having motioned them over.

“I don’t keep things from you, Elizabeth, but this is just a minor glitch.” He told the truth. “But it does have to be addressed. You take the rest of the day for shopping or whatever...or enjoy the festivities.” The atmosphere had changed in his opinion. “Although, if you ask me,” he sighed lightly, “The ‘A’ list has vacated the premises and now...” He grinned affectionately, “the low-lives are filtering in. My type of people, granted but not necessarily yours.”

“If you don’t mind then.” She bit her lip anxiously, not wanting to sound unappreciative. “I would love to hit a few of the casinos again.” She confided in the man. “Red, that was the most exciting time of my life, that first night here.”

“I’m sure you refer to the time in my bed, but playing the slots runs a close second, I take it.” He sent her on her way. “There are slots here but like I said, the atmosphere is much more congenial at the actual casinos...tell Francis to amuse you.”

“I can amuse myself.” She frowned.

“You can show me that later tonight then.” He replied sensually. “Prove your boast. Can I video it this time...for posterity’s sake.”

“You’re a dirty old man.” She was relatively certain but had flushed slightly for she remembered the first time she had allowed him to ‘watch’ that particular spectacle.

“And you love that about me, right?”

She turned, flouncing away. He watched her hook up with Francis and Lia before turning to the business at hand.

“Let’s blow this joint.” Francis had picked up on Red’s subtle ‘look’ even from a hundred meters away. “I know a little hot dog vendor just waiting to load on the fixins. You women haven’t lived until you’ve tasted these babies.”

“Big spender.” Lia giggled, hooking arms with Liz at her arrival. “Knows how to show a girl a good time.”

“I showed you a good time last night.” Francis grumbled. “Or at least, that’s what you said.”

“Oh, Apple Strudel, you know you did!” Lia’s eyes went wide. “The Earth moved...twice!”

“Three times, but who’s counting.” Francis’ good mood had returned. “I’m just hungry, My Little Dumpling...forgive me.”

“Always.” Lia transferred her arm to ‘her man’, laying her head on Francis’ shoulder.

“We should find Amanda.” Liz had been scanning uselessly. “If Red had to bail, Mark did too. She’s probably searching for us.”

An hour later found them scouring the shops at Caesar’s Palace. Having found a resting respite, Liz
glanced up from unloading all her treasures, for she had won big at the slots in this fine establishment, then headed out to spend all her ill-gotten gains as quickly as humanly possible.

Which is, she was given to understand by the other ladies in her group, the thing to do while in Vegas. If one held on to such bounty, it was bad Ju-Ju or something to that effect.

Liz, not wanting to go against tradition, had a literal ball finding new and inventive ways to blow her wad.

She loved Las Vegas! It was the only place she had ever encountered where she could do a sinfully wicked thing and not feel like she should go to Confession in the very next instant.

Never had she gone through so much money so quickly and felt so amazing for the fact.

She was flushed and beautiful when Red finally arrived on scene.

It was like the ‘parting of the waves’...to see his people walk through an area. People literally moved aside and stared.

Women discretely stole looks at the handsome men as they passed. Men’s faces beamed a welcoming ‘hello’.

Red acknowledged each person who happened to catch his eye with either a smile or a slight tilt of his head.

The man had charisma that was for sure.

He pulled up short just feet away, his arms encompassing ‘it all’.

“I see someone did well at the tables?” he made his way through the myriad of shopping bags, finally reaching his destination. He removed his hat, the object dangling in his fingers as he leaned to kiss her lips.

“I did.” she beamed. “I even have money in the safe back at the Villa.” she proudly announced as he sat down beside her. She slid over, turning towards him. “Are you going to sight see with us?”

Red chuckled at the thought. He hadn’t gone sightseeing, in the traditional sense, in so very long. He actually could not remember the exact date or time. He was curious to see if he could mingle in with a crowd full of people from various walks of life any longer, and not be recognized.

“All right.” he nodded. “But if I say, we have to go...” he muttered.

“I know.” she smiled, before standing up. She understood his limitations.

The day turned out well, much to her surprise, and his. Seeing things through Lizzy’s eyes put a whole new perspective on the mundane.

A couple of times Red noticed Liz tense when someone stared their way a little too long.

He would steer her interest to another shop, something having caught his own eye, but she had to wonder if he had felt their eyes as well.

“Relax, Lizzy.” Red reassured, whispering softly in her ear after yet another individual, this one with short cropped hair, looking every bit the stereotypical cop on an everyday outing, kept repeatedly checking them out. “He wasn’t looking at me.”
“You...” she nodded minutely, “you saw him then?”

“Of course I saw him. And the other two back at the shop we just left.”

“Do you think they’re cops?” she whispered.

“I doubt it.” he laughed quietly. “Lizzy, they were staring at your ass.”

“Wha–” she was flabbergasted.

“They had no interest in me what-so-ever.” he craned his own head about, openly checking out her ass. “You on the other hand...” He cupped said bottom, squeezing the orb gently. “Not that I can blame them.” he traced the seam of her pants suggestively.

She shooed his hand aside. “I guess I’m a worry wart.”

“Trust me Lizzy, I know when I’m in the crosshairs.” he pulled a face. Yes, that was one thing Red Reddington knew.

She read the sincerity in his eyes. After twenty years on the run, he would definitely sense when he had a target on his back, of course.

After about twenty minutes and nine more shopping bags, Red suggested they grab a bite.

She and the girls opted for a quick change in the bathroom into some dresses that thankfully, went swimmingly with the sandals they were wearing. After a quick fluff to their hair and a little makeup fix, they were more than ready to dine at the fancy restaurant Red had chosen.

Near the end of another delicious meal, Red was interrupted yet again as Mark shared a text he had sent. Red’s approval was immediately forthcoming.

“We’re about to meet the owner of this fabulous establishment, thanks to Mark here.” Red indicated with a sweep of his hand. “I’m certain we will be entertained in the highest of fashion so if there is anything on anyone’s wish list, now is the time to speak up.”

Liz thought back over the days activities. She knew Red was doing this all for her, since he didn’t seem the type to walk around Las Vegas like a common tourist, but she was so very glad he was.

She loved how they blended in with everyone else and were like every other couple enjoying a little getaway.

Amid boisterous backslapping and introductions, yet another hotel big shot graciously offered any services available.

Today alone, she had pet dolphins and held a baby lion. Liz and the girls had even got to take their picture with a large cat and it’s trainer. She was amused, looking up to see, the guys stood ever so watchful, their hands on their weapons.

She supposed they were nervous about attack after what happened to that famous trainer a few years back.

But the cat was a bigger version of Keres, if anyone asked her. Even going so far as to lay it’s head in her lap, licking her thigh, much to Red’s annoyance. That was his job after all, he proclaimed to any and all.

Silas said the animal was simply tasting the meat before committing to the buffet, but Liz thought, the
They had hit everything from Louis Vuitton to M&M World. All of it had been ransacked by Red and company. He and Francis alone, almost cleaned out each store along the way. Luckily, the purchases were sent back to the Villa’s in a chain of Uber drivers, or at least that was how Red put it.

But she and the girls weren’t much better, aside from shopping at the luxury stores, they had taken every free thing tossed their way by the hotels, from sweatshirts to decks of cards.

An entire auditorium was made available to them to watch performers for Circus De Soleil have a dress rehearsal for a new show that hadn’t even premiered yet.

They went with the guys up to the top of the Stratosphere so the macho fools could experience the thrill ride, though she and the girls hid their eyes, lest they see them fall to their deaths.

Liz, admittedly peeked the entire time if only to see Francis’ face.

They fed the sharks behind the scenes at the Mandalay Aquarium. Their group went to the top of the Eiffel Tower alone.

Come to think of it, everything they did, they had done as a group, alone. Because of the guys having connections everywhere in the city, access was available to them where some others may not have such good fortune.

Through it all, Liz’s favorite moments were the little things.

Taking a picture with Red in front of the iconic Las Vegas sign or at the Luxor. Kissing him with the Statue of Liberty or Eiffel Tower as their backdrop. Walking hand in hand through the entire day.

The evening ended at the Bellagio, watching the water show.

Liz leaned back into Red’s support, her hands covering his which wrapped around her waist. The water shot high into the air before settling back down in a mist, as the lights dimmed and the crowds clapped their appreciation for another brilliant show.

“Have you had a good day?” Red asked quietly, having noticed the serene smile on her face.

“I’ve had a fabulous day.” she beamed happily up at him. “Thank you for sharing it with me.” she hugged him tightly as they walked to the waiting car, heading back to the Villa.

And so the clock struck twelve, Liz mused. Her Cinderella got to go home with the Prince, however. She glanced over to Red, thinking her thoughts aloud.

“A perfect ending to a perfect day.” she mused quietly.

“It hasn’t ended.” he met her eyes. “Don’t count me out just yet.”
Synergy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

May 19

Red wished his contemporaries a good night before retiring to the room.

Having waded his way through the mountain of shopping bags and souvenirs from a day well spent, the man took sanctuary in a favorite spot.

Sitting in a plush chair, Red sat looking out over the quiet solitude of the tranquil pool and lush gardens which stretched before him.

Normally, his thought were disciplined and focused. But tonight, they were varied and disorganized. Which was a very rare occurrence for the man.

He listened contentedly to the off-key singing drifting into the room. Lizzy sang in the shower.

It had become a part of their ‘routine’.

She usually serenaded him, unconsciously of course, with a rousing rendition of “Don’t It Make My Brown Eyes Blue”. He strained to hear the exact tune tonight, pleased by her choice. She must be remembering their “Unforgettable” time on his boat.

He was suddenly flooded with a sense of contentment.

The first time he had ever felt this comfortable was the second week of his marriage, after everything had settled down. He and Carla were in their new home after a long day of unpacking.

Though his ex-wife had never sang, she had been in the shower while he had enjoyed a beer on the porch, staring out at a lawn that was now his responsibility.

There was a comfort with Carla, yes. But there had always been an undercurrent of... something he could not define... until years later.

Indifference, had been the word he’d been searching for.

They married, but were virtual strangers come to find out. They both worked long hours, trying to climb the ladder to afford the new home they had purchased. They had romantic dinners, weekend trips away... made love. Normal couple activities.

Into their second year, when they were comfortable in their situation, they decided to have Jennifer.

They ran the gauntlet millions of other couples did everyday... in hindsight, it had all felt very mechanical.

He had vividly remembered thinking, ‘Was this the new norm?’

While he felt that now, there was a vast difference between the two worlds.
He chuckled softly as Lizzy hit a high note... pretty well actually. She must have grown accustomed to the acoustics available to her.

Red allowed his thoughts to drift. Were he honest with himself, there was something inside him tonight. He was trying to define it.

Thinking back over the past two weeks the man was suddenly amazed. It seemed so much had happened in their relationship in such a short amount of time. What was more amazing to Red, is that how very special the mundane had become.

Something as simple as Liz’s every day interaction with those people Red kept close to himself. An easy camaraderie had been established which allowed Reddington to truly relax and enjoy his surroundings.

He had felt that all day.

He could never imagine Carla in such a situation. He did remember however, that he never felt the need to invite people into his home... well his friends. Hers were always about and underfoot. Carla never seemed to click with the Navy lifestyle.

Perhaps had he tried harder. Red dismissed such futile thinking. The past was the past.

Liz had opened the door to the bath area. A sweet smell of lilac and roses drifted out with the billowing shower steam. Red relaxed back against the expensive fabric of the chair, one leg dangling over the other.

He lazily swirled his forgotten drink, the glass drooping from his fingers.

A smile played about his lips listening as Lizzy hummed what he was sure was an upbeat version of “Afternoon Delight”. The woman did say she was eclectic.

Red chuckled appreciatively arising from his chair. He entered the bath offering a brief glance to it’s sole occupant, who ignored his arrival completely, too wrapped up in her nightly ritual to give a mere male a second thought.

He stripped, climbing in the shower, inhaling the intoxicating scent of the female essence. Body lotions abounded on every surface available, shampoos, conditioners, scented soaps... the works.

Liz watched the hazy movements of the man behind the opaque shower wall. She had noted the well built physique discreetly as Red had entered the enclosure, her eyes taking in the well rounded derriere.

Red was totally oblivious to the fact. He fingered a few objects on the shelves, absently reading the labels. He searched for his own brand, chuckling when he found them pushed far back among the other assorted sundries.

He affixed the temperature, inhaling luxuriously. It had been a long time since the simple scent of a woman made his heart race, but then, Lizzy’s scent was like no other.

Not only did she wear the softest of perfumes, but her natural aroma... the pheromones she released... drove him insane at times.

The subtlest shift in her mood, alerted him to what she was feeling.

He was amazed how many times a day the woman became stimulated. Though, it was to be
expected. Liz was a young, vital woman in her prime.

Experiencing that sweet redolence was like smelling the first bloom of a rose.

He breathed in the soft feminine perfume surrounding him, the tensions of the day melting away.

The day came back in other ways, very pleasant ones. Seeing a slip of the woman’s thigh through a slit in her dress, catching a glimpse of the voluptuous and sensual curve of her back. The sound of her laughter, the fullness of her mouth, the firmness of her bottom, the swell of her breasts...

Red glanced down at his penis. It had arisen to half mast, he chastised it with a look.

His need to mount the woman and fill her with his warmth became overpowering to the extreme at times. He was slowly learning to curb such tendencies, but there was a part of him that wondered why he should.

He hadn’t ridden anyone bareback since his ex-wife. Otherwise, with anyone else, it was too personal. Too committed.

But with Lizzy... he suddenly realized just how much he wanted that intimacy. The exclusivity.

While the Alpha side of the man needed to mark her as his own, the male side, wanted to see the evidence of their union fresh inside the woman’s body.

Everyone had their fantasies, even Red Reddington.

Condoms were all very nice... thank God for condoms, however he had been pleased that Lizzy had rejected his own attempt at civility.

He had recently presented her with an updated print off of his STD free status as proof, but that had been after they had already started using lambskins, which only protected against pregnancy, not the latter.

Liz had rolled her eyes at the gesture, reiterating that she trusted his word, then wadded up the test, tossing it at a indolent Keres.

The cat had looked at the makeshift toy with great indifference until Hudson had taken a liking to it, then the fight had begun over ownership rights.

Lizzy had stepped in the middle, cooing lovingly to both animals, diplomatically ripping the balled paper in half. Giving each their own toy... both lost immediate and complete interest, much to Lizzy’s vexation.

Red lathered his body, a soft smile gracing his lips. It was another thing he loved about the...loved? Should he bandy that word about so soon, he wondered. His smile grew. What was the politically correct term for what he felt for Elizabeth Keen?

Didn’t matter because Red had never been one to kowtow to society’s dictates. And his emotions were not a subject to be discussed openly.

He rinsed absently, visions dancing in his head. What would it be tonight? That tight little black see-through top and non-existent panty set that made him want to drool or perhaps one of those delectable knee length satin gowns so easily removed. Either choice delighted him.

He hung his towel, crossing to grab the necessities, stepping into the silk boxers as an afterthought.
Rounding the opened doorway he pulled up short.

Lizzy lay casually back against the pillows, book in hand...completely naked...sans clothing...raw...in the buff...

*This was new...*

Tonight, she had cut out the middle man, as it were. The middle man being himself. A fact Red found he could live with. He hoped she was in a playful mood, because dressed like... or *not* dressed like that, there was no way he was not going to play a few games tonight.

“I feel a bit overdressed.” he gestured to his boxers, his face placid.

“So, take them off.” Liz replied, absently sitting her book aside. Turning her attention to the man, she watched his boxers slide down those amazing thighs until she heard the soft rustle of them hit the floor.

Her eyes raked the man’s form appreciatively.

He had well formed arms, chest and thighs that she found very attractive. And believe it or not, the slight swell in his stomach was cute as hell.

She remembered thinking at one time, that she found her very apparent attraction to Red odd, after Tom and his six pack abs.

But the more time she spent with Red, the more she found she appreciated his attributes, as it were.

Besides the fact that the sex was beyond amazing. When they made love, she felt sheltered and protected in Red’s embrace where she had never felt such things with Tom.

Red was so powerful and commanding. When he settled his weight into her, she felt comforted.

The man literally oozed sensuality.

Tom couldn’t muster even half of what Red exuded. Just *thinking* about being with Red in a sexual situation made Liz’s tummy flip chaotically, all because of what the man had to offer.

When his thick thighs brushed against her soft ones, she withered inside. The strong arms that rippled with his movements as he made love to her, turned her on. The thick mat of hair on his chest could tease her nipples into sharp points of throbbing sensations within seconds.

His mouth... that blessed mouth, which could kiss her senseless, also had the expertise to bring her to a shuddering climax anytime he pleased.

And his cock. She loved the man’s dick more than life itself. She had never felt so complete, so full... until Red Reddington.

Liz tossed back the blankets, her eyes issuing a warm invitation, pleased when the man didn’t hesitate in the slightest to join her.

Climbing under the sheet, Red sighed, loving the freedom his nakedness afforded him.

Laying against him, Liz felt the butterflies in her tummy flutter about. The man’s soft fuzz on his chest rubbed against her quickly swelling breasts. The smattering of hair on his stocky thighs fascinated her no end. Her knee deliberately brushed against the head of his well hung penis.

She felt a tightening between her legs, her breasts tingling in response to the overpowering
masculinity of her lover.

Red refused to extinguish the lights tonight, even when Liz sent a questioning glance to the bedside table.

“They stay on tonight.” he informed her seductively. He expected a slight flush but was disappointed when Liz moved to his side, relaxing totally into his sphere.

He was more than fine with that.

Liz twirled her finger through his light chest hair, trailing a leisurely path to his stomach with a well tapered nail.

She was truly looking forward to the chance the man had offered. When they were intimate, Red was so concentrated on her and her pleasure that she had never had the opportunity to concentrate on his.

Not that she was complaining, in the least. She had never had a lover so in tune with her body and mind.

Tonight she was looking forward to returning the favor. She planned some undivided attention to be cast his way.

Stroking his arm, Liz felt the muscles bunch under her touch. She gently moved her hand over, threading her fingers casually through the abundant blonde hair, teasingly circling his nipple.

She traced the flat dark skin, rolling the small peak, smiling her pleasure when it became taut under her administrations.

So, Red Reddington enjoyed it when someone played with his nipples. How enlightening. She smiled sweetly at the man.

Red lay silently, watching her explore his form. He had explored just about every inch of her and had a pretty damn good idea what made her tick but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t keep searching for new little hidden treasures with which to play.

He recalled the morning after they had made love for the first time. He could not stop staring at her profile.

He hadn’t realized how full her breasts were, finding himself completely mesmerized by the movement the beautiful tear shaped mounds made when she moved an arm or stretched just so.

Or her ass... he had finally seen it bare in the soft morning sunlight. There was nothing more beautiful than the human form in its natural state.

He could not get his fill of touching the perfection of Lizzy’s form. Often, he touched her simply because he could. One of his favorite things was to walk up behind her and press himself into that firm little bottom.

Instantly his cock would react. In the beginning she would start at his unexpected presence but of late, the woman’s reaction was more natural and instinctive which is what he hoped would happen eventually.

The feel of her mouth, how the full lips seemed to fit perfectly to his. Her warmth, the intense pleasure just the slightest flick of her tongue gave him always astounded him.
He loved to feel the edge of her opening, the wetness of her body against his fingertips.

Chauvinistic or not, Lizzy was so tiny in comparison to him, so feminine, it turned him the fuck on.

One of his favorite pastimes was mapping out freckles on her body purely to see her reaction.

The long line of her neck allowed him to sense the quickened heart beat of her pulse point. Softly draping his thick fingers down the exquisite expanse of her naked back, elicited a score of gooseflesh allowing the man to actually see the affect he had on her.

His hands fit her waist and shapely hips perfectly which had proven an incredibly sensitive area of her flesh.

The woman’s stuttered breathing meant he was on the right track.

Hooking her knee and sliding his length into her wet core was one of his favorite positions, especially if he had her pinned against a wall.

He had shared all of this with the woman. He was never less than honest in anything he did, but especially in those intimate moments, which Lizzy seemed to appreciate.

Their passionate couplings had been more primal, hot and dirty of late, which was like living out his more baser instincts. There were moments of concern when Red thought perhaps, he was being too rough with her, but the woman’s raspy moans of pleasure, flushed cheeks and blown pupils had erased any doubts or recriminations.

Liz was usually a very vocal lover but the intensity of their more recent lovemaking sessions had amplified tremendously. Red could not have been more gratified by the fact.

They often ended up in a sweaty, panting mess of tangled arms and legs, which felt fucking wonderful.

Red brought his thoughts back to the present with a jolt. Lizzy was tracing his skin like she’d never seen a naked man before. He could actually feel her curiosity spiking.

He suddenly realized he had never allowed her to explore. While he had been fine with that, finding exploration of her much more interesting, it didn’t mean Lizzy wasn’t curious about him.

He lay silently, finding her fascination with his body charming as hell. Some people might feel uncomfortable under such scrutiny, but in fact, Red was learning just as much about the woman as she was him.

By now, most men would probably have been rock hard and ready to fuck. But Red kept himself under control, allowing anything Lizzy thought to do.

His eyes deepened as she inched the sheet down, exposing his pubic hair which covered the beginning of his shaft. When he didn’t stop her, she boldly advanced until his flaccid cock was exposed to her gaze.

It did pulse slightly, stirring to life, but who could blame it? He was only human, contrary to popular opinion.

If someone had told him a year, hell, a month ago... that he and Lizzy would be laying naked in bed, playing games only lovers played, he would have laughed in their face. Granted, he would have imagined it down to the smallest of detail... but he still would have laughed.
She reached out, running a tentative fingertip over the length of his still dormant shaft which altered the condition rapidly enough, admittedly.

But still, he waited.

He watched her trace the tip of his cock, her face allowing her fascination.

And then it dawned on him. She’d never been with a man whose penis was uncut.

Their appearance turned a lot of women off.

He wondered what his lover thought of it? Lizzy had obviously been with cut men.

Did she dislike his appearance? Did she enjoy it? Did it make her feel good? Could she tell a difference?

Liz sat up, leaning her weight on her arm, studying Red more closely.

“You can touch me, Lizzy.” he encouraged quietly.

She lifted intrigued eyes.

“...Touch me.” he bid.

She arose to her knees, sitting beside him, wrapping her fingers around him, testing his weight and girth. She played with the extra skin, experimenting with it’s movement and texture.

Red drew in a breath, relaxing his head into the pillow as her warm, slim fingers encompassed his flesh.

“Does this feel good?” she asked hesitantly, searching out his features.

“Yes.” he rasped hoarsely.

She stroked his shaft diligently, moving the skin up and down, revealing his cock head to her view before it was covered again with the foreskin. She watched the movement of her hand hypnotically until Red was semi-erect.

“You’ve never held one before, have you?” Red murmured quietly, unwilling to break her concentration.

She shook her head, her eyes wide, “My God, am I doing it wrong?”

“Oh hell, no.” he grunted aside, concentrating on the moment.

Liz relaxed somewhat. “...Show me what to do.”

Wrapping his fingers around hers, he adjusted her grasp, moving the extra skin on his rapidly growing shaft.

“Does it bother you?” Red had to know. “There are variations of circums–”

“No...” Liz focused entirely on his penis, which caused Red to react to the visual stimuli.

Liz gasped quietly in awe as her fingers gapped around his now growing girth.

“I could get ask Dr. Bryan to...”
“No, please don’t.” Liz frowned up at him. “What do you mean ‘variations’?”

He wrapped his hand around hers, bringing the foreskin over his glans.

“My father refused to allow them take but a little off the top,” Red put it that way deliberately, hoping to make light of the subject. Running his finger over the tip, he showed her where the tiny bit of extra skin had been, but was now missing, “to make it more ascetically pleasing... hopefully.” he watched her face carefully.

She inspected him closely. She decided she appreciated his appearance, finding him very attractive.

Red was by far, the most erotic man she had ever seen, cut or not.

Besides being incredibly nice looking in color, length and in his grooming. What there was of the extra skin, actually showcased his very large mushroomed head for her viewing pleasure.

He had just the right amount of... everything, going on. Of course, that was only her opinion, she hoped it mattered.

“I like it.” she decided. “I love how it looks and it feels just perfect.”

He was hoping she’d say that. God how he was hoping. Red silently thanked his father, a first that he could remember.

His first wife hadn’t been a complete fan of his cock and blasé about the chest hair. His vanity had suffered a little granted, although he finally made the point, that she married it and had to live with it.

His other partners had one goal in mind. Physical attributes weren’t important. Just the release.

And then there was Lizzy.

Sometimes, you were directed to a certain person for a reason. And Red was ever so thankful to be thrown into the path of this woman.

“The option is always open to you,” he corrected immediately, “...to us.”

“I’m serious about this.” she replied breathlessly, tightening her grip around him, pumping with a more established rhythm. “Don’t you dare do anything like that, Red Reddington.”

She was being completely honest.

She hadn’t realized until Red, how big a difference such a small thing made. Or perhaps it had nothing to do with circumcision. Red always worked his way up to a gradual climax, only really fucking her harder because she just enjoyed how it felt.

But more importantly, she loved his reaction to the request when it came from her end.

She loved when the man got assertive in the bedroom.

Red would growl low in his throat, grasp her tightly and fuck her until she was left a quivering mess. It was one of the major things she loved about Red Reddington.

Her fingers tracked the bulging veins beneath his velvet skin, Liz memorizing the feel of him. “I want to learn what makes you happy.”

“Touching you makes me happy.” Red replied honestly.
Liz was too enthralled to take her concentration from her pastime even though the statement made her ‘happy’.

“Though, I have to say,” he sighed contentedly as she pumped his shaft with both hands, her thumb running back and forth over the slick head, “I am enjoying this interlude tremendously.”

Well, that felt great. The man stifled a heartfelt moan.

She smiled softly, enjoying the man’s reaction to her touch.

“I like touching you.” she murmured indistinctly.

“I’d say the feeling is more than fucking mutual.” he muttered silkily.

She traced his flesh, alternating her touch from soft to insistent, at first hesitatingly and then with more confidence.

The woman was always contradicting herself. But it didn’t seem to matter to his dick as it grew in her hand. If anything, he enjoyed the fuck out of her uncertainty.

He couldn’t remember the last time he got a hand job for no other reason, but to give him pleasure. With no hidden agenda.

He had been with other women who could get him off in five minutes flat. But this... this was real.

Not that he was judging any woman. He would never do so. The women he had known, usually had a standard procedure. They only cared about the end game, the deal, the fragile loyalty.

While he understood and accepted the rules. He was ever so glad he had found a woman who actually cared enough to find out his likes and dislikes. Not just about what worked.

Lizzy surpassed them all if only for her willingness to try. That contagious giggle when she was bent in an awkward position say... or if some unforeseen ‘incident’ amused or mildly shocked her, was the most captivating quality he had ever found in a woman.

Lizzy cared about the man.

“In fact,” the man growled his involvement, “no one has ever touched me the way you are.” Red knew the statement could be taken two ways, which is exactly how he meant it.

Liz smiled her pleasure, hearing such a statement, such encouragement urging her onward. Stroking his shaft, she rimmed his head, cupping the sensitive area under her palm, keeping no set pattern. The little cock tease.

“That feels really good, baby.” He whispered, closing his eyes to the reality.

“What do you like?” She squirmed about, pushing at his knee.

“What you’re doing.” Red moved his leg, allowing her to kneel in the open space.

“There must be something else?” She questioned softly, something occurring to her. She dropped her hand down to his sack, rolling them about gently, feeling the pliable flesh.

“God....” he sighed blissfully for such initiative.
“See, I knew there had to be something else.” She was very pleased with her discovery, settling more into her task.

He almost chuckled outright at such enthusiasm until the woman put two and two together, alternately stroking his shaft and his balls, while her other hand continued to play with his head.

He lay very still under her ministrations, relaxing, watching the show.

His cock throbbed wondrously in her small hand. His eyes deepened considerably as the tip of that tiny tongue flicked out about the full lips.

He had often wondered what her mouth would feel like.

Would she be experienced? Or hopefully, a novice. Why did it bother him so much to think of her with other men in similar situations. He had been with other women.

Red’s jaw tightened, his body tensing. The woman had caught those red lips between startling white teeth. He sensed the turn of her thoughts, hoping beyond hope that they were on the same level of communication.

Even if not, even if she didn’t do anything, that visual alone about made his balls spasm.

But if she did... it would be the first time those beautiful lips would be wrapped around his cock. An event he fantasized about... often.

He had many fantasies about oral sex. Her full lips sliding down his erection, the thought alone could almost bring him to orgasm. Would her tongue flicker about his sensitive flesh. Would she suckle intently or just half ass the job. Would she swallow? Not that he preferred one over the other, he was just damned curious.

Okay he was lying about that one.

Some women hated it. Other’s enjoyed it. What he really wanted to know, was Lizzy’s preference?

If he could come in that amazing mouth it would be the pinnacle of any man’s sexual desires.

Lizzy’s cheek brushed lovingly against his length. She found his clean fresh aroma arousing. She knew that scent, she found comfort in it. And she wanted more of it...

Turning her head slightly, the woman blew out a slow, controlled breath. Red’s fingers twitched at his side as her chin inadvertently brushed his glans.

Unconsciously holding his breath, he watched that sweet pouty mouth part subtly, her hot breath fanning tantalizingly over his more than sensitive skin.

He watched avidly as her tongue flicked out, tasting his head teasingly. He groaned softly as the little pink muscle flickered timidly over his taut skin.

He watched avidly as her tongue flicked out, tasting his head teasingly. He groaned softly as the little pink muscle flickered timidly over his taut skin.

Touching him with more pronounced pressure, Lizzy rubbed the course surface against his glans, getting the feel of him, before fully capturing his bulging crown between her luscious lips.

“Shit...” Red gasped shakily, clutching the sheets tightly in his hands, to stop himself from grasping at her hair.

Having been on the receiving end of blowjobs a few times in his life, a universal rule was to not
touch a woman’s head unless given express permission. Or they would invariably stop all movement.

His stomach flipped pleasantly as her eyes fluttered open, staring straight up at him.

Red watched the very stimulating sight of her voluptuous mouth sliding in an agonizingly slow pace, down over the bulging flesh, fully encasing his cock head.

“Son of a bitch...” he murmured tautly as the woman’s tongue suckled him gently.

Liz eased her way down the engorged flesh, pressing the thick crown against the roof of her mouth. Flattening her tongue along the underside of his penis, she hummed melodiously at the first taste of him.

She felt a powerful sense of accomplishment as the man’s mouth parted sensually, his dark eyes remained steadily fixed on her face.

She moaned softly as the large muscle involuntarily contracted, followed by the subtle heady mix of earthy musk and salt. Suckling gently, she tasted the warm pre-cum, memorizing the elixir that was all Red.

The man grunted deeply, the carnal sound making heat pool between her legs, leaving her slick and ready. Reaching between her legs, Liz ran her fingers through the thick arousal, teasing her own clit.

Red almost lost it at the sight of her touching herself. Before, he had almost sold his soul to simply get her to the stage where she felt comfortable enough to do such a thing. And now here she was, instinctively taking care of not only his needs, but her own.

Truth told, the whole damn picture was turning him the hell on.

More so, her total lack of experience, that she was a novice, meant she hadn’t done this often, and it thrilled him beyond belief... the combination was working wonders.

He had blowjobs from experts, but truthfully, had never been this hard, this close to coming, after just a few moments in a hot wet mouth.

Her experimentation, hesitation and nervousness was driving him out of his fucking mind. In such an unbelievably good way.

Liz bobbed her mouth on the straining organ, rolling her tongue over the bulging flesh. She listened intently to what the man did and did not respond to.

She had been wanting to do this for a while, but had lost nerve at each opportunity presented. She had to say, she was really enjoying the experience. More so, the intimacy of it.

She had Red’s penis... in her mouth. Besides making love, there was nothing more intimate than this. And that he seemed to be enjoying it, made it even more exciting.

Even if she was nervous as hell.

She really hadn’t done this a lot, maybe a handful of times with each partner she had. She knew the mechanics of it of course, but had never felt confident in her abilities. To be as forward as she had a moment ago, when she had taken the initiative, to proceed on her own.

Normally she had been asked to perform the activity by any given partner.

She had always been so concentrated on what she was doing before, so worried about her
performance and lack of skills.

She had never really obtained the sexual thrill she had read about from performing oral sex on anyone... until now. There was something about doing it to Red that was such an aphrodisiac.

Liz sensed Red was allowing her to take control. Having watched his fingers occasionally gripping the sheet from time to time told her that the man was holding himself in tight check.

She absolutely loathed when guys would grab her head, trying to control her movements. In her mind, it signified that she was not pleasing them in some manner. So she truly appreciated Red’s control, allowing her to feel her way, to adapt to his size.

That infamous control slipped a notch, the man’s hand lifting of it’s own volition, halting mid-stride as it almost touched the shiny crown of the dark head. He curled his fingers into a tight fist willing himself back under restraint.

Liz caught the tentative hand, encouraging his touch.

Red groaned brokenly, “Oh, fuck...” he whispered hoarsely, very much enjoying the visual presented.

Softly curling his fingers into the dark strands, he reached out brushing aside the bouncy locks blocking his view.

Completely enraptured by the sight of the woman’s pink lips stretched around his thickened shaft, the man’s steady breathing became labored as the two moved in a steady rhythm.

He knew the time was nearing to put a halt to her pursuit, but at present he just did not have the will power.

“Okay, baby...” he offered a feeble protest. “We should stop.”

The sight of the little extra skin he had, meeting with her swollen lips and the titillating sensation of her hair brushing his thighs and groin, had him quietly cursing his lot in life.

“Really, baby.” the man tried for more emphasis. “Maybe it’s time to...”

Threading his fingers through the thick strands of hair, Red cupped her breast, drawing a long moan from the woman as his crown settled against the back of her mouth. The slight suction and the vibration tickled along his cock head and shaft deliciously, snapping any restraint he had left.

“...Stop.” he whispered his growing agony.

It was a toss up between his need to complete the act and his common sense that told him, the first time should be accomplished with a little more finesse.

“Get the fuck up here!” he snarled, having lost the battle in reality, for he so longed to complete what his body was crying out for. “Now!”

Liz hesitated visibly, unnerved by his tone. She wondered what she had done wrong, unaware that her mouth was still suckling at the taut skin of his penis.

“Oh.... fuck.” the man trembled visibly, abruptly pushing his hand between their bodies. Thumbing her chin, he broke the amazing suction as quickly as humanly possible.

She sat up slowly, still unsure as to what exactly had happened. She tried to keep her perspective but
secretively she was a little hurt by his actions.

“Did I do something wrong?” she asked anxiously, absently crawling, straddling the man’s hips.

“I was about to come down your damn throat... “ he panted shakily, “so no, you didn’t do a fucking thing wrong.”

She felt a little better, pleased with his apology, of sorts. “Oh well, okay... but...” in her opinion, he could have been a little bit less astringent about such a gift.

Pushing a hand between their bodies, he cupped her mound possessively, “I want to be here,” he pet the wet hole with his thick finger, “when I come.”

Liz shivered slightly at his roughened voice and manner. Pushing back, she purposely teased the erection straining against her backside.

Red’s eyes darkened as his cock head slid along her slit. His jaw clenched as the woman lifted, catching the throbbing crown with her body. The tip just easing into her drenched center.

“Dammit!” he snapped, quickly rolling the woman to her back. Gaining control of the situation once more.

Shoving her legs apart, he settled himself commandingly between her thighs.

“You’re playing a very dangerous game here, Elizabeth.” he growled his frustration, pushing his groin against hers as he reached for the drawer on the side table. “You’re pushing me beyond...”

Liz reached out, stopping his quest for what denied their total intimacy.

“...No.” Her eyes beckoned him.

“What the hell are you doing?” he gritted painfully, needing to be with her so badly, he ached.

“I want to feel you.” she looked up at him, her voice shaking slightly.

Red’s body trembled at the implication. He dropped his head, groaning as his cock brushed against her opening, feeling her center flood with wet heat. Fuck that felt good...

“Are you telling me,” he looked at her almost sternly, his hand having withdrawn from the drawer and it’s contents, “you don’t want–”

“Not tonight, okay...” she pleaded softly. “Please, I need to feel you.”

He pushed his thigh against hers, opening her legs wider as he adjusted his stance. Steadying himself on one arm, laying warm fingers against her sex.

“God, baby, I know...” he groaned piteously. “I want that as well, so much.” he dropped his head.

Liz shifted her hips, his shaft naturally falling where she wanted it most. He slid forward slightly, the temptation too great. He teased her swollen labia, before pulling away almost angrily. He swore under his breath.

“Sweetheart, we haven’t discussed this.” the man reminded tightly.

“We’re discussing it now.” she reminded peevishly.
“This isn’t really a good time for me.” he reminded waspishly. He grasped the bedding, holding back on giving into his need. He looked into that little face, feeling himself cave by degrees.

“Yes, agreed.” he was going to try diplomacy if it killed him. “We’re both wanting more than anything to go bareback.” he gritted roughly.

Liz reached between them, wrapping her small fingers around the thick girth, setting his crown at her opening. Dragging the smooth skin across the area, she melded the thick head in her heat. The stiffness of his erection made her body flutter about the bulbous head, which tried to grasp and pull him in.

“Baby, you’re ovulating..” he tried reasoning, suckling on her sweet neck. “And don’t even think of telling me to pull out, because I won’t.” he wouldn’t lie. He pushed against her a little, feeling her tight little hole fluttering already. “I’ll fill you so fucking full...” he growled at the thought.

He could not prevent his large fingers sliding into her body as he slowly pumped them, testing her arousal.

Red grunted deep in his throat, finding the woman more than ready for him. Sliding his fingers free, he circled her small nipples, wetting them before suckling away the intoxicating taste of Lizzy.

“We’re covered.” she pointed to her table, showing him a depressed spermicide plunger. “I got that stuff you hate.” she held his eyes imploringly. “I did it while you were in the shower.” she explained hastily. “I so want this, with you.”

Red felt his heartbeat quicken in anticipation. This had not been spontaneous. She had planned for it to happen.

Elizabeth wanted this just as much as he did.

“I have not done this since my ex-wife.” he confessed. “Do you understand what it means to me, if we do... proceed?” he asked her seriously.

“Yes.” she replied shyly. “You’ll be sharing something with me, you don’t anyone else.”

“And what does that mean to you?” grasping his cock in his hand, he brushed the mushroomed crown along her damp curls hoping it wasn’t to influence her decision in anyway.

“It’s a commitment, to you.” she answered quickly, moving up into his touch. “And you, to me.”

His breathing stuttered as the tip of his erection grazed her clit, producing a fresh wave of wetness flooding from her body, and his.

Shit...

“And you want that... with me?” he pushed along her swollen sex, groaning. His slit warm with pre-cum, massaging her clit further as their arousal mixed together.

“Do you want it with me?” She lifted hopeful eyes.

“Damn right I do.” Red lowered his mouth, kissing the woman fiercely. “God knows I do.”

Even though she was thrilled to share this with Red, she was nervous as hell. His large shaft stroked her, heightening her arousal, her body trembling with growing excitement.

They were really going to do this.
“Are you all right?” His deep voice full of concern and lust made her fingers shake.

“God, Red,” Her hand trembled as she placed it on his shoulder, “I’m so nervous.”

He smiled softly, gently nuzzling her nose. “You have done this before.”

“No on purpose.”

Red slowed slightly, the confession giving him pause for thought. “You’ve never...”

“No.” she dropped her eyes embarrassed slightly, a mild trepidation overtaking her. She hoped Red would not change his mind.

“I thought you and Tom...” he questioned his own sincerity.

“You’re the first one I’ve ever felt...” she looked up at him, desire shining in her eyes, “it was so warm...”

And they said dreams didn’t come true.

The thought that he would be the first to intentionally ride her bareback and fill her with his cum, made his dick throb with anticipation.

She gasped softly when she felt his shaft pulse against her, as she wiggled about, needing to feel closer to the man.

“Are you sure you want this?” the question devastated the man, but it had to be asked. “There is no rush, Lizzy.” he forced himself to say as much.

“I know... I know.” she was quick to respond. “I’m nervous... excited.” she admitted. “I want this, Red.” she reassured. “I want to share this with you, and only you.”

Red’s heart hammered in his chest as he pushed at her wet core.

“If you change your mind...” he finished the statement in his head... I’ll fucking die of a fucking heart attack right here on the fucking crisp white sheets.

“I won’t.” she promised shakily, urging him to nudge forward. She held her breath as his warm thick head pushed past her tight opening, popping through with effort.

“Oh, Red...” the woman moaned sweetly, heightening the man’s pleasure two-fold.

“Fuck...” Red gasped, having forgotten how good this could feel. Especially as her downy thatch of hair rubbed along his length.

It was as if he had waited his whole life for this moment.

“Tell me we’re good here.” he pleaded softly, very much wishing to continue the journey he had begun.

Liz moaned breathlessly as she felt the exquisite stretch of his large bare crown breaching her. She clutched his arms, curling her fingers tightly into the bulging muscles.

“God, please answer me...” He growled through gritted teeth, pulling back, feeling the heavy drag as she clenched hard around him, trying to make him stay.
“Please don’t stop.” she whimpered softly. He pushed back against her hot, moist cradle in response.

She couldn’t help but feel delighted by the man’s reaction.

Red had savored their lovemaking from the very beginning of their relationship. Always taking his time penetrating her. There was a time or two when she thought she might snap and drive him in herself, the man had been so meticulous. Which, come to think of it, had actually happened once or twice, making the man chuckle at her impatience.

But tonight was different. This time, she was just as concentrated as he. She had never felt anything so wonderful... so breathtaking.

She’d never felt anything like him before. His shaft was massaging her in ways she didn’t think were possible.

He was so thick, filling her, stretching her like no one else had. The ripples and ridges on his long shaft that she had only vaguely felt before, rubbed along her tight walls, electrifying her already sensitized core.

His heat... she hadn’t realized how hot a man could be. He felt amazing.

He was inside her body with no barriers what-so-ever between them.

“Oo... oh...” She tensed, her muscles locking around his shaft as an orgasm ripped through her unexpectedly.

Red snarled softly as she trembled hard beneath him seconds before a hot gush of fluid surround his cock head.

He held himself still, his chest moving in deep, irregular breaths. He meticulously watched his lover enjoy just a taste of what he was capable of giving her.

“I take it that was good for you?” he rasped.

She nodded jerkily, caressing his torso languidly.

He couldn’t blame her for coming as fast as she did. From the minute he had pushed inside, she felt even more amazing than he had imagined. He was truly surprised he hadn’t blown his own load as yet and he wasn’t even half way inside her.

Bracing on his arms, he waited for her to relax before pushing in again, bumping her already sensitized clit. In response, her core rolled around him in a wave.

“God, Lizzy...” he slid in further, pushing at her tight walls, “I have never felt anything so wonderful in my entire life.”

“Re...” she broke off, a deep throated moan over taking her. She had never come that quick from straight penetration and certainly not without her fingers helping. He was stroking her so expertly, she felt her arousal growing before she knew it.

He knew this was going to be memorable, but she was even more responsive than he dreamed she’d be. Her obvious enjoyment made his all the more potent, sending a warmth spreading through his body.

When he did come, it was going to feel fucking phenomenal. He had to admit, the male in him was
rejoicing at the thought of coming freely inside her. He had missed the sensation and was anticipating a spectacular release.

Dipping his head, he tongued her nipple into a hard peak, his bare shaft sliding further inside the molten cavern.

There was no way in hell anything was going to prevent him completing this union. If the next Messiah were to arrive at the door in the upcoming moments, Red knew he would remain exactly where he was.

He didn’t give a shit what was happening outside this room. Unless someone physically came through that door, he wasn’t about to leave the cradle of Lizzy’s thighs until they were well and truly finished.

He rolled her nipple with his thumb, dropping a soft kiss to her throat.

“This is where I want to be.” his voice deepened as he felt her spreading for him. “I have needed this from the moment I first laid eyes on you.”

“You couldn’t have known...” She broke off, gasping when he slid his entire length inside her. “Oh, God...” He was so thick. The ridges of his shaft dragged along her slick walls, making her pussy quiver in a fluttering wave.

“I knew.” he murmured contentedly withdrawing slowly, placing his tongue over the her pulse point as he pushed back inside. “God knew.” he was relatively sure. “Hell, I think everyone knew except you.” his mood was so high he found himself grinning at the absurdity of his next statement. “They were even taking bets on it.”

“Don’t stop...” she moaned breathlessly. The sharp, hot breath brushed against his neck, delighting him.

He bent his leg, placing his thigh under her raised one, changing his angle allowing him to slip in even deeper. His mouth concentrated on her neck, shoulders and breasts. Sucking, licking and nipping the glowing skin leisurely.

He groaned brokenly, slowly pumping his shaft inside her welcoming warmth.

“You’re so hot, baby.” He pushed at the tight walls grasping hold of him, pulling him in deeper. “So fucking tight...”

The condom had always made the ride so slick, he hadn’t realized how damned perfect she was. He could feel his sack growing heavier the more her body gripped at the extra skin, massaging his cock superlatively.

Their mouths clung languidly, their kisses both ardently passionate and amorously sensual.

Liz rubbed her smooth legs along his thighs. He pulled tighter on her waist, tilting her hips, as he dragged his shaft along her swollen clit.

She inhaled sharply, whimpering. “How did you learn to do that?”

Red enjoyed the reverence in her tone, his mouth curving into a smile.

Drawing back, he braced a hand against the low headboard, increasing his tempo. He deliberately watched her sinewy body undulating back along his cock.
“You do realize I’m going to fuck you bare from here on out, yes.” the man needed confirmation.

“Promise...” she gasped sharply, enjoying the slight dusting of hair which tapered down into his pubic area, as it brushed along her flat stomach.

“Oh, I fucking promise.” he snarled. “I’m going to take full advantage of this every chance I get.”

Lizzy’s young perky breasts, erect with arousal, bounced slightly under his constant assault. He felt the low throaty groan seconds before he actually heard it, as he watched her pinch and roll the dusky tips in order to ease the growing ache behind them.

Red ran his hand against the soft thatch of hair on her mound, laying the flat of his palm on her abdomen, covering her from mound to belly button. She was so tiny in comparison to him, so delicate.

Getting lost in her sweet cries of passion, he wrapped his hands about her waist. Drawing her against him, he focused on the sight of his heavy girth disappearing repeatedly into her wet hole.

He couldn’t believe there was anything more captivating than the sensual wave of her body as he made love to her. But as his bare cock came into view, glistening with her arousal, a low growl of satisfaction rumbled deep in his throat.

Red’s mouth lifted at the corner, watching as her brow furrowed critically, her mouth falling open as Liz released the sweetest cry of ecstasy he had ever heard.

She rolled her hips hypnotically into his in an effort to ease the building pressure inside her.

“That’s good,” he praised roughly, “fuck me with that tiny pussy.” he panted shakily, watching her make love with him.

Gripping the man’s ass, she pushed back against his long thrust, dragging the peak of her sex determinedly along his fat length.

“Help me...” her impassioned plea made his stomach flip wildly. “Do something.”

Hearing that sultry voice begging for more and feeling his own impending orgasm approaching, he dutifully doubled his efforts. Panting with the exertion, he got lost in the damp slide of their bodies moving together so rhythmically.

Liz had never felt anything so intimate before in her life. To know in mere moments he would come freely without restraint, filled her with excitement and a little uncertainty.

She had placed high expectations on this moment and hoped that it lived up to her dreams and imagination. Not to mention his.

So far, she was very pleased with their efforts.

“Let me hear you, honey.” Reaching down, he circled her abused clit lovingly with his fingers, “Come on, sweetheart.”

Over sensitized, she wriggled from his touch, the moment too intense to prolong. Red grasped her hip, keeping her in place.

*There was no way in fucking hell was he going without her.*

“Be a good girl and come for me...” he crooned silkily. “Come on my cock...”
“Ray...” She mewled, arching into him as the man gently pinched his fingers around her swollen flesh, giving her the jolt to slip over into the white hot release she so longed for.

That was the first time she’d said his name while he was balls deep inside her. For the first time in his life, he fucking loved his name. But only when she said it like that.

He’d never heard anyone say his name quite like that before. So passionate, filled with so much desire.

Her walls rippled around him, massaging his length, drawing tightly on his hard cock before shuddering with the power of her climax. Her knees tightened against his side, the slim legs shaking erratically as they gripped him.

Crying out, her body gave into his.

“I love watching you come.” he praised her, feeling the indescribable tingling along his spine and throbbing in his shaft intensify, signifying he was nearing the end.

The sight of her readily accepting his thick spread, the push and pull of her rosy labia enfolding his bare erection in a warm lover’s embrace... was incredibly and utterly satisfying.

As was the look of anticipated suspense on her glowing features.

“So you sure, baby...” he panted, the longing in his voice apparent.

“Ray, please.” She pleaded, tilting her pelvis up in invitation.

Correction, he forgot how good this felt.

He felt a frisson of pleasure and overwhelming anticipation that she truly wanted to share this deeply intimate moment, one she had never experienced before, with him.

The man concentrated on the repetitive movement of his hips easing his shaft into her cushioned depths. Slowing, he ran a large hand over the soft thigh brushing his side in the steady rocking motion he had established.

“Let me feel you...” she pleaded.

The tiny hands gripping his forearms and sharp sounds of enjoyment echoed around the room, and her beautiful features lit in euphoria, made his arousal spike.

Her eyes fluttered open, gazing up at him. The look in her eyes, the desire to share this with him made him fully relax.

Red bent his elbows, brushing his lips against his lover’s, their ragged breathy moans mingling as one. Her fingers curled into his side as his own worked through her thick mane of hair.

Their erratic breaths and tongues flicked sensually against each other. The natural give and take of his cock, pleasured her receptive flesh as they murmured ambiguous endearments aloud.

The sensation pushed the man over the edge as he gave into his body’s dictates.

Keeping his eyes locked on hers, Red let go... emptying himself into the woman.

He shook with the intensity of the powerful release, both gasping and moaning fervently as his cock jerked powerfully, expelling his thick essence in her suddenly tightly coiled body.
“Oh God, *oh God*...” she drawled methodic phrases of ethereal emotions, as his warmth hit her cervix, the experience literally mind blowing.

“Lizzy...” He breathed against her mouth as she clenched tightly around his cock, her little hand erotically scratching at his back. “God, baby...”

He had just come in Lizzy and the thought thrilled him no end. He could feel the hot proof backwash over his swollen cock head.

And it was the most intense experience of his life.

Easing to his forearms, as his chest pushed into her warm breasts, he laced his hand with hers. He squeezed, their fingers entwining. He felt the band of her engagement ring... his ring... against his fingers.

“Come here...” he whispered forcefully, bunching her hair in his fist. He palmed her tiny ass, pushing his cock head against her swollen cervix, pumping the remains of his hot load deep inside.

“When you feel me, baby?” he growled against her neck as the thick cream flowed in massive quantities from his sensitive slit.

“...Yes.” she moaned passionately. Her center flooded with his cum, leaving her feeling content and dreamy.

“Does it feel good?” he questioned roughly.

“More...” she lifted breathlessly, rocking her hips up to take what he had to give, “give me more.”

Red gripped her thigh, keeping it upright. Rocking slowly, he eased their bodies through the last of their spasms as his erection softened.

Reluctantly sliding free of the tight cavern, Red kissed her swollen lips sensually.

He dropped his lips against her neck, nuzzling her silky flesh, bringing his breathing back under control before rolling from the bed.

Leaving her warmth left him cold.

Coming back a moment later with a warm cloth, he cleaned up his mess, mesmerized by his arousal pouring freely from her body. The sight of his thick white cream wetting the soft brown hair covering her swollen sex, made his dick stir to life yet again.

Blinking away his focus, he cleaned himself off.

“Lift, baby.”

Liz blinked lethargically, finding the man unfurling a soft towel. She felt her cheeks redden at the realization that there was a growing wet spot under her bottom.

Moving a little, Red laid the cloth on the soiled sheet before crawling back into bed.

He slid in behind Lizzy, pulling her into the cradle of his body.

The sated woman yawned sleepily, wiggling against him before settling down. She blinked hazy eyes, trying to stay awake.
“Sleep, Lizzy...” his roughened voice soothed. Kissing her shoulder and neckline, Red whispered quietly watching as her breathing slowed and she eased into a deep, restful sleep.

Pulling the blankets over them, Red allowed his body and mind to assimilate all that had passed between them.

*Well, that was... unexpected.* So unexpected, he couldn’t quite grasp the fact that it actually happened.

But it had.

Not only was his body still thrumming with the vestiges of how wonderful the experience had been, leaving him incredibly sexually gratified, he had the evidence right here between them.

He could smell himself mixed in with her own intoxicating aroma, calming his heart.

He couldn’t remember when he had felt so happy. Even the simple act of holding Lizzy’s hand made him feel peaceful. And her kiss, Lizzy made a kiss feel brand new.

Which meant the sex itself was mind blowing. With all his experience and her naiveté, they made quite the pair. But even with all his experience, only she could have made that feel... so damned fulfilling.

He wouldn’t admit it to anyone, except Lizzy. But he had never experienced such a raw and powerful emotional connection with anyone... not even his ex-wife.

Lizzy made him experience so many wonderful emotions he hadn’t felt in years. He honestly felt like his soul was at peace for the first time in his life.

But with that, came the other side.

The jealousy. His long dormant territorial side.

Since his entire focus had been on Elizabeth, he knew that she didn’t have a wandering eye and seemed completely oblivious to the men who stared at her.

But he wasn’t.

All he knew was that when he warded off Brad’s intentions or he stared down an admirer, he felt something inside him click.

He felt the Alpha Male inside diminish somewhat if he simply set his arm around her waist.

Red felt a surge of pride that he tried desperately to suppress, but then he didn’t.

Talk about marking his territory. No man could dispute his rights after what transpired tonight.

Of course he couldn’t say it right out, but he would make certain that other men knew and kept their place.

Elizabeth mewled softly, cuddling closer to him before settling into the circumference of his arms.

He lay his chin against the soft curls of her hair, his hand naturally curving around her breast. Even in sleep, Liz leaned into his touch. He smiled tenderly down at her averted profile before reaching to turn out the lights.
He settled more comfortably into his pillow, his thumb absently brushing across a convenient nipple.

He could not wait to see what tomorrow brought where this woman was concerned. She had pleased him as no other tonight.

She pleased him in so many different ways, and often surprised him just how inventive she could be.

He realized suddenly that his life with Elizabeth Keen was just beginning and he also knew... he couldn’t wait to share it with her.

Chapter End Notes

I’m sure we’re all aware that Spader is “cut” from his nude scene in Supernova.

I know this because Beta Jami not only slowed the scene to a crawl. She paused it, zoomed in and stared at it for a good hour while I patiently contemplated the universe and waited for the movie to resume.

I have yet to see the ending...

I am also bombarded by the fact because Beta Jami has also made that screen cap her desktop photo, so I see Spader in all his naked glory almost daily.

But we have been having a discussion in email with some readers who think of Reddington as being different than Spader. One side of the issue wanted au natural. The other, wanted him cut. Ouch.

So we did a little of both worlds and gave him a little trim off the top, hopefully pleasing both parties.

Could I run for office or what?

Hope you guys take no offense and just enjoy the hell out of this little outing.
Having overslept the next morning, Liz found herself having to rush about in preparation for the wedding.

But Red’s thoughts were running to a rush of another sort. The man was valiantly trying to set aside his desire to be with her again.

There was a new intimacy between them that had not been there the day before. He had almost felt something like this with his ex-wife after their daughter was born.

The emotion was close to elation verging on euphoria.

They had both been so exhausted, Carla more than himself, of course. The labor had been long and tedious. But as they held their sleeping infant between them, there was a shared feeling of excitement, fear... hope for the future.

Last night, Red had experienced the same emotions, along with a sense of unity and overwhelming love.

As he watched Liz dry off, sneaking furtive looks in the mirror from time to time, he felt his body start to react. Liz’s hands moved her breasts this way and that as she dusted powder and dabbed perfume. Small glimpses of that beautiful ass, had him moaning inwardly.

Determinedly clenching his fists at his side, he turned away from temptation. The sex he could actually handle, but to experience the addictive emotional bond they had shared, that was proving an insurmountable obstacle.

Red glanced at the clock, finding their time short. While he wouldn’t normally give a shit, he thought Lizzy might.

She had been looking forward to attending this wedding and wearing her new dress for what seemed like ages to the man.

There seemed to be an air of contained excitement about the woman in regards to the wedding itself.

He had gathered from Francis, that Lia’s expectations ran as high as Lizzy’s. The man had said, Lia was looking forward to seeing it because of the caliber of the wedding party.

Red could understand that, he supposed. The rich and infamous did tend to have a certain flair about them.

So maybe that was what Lizzy was looking forward to? The venue, reception... the bride’s dress.

He likened it to himself enjoying a fine vintage or a long conversation with an intelligent, eloquent orator.

“I’m going to shave.” he quietly resigned himself to waiting for the right moment, the thought of disappointing Lizzy more powerful than his heightened libido in this instance.
She came alongside him, grabbing her hair dryer from the basin, critically surveying her reflection before attempting to dry the wet strands.

Liz inadvertently dropped a hair pin which had been dangling from her mouth. She muttered an oath, bending over directly before him. Red glanced down.

He stood transfixed on the soft weight of the robe covering her shapely curves. It was evident she wasn’t wearing anything beneath. The outline of her body was draped by the silken folds, the imprint of her vulva clearly visible, right there for him to see.

*Holy hell...*

He gripped the handle of his lathering brush tightly. His eyes closing momentarily to his lapse of control. Jabbing the bristles into the thick foam, he gathered some on the ends before smoothing the frothy cream around his face. Dropping the brush into the bowl, he snatched up the razor and slid it over his cheek.

“Can I watch?” Liz asked, having arisen, pushing her hair from her face, intently scowling at a wayward strand of her bangs as it waved haphazardly about. The woman blew fruitlessly, annoyed when the soft hair fell right back into place.

He gestured for her to have a seat on the low part of the basin where she had sat her cosmetics.

Liz watched the razor glide over his skin, then his fingers checking the cleared area before rinsing the blade. “Can I do it?”

He looked down at her and where her robe fell away from her leg, giving him a tantalizing view of the top of her thigh.

“Have you ever done it before?” He asked, rinsing the blade again.

She shook her head. “No.” she piped up gingerly. “But I’m a quick study.”

“Hop up here.” He patted the higher counter, grabbing the supplies he’d been using. “Firm, down unless I say otherwise, rinse the blade after every stroke.”

He handed the razor, pulling it out of her reach just before she took hold of it.

“And it goes without saying,” he cast her a stern glance, “don’t slit my throat.”

He stepped into the space between her open legs, placing his hands on her thighs. She did as directed, before hesitating when she got to his upper lip.

“You take over.” while she had enjoyed the interval immensely, she hesitated at this point.

“You can do it.” He encouraged.

Inwardly holding his breath, hoping like hell he had a top lip when all was said and done, he readied himself appropriately. Her tongue poked out the side of her mouth, making it damn hard not to smile.

“Phew...” She relaxed and rinsed the blade, peering back at her work. She ran her fingers over the bare area, tracing his lips with her thumbs.

Red stayed very still under her touch. He watched her face. She was lost in what she was trying to accomplish.
Tilting his head up, he could feel her position and reposition the blade several times before committing to the task.

“You can press harder.”

“My God, don’t talk.” she practically snapped his head off.

“Relax, you’re doing fine.” He bent the other way, stretching his neck to assist in her efforts.

Taking one last swipe, Liz felt his neck, finding it smooth as a baby’s bottom. “There. How’s that?”

He felt over his face and neck proclaiming a job well down. “Give me a wet cloth will you.”

She wet the soft cloth, ringing out the excess water before wiping it across his face herself. His eyes shut to the soothing touch.

“Aftershave lotion?”

“Behind you,” his voice lowered softly, not wanting to break the quiet moment, “black bottle.”

She opened it, sniffing the warm and mellow aromatic liquid. Pouring a bit into her palm, she rubbed her hands together then smoothed it over his face and neck. “More?”

“No..” He muttered. “It’s good.” he glanced down, watching the gentle slope of her breast and nipple move under the light weight of her robe, and couldn’t take it anymore. He needed to touch her... badly.

“You smell nice.” she sighed.

He dropped his nose into the crook of her neck breathing in her scent, his hands encompassing her small waist. “So do you. You always do.”

“Yeah, say that after I’ve just left the gym.” she teased. “Or had a training session with Silas.” her pretty brow pulled into a dark scowl. “I’m beginning to hate that man.”

“As long as you don’t hate me...” he murmured quietly. His mouth gently connected to hers for a brief eternity. “You... smell... good.”

She smiled, “I haven’t even put anything on yet.” she giggled, his nose nuzzling tickling her neckline.

“You don’t have to wear anything.” he touched the tip of his tongue to her, tasting the warm flesh. “I love how you smell. I’m happiest when you’re near me.”

She understood what he meant. It didn’t matter if he had just come from the shower, a long flight or a smoke filled room. Anytime or anyplace they happened to be, she would catch a whiff of him and feel a maelstrom of emotions ranging from happiness to safety to, most recently, intense arousal.

She couldn’t remember when it had started, she only knew when she smelled his scent, all was right with the world.

He stepped further into the space between her legs, the fabric of his towel rubbing erotically against her vulnerable flesh. She gasped as his warm palms encased her buttocks pulling her insistently closer.

Red ran his hand from her knee to her thigh, pushing the robe open, baring more of her leg. His eyes
dropped to his handiwork.

He lifted her chin, his mouth parting hers hungrily as he angled her head, devouring her soft lips.

She mewed softly lifting her arms about his neck to encourage his actions.

Leaning back on the basin she braced her hand, wrapping her bare legs around his waist, lifting herself closer to the man. Grunting against her mouth, he cupped her ass, rocking her against him in the ancient movements of lovemaking which produced that wonderful sound again.

The sound that made his cock vibrate.

He kissed the dip in her throat, trailing down to where her robe gaped open, to kiss the very top of her breast.

He tightened his embrace about the small waist, the action easing aside her robe. He revealed more of the pale mound, his mouth working a sensual path about the soft curve, halting just inches away from her nipple.

All that stood between them now was his damnable towel. All he had to do was drop it and slide into her heat.

Red felt very comfortable at this moment. He had taken the time to have a very long talk with those closest to him about interruptions and untimely intrusions.

How he had got laid in the last few years was a wonder, but just these last few days... it seemed the entire fucking universe was against him. Especially given that a very sexually willing woman was sharing his bed.

Some would say that he had more than ample time with Lizzy, but if anyone asked him... Red would have said that his devout wish was to have just one day to stay in bed and make love to Lizzy whenever the mood struck... and to hell with the outside world.

In Red Reddington’s world that was almost an unheard of concept. Odd, he had never really minded before.

Liz’s eyes wandered the room behind her, her thoughts certainly not on her surroundings until... she gasped pushing frantically against the man’s stocky frame. She had noticed the clock on the basin.

“We... uh,” Liz sighed her distraction, squirming slightly trying to close herself up to Red’s attention, “better get ready.”

“Oh huh.” the distracted reply came at a leisurely pace. Red worked his hand between their bodies, ignoring her feeble protest to halt his advancement.

“...Red.” she prevented him reaching his goal, her hand stoutly refusing to move, which protected her virtue. “I have to get ready. It takes me longer than you.” Scooting forward, she managed to wrangle some space between them. “Though, I’m not sure why. You wear more clothes than I do.”

“I can remedy that...” he pulled her back determinedly.

“Later.” She moved past him skillfully, pushing at his hands. “You can sniff me and whatever, all you want... later.”

She was openly flirting with him. She had said he could do... whatever. And she had said it in the
proper tone and she had given him the look. The possibilities of... whatever, filled his mind.

“I’ll hold you to that.” He said, walking stiffly into the closet.

Opening the drawer, he pulled out a pair of boxers slipping them on just as she breezed back in, wearing nothing but her bra and panties.

“I forgot to grab my dress.” she grimaced apologetically, grasping the beautiful garment frantically.

“Jesus...” Red gaped, seeing the dark thatch of hair on her mound and her rosy pink nipples through the delicate lavender lace barely covering her. “Oh, you conveniently forgot your dress.” He nodded thoughtfully. “And then you come in here wearing nothing but a smile...”

Liz glanced down at her lingerie, a little perplexed. A thought fleetted through her anxious mind.

“I don’t know where I put my shoes.” she began a frantic search throughout the spacious area, oblivious to the fact that her body was on display with every movement she made.

Red lifted his hands in the air shaking his head, raising his eyes to the heavens. “And now she’s bending and stretching and parading around like she doesn’t have a care in the world, and does she give a shit what she’s doing to me...” he voiced his frustration, muttering quietly aside.

It was official. God hated him. Was punishing him. And it was a painful punishment.

His whole body ached to touch her, to be touched by her. He would give anything to have her. He boiled inside with the need to be with her.

He wanted her so fucking badly. His head throbbed, both of them, one more than the other, granted.

He enjoyed the build up to making love until they couldn’t take it anymore and the only release was being connected to one another. He loved getting her on the edge of–

But it wasn’t going to happen. He knew as much.

“Are you all right?” Liz asked. He refocused his attention, finding her staring at him with a concerned look.

“Why wouldn’t I be all right?” He asked almost pleasantly.

“Well, that’s what I’m asking.” she was almost annoyed. “Red Reddington, if you spoil this for me today...” she pointed an accusing finger.

He stepped threateningly, “I need to be with you again...” his passionate gaze swept her frame, “more than you can possibly imagine.”

Her eyes widened at the incredibly lustful way the man was looking at her. She was sure if she had been dressed, her clothes would have been ash within seconds.

“Well, I understand that...and I so appreciate the thought.” she tried to placate.

“Oh, you appreciate the thought.”

“Of course I do, you know I do.” Liz wailed. “But you’ve been to hundreds of these things, thousands. This will be my only one.” she turned the ‘pout’ his way. “It seems to me, that you could put aside your needs for once.” she stepped forward threateningly as well, her fists clenched at her side. “And help me find my shoes! I want to see this wedding.”
All the fight went out of Red. She looked so damned cute standing there like she was.

Red took a steadying breath, his grip on the dresser next to him tightening. “Fine.” he quirked his head jerkily. “With that said, you should put some clothes on before I forget all my good intentions, get you down on all fours and fuck the hell out of you.”

Liz blinked her disorientation. Actually, that sounded just fine to her. But she was torn and she did have a new dress and shoes.... and jewelry.

“Are we fine here?” Red wanted an immediate decision.

Liz hesitated only slightly before taking the dress from it’s hanger. She stepped into the cool tulle, wiggling it up her body.

“Can you zip me up please.”

He paused in buttoning his trousers, his annoyance still not completely satisfied. He reached, however pulling the small tab up slowly before leaning to kiss the bare shoulder, the cut of the dress allowed.

He felt better when he noticed her reaction to his touch when he latched the tiny eye hook. He patted the indentation of her waist signifying when he finished.

He looped a tie around his neck in the same lavender color as her dress. She turned about gazing at the finished product.

“Oh, we match.” she reached out, running her finger down the rich silk. “Everyday with you really is like Prom.”

“I got laid Prom Night.” he replied sourly, then not so much so. His look stern. “Should I assume that this evening will end with the same results?”

“Yes, you should.” She batted her lashes flirtatiously, before sitting down at her make-up mirror.

“Well, I do.” he grumbled. He grabbed a cigar, heading out onto the balcony away from temptation itself.

Liz watched the man’s retreating back, a smile overtaking her face.

“Well, good.” she called after him.

She was really enjoying this flirtatious side of Red. He had been flirtatious before but hadn’t really been aware how much attention the man had truly paid her. But now that his touch was more than acceptable, she was very conscious of Red’s appreciation of her presence in his life.

Her eyes softened at the thought. At one point, she was sure she’d never get involved with another man. But now, here she was... involved beyond scope.

Liz’s eyes drifted towards the man as he settled himself on the spacious deck. A odd emotion settling in her stomach.

She didn’t recall ever feeling anything like it before.

Closing her eyes, she tried envisioning her first year of marriage with Tom, but could only remember feeling anxious, stressed, scared. And it wasn’t because of Tom. It was just the weight of the adult world caving in around them.
But if she thought about it, she should really be experiencing those emotions now, ten fold. She was an FBI Agent dating Red Reddington. A renowned criminal.

Surely she should feel some anxiousness. But she didn’t. Not one bit. She felt... content. Serene even.

Because she trusted Red. He had tirelessly proven himself time and time again. She knew he would always have her back, would always support her. Constantly repeating the mantra seemed to engrave some image on her heart and mind. It was an image she was beginning to value above all else.

Red looked at his watch, in turn causing her to do the same. She started when she saw the time. She would have to woolgather later. She had a lot to do before their departure.

Turning away from the wind, Red lit the cigar, puffing until the end was completely lit. Drawing the sweet smoke, he let it sit on his tongue before blowing a thin stream up into the gusty air.

He drew in again, retrohaling, blowing most of the heady smoke out through his nose, tasting the full flavor the cigar had to offer. Alternating between the two methods every other draw, he was surrounded by the relaxing aroma in no time.

He sat, staring off into the trees thinking about last night. Normally it would bother him that he could not seem to get it out of his mind but for some reason, he was not going to even try to explain... he did not feel in anyway discontented.

It was an odd feeling but he thought that he could get used to it. The thought brought a smile to his lips.

“Drink?”

He turned his head to see Lizzy standing at the door with a tumbler in hand.

“Yes, thank you.” He sipped the cool beverage, sneaking a drag of his cigar before the taste of the liquor dissipated.

“Yes or no to nylons?” she asked the crucial question.

“You do tend to get chilled.” he offered both alternatives. “We may be in the shade and it does get breezy... but you don’t need them.” he glanced at her tanned legs.

“I’ll go ahead and put some on,” she shrugged playfully, “if it gets too hot, I’ll take them off.”

Red rolled out the cigar, tapping off the last of the cherry. “Decision made then.”

Finishing off his drink, Red guided her back inside and straightened his tie, placing it under his vest. He put on his jacket waiting for her.

She walked out with her nylons and shoes in her hand. She bent over, working the nude stocking over her foot, before sliding it up her leg.

Red stood there, transfixed by the show. He didn’t think there was anything more fun than taking those off, but watching as they were put on, was just as enjoyable.

Especially when he watched her run her hand up her calf, straightening the soft fabric, before raising her skirt and adjusting the elastic around her bronzed thigh.

She balanced herself on her leg, then wobbled. Trying again, she just couldn’t keep her balance on
the weakened leg.

“Sit down.” He directed. Taking the stretchy fabric, he knelt before her. Bunching the hose in his hand, he slid it over her foot, making sure the toe was aligned correctly, before sliding it up her leg.

The warmth of his touch delighted the woman, sending chills up her spine.

By the time he got to her knee, they both were breathing a bit more rapidly, which amused Red no end.

“What?” she asked, a slight quiver to her voice.

“Normally I am told, one should be aroused when assisting a woman undress,” he inched the stocking up her leg watching his progress, “not the other way around.”

He pushed the sheer fabric over her knee completing his task, then held his hand out, helping her stand. He ran his hands up her leg, adjusting the elastic at her thigh.

“I don’t know...” She said breathlessly, “it just sounds like an old-wives tale to me.” He looked up at her, grinning slightly.

He took her shoe, slipping it on her foot, palming the object in his hand as Lizzy balanced herself on his shoulder, to fit the other.

He waited, holding her hand as she stood in the low heels. “This is your first excursion after your recent injury, how do they feel?”

She held his hand, taking a tentative step and then another. “It feels okay. No pain.” she clasped her hands together joyously. “Oh, I’m so happy because I love these shoes.”

Liz walked cautiously to the dresser, slipping on the jewelry he had purchased before grasping her new bag.

She reached for the door handle only to find herself being pulled back into Red’s embrace.

“The minute I find an opportunity...” his rough voice tickled her ear, “I’m going to warm you exactly like I did last night...” the sybaritic statement delighting her no end, “in the very same manner.”

Red’s mouth curved sensually as he felt the woman relax in his arms. He crooked his head, leaning down to her level to tease her lips with soft, fleeting caresses only just touching the surface of her mouth, leaving the woman wanting for more.

Liz pushed to her toes, wrapping her arms around his neck. Flattening her breasts against his chest, she methodically deepened the kiss.

Red ran his hands over her shapely bottom, kneading the tight cheeks provocatively. Bunching the billowing skirt, his fingers brushed the lace of her panties while capturing her small whimper of pleasure in his mouth.

A soft knock on the door alerted them that the car was waiting. Red tapped back in response, loathe to break the contact just yet.

He could not resist one last squeeze of that luscious bottom. Reluctantly pulling back, the small smile reappeared as he looked down into her deep blue eyes, his own sweeping the kiss swollen lips possessively.
Just knowing he was going to cock tease her all damn day, heightened the man’s mood two-fold because after all...

A little foreplay never hurt anyone...

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While Liz didn’t know the couple personally, she still couldn’t help but get a little weepy during the ceremony.

Not only was the bride beautiful, the venue was idyllic. While it was a large area, it was surrounded by lush trees, flowers and romance. Giving not only the bride and groom, but the guests, a sense of privacy.

Red chuckled softly, handing over a handkerchief to Liz. She appreciated the gesture greatly because the other guys in their party gave her friends the business when the couple repeated touching vows and exchanged the rings... things that touched a woman’s heart.

The mother’s in the bridal party both offered endearingly touching thoughts on each perspective new family member.

Liz had to admit, both speeches had been meticulously prepared. She held her breath in anticipation of what was to come. She had been to weddings before and usually one or the other side of the family would somehow cause trouble.

While such antics sometimes proved entertaining, Liz was so very pleased in this instance, to see so much love given on both sides.

One of her favorite moments of the ceremony was when the couple lit a candle, signifying their unity.

As the officiant spoke of commitment and love, Liz gripped Red’s hand, dabbing her eyes with the pre-offered handkerchief.

Red squeezed the small hand in his, kissing it gently as the priest gave permission for the groom to kiss his bride.

He laughed quietly as the women sniffled as all arose. A boisterous clapping followed as the couple was first introduced as man and wife then took the obligatory walk down the aisle.

Red turned towards Elizabeth, an odd light shining in his eyes. She questioned it silently, her attention being caught by Mark’s quiet chuckle.

Amanda was making a show of having the man check that her makeup was still intact, swiping feverishly at imaginary mascara marks beneath her immaculately made up eyes.

“Don’t you love weddings.” Francis grinned as he hugged a weepy Lia against his side. “So many vulnerable women.” he sent a teasing glance down to the tiny woman. “So little time.”

Liz smacked the man smartly on his arm, causing Francis to wince painfully.

“Flesh wound here!” the man cringed, holding the area protectively.

“Who’s the vulnerable one now.” Lia quipped playfully.

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The reception was an epic gala affair with delicious food and tasteful décor.

Everyone watched as the bride and groom cut a magnificent cake which was of course, followed by the bouquet and garter toss.

Liz was pleasantly surprised to see Red right up front with the gentlemen lined up for the event.

But as it turned out, Red’s participation consisted of nothing more than forcibly holding Francis back from catching the garter. Even though the young man struggled valiantly against an entertained and amused older opponent, he never gained very much ground.

Liz had never seen Red laughing so freely before and she found herself laughing right along with him.

Watching the fight Francis was putting up was hilarious.

The man virtually clawed at the floor with everything he had, trying to win the prize. But Red gripped his belt in a stronghold, not giving the younger man an inch of wiggle room.

Liz, Lia and Amanda were a little shy about going up for their turn at the bouquet. None of them well acquainted with the other ladies in attendance. But they stuck together, playfully jabbing elbows, as the bride let the bouquet fly...

Liz was totally shocked when the fragrant bunch of roses landed smack in her outstretched hand. She stared at the hastily clutched sprig, trying to ignore the jostling and good natured ribbing going on around her.

She gaped at the flowers in hand, quickly cradling them to her chest when another woman made a swipe for them. She scowled hard at the intruder to her space as Red’s deep laughter echoed from across the room.

He sauntered across the gleaming hardwood floor towards her, his mood high.

“T’d back off if I were you.” he warned the other woman as he approached, his eyes dancing mischievously. “She knows people…”

Francis Holbrook swaggered past throwing Liz a smug look.

Red was amused when the other woman’s complexion paled slightly as she made a rather hasty exit from the scene. Evidently Francis’ reputation had proceeded him.

Seconds later, Red’s warm breath tickled Liz’s shoulder as he dropped a kiss to the bare flesh. “Congratulations, my little bride to be.”

Liz lifted scrunched brows having noticed the odd exchange. “What’s with her?”

Red glanced after the departing woman, more pleasant things on his mind.

The man had taken every opportunity presented to brush his hand along Lizzy’s body anywhere and everywhere he could inconspicuously touch, throughout the entire proceedings.

He made certain the woman knew he had not forgotten his earlier promise of how the evening should end.

Turning gentle eyes towards Lizzy, Red held out his hand. She blushed a deep crimson, being only one of three couples on the dance floor. She could feel hundreds of pairs of eyes on her, and while
Red could shrug off such attention, she was as yet, unaccustomed to the scrutiny.

She placed her fingers into his warm palm trustingly, however, as he pulled her into his embrace.

Swaying gently among the other couples, Red took the opportunity to reflect on the time and place. Under the low lights, a beautiful woman in his arms, the evening seemed filled with enchantment.

The bride was lovely and seemed so very much in love. He couldn’t help but wonder if he would ever get Lizzy in such a state of mind. Where they wouldn’t be guests at a wedding but the honored couple themselves.

He remembered back to his wedding with Carla. He had actually stalled for months, struggling with the decision to ask her the important question or not.

There had been doubts and a certain fear that he attributed to his youthful age and inexperience in the world. But with Lizzy, there was only an eager anticipation about when he could ask her and it be acceptable.

He didn’t want her feeling backed into a corner. Like she had to make an immediate decision. He didn’t want her stressed out over the matter or feeling that pressure he had felt.

But that didn’t mean he didn’t want to ask.

As the song came to an end, he led his partner back to the table and it’s grinning occupants. While Liz and the girls fussed over the fragrant bouquet and chatted about how elegant and pretty the entire affair turned out to be, exceeding their expectations. Red and the other men squeezed in a smattering of business on the side.

Time was made for several dances with their respective partners however.

And of course, Dembe and Silas cornered the market on the other eligible ladies.

Before the festivities started winding down, a tipsy Francis came up, grinning madly, showing off the party favors he was sporting. Huge glasses, an equally enormous hat and a blinding bow tie.

The young man always found the most fun wherever he managed to be. His lust for life was contagious.

Dragging the girls off to the photo booth, they too, donned boas and tiaras before taking a series of photos to commemorate the memory of a wonderful day.

Liz gestured Red over in the midst of all the merrymaking, giggling happily before plunking a top hat down on his head. She somehow managed to persuade him into a series of photo shoots of the same caliber.

It was an odd feeling, purposely taking a photograph of himself. After all, there was a perfectly good one on the Post Office wall.

They had taken quite a few the day of the city tour but Red’s instinctive survival mechanism had kicked in and later Liz had complained that there was not one good front face of the man to be found.

As she posed next to him, laughing joyously at the absurdity of the moment, he could not help but feel his affection grow with each passing flash of the camera.
At one point in the proceedings, he turned the tables on the woman having suffered through several coquettish attempts to embarrass him, by turning her into a full on kiss.

His mouth worked expertly on hers, teasing her tongue languidly. He tightened his arms about her waist, his fingers spreading over the lower part of her back as he pressed insistently forward, melding her body to his.

He felt all resistance drain away as she responded fully for a brief eternity before another bright flash brought her to her senses but not before Red got a picture he wanted.

They waited patiently for the photos to come off the printer. Looking around at all the festive revelry he realized that he had actually had a very good time today.

He watched Lizzy eagerly flip through the photos, sharing each one. Her face beamed with happiness. Each member of the group ran around like chickens with their heads cut off sharing in the frivolity.

There was a warmness in his heart that had not been there before. Red really never allowed himself to let go to the extent he had this evening. There was always a part that remained reclusive, his mind never really shutting off from the danger surrounding him at any given time.

He was surprised to note that he had not once checked on Silas’ whereabouts. He was heartened to see the ever vigilant individual standing off to the side, smiling at all the shenanigans going on around him.

Lizzy’s laughter pulled Red’s attention plus the fact that she had lay a gentle hand on his rolled up sleeve.

Dembe, Francis and Mark posed with their weapons in the classic 007 style, while Lia and Amanda played the proverbial bombshells. Silas was even pulled into the fray and immediately took center stage, his powerful frame working well to his advantage.

Even Red was impressed with the end product, his brows lifting to signify as much. Liz crumbled into a heap of helpless laughter.

“Oh, I wanted to be a Bond girl!” she playfully whined.

“You’re Red Reddington’s girl.” the man reminded artfully for her ears alone. “Which is infinitely better.”

He looped her arm through his, laying her warm palm on his bare flesh.

“We better get these characters back to the hotel before they’re too much to handle.” he nodded in the said direction, going off to gather up his little entourage.

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Red had not the time or the opportunity to practice one of his favorite pastimes until this evening. Taking advantage of the down time afforded them, he actually sat in on a few of the higher stake games at the tables.

Liz was excited to see the big man in action. She had heard of his legendary prowess from Silas and Francis, of course, but until this moment, had never experienced the thrill herself.
They had bounced a few tables, trying just about everything before Red and the boys wanted to try their luck at Baccarat.

She personally found the game confusing. Silas had tried explaining it to her, but she just hadn’t been able to catch on.

He thought she wouldn’t enjoy it much anyway, since it was a high rollers game and movement was pretty swift. With that said, she had avoided it at all costs.

She had preferred the more relaxed fare. Poker, blackjack, the roulette wheel.

After about an hour she and the girls settled in behind the guys at a private table. Christopher had sent refreshments and food. She had eaten at the wedding but she found she was famished and was very grateful that their host had been so very thoughtful.

In between fun conversation with Lia and Amanda, Liz watched the guys and had to agree with Silas. They did move quickly through the cards. She could not keep up with what was what. She knew the stakes were high because even Silas had began pacing back and forth at one particular ‘iffy’ moment.

The tension was broken by an abrupt raucous celebration. Francis pounded Red heartedly on the shoulder having jumped up triumphantly as the man played his hunch.

Liz pushed from the table, excusing herself. She slid in artfully behind Red’s stool, leaning her chin on his shoulder.

“What’s going on?” she smiled, casually pressing her breasts into his back.

“He just won a huge pot.” Mark applauded the man. “Much to Christopher’s dismay.” He chuckled his delight.

Chris smiled openly, shaking his head. “I knew what I was in for, prior to your arrival.”

“Do you have a reputation?” Liz whispered playfully in the man’s ear, the undertone of the question more than apparent.

Red turned his head slightly, smiling at the woman. “This surprises you?” he questioned, kissing her cheek.

“No.” she laughed in a carefree manner, “it’s just, that reputation of yours exceeds even my expectations sometimes.” she smiled, leaning into the kiss his mouth fully. “I’m going to play Blackjack with the girls.”

Red turned his head, searching for the extra guards. “Have fun, baby.” he was satisfied of her safety. “Bet big.”

Liz rolled her eyes, dropping her lips against his neck as another stack of chips was shoved his way.

As they played their respective games, Red glanced over frequently when ever he heard the woman’s laughter, feeling a smile spread across his own face in response.

It pleased him to see her having a good time.

She had obviously taken to these women, and the female dealer now seemed part of the group. A good time was being had by all.
He had never had the opportunity to see Liz interact with her own sex in a normal setting. It was obvious that the card game was just a ploy for the women to share gossip and bitch about the men in their lives.

Red watched Liz return from a third trip to the ladies room. He was amused that she listed slightly as she walked and when she took her seat, she almost missed the mark.

The hour was getting late.

Pleased with his success at the tables, Red cashed in his chips.

Lizzy was just this side of tipsy and he was in dire need of a shower, so while the others decided to play for a while longer, he and Lizzy were going to retire for the evening.

Caressing her neckline provocatively with his lips, Red smiled as Liz giggled her delight at the slight tickling sensation.

“You ready to go to bed, Pussy Galore?” his tone matched Sean Connery’s to a ‘T’.

“Oh, say that again.” she lifted astonished eyes. “And in the same accent.”

His smile widened as he helped her from her seat.

“Accents do it for you, huh?” he mused to himself, his eyes dropping to the deep cleft of her breasts. “I speak several different languages as well. Which do you prefer?”

The other girls at the table were suitably impressed, all making appropriately cutting remarks.

“You know...” Francis nudged Red, his glassy eyes dancing merrily in Liz’s direction as she gathered her things, “we are in Vegas, a couple hundred chapels everywhere.”

“No!” Red groused, looking over his shoulder quickly to make sure Lizzy hadn’t heard the little twerp.

Francis tittered even as Red wrapped his hand around the young man’s nape, dragging him forward, holding the boys bloodshot eyes steadily.

“And don’t you do it either.” the older man warned.

Francis snickered drunkenly. “Yeah, okay.”

“Watch him.” Red turned warning eyes towards Silas. “Make sure he gets back to the Villa.”

Silas gave a lazy salute, absently pulling the handle on his machine. In the next second, he had dragged Francis to the slot beside him, shoving a bucket full of coins at the inebriated man.

“Baby?” Red searched out Elizabeth. “You ready?”

Liz turned around in circles, her face perplexed. “I can’t find my purse.”

Lia piped up, “Maybe you left it in the ladies room?”

“Oh my God...” Amanda’s face showed her concern. “Did you leave it at the wedding?”

“Or...” Red lifted the strap of the fancy little bag, which lay against Liz’s bare shoulder, he waited for Liz to make the connection.
“Oh you found it!” All three women seemed to breathe a sigh of relief.

“Ready now?” he was all set to usher the woman through the crowded casino area.

“My bouquet!” Liz was devastated.

“In your right hand.” Red helpfully supplied, nodding to the sprig.

Again the women were very grateful for his timely intervention.

“And on that note...” he nodded in a gentlemanly fashion, “we wish you ladies a very good evening and the best of luck at the tables.”

He carefully guided a wobbly Lizzy out into the coolness of the night. He glanced at the pretty profile all sorts of wickedly sinful visions dancing in his head all of which he reluctantly was forced to dismiss.

It would not be right to take advantage of her in such a condition.

Sometimes he cursed his code of ethics and tonight he was unleashing a string of vulgarity in his mind, that would make a Sailor blush.
May 19

The short drive from the hotel to the Villa had been entertaining enough to pull Red from his doldrums.

On the best of days, Lizzy was affectionate and even playful. She enjoyed being held and kissed, and seemed to especially relish their time in bed. Or at least, that was the story from Red’s perspective.

But drunk Lizzy... was something entirely unexpected, which isn’t to say...not unpleasantly so.

What had started innocently enough with her cuddling against him, laying her head against his shoulder in quiet contentment, had eventually graduated to the woman literally squirming into his lap, becoming amusingly demanding of his attentions.

Red smiled warmly at the less than suave gestures generated by such impulsive quests. He almost felt as if Lizzy were a kitten searching for a source of nourishment, as she, at one point... inexplicably nuzzled the front of his expensive shirt. He expected at any moment, she might start kneading him to get the desired results, whatever they were in her mind.

He could not be less than affected by such naïveté at one point returning the affection in kind. His lips gently trailed a searing path along the silky flesh of her nape.

He had meant it as nothing more than a gentle reassurance but the action had the opposite effect, in it encouraged the woman to new heights of exploration.

He chuckled against the sweet mouth ravishing his as Lizzy’s hands accosted his person at every turn. She more than aggressively pulled at the tails of his shirt, working her way under the light fabric, her warm touch encompassing every inch of his available torso.

Her palms flattened on the hardness of his abdomen, the slim fingers running through the smattering of hair which led onto his chest. She squeezed his nipples hard, causing Red’s amusement to grow by leaps and bounds as he jerked from such indelicate handling.

Fortunately, her attention span moved quickly in such a state and soon enough he was being man-handled at every turn as she tugged on the secure buckle of his belt.

He tried to halt his throaty chuckle for he had reached to assist in one instance only to have his hand knocked aside unceremoniously.

“I can do it.” she grumbled her dissension, as she advanced her assault only to be waylaid by the layer upon layer of lilac tulle which crinkled delicately in thick bunches in Lizzy’s uncoordinated hands as she pushed uselessly at the skirts as she attempted to straddle his thick thighs.

“Where the hell...” she muttered irritably, wading through the thick tulle as best she could.

Taking pity on her, Red bunched the sheer fabric around her hips, baring her thighs for his viewing pleasure... inadvertently unearthing the object she had previously sought.
“Oh, there it is.” she nodded amiably, as though she had stumbled over the discovery herself. Her uncooperative fingers clumsily yanked at the heavy buckle to no avail, yet again.

“What the hell is wrong with this thing?” she muttered gruffly. Undeterred from her lack of headway, she tugged on the clasp with more determination.

Red shook his head ruefully, his amusement barely contained as the woman roughly wrenched him this way at that in her pursuit to free him from his confinement.

“I don’t think this,” he waved a hand over the simplistic catch, “is the problem, sweetheart.”

“Well, there’s something wrong with it.” she frowned disgustedly at the unyielding enemy, huffing her irritation.

Red’s chuckle deepened as Lizzy focused intently on the gadget, staring at it in open bewilderment. The car smoothly slid in under the Villa’s awning, alerting the man to a more pertinent fact.

“We’re here.” he raised her chin with gentle fingers, breaking her concentration.

Smothering a laugh, the delight clearly shined in the man’s eyes as Lizzy tsked her frustration at the disturbance.

“I almost had it figured out.” her face showed her utter disappointment.

“How about we figure it out together.” Red suggested, drawing her attention to their new surroundings.

“Oh!” Liz smiled excitedly, rubbing her heat against the bulge hidden beneath the offending material of his slacks.

Wincing visibly, Red grasped the woman’s hips hastily, stilling her erotic enticement.

“...Inside.” he prompted huskily.

The woman’s reddened cheeks plumped into an enormous smile as she wrangled with the door, just as unproductively as she had his belt. Her eagerness endearingly touching.

Red grasped the handle in sure fingers, pushing it open. Throwing out his arm quickly, he caught the woman as she toppled outward.

Liz giggled her delight as Red effortlessly eased her feet to the ground.

“Are you steady?” He slid out behind her, looking down, only seeing the billowing dress. Sighing, he bunched the skirt in his fist, finding the tiny feet flat on the pavement.

Hooking her arm securely, Red stuck his head back in the car, quietly directing the driver to remain on stand-by for the others which would shortly be arriving. He remembered to grab her purse and bouquet.

A short time later, after a quick shower and even quicker snack and some hastily contrived aspirin concoction for the morning after hangover, Liz was somewhat in better condition but not nearly enough for Red’s liking.

Checking with security as was his nightly ritual and seeing that all was in place, Red rejoined Lizzy, finding the woman already in bed, as naked as she was the night before. The nightgown he had wrangled her into with such difficulty... totally absent, discarded on the floor beside the bed.
She grinned drunkenly up at him, patting the open space beside her invitingly.

Red shook his head, scolding her antics before crawling into the bed. He wasn’t the least bit surprised when the woman accosted him the very second his head hit the pillow.

He chuckled quietly, kissing her for countless minutes. Rather enjoying her inebriated state.

“You’re drunk, Lizzy.” he chastised, working her onto her back.

“No...” she disagreed, pointing a debating finger his way, “I’m tipsy.”

“Same thing.” he countered. “You need to rest.” he softly nudged her nose with his, showing his affection for the woman.

“You deliberately teased me all day...” she sighed happily, rubbing her little muff against his thigh in open enticement, “and don’t you think I didn’t notice.” she chided. “And now I need you to make love to me.” she corrected. “It’s clearly your fault.”

“You’re drunk.” he repeated.

She tilted her head, quizzically. “Are you trying to tell me, you won’t have sex with me because I’m tipsy?” She made it sound like the worst insult given in the entire history of the world.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you.” Red replied, grinning. “Well, I do, but only when you’re an active participant.”

“While I think it’s sweet, maybe even charming that you think like that...” she smiled seductively, “but I am perfectly capable of making rash decisions on my own.”

Red bit his lip to keep the smile from his face.

Liz impulsively reached, grabbing her phone, putting it on speaker... admittedly it took her a good few seconds to push the screen correctly. She waited patiently and then not so much so.

“Francis are you there?” the ring tone was still in effect until suddenly a young, masculine voice answered the line.

“Francis, what’s twenty plus two?” Liz asked without preamble.

“Umm.” Francis slurred slightly, and Red could hear the wheels turning. “Sixty-nine?” he snorted at his own wit.

“Let’s try that again,” she giggled infectiously while Red shook his head woefully for his lot in life, “what’s four plus four?”

Red sighed heavily as the sound of silence greeted them. Liz on the other hand seemed more than content to wait it out, her fingers tracing his lips over and over, the pressure contorting his mouth comically. All of which was allowed.

“Better yet,” Liz tried again, “four minus four.”

“Umm,” Francis obviously was putting his all into this effort, “is it a Queen of Hearts?”

Red closed his eyes, fighting the build up of the beginning of a slight headache. “And he wonders why he loses at cards.”
“Lizzy, I can’t see you.” the young man’s voice wavered, for he was obviously looking around for
his unseen friend. “Are we playing a game?” the delight was apparent suddenly. “Is this hide and
poke!”

“Hide and seek, Francis.” she corrected, giving Red an ‘God, he’s stupid’ look.

“Not how I play...” it was tittered.

“Francis!” Red barked at the boy. “Give the phone to someone else.”

“I think it’s for you?”

The phone was fumbled, then slid along a felt table top before it was picked up by more capable
hands.

“Yeah?” Silas’ clear voice came across the line.

“Cut Francis off.” Red grumbled. “He sounds like a toddler coming off a sugar high.”

“You got it.” the man stated distractedly. “Hit me.” The dealer was sharply informed.

“Silas, if you lose him...” Red was clearly aggravated.

“Can’t lose him, boss.” the man rattled the ice in the glass at a passing waitress, “Jack and Coke,
honey.” Silas flirted openly before returning his attention. “Kaplan knows where all the bodies are
buried.”

Red’s eye twitched irritably, his mouth opening to offer his own retort. Liz pulled the phone from his
hand, purposely turning aside.

“Keep Francis alive and breathing, please.” she asked sweetly. “And come back home safe tonight.”
Red reached around her, jabbing the screen, cutting the call off.

He pushed the woman to her back, kissing her hungrily. “Forty eight plus twenty five.” he
questioned roughly.

“Seventy three.” she sighed, as the man drew her nipple into his mouth, his growing length pushing
insistently against her thigh.

“The square root of 9?” he moved her thighs apart, settling his weight along her body.

She rocked her hips seductively, sliding along his length incessantly. She got lost in the wondrous
sensation, pushing her clitoris against the rigidness with determination.

A muffled laugh built in Red’s chest as the woman’s concentration wavered, instead focusing
entirely on her needs.

His little kitten wanted the cream all right, and was doing everything in her power to get it... and was
doing well in her endeavors.

Her plump lips wrapped about his erection, the rigidness of her clit raking against his heightened
flesh, his cock head beading with a prelude to the elixir she craved.

Red let her rub against him to her hearts content, nudging her with his cock as incentive.

“Lizzy...” he muttered warmly, coaxing her back to the question posed.
“Umm, three?” Liz questioned, much in the same vein as Francis before her.

“Are you asking me or telling me?” he muttered, nipping her lip erotically.

“No. No it’s three.” she groaned as the man cupped her ass, sliding wetly along her slit then between her ass cheeks. “Oh God, do that again.”

Red chuckled appreciatively, obeying mechanically.

“You like that?” he questioned roughly, once again directing his shaft between her cheeks.

Liz nodded jerkily, tilting her bottom up for more connection, pressure. “... More.”

She focused on the bulging shaft, her eyes closing dreamily as the heavy weight slid along her tender flesh. The extra skin of his shaft massaging the hypersensitive skin of her vulva and... God...

Her cheeks clenched as the man’s thick head scrapped over her sensitized ass.

The foreskin she had grown to adore more than anything in the world, rippled along her puckered hole, drawing a fresh wave of heat from her center.

“Oh, you do like that.” Red drawled hoarsely as the slick heat coated his shaft.

Reaching for one of the spermicide plungers, Red slid it into her wet body.

“Spell, sexual intercourse.” he rumbled deeply, depressing the plunger.

Liz felt the gel fill her center before the man replaced the plunger with the bulging crown of his shaft.

“Fuck...” she drawled in a long moan.

“Close enough.” he chuckled, slipping the mushroomed head in further. “If a train leaves New York at–”

“Shut up...” she grumbled, as his bare shaft pushed at her cushioned tunnel, “no one can answer those stupid questions.”

Red’s throaty laugh turned into a rumbling moan as he met the tight resistance of her body.

The woman opened her legs wider in open invitation, enjoying the low growl in the man’s throat before he gently thrust, seating himself in her warmth.

“You like that?” she asked breathlessly.

“I love that...” the man sighed his contentment as her little body fluttered around him, trying to accommodate his girth. His head fell forward as her tunnel rolled about him in a wave as his pelvis nudged her clit.

“My next lesson is the coupling between a man and his lover.” he groaned, sliding back out into the cool air of the room, his dick instantly missing the connection.

“Yeah?” she questioned, setting her heels comfortably on his rounded ass. “How does that go?”

“I insert my hard cock into your very wet pussy.” he instructed, before sliding back inside in illustration.
“And then what happens...” she waited for more.

“I move in rhythmic thrusting motion... repeatedly.” he bumped her cervix, enjoying the feel of her thighs quaking already. “Until we reach the point of climax.” he dropped his mouth against her neck, suckling her gently.

“Your body releases a thick cream over my shaft.” he schooled her in the sexual congress happening between them. “Slicking my way to achieve a climax of my own.”

“What happens then?” she mewed as he grasped the crook of her knee, pulling it up alongside his hip, allowing him to slide even deeper than before.

“I fill your little pussy full of the hot cream you so desperately want from me.” he snapped his hips, upping the speed of his movements, fucking her harder. “Would you like that?”

Raising up on her elbows, she whimpered softly at the sight of Red’s thick, wet erection and the incredible feel of it’s heavy drag sliding easily and disappearing into her snug depths.

As Red’s large sack pressed intimately, nestling snugly against her bottom, she knew without doubt, he would give her what she had been wanting all damn day.

“Yes...” she purred, “I would love that.”

“Good,” he gritted, watching what she was, “because it’s going to happen.”

Their heady moans grew in volume as they watched their bodies move together until the need to come became too much.

Liz’s head fell back into the pillow, grasping the man’s tight ass in her small hands. He grinned, crooning lovingly to her as she urged him to go faster.

“God...” she gasped, her back arching off the bed. Her cries of ecstasy grew as the man’s thick shaft dragged along her pulsating clitoris. “Don’t stop...”

Red readjusted his stance, adding pressure to her clit, drawing the woman’s orgasm out, much to their delight.

“Don’t stop, baby.” he urged. “Keep coming on my cock.”

Her center gripped at him in strong waves, pulling at his thickened shaft, making the man moan louder as he neared his own release.

“Baby, look down...” his voice shook amorously.

She felt the first hot splash of his semen warm her, then watched the man slide his throbbing erection free.

Liz gaped as a powerful stream of white cream shot from his large pulsing crown, landing hot and thick on her mound and tummy before he slid back into her still rippling body.

“Oh my God...” she gasped, the feeling of his essence warming her body became even more potent, actually having seen the visual.

“That’s what I’m doing to you.” he nestled his mouth against the gentle curve of her neckline, a long groan of satisfaction rumbling from the man’s throat sending shivers down the woman’s spine until he came to a slow stop, his cock spent.
She moved her hand between them, touching the still warmed liquid, looking at it in the low light before bringing it to her tongue, tasting it.

Red snarled, grasping her wrist, pushing it into the bed. Bunching her hair in his fist, he dragged her into a heated kiss, his tongue dancing along hers.

The man grunted, finding his taste on her tongue. The mix alluring as fuck.

His waning erection slid free, a hot gush of their union following his exit. He moved her hand between her legs. She moaned softly as the thick cream flowed from her and along his shaft and her fingertips. He swiped his fingers through the thickened fluid, holding it up for her to see.

“I did that to you.” He growled heatedly.

Which each clench of her body, more of his warmth wet her lips and the bed beneath them. Red lay into her, his tongue teasing her own until the man rolled to his back, taking her along with him.

Liz sat up, rolling her hips, slicking his pelvis and stomach in their lovemaking for several minutes until the man pushed at her hips, scooting her back against his straining erection.

Taking him into her body, she watched the man beneath her divide his attention between her and her mirror image. His obvious appreciation of their activities and her body... of her, were fully on display in the man’s handsome features and in the way he touched her.

She was so glad she had listened to her heart and had taken a chance to be with the man... a man who clearly worshiped her.

But more importantly, she was never so happy to have someone to share in this deeply intimate moment, to share her life and happiness.

Red frowned up at the woman, smoothing a hand up between her breasts, laying his palm over her heart.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” concern was on his face for he sensed something not present before.

“No one damn thing.” she smiled, concentrating fully on her lover.

The amazing night seemed to go on and on.

Red’s cock throbbed once more as a breathy quivering sound, one he was highly addicted to hearing, rushed past Lizzy’s lips as they enjoyed yet another round of passionate and vigorous lovemaking.

Lizzy had more than fulfilled his earlier need for her, ten fold.

Her inebriated state, had not stopped him from partaking in her many... amazing qualities.

Just when he thought he may have had his fill of the woman, he would catch a tantalizing glimpse of her shapely form peeking out from under the crisp sheet and feel his body respond of it’s own accord, demanding more of what only she could provide.

What he thought was going to be a self sacrificing night had turned into one of the most amorously passionate events of their relationship.
“You were grumpy this morning...” Lizzy murmured, pushing back against him to take all he had to give.

“Now you know why.” he bit softly, traversing the silky flesh of her shoulder. “I needed this, Lizzy.”

“Have you had your fill of my... female charms, now?” she moaned as his tongue traced a tingling path up her spine. “Please tell me you haven’t...”

“Sweetheart, I’m not even close to getting my fill of the amenities you provide.” he stifled his bubbling amusement at the description provided.

“Amenities?” she giggled. “What, I’m like a bottle of hotel shampoo?”

“God baby, you are so much more that,” the scent of the dark strands of her hair enticed him, “you’re that unexpected shower cap, or the ever elusive, but much needed, sewing kit.”

Red trembled with the last vestiges of his orgasm, shaking the last drops of cum from the tip of his cock inside her overfilled body, very much enjoying the sensation.

“Your sexy talk makes me all aquiver.” she rasped as the man unexpectedly moved his shaft just so, etching a wide smile across Red’s face when she did indeed... quiver.

The moment was shattered much to the man’s growing discontent by the sound of men’s voices yelling out through the silenced Villa, jolting Red to action.

“What the fuck.” he pulled free quickly, grabbing his weapon.

Sliding Lizzy off the bed, he flicked the light off, handing her a weapon. Walking quickly to the door, he listened intently, silently slipping into his pants.

“You stay here.” he warned sotto voce.

He inched the door open, hitting the lights off in the hallway as he crept slowly out into the open area.

“Where the hell are you!” a man’s gruff voice snapped as footsteps walked closer. A shadowy figure appeared through the arch way. Seconds later the bulky frame was highlighted against the softly lit adjoining corridor.

The man froze instantly, hearing the sound of Red’s weapon being racked. Slowly, ever so much so, arms were raised, hands out, showing no weapons.

“Who the fuck–” Red hit the lights, finding Silas standing stock still, a disgruntled look on the handsome face.

“We can’t find Francis.” Silas bitched, dropping his hands before stalking to the powder room, shoving the door open, checking inside.

“You lost him?” Red grated irritably, sliding his gun into the back of his waistband, following the man’s trek.

“You know, I do have to piss from time to time.” Silas snapped right back.

“Did you find him?” Mark appeared on the scene, leaning casually against the open archway.
“He is not on the premises.” Dembe’s mouth was pinched with irritation as he approached from the opposite direction.

“Where was he before you lost sight of him?” Red demanded answers.

He rubbed his eyes wearily hearing the door crack open behind him. He turned, pushing it open, gesturing to the woman peeking out, to join them. Liz came up alongside, absently tying her robe.

“He was all over that girl in the casino...” Silas huffed, “trying, probably unsuccessfully, to get his long john to fill his jelly donut with their special cream.” the man air quoted much to Liz’s amusement.

Mark chuckled until Red glared at him. “I’m sorry, every time he talks about them,” he air quoted to indicate Francis and Lia, “he refers to them by a different pastry category.” The man laughed out loud. “HoHo and Pound Cake. Yule Log and Twinkie. Sno balls...” he snorted, chuckling his amusement, the image simply too much to contain.

“Think.” Red cut the tirade short, returning his interest to his head guard, “if you were Francis...”

“I can’t be that fucking stupid.” Silas grumbled.

“...Where would you go?” Red finished irritably.

The silence was deafening as each individual unsuccessfully tried to place himself in the confines of such a minuscule brain.

“He wouldn’t...” Red’s face was a mask of incredulous disbelief.

Silas’ head fell back as he picked up on the insinuation.

Mark started laughing again as he too realized the direction the conversation had taken.

Dembe’s face was a study of sullen gloominess. Each man reacted differently and in their own inimitable fashion.

Red hurried to the bedroom, crossing into the bath, Liz hot on his heels.

She matched Red’s movements, quickly slipping into her clothes watching the man dress far more quickly than she could.

“What? Where is he?” she questioned, sliding her feet into her shoes, her fingers combing her wild hair into some semblance of order.

“That little moron is getting married.” Red groused.

“Can I have just a second.” she grimaced endearingly, gesturing to the facilities behind them.

Red nodded his understating.

“We’ll wait.” he murmured for her alone, watching after her as she scurried off, ignoring the men blathering outside the bedroom door. He reluctantly drew his attention to where it was needed.

“Francis did not catch the garter.” Dembe was stating sagely, as Red approached.

“Who the hell does he think is?” Silas feigned shock. “Going against tradition like that. There’s no way he can be getting married, Red.” the guard’s mood was surprisingly high.” He can’t claim
something he didn’t rightfully win.”

“He could be anywhere.” Mark tossed his hands out to his sides, shaking his head at the absurdity of the moment.

Liz hurriedly came out of the bathroom, taking Red’s outstretched hand.

“No...” Red stomped off towards the door, the little entourage close on his heels, “it’ll be one of a couple places.”

Silas waved off the driver, taking the position himself as the others gathered around the large vehicle.

Liz caught the man’s arm, drawing Silas up short. “Are you sober?”

“Sober enough to go moron hunting.” he held open her door, shooing her inside. “Isn’t that like the pot calling the kettle black?”

Liz gave him a disgruntled look before sliding into the sleek automobile.

“...Silas?” Red eyed the man critically.

“I haven’t had a drink since we lost Honey Buns and Spotted Dick.” Silas replied seriously.

Mark fell into the car, laughing fitfully.

“... Spotted Dick.” the man wheezed, as he wiped the tears of amusement from his eyes.

Red looked up to the heavens for deliverance, before gesturing Lizzy to take center seat. Liz’s lips quivered as she valiantly tried to withhold her own amusement at Mark’s good humor.

He was right. Silas’ comical branding of nicknames for Francis or Lia was actually rather funny, if one thought about it.

“How do you know where he’ll be?” Liz asked to get her mind back to the subject at hand.

“He’s drunk.” Red explained his reasoning. “They have theme weddings... the idiot will want to put on a good show. It’s how he operates.”

They checked the first two chapels that fit the bill and found nothing.

“We should have split up.” Liz said, climbing back into the car, Red right behind her.

“It’s always the last one you check.” Mark grumbled as he slid into the back seat, directly behind Dembe.

“How long have they been gone?” Red asked as they pulled out into traffic.

Silas looked at his watch, grimacing. “An hour and a half.”

“They would have had to get a marriage license, right?” Liz queried.

“Yes, but that only takes a couple minutes.” Red sighed. “They’re nothing but efficient here, especially with a top money maker.”

“How can they even do this?” Liz was confused. “I mean, they’re drunk.”

“Francis can skirt any rule, if he really wants to, Lizzy.” Red said knowingly. “Plus, you throw
enough money at people...”

“They look the other way.” Liz concluded. “Regardless, I don’t get what the big deal is.” she shrugged. “It’s not like they can’t get it annulled.”

“And if anyone finds out about Francis’s little escapade?” there was an edge to Red’s tone.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

“Let’s just say, Francis has a reputation.” Red quirked his brow. “Lia seems like a sweet girl. There’s no need to drag her into this lifestyle blindly.”

Again, Liz didn’t quite catch the reference but her questions would have to wait as they pulled up to the last of the top choices.

She quickened her steps, following after Red as he stalked his way into the stucco style chapel.

Liz craned her neck, hastily reading the neon sign looming large above the entrance. She hesitated in her footsteps as the receptionist came out of her seat, calling after the men beginning their search of the premises.

“Sir! Sir, you can’t go back there.” the stout young woman was traipsing after Silas who was ignoring the warning completely.

Mark came alongside, taking the woman’s hand lifting it gallantly to his lips. “We’ll only be a second, sweetheart.” he reassured. “He wants to look over the accommodations before we commit.”

Silas threw him a caustic glance. “He’s so impetuous, that’s what I love about him.”

Liz quickly scurried after Red, ignoring the woman herself.

The blaring sounds of 2001 Space Odyssey filled the small cathedral, halting everyone in their tracks.

The lights lowered, a purple hue filling the room, strobe lights danced merrily over the fog which now crept eerily along the floor.

Liz stood rooted to the spot, her eyes wide and startled. “What the hell...” she whispered her stunned awe.

Dembe stepped aside in a gentlemanly fashion as two scantily clad Showgirls sashayed into a well worn carpeted walkway which led up to the eternally decorated altar.

Mark craned his head to the large looming palm trees above them, having almost ran face first into a trunk that had been hidden by a fake plant.

Red’s head swished back and forth as unmistakable music of Elvis Presley’s smash hit, “That’s All Right”, rang out.

Wide doors opened from somewhere behind them, a fierce beeping of a horn alerting any innocent bystanders to the arrival of a brand new, shiny, pink 1964 Cadillac.

Red stepped in front of the car quickly, leaning his large palms into the hood, making the driver come to a sudden halt and the passengers in back flop around haphazardly.

“Francis!” Red barked resoundingly even over the strands of the incredibly loud music. “Don’t even think about it!”
"You guys made it!" Francis called out jovially, as though they had responded to an elegantly issued invitation.

He slid up the seat onto the back trunk, attempting to swing his legs over the open side, greeting Red’s arrival just in time to offer a sincere hug. "You will be my best man, right?"

Liz squinted hard through the flashing lights, taking in the young man’s outfit, chortling softly under her breath.

Francis was dressed in close resemblance to Captain Jack Sparrow, minus the gold teeth, and his bride-not-to-be, was dressed as a female pirate, though the costume left very little to the imagination. It was low cut, short and tight.

If anyone asked Liz, they were the cutest couple she had ever seen.

Though, she had to wonder, if they were having an Elvis wedding… why the pirate gear?

Red looked Francis up and down, sighing shakily. “Boy,” he ventured an opinion, “what the fuck have you gotten yourself into this time.”

“You like it?” Francis grinned, waving theatrically over his rented threads. “I’m like early ‘Navy bad guy’.”

“No, you’re a pirate. There is a difference between Navy and....” Red hesitated, realizing a lost cause when he saw it because Francis’ eyes were glazed over, vacant, but concerned. “What the hell am I doing?” he muttered to himself.

“I even get to carry my own weapon, see.” Francis pulled it free, waving the weapon about haphazardly until Red snatched it free from unresisting fingers.

“They had flintlock pistols, not Glocks.” Red snapped peevishly, checking the safety was on before shoving the confiscated weapon in his waistband. “Let’s go, Francis.” He thumbed to a nearby door.

“I’m getting married.” Francis’ face fell. “Aren’t you happy for me?”

“There will be no wedding.” Red’s patience was waning.

Francis looked around at the chapel, then at the officiant, openly confused. “It’s all legal?” he held up the paper as proof for Red to see.

Red took it, folding it into his pocket. “You’re drunk.”

“On love...” Francis sighed dreamily at the woman across from him before frowning hard when he didn’t see her at her proper place by his side. He glanced down, finding the object of his affection, helping her slide up to his level. “Our love will be written about in songs.” the man professed.

“Only a country tune will fit the bill.” Mark muttered his growing amusement. Liz hit his arm gently as a rebuke.

“Walk away now before she takes your dog and truck and you end up in prison.” Silas clarified the statement, walking on scene, having turned the music down to a discernable level.

“I don’t have a dog.” Francis looked to Red for confirmation of the fact.

“See, she’s already started.” Silas pointed out. “She’s taken the dog.”
Francis frowned suspiciously at Lia before shaking off whatever the hell he had been thinking.

The Elvis impersonator leaned comfortably against a nearby pew, laughing quietly, enjoying the show being put on for him, for a change.

Silas moved around the car, helping the equally inebriated woman from the back. He stuck his other arm out quickly, catching her as she toppled from the car in a fit of giggles.

“You all right there, hon?” the large man asked.

“Yep.” Lia grinned happily, before throwing Francis an affectionate ‘finger wave’.

Red gripped Francis’ hand, stopping the man’s response in mid-wave. He gripped Francis’ chin, forcing his focus.

“What’s her favorite color, song... book?” Red questioned.

“Uhh...”

“Where is she from?” Red tried again.

“She’ll be from Washington D.C.” the man was proud of his sudden cognitive abilities. “Isn’t that right, sugar britches?”

“I thought she was love muffin?” Mark muttered to the men standing beside him. Dembe and Silas chuckled, both in good humor now that they had their wayward Lothario well in hand.

The stocky guard frowned, looking down at the small woman leaning into him, snuggling her cheek into his chest.

“You’re really cute...” Lia giggled, softly stroking Silas’ goatee.

The man grinned lecherously, winking at the small soused woman. “Is that right?”

She smiled drunkenly up at the man, before resettling her head on Silas’ strong chest, patting it absently.

Silas quickly caught the woman as she started a slow slide to the floor. Hooking her legs with his arm, he drew her up against his chest.

Lia sighed happily, settling her head on the man’s shoulder, gingerly tracing his soft beard with overly familiar acquaintanceship.

“You’re really cute...” she grinned happily.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.” The large guard nodded amiably. Mark snickered quietly, returning his attention to Red and Francis.

“I’m her cinnamon roll...” Francis proclaimed. “And she’s my tootie frutti...”

“What is her name?” Red sighed.

Francis blinked heavily, shaking at the forming cobwebs. “Lia!” he smiled triumphantly.

“He’s got you there, Red.” Liz grinned happily for the man.
Red returned the smile, finally finding humor in the situation, now that they had Francis under control... for the most part. Now all he had to do was cut through the drunkenness and get Francis to leave, peacefully.

“Her last name.” Red purposefully fished.

Francis hesitated, staring off into the stained glass so long that Red wondered if the boy was still with them.

“She’s taking my last name.” Francis waved a finger about, as if signing off on it. “Isn’t that right, baby cakes?”

Lia looked around for Francis over Silas’ shoulder, away from the direction everyone was facing.

Silas tapped the woman’s thigh, getting her to turn the right way. “Honey, you’re man is over there.”

The young woman rolled bloodshot eyes Francis’ way, wrinkling her nose in a cute manner at the man, waving once more.

Rubbing her cheek affectionately against Silas’ shoulder, she smiled blearily up at the man. “He’s my special brownie.”

“If you mean, pot laced, then you may be correct.” Silas muttered.

Liz looked at the couple and couldn’t help but think of how cute they were together, how they got along so well...

Red shook his head when Liz looked at him imploringly. “No, Elizabeth.”

He gestured for the boys to take Lia to the car. “She’s going to sleep this off.” he said, before wrapping his hand tighter around Francis’ arm. “And so are you.”

Lia pouted in a decidedly childlike manner, making the revealing costume she wore seem suddenly too risqué for the woman.

“But...” Francis protested.

“When you wake up in the morning wide eyed and sober,” Red made the boy focus, “and you still want to get married. I will bring you back here personally.”

Sliding Lia over to Mark’s waiting arms, Silas chuckled finding the woman’s beseeching eyes looking up at him, then forlornly at her suddenly lost love.

“We’ll bring Fruitcake along in a minute,” he brushed an errant strand of hair from her face, smiling, “I promise.”

She smiled brightly, before hugging Mark around the neck and giggling. “You’re really cute.”

Silas rolled his eyes, sighing. “They’re so fickle these days.”

“But I paid for it already...” Francis pouted, pointing around the chapel and his costume as Red pulled him from the car.

Silas stepped forward quickly, helping Red keep the man from taking a nose dive into the large flower arrangement beside the car.
“Whoa!” the man yelped, before straightening quickly. “There’s a step there”, he pointed in warning to the flat even floor beneath his feet, “be careful.”

Red shook his head ruefully before gesturing for them to vacate the premises.

Francis pulled up short suddenly, falling into the pillar beside him, grinning at Red. “Hey! Why don’t you use it!”

“What?” Red questioned, re-righting Francis.

“The chapel.” Francis suggested gleefully.

Red staggered in place, inadvertently tightening his grip on Francis, making the young man wince. “Ow...” Francis’ response was a genuine one, he rubbed his arm casting Red a suspicious glance.

Mark and Dembe stopped in their tracks, slowly turning to look at the group behind them.

Red looked at Dembe quickly, instant communication passing between them before the spell was broken when Raymond had to quickly grasp the weaving man’s arm to keep Francis upright and functioning.

“You and Lizzy...” Francis reached out, grabbing Liz’s hand, dragging her closer to his side. “You’re engaged to be married, the place is bought and paid for... she caught the bouquet.” he pointed out the logistics of his plan. “No need for it to go to waste.”

Liz’s mouth gaped at the suggestion, looking quickly at Red, finding him staring steadily at her, before returning his attention to the man beside them.

“No, Francis.” the man moved the younger one closer to the end of the car.

“What do you mean, no?” Francis dug in his heels, refusing to budge suddenly. “You don’t want to marry Lizzy?” The statement was a sacred whisper.

“I didn’t say that.” Red managed tightly.

“You didn’t have to...” Francis pouted, hastily turning a slurred explanation on Elizabeth. “He didn’t mean he wouldn’t.” he placated any supposedly hurt feelings. “He just meant...” the man hesitated visibly, his anger suddenly more than apparent, “what did you mean?”

“Francis.” Red grated. “This is not the time.”

“Do you think you’re to good to marry her?” Francis gripped blindly for something to halt their progress, wrapping his arms around a large urn of flowers.

“She caught the bouquet.” he reiterated, speaking through the large four foot tall floral arrangement, his face all but hidden by the fabric Calla Lilies.

Elvis chuckled heartily at the theatrics, enjoying this show more than anything he’d seen in a while. Red shared a look with the bedazzled man, suddenly feeling like the father of a wayward teenage boy who could, and did, get into the strangest predicaments possible.

“Francis, why don’t we just go back to the Villa and get some rest.” Liz tried her hand at placation.

Red took the flowers, sitting them back on the table, shoving the man forward roughly. But Francis gripped the door jamb quickly to halt their progress.
“See, you’ve hurt her feelings.” the man’s mouth drooped sadly. “She’s trying to, uhm...” the man scrunched his face, desperately searching for the word.

“Improvise?” Red supplied, wanting to move things along.

“Yes...” Francis drawled, “Improvise... something,” he frowned, having lost his train of thought. The man scowled hard at Red, his mouth turning down considerably having remembered something. “You hurt Lizzy’s feelings.”

Red ran a hand over his face, scrubbing the surface hard before looking at the man, then in turn, Elizabeth. The man’s gaze steady and unreadable.

Liz felt a course of shivers run down her back, though she wasn’t sure why. “We u-uh, don’t have a license.”

“It’ll only take a couple minutes.” Francis nodded knowingly. “They’ll even bring it here.”

“Y-you...” she stammered, “you can’t walk me down the aisle, silly.” she smiled warmly at her friend. “You’re far too,” she steadied him with Red’s help, “…wobbly.”

“You want me to walk you...” he pointed at himself, truly touched that she wanted him to do that. Francis blinked hard and shook his head, as though trying to make the drunk go away. “Coffee... give me some coffee.”

“I-I...” she thought quickly, “I don’t have my dress either, Francis.”

“Get a new one.” the man replied. “Or better yet, go back there.” he gestured to some unseen room. “They got a bunch of stuff...”

Liz caught her lip with her teeth, thinking of something to say, to help get the man to leave peaceably. 

“Oh. I get it.” the man nodded. “Your dress...” he shot a finger gun her way, “it’s your mom’s right?”

Liz’s brow furrowed, instantly wondering if her mother had a wedding gown when she’d married. “Dammit, Francis!” Red growled, shoving the young man towards the door and into Silas’ capable hands. “Get in the fucking car!”

“What’d I say?” Francis pouted up at the bulky guard as Silas righted Francis to his feet.

“Something stupid.” Silas sighed. “Something you won’t remember.” he granted. “But something she’ll forgive you for.” he dragged the prattling man to the door, trying to give his boss a moment alone with Liz.

“Francis has left the building!” Francis called out before striking a pose Elvis would have been proud of... until the man fell into the guard trying to guide him along.

Red approached the silent woman, his face sympathetic. “You all right?”

“Did she have a wedding dress?” she asked quietly.

“I don’t know.” Red shook his head slowly. “I wouldn’t think so.” he fairly scoffed, before catching himself. “She wasn’t...”
“She didn’t love him, did she.”

Red found himself at a loss on how to answer that question. He was really never sure why Katarina had married Constantine.

It could have been the man’s status. He did provide her with easy access to the ‘inside’. She could have needed access to his money. She could have been genuinely fond of the man. There were so many reasons why she married and stayed with the man.

But love? He didn’t think so.

He couldn’t imagine being unfaithful to someone he loved. But then, he was beginning to wonder if Katarina ever loved anyone at all.

“I would never cheat on you...” she muttered quietly.

While Red was thrilled by the statement, he also felt a sense of melancholy. That she felt the need to defend herself, against her mother’s actions... as if the trait were hereditary.

“I know, baby.” he soothed her worry. “And that’s a two way street.”

Liz stood taller, tilting her head, sensing that there was a question hanging between them.

“There may come a time when...” Red began a difficult transitional subject matter.

“Red...” Silas stuck his head back through the doorway, “Francis is heaving in the gutter.”

Red hung his head dejectedly, the moment between himself and Lizzy thwarted for the moment.

Liz chuckled quietly, leaning into Red’s chest, muffling her amusement.

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Silas gave a thumbs up, then grimaced as he looked out to the unseen man and the grisly sound of further regurgitating.

“We’ll discuss this later.” Red gestured towards the door.

“Not taking the offer?” Elvis grinned, casually leaning against the door jamb of the exit.

Red glanced down at the woman beside him, softly sighing his disappointment.

“Not at this time.”

♥

“I think we should notify someone.” she watched Lia sleeping peacefully before closing the door gently, having left on a small night light.

Waking up in a strange place always unsettled her, so having a dim light somehow was reassuring.

“Try her phone.” Red suggested, motioning to the bag Silas had dumped on a nearby table. “But I would suggest a friend instead of the parental units.”

Liz balked at such a personal invasion but she did have to live up to a responsibility.
“We don’t need the parents embroiled in this mess.” Red stated his reasoning.

“She’s an adult, Red.” Liz rolled her eyes as she scanned the contact menu.

“You think that a grown woman’s daddy wouldn’t demand a shot gun wedding?” he pulled the buttons on his shirt free, leaving the front dangling open.

Liz giggled, then outright laughed, “If they only knew the term ’shotgun wedding’ would take on a whole new meaning with this crowd.”

Red quirked his brows in agreement, allowing the woman to make the necessary calls.

“Lia’s a bridesmaid,” the woman winced having disconnected the line. “The bride asked we give her a nine am wake up call.”

Red grinned accordingly, checking his watch. “Talk about bloodshot eyes. Well...” he quipped, “everyone is supposed to focus on the bride anyway. Who will notice. Right?”

Liz grimaced again. “Poor Lia.” she sighed heavily. “A wedding should be perfect.”

The statement sobered the man’s thoughts.

“I want to marry you.” he began without preamble.

“Wha...” Liz blinked quickly, trying to wrap her head around what he’d just said.

“I wanted to take Francis up on his offer. Don’t think for one second that I didn’t.” he continued his narrative. “But I’m not going to marry you because it’s convenient.”

“Are you saying...” she stammered her confusion, “if I had agreed,” she hesitated visibly, “you would have... even at that horrible place...”

“Yes, I would have.” she was trying to see humor in the situation but his steady gaze robbed her of any sense of convention. “In a heartbeat.”

Liz’s mouth fell agape. “I was just thinking, most men need to be dragged to the altar.”

The man’s face suddenly became expressionless.

“I am not most men.” Red clarified. “And their bride, certainly isn’t you.”

Liz’s cheeks brightened at the compliment.

“I told you...” he iterated, his former beliefs, “I want more than anything, to work towards that goal with you.” his eyes hardened slightly. “If I thought for one second, you were of the inclination, I would not have hesitated to make it happen this very night.”

“But we just started dating.” Liz thought back over the last two weeks, her head swimming with details and memories. “You don’t even know for sure you like me or—”

“Oh, I like you.” she was instantly assured, the deep resonate tone vibrated along her spine.

“But...”

“Listen to me Elizabeth.” the man demanded her full attention. “I would marry you this very second, if you allowed it.”
“I...I...” she stammered, torn between two possible realities.

“You don’t have to say anything.” Red calmed her quickly. “I just needed you to know.” he clarified. “Tonight, tomorrow night, next week,” he stopped for emphasis, “all you have to do is say the word... or allow me to say them.”

Liz twisted the ring on her finger, thinking of all the reasons why she shouldn’t... but each was over shadowed by every reason she should.

Red took a deep breath, pulling her into his embrace.

“I’m sorry.” he interrupted the woman’s silent musings. “I just made that sound like you had to decide right this minute.” he soothed.

He had worried about pressuring her earlier at the wedding, and here he was... doing exactly that.

She smiled up at him, listening intently, hoping he would continue.

“If you want to go back, I am more than up for it.” he began. “But there’s also a part of me that wants you to pick flowers you love, a friend of your choosing by your side and a cake made just for us.” he lowered his voice, keeping the conversation just between the two of them.

“I want to see you in a beautiful dress...” he painted the picture. “I want you to throw a bouquet... I want to hunt for a garter.” he voice lowered intimately, drawing Elizabeth’s heart from her body.

“I want us to have a wedding that we will look back on with happiness and fond memories. You deserve that special day... full of love.”

She held his gaze steadily, picturing what he said, and felt a warmth spread through her.

“You are a damn good thing for me.” Red declared. “You center me. You make me feel alive. You make everything, everyday... perfect.” he kissed that little mouth gently, adoringly. “When you’re ready... I can be that for you as well, Lizzy.”

Liz honestly felt at a loss as to what she should do. No one had ever said those wonderful things, those heartfelt words to her before in her entire life. Not with such meaning, anyway.

There was a part of her wanting so badly to take Red up on his offer, right then and there in their jeans and tennis shoes.

But there was also a part of her that wanted to give him what he wished for as well, and that was a wedding that was just for them. Something they had built up to and grown to anticipate.

He ran his fingers through her long hair, rubbing his fingers against her scalp soothingly. “I’m not letting you get away from me, if I can help it.”

Even if she decided to get married a week from now, or if she should wake up tomorrow, after having let the idea settle more...

She had time.

“Unless something changes before our departure,” he left the option available to her, should she desire it, “I will ask you to marry me, Elizabeth.”

She blinked rapidly, comprehending the words.
“And when I do...” he let the idea settle, before gently grasping her chin, “I will expect a response.” She couldn’t help but wonder, if he did ask, as he stated he would...

*How would it happen?*

What would he say? Would he get down on one knee? Or ask after they had made love? Maybe he’d whisk her off on a romantic holiday? Or maybe when they were home, enjoying a rainy day together?

The anticipation she felt, that Red would pose the question when it was the right time for them and for all the right reasons... to join two lives together based on the love they had for one another.

The wait for the *real* thing, besides being an exciting and exhilarating thought...

Was a wish she desperately hoped would come true.

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MAY 20

Francis and Lia finally came pitifully shuffling out while the others enjoyed their breakfast.

Both wore dark sunglasses, sitting heavily in their chairs, grimacing at the smell of the food around them.

“Sausage?” Silas passed a plate of steaming meat under Francis’ nose. The man’s pasty complexion paled even more so.

“You’re a real bastard, Silas.” Francis grumbled, having turned aside hastily. “And remember, I too have a gun. And I know how to use it.”

“Well, we got up on the wrong side of the bed, didn’t we?” Silas grinned happily, his mission accomplished.

Red allowed the moment, sipping his coffee leisurely. “Eat something,” he suggested, “you’ll feel better.”

Francis and Lia turned a shade of green at the thought, but looked relieved when only fruit and vegetable were placed before them.

They nibbled the offering, and before long, they were easily putting the light food away as the nourishment worked its magic.

Red and Mark conversed quietly for a spell, before Mark excused himself. He patted Francis consolingly as he passed, chancing a quick wink in Lia’s direction.

“Any plans today, Lizzy?” Red turned the conversation to the mundane.

“I guess I might shop a little,” she shrugged, “play in the pool.” She locked eyes with him, conveying a message. “I have to check my email.”

Red nodded his understanding. She had been checking it since they’d been here, but after receiving word that they were closing in on one of the fugitives she had profiled, she needed to stay on top of it.
“Francis?” Red enquired solicitously.

“Unless you need me, I’m going with Lia to her friend’s wedding.” he dropped his head into his hands, pressing hard into his temples, before seeking out the others. “...Did I get married last night?”

Red chuckled into his coffee cup. Liz giggled musically, arising with a small shake of her and a scolding look to both Lia and Francis.

Silas and Dembe were embroiled in a debate encompassing the situation in South Africa. Neither were paying any attention to anyone but themselves and the topic at hand.

Red sighed heavily, arising as well, taking his coffee as he made his exit with but one chastising look in Francis’ direction.

“Seriously,” Francis called after the retreating figure, “did I get married?”

The young man exchanged worried glances with an even more concerned young woman.

Chapter End Notes

I would have given anything to see that all play out on the Viva Las Vegas Wedding Chapel Earthcam site.
May 20

It was a quiet morning considering. Red had left an hour ago to attend to his business dealings.

Liz caught up on her correspondence with the BAU and the Blacksite. With all the interruptions with people in house, especially Francis, she was pleasantly surprised to have popped out a difficult profile as quickly and thoroughly as she had.

She was doubly thrilled to have found that just a few short hours ago, the criminal had been apprehended. She did not delude herself that her profile was the reason but it certainly had helped according to the Special Agent in Charge.

Applying her signature to the preliminary paperwork, she continued in the process of checking her other mail.

She was at first surprised, then shocked, drawing in a startled breath as photos of her and Red started filling the page as they loaded one by one.

She perused the array frantically, her eyes darting from one image to the other.

A couple showed she and Red with their entourage as they toured the Las Vegas Strip. A few contained shots of Silas and her alone.

One was an intimate pose as she and Red watched the Bellagio water show. Yet another had Red’s arm wrapped about her waist as they looked over the canal at the Venetian. There they were, as they took in the aquarium at the Mandalay.

The affection between them was apparent. To Liz at least.

They were supposed to be affectionate of course. She was playing the part of Red’s fiancée.

Really, the pictures had all been relatively tame, which was not how she vividly pictured their time here.

But that didn’t stop the fact that each contained a plethora of scathing vitriol beneath each photo.

—

Reddington is a vile and atrocious being, tainting everything he touches
Rid yourself... the world... of his evil, violence and killing
To keep in his company, will only lead you into an eternal damnation
No one will think badly of you, should you kill him. They will understand your reasoning
Tonight, Elizabeth. End Reddington’s reign so we can be together in peace.

“Yes, the rambling diatribe of a psycho nutjob was just the incentive I needed to act on murderous intent...” Liz rolled her eyes expressively, “so I’ll get right on that.”

Scanning back through the photos, she thankfully found, none were of their time in the Villa. With the high walls and heavily guarded property, to see into the sanctuary had obviously been
impossible.

She tried to remember a camera pointed at them, but it was difficult to pinpoint anything for sure because...

Everyone had a camera in their hand as they took in the sights of Vegas, so singling out any individual purposely surveilling their group was virtually impossible to detect.

Moving the cursor over the delete option, she hesitated fighting her natural instincts. Red had been saving these horrible things and even the envelopes, looking for a point of origin.

She made a hasty decision, calling Silas for an expert opinion.

The man’s grey eyes darkened as he pulled his phone free, issuing an order to track the origins of the IP address, having seen the problem laid out before him.

Liz put in the same request of Aram. She mentioned that the content was private, instinctively knowing her privacy would be respected.

Within moments, the information was relayed that the email had been sent from a library a couple blocks away from their hotel.

A view of the surveillance, only produced a grainy image of a man in a black hoodie sitting at the computer for about five minutes before exiting the building.

Silas directed the computer geek to trace DOT and hotel cameras to track “Black Hoodie Fucker” to and from his last known position.

“Should we phone Red?” Liz bit her nail nervously.

“Red is in tense negotiations at the moment and shouldn’t have the distraction at this time, unless absolutely warranted.” Silas answered almost absently, his mind clearly on the problem at hand. “I am exemplary in my job.” he practically teased to lighten the mood. “What are you worried about? I might begin to think you don’t trust my impeccable credentials.”

“Well, Red is going to be pissed as hell later on,” she cut doubtful eyes his way, “and I’m going to blame it all on you.”

“So what else is new.” he motioned.

She felt very secure in Silas’ care... but he didn’t have to know that.

“That new bag you’re taking me to buy.” she shut down the computer, intent on enjoying her well deserved day off. “Let’s go shopping.”

“I’m glad you’re not letting this creep get to you.” he nodded approvingly. “But isn’t there some soap opera you can watch or Bon Bon’s you can eat?” he pulled a slight grimace. “I’ve got manly things to do.”

“After we get my purse...” she batted her eyes coyly up at the tall man, “we can take in a car exhibit, which is a very manly thing to do.”

She wasn’t much of a car aficionado, but the exhibit was interesting. Silas fell into the mood of the day, so next they hit the wax museum.

She felt very much the tourist as they took photos of one another with countless statues as they went
She had tried to make her poses look as natural as possible, most of Silas’ photos on the other hand, were of him with his arm wrapped around the wax figure, cupping a breast or ass cheek... sometimes both.

Lunch was nearing, so they decided on the burger joint at their hotel.

Liz craned her head this way and that. “I’m going to the bathroom.” she had spotted what she needed.

Silas turned his bulky frame in the booth so he could watch the door.

“If she comes back before I do,” Liz stated, “can you get some mustard and ketchup on the side?”

“Yeah, you want extra pickles too?” he asked, knowing the woman’s penchant for the staple. “I know you absolutely love anything resembling the phallic shaped vegetables.” he held his smirk.

“Remind you of the boss, does it?”

“You’re a dirty old man.” she tsked.

“That sounded vaguely like a compliment.” the man’s eyes constantly surveyed his surroundings, Liz noted.

“An observation of fact only, you perv.” she corrected. “And yes, I want a pickle.”

“Are we using that as a euphemism...” the man chuckled.

“The fucking vegetable.” Liz snarled then grimaced when the guard chortled.

“What you do with it is your own business...”

“I’m gonna shove it so far up your a–”

“Intrigued by the idea of anal play, are we?” the man enquired innocently.

Liz’s retort was lost, as her thoughts wandered. A vision popped into her head that was both intriguing and yet a little off putting.

Unaware of the smile playing about Silas’ lips, the guard seemed to read her mind.

“There’s nothing quite like it.” the man further needled the woman. “The trust formed between lovers after such an event is quite spectacular.”

Liz cocked her head, staring sightlessly at the table top, a frown pulling at her brows. “Spectacular you say?” she mused quietly.

Silas bit the inside of his cheek, “Please do tell Red who turned you on to the notion.” he settled more comfortably into the wall, drumming his fingers on the Formica. “I’ve been anticipating a bonus for quite some time.”

“If I tell him you said that, he’ll likely knee cap you.” Liz allowed her humor of the situation through, very aware her guard was pestering her.

“No he won’t.” Silas replied matter-of factly. “He’ll be too busy thanking me as he tries to get his dick buried in that tight–”
“Going to pee now.” Liz sighed, turning on her heel without a backward glance to her chuckling protector.

She did her business, checked her appearance and smiled. She looked like she was glowing... and didn’t think it was just because of the slight sunburn on her nose and cheeks.

Granted, she was still lost in thought about her discussion with Silas, but not the specific details of what he suggested.

She was more caught up in the intimacy she and Red had shared. The trust that was building between them. She had every intention of making sure that connection was solidified.

Suddenly, to be with him... to feel him so very close again, was a high priority. She sincerely hoped Red got off work early tonight.

Smoothing her hair, she opened the door, the good thoughts vanishing into an angry veil.

“What the hell do you want?” she grumbled irritably as Brad smiled, pushing off the opposite wall.

“I want to know what you see in the old guy?” he shrugged. “I mean, I know he must be pretty loaded but...”

“You don’t know shit.” she snapped peevishly, pushing past him aggressively. She was more than incensed when he reached out, grasping her arm in a no-nonsense grip.

“I know he’s Raymond Reddington.” the man grinned maliciously.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” she scoffed, jerking her arm free, making a move to pass him yet again.

Brad scowled at the unexpected response, before capturing her arm again to stop her departure, trying a different tactic.

“We were pretty good together.”

“We were so good together,” she saw the ploy for what it was, though he seemed to have forgotten one minor detail, “...it made sense to you to cheat.”

“I was drunk.” he explained it away. “We could be that way again.”

“No, thanks.” she grimaced disgustedly. “I like what I have now and like my friend said, you pale in comparison in every way imaginable.”

“I can be your new Sugar Daddy, if that's what you're worried about.” the man baited.

“No, you can’t.” she replied coldly. “You will never be as charming, kind, caring or as good a fuck as Red is.” she spat and the man’s face grew furious. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have more important things to do,” she side stepped the man, “like eating my burger before it gets cold.”

Brad readjusted the hold he had on her arm, pulling her up against his chest as his face descended towards hers.

“Back off!” she snapped viciously, pushing hard against his bulk.

Delivering a swift punch across the man’s jaw, much to his astonishment, she landed another to his cheek in his stunned stupor. She blinked her surprise when the man was suddenly hurtling down the
She snapped her eyes to her right, finding a large dark shadow looming over her, snarling it’s rage.

“*I told you...*” Red grated angrily, “she wasn’t fucking interested.”

Ripping the fedora from it’s perch, he plopped it on Liz’s head, stalking towards the man who was attempting to shake off the jolt he had just received.

Grasping the collar of Brad’s shirt, Red bodily lifted the man to his feet.

“Get her out of here!” Red barked before shoving Brad back through the double doors of the kitchen.

Liz glanced back quickly, finding Silas and Dembe moving stealthily down the corridor as patrons craned their heads around the bulky frames. The men grinned mischievously, waving for her to follow after Red.

She scurried into the kitchen upon hearing an enormous crash. Pushing her way through the doors, she found Red throwing Brad into a stainless steel shelf, the glass sundae cups tinkling merrily as they wobbled dangerously back and forth. Large metal trays fell haphazardly to the floor making a resounding crescendo of noise echoing down the hallway.

The door behind them burst open as two new arrivals stumbled their way on scene.

“Yes!” Francis pumped his fist energetically, his face beaming his joy. “I didn’t miss it.”

Christopher grimaced his delight. Red punched the man square in the face, sending Brad careening out the back, knocking the door slightly askew as Red stalked his way after him.

“What part of, *no,*” Red vented, viciously punching the man square in the abdomen, “don’t you fucking understand!”

He lifted his arm, blocking an intended hit, before nailing Brad in the solar plexus. Brad grunted, falling into the wall behind him for support.

Red reached out, grasping the younger man’s collar, holding him steady. “Do you fucking comprehend it now you stupid son of a bitch!” he seethed, before delivering a series of blows to the man’s jaw, “Disrespectful little fuck!” he spat his disdain.

Liz blinked rapidly, wincing with each hit Red landed. Even against Edward, she had never seen Red so furious.

She instinctively sought help, glancing about for Silas or Dembe. Her hopes in that direction were dimmed considerably as she watched all concerned crane their necks this way and that to get a better look at the proceedings taking place.

Francis was jabbing his fists in open air in silent encouragement, the look on his face of total delight. Christopher was right there beside him, literally dancing back and forth as a boxer, his beefy arms warding off “air blows”.

Silas and Dembe nodded thoughtfully from time to time if Red happened to deliver a blow of which they approved.

Liz motioned insistently for her guard to step in and do his ‘duty’. Surely someone of Red’s so called
friends should be attempting to put a halt to this fiasco.

Silas waved a careless hand as if to say, ‘woman, there’s some serious betting going on here, back off’.

She turned her eyes back Red’s way, wincing when Brad finally landed a punch of his own.

She looked anxiously at her guard, only to find the man smirking. He caught her in his vision, sighing. The man sidled closer to her, not taking his eyes from the men trading hits.

“Lucky punch.” he muttered. “Won’t happen again.”

Liz flinched as Brad landed another, then frowned up at Silas who shrugged nonchalantly. It looked as though... it was almost as if Red left himself open to the hit.

She looked imploringly at Silas, only finding the man oblivious to her. Through it all, Red didn’t stop once in berating good old Brad. No matter who hit who.

“He’s feeding off it.” Silas explained cryptically.

As Brad hit him again, she watched Red’s eyes go ebony black, only then truly understanding what Silas had meant.

Red drew back, delivering a blow that left Brad clumsily stumbling backward, sending the young man to his knees in an ungraceful slump. The crunching sound of the man’s kneecaps hitting cement could be heard over the sounds of Red’s angry cursing.

Curling Brad’s shirt in his fist, Red yanked him forward, pulling the man close until their noses almost touched.

“And if I wasn’t perfectly clear the first fucking time.” Red spat. “She’s mine, asshole.” he growled dangerously.

Liz had never liked the macho mentality, but something about Red’s tone sent shivers down her spine. Something primitive, something deeply ingrained sparked to vivid life.

Understanding dawned on her. It went beyond territorial. Reflection and logic did not apply here. That she was okay with such a concept neither surprised nor shocked her.

“He’s staking his claim, honey.” Silas muttered, solidifying her thoughts.

She suddenly realized, Red needed to do this, for a host of reasons. And she needed to allow it.

He needed to do what came natural to him.

Someone had accosted his woman, and that was something a man like Red Reddington simply could not tolerate.

He needed to vent this frustration, to protect her... and stake his claim for his own peace of mind.

Just as she said he should, if he felt it was warranted.

As she watched Red shake Brad like he was a rag doll and backhand him with a closed fist... it was obviously a moment where he felt such action was warranted.

“Look at me!” he hissed until the man blearily focused bloodshot, swollen eyes on Red’s furious
Brad closed his eyes, turning his face away from the enraged man.

Red snarled murderously at the perceived brush off. Releasing his grip, he let Brad fall to a heap on the wet ground. Pulling his weapon free, he racked it and settled it against the man’s chest before Liz could blink an eye.

Silas quickly reached out, laying a stilling arm over her chest, though was surprised to find the woman standing stock still and watching quietly.

She was looking between both men anxiously, but stayed perfectly silent.

“Do not ever come near what’s mine again.” Red repeated darkly, his weight leaning into the weapon. “...When Elizabeth speaks... obey,” he snarled. “I will not hesitate to put a fucking bullet through your fucking heart.” he hissed. “Do you understand the words I am saying.”

Brad coughed wetly, spitting a mouthful of blood on the pavement.

“Do you understand me?” Red once again grated harshly, shoving the barrel of his gun painfully into the man’s chest.

“... I u-understand.” Brad slurred.

Red stayed hunched over the man for countless moments, his thumb rubbing along the stock of his weapon before finally pushing off the son-of-a-bitch.

Glaring angrily down at the man at his feet, Red took a deep breath trying to batten down the rage he still felt. Lifting angry eyes, he pulled up short when he found Lizzy standing there.

Glancing at Dembe and Silas, his look informed them of his displeasure for not doing as he had directed. He stepped over the heap on the ground, his eyes sweeping Liz’s form.

“Are you all right?” he asked. While he knew Lizzy could handle Brad admirably on her own, he couldn’t help but worry for her emotional state.

It wasn’t everyday you watched your lover beat the living hell out of someone. This was his world, not hers.

“I’m fine.” she murmured quietly.

Red inclined his head, understanding the quiet tone. They would need to speak later.

Turning to their host, Red took a deep breath, controlling the anger that simmered just beneath the now cool exterior. “I apologize for the disturbance t–”

Christopher laughed, shaking his head. “Don’t apologize...” he slapped Red’s arm in open camaraderie, “I’m sure the patrons loved it. It’s Vegas after all.” the man chuckled. “Besides, I’ve had security checking surveillance to alert me if a confrontation came about... so I wouldn’t miss it.”

“That was so fucking awesome!” Francis grinned widely, as he hopped excitedly in place. This was a fight he would have come a long way to see.

The young man jerked his head to the right as the back door was thrown open violently, revealing a panting, disheveled Mark Donovan.
“Ah, dammit!” Mark bitched seeing the man laying on the ground and Red’s red and bloody knuckles. “I fucking missed it!?”

Francis waved his phone excitedly in the air, thrilled to share his enthusiasm with someone who would appreciate it as much. “I got it!”

Gesturing the man over, Mark rushed towards Francis, his face beaming.

Silas came out the same door at a leisurely pace, carrying a couple of ‘to go’ orders.

Red sighed heavily, shaking his head for the guards lackadaisical outlook on life. He startled when he felt cool fingers tenderly trace his face.

“Are you all right?” Liz asked quietly, blotting a small split in the corner of his lip with her finger.

Pushing past the haze, Red found her big blue eyes looking up at him worriedly.

“I’m...” he took a deep breath, the last of his anger vanishing. “...better.”

He placed his arm about her waist, following Christopher as the man led them to a private area.

Liz sat down in the chair Red offered. She watched him cross the space to a door which she assumed was a bathroom.

She sought out Dembe, her concern expressed in her face.

“There is no cause for concern.” she was assured.

Silas pulled her burger from a take out box, shoving it towards her, along with another container. She snatched up the offering, opening them with a flourish, finding her requested condiments.

“Silas...” she mooned adoringly, “you’re the best.”

“Hell, I know that.” he agreed readily, taking a large bite from his gigantic burger.

“I know it’s incredibly rude...” she cupped her own tasty concoction in her hands, “after all that’s happened, but I’m starving.”

“It happens.” Christopher shrugged, always the consummate host. A waiter entered inconspicuously, placing food before those gathered.

Closing the door behind him, Red hesitated in his trek across the room, his eyes taking in the developing scene. Lizzy sat, his hat tipped back up on her head jauntily... hungrily devouring a large hamburger.

“You want a bite?” she questioned around her own mouthful, having noticed his interest. She held up an offering.

“No, baby,” he sat down beside her, moving her drink closer, “you eat.”

She smiled happily, dragging her fries closer, grabbing a couple before waving them through the condiments and shoving them in her mouth.

Red breathed a mental sigh of relief. He listened to the woman giggle in between bites, as she listened to Francis’ embellished retelling of the fight through his eyes, even as Mark and Chris watched the video of events as they had truthfully played out.
He was so sure she would be upset. Would be angry with him.

But she wasn’t. She was starving. She was smiling. She was laughing.

She was happy...

While Red was pleased Liz was handling his loss of control so well, he was also, admittedly a little worried.

Was this the calm before the storm? Would they argue later? He hated when they were at odds.

A platter with a large steak, with equally large portions of vegetables and other side items was placed before him.

He stared at the delicious offering, lacking any real appetite.

He tried so hard to control his temper when she was about, but had failed twice now, in spectacular fashion.

And worse, both times had been because of the woman. He hoped like hell Liz didn’t feel guilty for his own lack of self control where she was concerned.

He had seen a threat to her and neutralized it. That’s what he did.

He protected her, at all costs.

“Red...” she tapped his leg, drawing his attention, “please eat. You haven’t had anything since breakfast. You must be starving,” she frowned at his untouched plate before popping a pickle in her mouth.

Red reached over, clasping her hand in his, squeezing her tightly. She clutched him right back, lifting his busted knuckles, kissing the frayed skin gently.

He winced openly, as her frown deepened in response.

“It’s her daily required allowance of iron intake.” Francis had noted the affectionate exchange.

Liz sighed, kissing the tattered flesh once again, conveying her feelings in the simple gesture.

_They were fine. Stop being stupid._

“Eat...” she repeated, handing him a fork and knife.

He took the offering, slowly cutting the expensive meat before lifting a small portion to his mouth. Chewing the succulent beef, he found the woman smiling happily over at him.

He suddenly found himself simply ravenous.

Whatever came of this incident, for the moment he had Lizzy’s forgiveness and good friends surrounded him. In life, it was always the small things that gave the most pleasure.

Red Reddington had discovered that fact many years back.

He never wasted time considering what might have been or second guessing any decisions he made.

He dismissed from his mind any disruptive thoughts that betrayed those facts.
Instead, he focused on the contentment he was experiencing, intent on thoroughly enjoying the ever changing landscape which was his life.

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After a scrumptious meal, Red made his excuses to his host.

“I have to change.” he stated. “Could you tell Antonio and Guiren that I will be along shortly?” he asked of Christopher.

“Yes, of course.” the man replied cordially. “Take your time.”

Liz and Red made their way back to the Villa shortly there after.

He closed the door quietly behind him, stepping into the sanctity of their room. He was totally shocked when her little body suddenly collided forcibly with his. The kiss she offered was both sensual yet fiercely affectionate.

“I’m not mad.” she whispered before he could even begin to gather his thoughts. “You gave Brad fair warning, I gave him fair warning.” she continued. “He chose to ignore it.”

“I should not have lost my temper.”

“That was incredibly rude of him to ignore my demands, and if you ask me, he had it coming.” she raised her chin defiantly. “If it wasn’t you, it was going to be me.”

A soft smile played about his lips. He found he very much enjoyed Lizzy when she was in a surly mood.

“As for that temper…” the woman’s voice lowered, as she sidled closer to him, “I didn’t know you could be so...forceful.”

Red lifted gray eyes, his brows knitting slightly, asking the rhetorical question.

“I didn’t know you could be so...forceful.”

“Always expect the unexpected.” he muttered his delight.

“What?” she asked slightly enthralled by the sound of that throaty chuckle.

“Nothing... just talking to myself.” he kissed her gently, pulling back slightly to read the woman’s expressive features.

“Were you defending my virtue?” she asked lightly, drawing an involuntary smile which replaced the frown on his face.

“Your virtue is fully intact, regardless of Brad’s less than noble intentions.” he murmured.

“Were you protecting your property.” The woman emitted a high sigh of contentment.

“While that concept is absolutely medieval,” he chuckled quietly, having never heard the woman make such a sound before... not when fully dressed at least, “to be truthful, I think you’ve actually hit
on it.”

“I think that’s really hot.” she moved closer.

“Oh you do, do you?” his chuckle returned for a moment before his agitation resurfaced.

“Be glad I didn’t kill the asshole...” he grumbled his irritation, visualizing what he had walked up on earlier, his eyes dropping to her mouth, “little bastard trying to kiss my baby...”

Those little endearments aroused her beyond distraction.

His mood lightened, as he once again pressed his mouth to hers. He reluctantly lifted the deeply satisfying caress after a fashion.

“You look awfully cute in that.” He gestured to the startling blue fedora sitting on her soft dark hair.

“We need to get you one,” he said, removing the hat, tossing it to the bureau beside them, “they look quite becoming on you.”

She frowned at the fedora’s removal, until his lips against her neck caught her attention.

“Are you my Sugar Baby?” Red murmured against the soft skin.

Liz tsed softly, rolling her eyes.

“I didn’t say that.” she remembered back to the remark Brad had made concerning Red.

“Well, you didn’t deny it either.” he pointed out the fact.

“I’m your girlfriend...” she hesitated at the term, “significant other...” she screwed up her nose distastefully. That did not work either.

“...Whatever.” Red concluded, trailing a soft line of kisses along her jaw line. He knew the label he would like to apply to her, but she wasn’t ready for that... yet.

“We really must settle on something.” he rumbled deeply. “Sugar baby would work for me.” he grinned. “Though, normally, when I think of you...”

“Don’t even go there yet.” she put a little space between them, a scolding look on her face. “Are you going back to work?”

Red could see her point, moving her closer in his embrace all the same. “Well, I can’t be your Sugar Daddy if I don’t continue bringing in the dough.”

“I can just see it now.” she allowed herself to be maneuvered, completely pliable in his arms, “at the company Christmas party.” she teased. “Hi, I’m Liz and this is my Sugar Daddy, Red Reddington, aka, fourth most wanted criminal in America...”

“And possibly the rest of the civilized world...” he was anything but immodest, “you want to take me to your Christmas party?” he was visibly touched.

“You can be my secret Santa.” she flirted openly.

“Oh, I plan to be your secret Santa.” the grey eyes took on a blue hue as his mood lightened further. “Have you been a good little girl,” his manner turned playful, “because if you have, I get to slip you a special Yule Log this year.”
She stifled a giggle, “Only you know which list I’m on, Santa.” she responded in kind. “Should I leave you some of my special cookies.”

“Oh, hell yeah.” his eyes dropped to her breasts. “I absolutely adore special cookies.”

“I thought you might.” she shook her head woefully, chuckling appreciatively. She tucked herself under his chin, snuggling into his warmth.

“Those cookies are only for Santa, remember.” his tone took on a scolding inflection. “Santa doesn’t like to share...”

“I did not know that about Santa.” she stated playfully. “So territorial...”.

Red pulled back slightly, lifting an eyebrow, “And you’re not?”

He looked at her pointedly, both knowing very well he was remembering her reaction to Natalia.

“Maybe I am.” she admitted impassively. “But I hope I would find something better to say than, he’s mine.” she scoffed, her eyes lifting defensively. “You couldn’t have been a little more erudite where I am concerned?”

“One says thing in the heat of the moment, one often regrets,” he glanced down at her small pout, “but in this instance, I said exactly what I meant.”

Red pulled back reluctantly, remembering his state of dress. He grimaced accordingly.

“I have to get out of these clothes.” He pulled at the shirt, removing it quickly before heading for the bathroom.

“I know that your little wannabe paramour is most likely indisposed...” he called back over his shoulder, “but I would like it if you stayed with Silas.”

“You don’t think Brad will heed the warning?” the blue eyes raised, the amazement apparent.

“He better.” Red said. “Or he’ll find a bullet up his ass.” he muttered, washing himself off before donning a new shirt.

Sighing, he pushed away from the sink. “I know that you are more than capable of handling Brad...” he reached out, brushing her hair gently aside as it fell off her shoulders. “I was so proud of your actions where the bastard was concerned.”

“Thank you.” she smiled gently, truly appreciating his concern for her well being and even more so, his belief in her abilities. “Silas and I were going to play the tables when I got back.

Looping a new tie, he made quick work of the knot, as he looked down at her. “If you should need me...”

“...Call.” she concluded, kissing the warm mouth in open affection.
Liz and Silas hit the tables and as in previous days, they were winning but not as efficiently as Silas would have liked.

“We’re not telling Francis about this, right?” Liz quipped having hesitated placing a large bet, instead lowering the amount considerably.

As they entered their second hour, she tilted her head, glancing curiously at her guard.

“Are you trying to steal my soul, you little Succubus?” Silas asked, tossing his cards back to the dealer, a disdainful look on his face.

“You don’t have a soul.” Liz stated succinctly. “No, I was just wondering where you were earlier, bodyguard o’ mine.”

“You’re asking why I didn’t rescue your skinny ass?”

“Well, in so many words, yes.” she replied, a smile playing about her lips. “Let me guess, a good hair day again?”

“I saw Red coming.” Silas shrugged his stocky shoulders. Liz leaned closer, clearly interested in the turn of the conversation.

“He saw you two and while not pleased, he hung back, giving you a moment.” he explained. Liz smiled to herself, appreciating Red letting her have a go at the jerk.

“When Brad grasped you the second time and made a move on you...” the man paused, taking a drink from his glass, motioning for other cards to be dealt.

“It didn’t matter if you were handling it or not.” the man smirked. “Red was gonna kill him.” he nodded at the truth in the statement. “I wasn’t about to get in the middle of that.”

“Have money on it, did you?” she smiled around the straw in her mouth.

“As if anyone would bet against Red.” Silas scoffed at the very idea.

“Red said you were all placing bets on the outcome.” she quirked her brow. “As is your way.” she allowed.

“No, we were betting on when, how and why Red would finally beat the living shit out of Brad.” he corrected the misconception.

“Was it worth it?”

“There’s nothing like watching a man fight for his lady.” Silas sighed lightly, taking a long drink from his tumbler.

Liz rolled her eyes, then peeked at her card.

“I’m serious.” the guard proclaimed. “With Red having pissed a circle around you now,” he baited
the young woman, “I knew he was going to beat the shit out of that prick son of a bitch in spectacular fashion.”

She shook her head, falling silent before tapping the table for another card. “Pissed a circle around me?” she scrunched her nose at the archaic phrasing.

Silas chuckled into his glass, “He rode you bareback... didn’t he?”

Liz’s mouth gaped as she sucked in a shocked breath. *How the hell did he know this shit!?*

“He told you!” she hissed quietly. Her temper came to the fore for a brief moment.

The man snorted his amusement. “I don’t have to be clairvoyant.” throwing his cards aside, he sighed heavily.

Liz looked at him pleadingly hoping her semi-pout would affect her guard as it did his employer.

“That won’t work on me.” he patiently waited for his hand to be dealt. “I’ve known Red for a long time.” he didn’t mind telling the story, however. “And I can honestly say, I have never seen him so... sated.”

The man treaded carefully in his use of words. There were certain things that should only be said between the parties involved. In private.

But he also knew Red wouldn’t mind him putting Elizabeth at ease.

“You’re full of crap.” she whispered leaning conspiratorially. “No one can tell things like that just by looking.” she scoffed.

Silas smiled softly, knowing the woman was on a fishing expedition. “Those close to you, those who really care... know.”

Would her team guess at her secret? They were good partners. They even socialized from time to time. But Liz was no where near as close to them as she was Dembe, Silas and Francis. The thought surprised her.

She could not have made that statement a month back.

And even if those at work found out, did she even care? Her first instinct was not to give a damn. Which... actually kind of shocked her. Liz was a people pleaser. Had she changed so much while in Red’s company?

She had tried so hard to gain acceptance and now here she was... not giving a shit about what they thought. What anybody thought.

For the first time she could remember, her happiness outweighed everything else.

Liz leaned in closer, laying her arm on the man’s chair. “Why didn’t he?” she asked quietly.

“Kill Brad?” Silas glanced over to her.

“...Yes.”

“Oh, he wanted to...” Silas thought back to the ending, the way Red had stroked the weapon in his hand so lovingly, “but there was a larger issue.” he waved off the next few hands as he turned so they could converse more privately. “It was imperative that Brad understand the significance of the
word ‘No’.”

Liz shook her head, not really following as yet.

“Well, I think he will listen to Red now.”

Silas corrected the assumption. “Yes, Red was pissed off that someone was encroaching on his territory.” it was granted. “But nothing pisses Red off more than someone who does not do as a lady demands.”

“So while Red was... staking his claim,” Liz felt her heart flutter at the thought, “he wanted to make sure Brad didn’t pull what he did with me in the future... with any other women?”

“Pretty much.” Silas nodded. “If Brad wasn’t listening to you, with Red Reddington by your side, who’s to say what he would do with a woman on her own.”

“Is there something you aren’t telling me?” Liz was slightly concerned.

Silas looked at the woman beside him, leaning comfortably into his seat back. “Brad’s daddy is a lawyer...” the man began, “and his son’s record was a little too clean for our tastes.”

Liz frowned at the insinuation, a sickening feeling settling in the pit of her stomach.

“Has he–”

“Unsure.” the man admitted, deepening the frown on her face. “Let it go.” she was advised, as he read her train of thought well enough. “You know damn well Red will have his movements watched... after the bastard is recovered, of course.” he returned to the game.

Liz nodded and relaxed after a moment, trusting in Red.

Francis came straggling in, taking a seat beside them. Heaving a heavy sigh of release, the young man looked around for a server.

Liz heaved a sigh of her own of a different sort as the young man conspicuously adjusted his package to better fit the seat. The woman ignored Silas’ deep chuckle of amusement, changing the subject hastily.

“Where’s Lia?” she asked, looking around for the woman in question, searching the busy gaming room absently.

“She’ll be along shortly.” Francis stretched, throwing in a couple hundreds, entering the game. “She was seeing the bride and groom off at the airport. She’ll call when she’s ready to play.” he groaned, having lost that hand.

“It comes and goes so quickly here in Oz, doesn’t it?” Silas chuckled again at the man’s bad luck.

“They aren’t staying here for their honeymoon?” Liz questioned.

“No, they’re going to Cancun, I think?” Francis shrugged. “And why, it’s not like they’re going to take in the sights.” he was genuinely confused. “Or at least, I wouldn’t.”

“Well, we know what you would do.” she pushed from her seat.

“And we know what you and Red would do.” Silas threw it out casually.
“I have to pee.” she snapped waspishly, throwing the guard an annoyed look.

Silas pushed back his own seat, waving off the next card as he arose.

“I don’t need you to wipe my ass you know.” she frowned at the man towering over her.

“That’s Red’s department.” he drained his glass, setting it on the table. “After this afternoon, I’d rather be close... if it’s all the same to you.”

“You just said–” she iterated.

“Yes well, a normal man would have gotten the message.” Silas justified his actions. “I want to be positive Brad isn’t a psychotic fucker.”

“That’s your job.” Francis cheerfully pointed out.

She shrugged, pointing to her seat. “Keep it warm for me.” she asked Francis, and received a nod in return. Liz had learned the ins and outs of Vegas casino jargon.

She walked alongside her guard, pleased when the man stopped at the end of the hall, instead of trailing her all the way to the toilet.

Silas had an open view of the bathroom and the only exit, so that was fine.

“I’ll be just a minute.” she patted his arm, rushing for the door. She really had to go!

She quickly did her business before looking herself over in the mirror.

“Why don’t you just do us a favor and give it up.”

Sighing, Elizabeth sang, *I told you so*, in her head as she wondered at the unlucky circumstances surrounding her bathroom trips this day.

Reluctantly turning away from the mirror, she came face to face with... Natalia.

“Excuse me?” she asked pleasantly.

“Red shouldn’t be tied down, it isn’t good for him.” the thick accent made it hard to understand the words, but Liz got the jest well enough.

“He *likes* to be tied down.” Liz replied innocently, before flicking a stray strand of hair out of her eyes.

“Red is a virile man. Way too much for a naïve woman like yourself to handle on her own.”

“I must be doing something right, he asked *me* to marry him.” Which, actually wasn’t a lie, come to think of it.

“You just aren’t good enough for him, obviously. He needs someone more,” the blonde looked Liz over condescendingly from head to toe, “...sophisticated.”

Liz repeated the action, with the same scrutiny, “I take that to mean you’re asking I let him free on behalf of someone else then, and not yourself?”

Natalia came at her, missing Liz by mere inches as she side stepped the enraged woman.
Giving Natalia a good shove, Liz sent her careening across the room.

And so the battle began...

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Silas glanced between the bathroom door and the main gaming area, keeping a close watch on comings and goings. He nodded an acknowledgment to Mark as the man came from a side door, Red following close behind, with Christopher by his side.

Red, seeing Silas manning a hallway, lifted his chin questioningly. Silas thumbed in the direction of the corridor which he guarded so zealously.

Red sauntered to the table, taking a stance behind Francis. He shook his head woefully when the young man lost yet another hand, sharing a small laugh with the dealer and the men beside him.

Francis cradled the phone against his shoulder, speaking into the gadget as he tapped his knuckles on the felt table, having glanced at the new card thrown his way.

“We’re still in Las Vegas, you tool.” the young man grumbled. “Now why the hell aren’t you here? You said you were coming in on...” he rolled his eyes, sighing his disgust. “I told you not to mess with her. Now don’t you wish you had listened?”

Red caught his attention and Francis craned his head back to fully meet the man’s eyes. “Alina tried to take Ben out.” he answered the rhetorical question.

Red nodded his understanding. Alina was a little more than unstable at times. But it made her no different than most people they dealt with on a daily basis.

“Ben wants to know if we’re still on for—”

“Yes.” Red confirmed. “Now get off the phone.” he shook his head as Francis said his goodbyes and busted... once again.

“Why do you always do that.” Red asked of the boy, stopping the young man from yet again, wrapping his knuckles to signify to the dealer... ‘hit me’. He showed nineteen of the allotted twenty-one. The dealer flipped his card, showing eighteen, leaving Francis the winner.

“Out of curiosity sake,” Red gestured to the cards, “if he ‘hit’, what would he have got next?”

The dealer looked at Christopher, waiting for permission. The owner smiled, gesturing to see the card.

Francis’ shoulders slumped as the dealer showed them the Queen of Hearts.

Ignoring Red’s low chuckling, Francis tossed the card back dejectedly.

Both men instinctively reached for their weapons as they heard a commotion. Silas took off at a full run, bolting down the corridor. A shrill voice followed.

“You little bitch!”

All the men glanced at one another before rushing to the sound. As they neared, they heard the sound of shattering glass.
Red sought out Dembe, relieved to see the man making his way rapidly across the crowded casino.

“Slut...”

Red’s steps pulled up short at the recognized voice. Dembe, offered a double take as well.

*That was Lizzy’s voice.*

Lengthening his steps, he came around the corner pulling up short, finding Lizzy and Natalia struggling against one another in the corridor. An expensive vase laying near their feet, shattered beyond recognition.

Silas stepped between them, breaking the two women apart. The man laughed quietly as Liz ducked his interference, yanking the blonde from the guard’s loose hold.

“You little shit...” the man chuckled, jerking back, narrowly avoiding the swiping arc of Liz’s arm as it flew past him.

Back handing Natalia across the face, which knocked the blonde into a nearby wall... Liz threw another well aimed blow, catching the woman with her ring, drawing a welling line of blood across Natalia’s cheek.

Natalia pushed back, grabbing Liz’s shoulders. Liz went with the momentum, catching her leg behind Natalia’s calf, causing both women to topple to the floor.

Sitting up quickly Liz drew back her arm, aiming and connecting with Natalia’s eye.

“Damn!” Francis laughed his joy, admiring the technique exhibited.

“Lizzy...” Red scolded quietly, nearing the melee. Reaching down to break the *ladies* apart, he stepped out of the way quickly as they rolled in his direction. A swift shift, had Lizzy gaining ground again.

“He’s better off with me!” Natalia screeched, desperately trying to elude an expert sidekick.

“He’s *mine*,” Liz snarled, connecting on a downward blow to Natalia’s cheek line, “you stupid bitch.”

Red’s brows rose exponentially, his lips twitching slightly. *A better label*... And to think, she had scolded him for using the same vernacular.

Chancing a glance up, Red found Mark laughing silently at the fiasco taking place, but the man managed to give a thumbs up sign, all the same.

Francis was completely charmed by Lizzy’s antics, smiling and cheering her on as if this were a bout of mud wrestling gone awry.

Dembe stoically watched the women, though, a small smile did play at his lips.

And Silas... even as he tried to “break them apart” was throwing out pointers to Liz, that the woman really didn’t need, seeing she was doing a bang up job all on her own.

Raising her fist again, Liz meant to shut Natalia’s mouth forcibly if necessary or to Red’s experienced gaze, that appeared to be the intended target.

Red caught the action, gently dragging Liz out of harm’s reach. His arm tightened slightly about the
tiny waist as he lifted the negligible weight easily.

“Dammit Red!” Liz kicked, fighting victoriously to get to her opponent who was splayed out on the floor. “Let me go!” Straining in his arms, she lashed out with her other fist, catching the enemy across the mouth, busting the pink stained lip open.

“Let her go, Red!” Francis yelled out sympathetically.

“Shut up, Francis.” Red pulled at Liz, tightening his hold. “...Lizzy, stop it!”

Liz fought against Red’s superior strength, scratching and clawing for her arch enemy.

Grasping Natalia’s ankle, Silas pulled her away from the fisticuffs.

Liz lunged unexpectedly, momentarily breaking Red’s hold, grabbing a fist full of the tousled blonde hair, dragging Natalia back towards her.

“You damn brat...” Silas grumbled his own annoyance.

“Baby, stop...” Red tsked as he tried to break Lizzy’s tight grasp, unsuccessfully, “you’re going to hurt your arm.”

“I’m gonna hurt her!” Red lost his grip on the squirming woman, his amusement not aiding him in this instance.

“I think you already did, sweetheart.” he noted the bruised and bleeding woman on the floor beneath them.

Grabbing hold of Lizzy’s belt loop, Red tugged her back, chuckling when she swatted at him.

Natalia blindly struck out, catching Liz in the shoulder.

“Bitch,” Liz wiggled from under his grasp, punching out, landing a solid blow to Natalia’s jaw, “I’m gonna beat your ass!” she was pretty sure of her proclamation.

Laughing harder, Red finally hooked his hand in the back of her jeans, controlling his little spitfire.

“Come here, you slippery little thing.”

Mark and Dembe, finally taking pity on those involved, helped Silas pull Natalia out of Liz’s reach which allowed him to stand erect, regaining his footing.

Squeezing Liz tight around the waist, Red grinned as she kicked out comically for her feet were off the ground mid-air.

Tightening his grasp around her waist, he pulled her flush against his large frame. Her simmering little body heaved with her exertion, still struggling to break free.

“Cool off!” he whispered decisively in her ear.

“You want me to cool off!” she demanded heatedly. “Then let me go so I can finish kicking that fucking skanky cunt’s ass!”

Red chuckled warmly. “Oh, those dirty words coming out of that sweet little mouth.”

He’d never heard her be so vulgar, but then, she had been in the company of Silas, so it shouldn’t come too much of as a surprise. “You’re turning me on.”
But as humorous, and dare he say, arousing as this all was, it had to stop. She was going to hurt herself if she continued.

Liz struggled against him, trying to get loose from his firm hold. The man grunted low in his throat as her round ass brushed against his crotch in her fight for freedom.

“Lizzy...baby,” he purred against her ear, “calm down.”

She inhaled sharply, turning her head into his voice. The low soothing baritone calmed her, in spite of herself.

“You want to tell me what happened?” he hoped to divert her attention.

“Just what I said would happen!” Liz snapped, fighting to release her arms again. “She got catty in the ladies room.”

“Baby...” He drawled soothingly, nuzzling her neck.

“Stop it.” She grumbled, all the while unconsciously baring her neck to the man. She stopped struggling when his breath tickled her hair line, drawing a course of shivers down her spine.

“It’s over now.” He slid his hand under her shirt, gently rubbing his thumb along her rib cage, calming her further until she relaxed fully in his hold.

“That’s a good girl.” He let go of her arms, stroking her in a soft caress.

He looked over his shoulder, to check on the proceedings. Dembe had Natalia contained, nodding agreeable at what ever Christopher was saying.

Silas stood between the combatants, narrowing his eyes at Elizabeth, though a smile twitched at his lips. “Don’t you even think about it.” he pointed a warning finger.

Dembe led Natalia towards the elevator bank. The woman zeroed in on Red, a malicious gleam in the lovely, if swollen, green eyes.

“Liz...” Silas warned sternly at the heat he saw returning in the little brunette’s eyes, even though he had to admit, he was enjoying this immensely.

He had never really seen Liz in action before. He was more than pleasantly surprised to find she packed quiet a wallop.

“Did you tell her you were with me earlier, Red?” Natalia’s tone was pure venom. “That we... fucked.”

“Dammit, Natalia.” Red snapped his pique. “Shut the fuck up!”

“Bitch!” Liz sidestepped Red, rushing for the woman.

“...Shit.” Silas grumbled disconcertingly.

Red reached for Liz’s arm, just grazing her elbow, missing the target. “Son of a bitch...” he sighed.

Silas made a swipe for, huffing his amusement when the little twirp ducked his effort like a pro-footballer heading for a touch down.

“Lizzy...” Red chortled quietly as he watched Lizzy evade capture. He tried to ignore the look of
pride in Silas’s face, other things on his mind at the moment.

Both men grinned as they neared the warring pair.

Francis barked with laughter, shouting at his friend gleefully, “Kick her ass, Lizzy!”

Liz pushed the woman back, slamming Natalia into the wall. She punched her foe square in the nose, producing a resounding cracking sound that echoed sickeningly down the corridor.

Dodging another blow, Red crowded Liz, grabbing her about the front. Spinning, he blocked the blow that had been intended for her with his back. The slight thump he felt more an annoyance than painful.

Silas stepped between Red and Natalia, catching the blonde’s arms easily before turning her face first into the wall, pinning her arms behind her.

“Settle down, Blondie.” Silas murmured, pushing his weight against the squirming she-cat.

“You settle down.” Silas tightened his grip slightly, driving her harder into the wall.

She kicked her feet back, struggling against the man’s unrelenting hold.

Silas sighed, taking the offered zip tie Dembe handed him, looping it around her wrists effortlessly.

“You’ve been a very bad girl,” he grinned as he secured her, “but you’re not getting the cuffs.”

“I’m going to blow a hole in your fucking skull!” Natalia screeched angrily.

“You’re not gonna do shit,” the man replied, “you bottle blonde little bitch.”

“Watch it!” Mark barked as a fist came swinging the guard’s way.

Silas jerked his head back seconds before Elizabeth’s hand reached out, grabbing a fist full of Natalia’s hair.

“Shit...” Francis laughed gleefully as Liz damn near ripped the woman from Silas’ grasp yet again.

“Lizzy, dammit.” Red chuckled at how fierce the woman was... and how determined.

“You wanna control the hellcat.” Silas asked snippily, pulling at the shrill woman in Liz’s grasp.

Liz tightened her hold, yanking the squalling woman closer.

Sighing heavily, Silas pulled his switch blade, cutting quickly through the long blonde locks, chivalrously breaking Natalia free.

“Oh, damn!” Francis choked on his own laughter. “He fucking scalped her!”

“You aren’t fucking helping.” Red pointed out, knocking Francis’ phone away as the young man recorded the proceedings.

Francis righted the phone hastily, falling into Mark, as both men cackled at the sheer look of disbelief on Natalia’s face.

Instantly reaching back to her head, Natalia patted the shorn locks in shock. “You son of a bitch!”
she wailed her astonishment, “I’m going to make you a enu—”

Silas clamped a hand over the woman’s mouth, dragging her towards a smiling Christopher and a large Security guard.

As Liz laughed evilly over the guard’s actions, she threw the hair gripped in her hand in her foe’s face.

She continued her berating long after Silas had deposited Natalia in the capable hands of the hotel Security guard.

Red physically lifted the struggling and bitching woman, effortlessly walking her down the hallway and around the corner, out of sight of the still shrieking Natalia.

Coming to a secluded alcove, the quiet was a most welcome respite. Red blocked Liz’s view with his body, ever so glad when Liz seemed to calm a tad.

“Were you!” Liz snapped out of nowhere, the blue eyes flashing angrily.

“Was I what?” Red looked down at her face, completely lost for a moment.

“Where you with her?”

Red snorted. “...No.”

“Then why did she say you had been?” it was angrily demanded.

“I suppose she thought it would piss you off.”

“Likely story...” Liz scoffed.

“I was with Mark, you know that.” he reasoned, if only to placate her.

“And I’m sure he’ll corroborate your whereabouts.” She bitched, folding her arms defiantly over her chest.

“Yes, him and the other ten people in the room.”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’ll all tell me you were there them whole time, when they all know you were fucking that bitch.”

Red grinned, pushing a strand of hair out of her face. She batted his hand away, making him grin wider.

“What the hell are you smiling for?”

“I like when you’re jealous.” he tried again to tame her wild hair, only to have Lizzy shoo him away irritably. “It’s very sexy...”

“I am not jealous.” She sneered her contempt.

“Then why don’t you believe me?” he tried another tactic. “I’ve never lied to you.”

Well, besides that little tidbit about her father and the fire, but he had explained that.

“Don’t pull that, I’ve never lied to you, shit on me, Red Reddington.” she gritted, poking him hard in
the chest with her finger. “It’s one thing to not lie about the work, it’s another when it’s personal.”

He inched forward, speaking roughly in her ear. “I will never lie to you... regardless of the circumstances.”

She leaned into the wall, trying to contain the arousal creeping around the edges of her anger.

“You know that you are all that I want.” he purred.

“You’ve fucked her before!” she hissed.

“Maybe, I did fuck her...” the man shrugged, not denying his past. Not lying to her.

She released a shaky breath, the profanity passing his lips a definite turn on to her great chagrin.

“But I never made love to her, like I do you.” He turned his head, tracing the sensitive shell of her ear with his nose. “You know I only share that with you.”

A flush covered her cheeks and neck, as his voice resonated deeply in her ear, painting a picture of what they continuously shared.

“Why is that?” his raspy voice demanded softly. “Why is it that I only share that with you?”

Liz stood straighter, the blush receding. “Because you’re mine.” she stated without hesitation and with absolute conviction. “You’re my confidant. My protector. My lover...”

Red captured her lips, pushing her into the wall. The man heated when a tiny mewl worked its way into her throat as she wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. Cupping her head, his fingers traced the small of her back, his mouth kissing hers ravenously.

While he knew he would be able to make the woman blush until the end of time, he also knew the things he would teach her from here on out, would make it impossible for anyone, even Silas, to do the same.

And while he would only admit it to himself, he would kind of miss that. He also couldn’t help but feel extremely elated not only for them... but for her.

While they had been having trouble finding a label that fit just who they were... who they had become, one Lizzy would not balk at using.

Lizzy had been having trouble finding her footing in the relationship. For a host of reasons.

But now, she had found a path in a small way.

She had finally voiced what had been bottled up inside. She voiced it loudly, confidently, what he was to her. To Natalia, to those that were standing about... even to himself.

*You’re mine. You’re my confidant. My protector. My lover...*

It was an emotional release she had needed.

Those words, said out loud, was her equivalent of shouting it from the rooftops that they were... together.

He released her gently, setting his forehead against hers. “I will *always* be yours, Lizzy.” he whispered coarsely.
Liz nuzzled into the affection, her breathing evening out.

“How’s your hand, arm?” he lifted both, examining the red and slightly swollen appendages, kissing the bruised knuckles.

“Better now.” She grinned.

Francis appeared at their side, breaking the moment. “To the victor.” He beamed, holding a glass of wine out.

Liz laughed quietly, taking the pre-offered refreshment.

Francis cleared his throat, subtly gesturing to four men who were suddenly striding down the hall. The oldest, in the center, swaggered as the other three flanked him protectively.

Liz was instantly intent on the older man. Even from this distance, she could tell he had an aura of power about him. As he grew closer, he gave off an air that subsequently made her think of Frank Sinatra in his later years.

He had style, class and charm. He even resembled the crooner to a certain extent not only in looks, but his classic style of dress and apparent charisma.

“Reddington...” The man held out his hand in greeting, his rumbling timbre washed over her like warmed honey. Something about it made her wish she could request him sing to see if he could belt a tune like Sinatra.

She flushed slightly at such an absurd thought.

“Antonio.” Red nodded his hello.

Liz groaned internally, hoping like hell Red’s business associate had not just seen the display she had caused with Natalia.

“This your lady.” the man smiled at Elizabeth. And she felt the need to seek out Red’s hand.

“Yes,” Red beamed, “this is Elizabeth.”

Antonio took Liz’s hand, raising it to his mouth. Liz grimaced, quickly scanning her hand for any sign of blood just as the man lay his lips tenderly against her reddened fingers.

“You’re quite a little scrapper.” the man chuckled, before winking playfully. “You must be very proud of her.” the man smiled at Red, his eyes crinkling at the corner.

“I am.” Red smiled warmly... proudly, at the woman beside him. “For so many reasons.”

Chapter End Notes

Of all the people who could have said, 'Cunt', first... it just had to be Liz.

I'm so proud of her!
MAY 21

Red lay awake, his mind active and functioning at break neck speed. The sensation was nothing new for the man.

But this activity he was experiencing was different than his usual calculated, precise process. He wasn’t thinking about the business aspect of his life, a novelty in itself.

He listened to the sounds of the room. The soft push of the air conditioner moving coolness about, the soft evened breathing of the woman beside him... calmed his mind.

A tree outside, cast an eerie shadow along the opposite wall of the room. As a child, Red was never bothered by nightmares or fanciful images of ‘monsters under the bed’. He had never believed in such things, even at such a young age. As a grown man, he now realized just how wrong he had been.

There were ‘things’ out in this world that caused childhood monsters to pale in comparison. He had been discussing one such example with Antonio Crocetti this long evening.

The old Mobster had seen twice as much than Red would ever know in his lifetime. Which was a highly disturbing thought, considering the atrocities Red had encountered.

But given Antonio had vast experience in the horrific brutality life could throw in your path, Red found the man to be a great source of insight, knowledge, and even comfort on occasion.

So it was a shock when, during the course of their quiet chat, the tables had turned and Red became the voice of reason for the disoriented and discouraged.

One of Antonio’s Lieutenants had gone off the deep end recently, it seemed, as Antonio had relayed the telling.

The man in question enjoyed killing. Antonio had never diluted himself of the fact, such things were necessary in the line of work chosen, after all. Even so, there were established rules among professionals.

The individual, one Mario Scarpa, had overstepped the boundaries set by Antonio. The old man himself did the deed. It had killed Antonio to have to be the one.

“He wouldn’t listen... maybe he couldn’t?” he sighed woefully into his tumbler. “My heart is heavy tonight, Red. He was like a son to me.”

Red listened respectfully as the tale unfolded for it was clear, Antonio needed a shoulder.

“Life’s too short.” the man pushed aside his heavy heart. “Go to your lady, Reddington.” It was
more than suggested. “Make passionate love to her...”

The man looked lost in a pleasant memory for a long moment, “Such a young nubile beauty...” a
smile graced the weathered lips, his eyes taking on a serene quality, “never neglect such an exquisite
gift.”

A deep seated pain replaced the touch of light that had shown in the older man’s eyes.

“Remember the important things,” Antonio reached out, gripping Red’s forearm, willing him to
listen, “keep them... her... first in your heart and mind.”

Red had nodded his agreement and understanding.

“Mario...” the old man’s heart was still heavy with grief and regret, “Mario had so many good
qualities.” Antonio nodded absently, deep within the moment. “He came from bad stock. Too much
happened as a boy. Too many things before he came to me.” the man muttered angrily. “I tried to
teach him...” he trailed off.

The silence fell as Red contemplated the depth of heartache children could evoke.

“I turned a blind eye on so many occasions.” Antonio glanced about their surroundings absently,
straightening his napkin unconsciously.

He had not touched his meal, Red noted. The old guy looked his age right at that moment, but Red
knew he would rebound.

Antonio Crocetti loved life too much to allow this hurdle to bring him down permanently.

“You did all you could, Antonio.” Red believed his words. “Sometimes, love just isn’t enough.”

“What a damnable reality.” Antonio nodded slowly. The clear, intelligent eyes shifted to Red’s
concerned ones.

“What are we doing?” the man spread his hands, encompassing his surroundings. “We have
a magnificent spread before us. Good wine. Good friends are near.” he was forcing the darkness aside.

Red had done it countless times enough to see it in others.

“No life is good. Let us partake, while there is still time on our side.” he chuckled at his own particular
brand of humor. “God knows, I’m not getting any younger.” the man huffed amusement. “This
could be my last meal for al...” the man’s stout voice faded, a supposed fear filling his features.

“Maria is fixing her world renowned pasta linguine this weekend,” he made mention of his wife of
forty years, “if I miss it, she will kill me. Never mind about the ‘Almighty’s’ plan.”

Red chuckled warmly, amused by the man’s statement. “She is good for you,” he lifted his wine,
sipping the mellow beverage. “I’ve always said as much.” he declared. “And a magnificent Chef to
boot.” he added. “When she does the deed, I will be first in line to take your place.”

“You are possibly the only one who could.” A hint of the old swagger returned, Red was happy to
see. “Not in bed, of course,” the old man needled his younger counterpart. “After me, she could
stomach no other man.”

Red graciously took the cut to his manhood. If asked, he would say the same of his Lizzy.

No one could love that woman like he did.
“That woman has been on a pedestal for fifty years.” Antonio was proud of the fact. “I’ve lifted her so high in that area,” he bragged to Red’s delight, “no one could ever take her to such a state of bliss.”

“Mr. Kaplan says,” Red made mention, “that all men consider themselves irreplaceable in that area of expertise.” he swirled the dark vintage in his glass absently. “When in reality, the very opposite is true.”

“Kaplan doesn’t know everything.” Antonio shook his head woefully. “Especially given that Kaplan is not only competition, but is said to have bigger balls than the two of us combined.” the man smirked at the ambiguity of the statement, drawing a reluctant smile from Reddington, before the older man sobered somewhat. “There are exceptions to the rule.”

“I certainly hope that’s the case.” Red glanced over to another table, his eyes falling gently on the object he sought out, and had made a study of, all evening.

“This one...” Antonio noted Red’s avid interest, “she is different than the rest.” he was a shrewd judge of character. “You feel something for her that the others could not offer.”

“...Yes.” Red’s brow furrowed. “I fought it for a very long time.”

“For her sake.” Antonio understood.

“What right do we have to bring them into our way of life...”

“My Maria knew of my... world before we...” the older man trailed away. “She accepts all that I am. It was not always so, of course. There were troubling years.” the man admitted. “She is a devout Catholic.”

“...Yes, I know.” Red did. “Do you regret–”

“No regrets.” Antonio interrupted, his tone firm. “Not a single one.”

Red glanced at Lizzy again. She was trying to retrieve a stolen French fry from Francis. Her ability to attain her desire results, just as cunning and assertive as it was a short time ago.

He smiled reluctantly at the antics deployed. “She is very young.”

“Teach her to survive, especially...” Antonio watched the farce play out as well, his own amusement triggered, “in your absence.”

Red turned his attention immediately.

“Time and misfortune claim us all.” the man reminded Red of their human frailty. “I have heard of your troubles.” The subject was broached. “Not the whole story, mind you. Only the price on your head raising...” Antonio edged forward, “which in turn, adds to the danger to her...”

Red remained silent on the matter.

“My resources are available to you.” It was offered.

“I want the bastard myself.” Red spat heatedly. “I want his throat in my hands, his blood...” he took a deep shaking breath, suppressing his sudden flare of anger. His lapse of control unacceptable.

Antonio causally glanced about, ensuring no others saw Reddington’s loss of restraint. He understood the younger man’s agitation. If it were his Maria...
“Understood.” he inclined his head regally. “But the offer is always open to you.”

“This I know.” Red nodded minutely, appreciating the man’s discretion. Not only due to the subject matter at hand, but for allowing Red’s enraged response. “And should the circumstances arise, the same can be said for me.”

“You waste your time with an old man when your choice of companion could be more... stimulating.” Antonio’s eyes lit as Reddington’s eyes caressed his lady’s backside lasciviously.

Antonio had to admit, he was enjoying this side of Reddington. He didn’t think he had ever seen the man so distracted, especially over a woman.

He knew Reddington was a lover of women. They were both of the same regard when it came to females. You respect them, cherish them... love them.

But the boy was practically spell bound in regards to the small beauty across the way. He did see the attraction. She was quite a woman. She was pleasing on the eyes, she was humorous, intelligent and was a ferocious fighter when warranted.

She turned their way, having sensed Reddington’s eyes on her. She blushed a charming crimson, before coyly batting the long dark lashes highlighting her baby blues.

Antonio chuckled quietly into his glass as the man across from him grunted low in his chest at the display.

Yes... she was quite an alluring package. One that should not be neglected any longer.

“My time with you is never wasted, dear friend.” Red muttered absently after a long moment.

“You used to be a ‘breast’ man.” Antonio chuckled. “I see you’ve come over to my side of the fence.” he winked playfully, sipping his finger of Scotch. “Nothing like the succulent curve of an enticing backside... is there.”

“You are still...” Red chastised with a look, “a dirty old man.”

“And I shall be to the day I die. God willing.” Antonio nodded sagely. “Let’s not forget about their luscious lips...” the man further added to Red’s enticement, “though which one’s we prefer tasting, is always up for question, don’t you agree?”

After further goading of Lizzy’s fine attributes, by his dear friend, Red had left shortly thereafter with his little seductress in hand and now... hours later, he lay here, quietly contemplating his lot in life.

After a private meal prepared by the Villa Chef, a truly wonderful night full of intimate conversation and unbelievably stimulating lovemaking had ensued.

As Red awoke, he had discreetly moved away from Lizzy’s sweet smelling body, the temptation to awake her too much if he tried to remain cuddled close to that ‘enticing’ backside.

They had made love less than a couple hours ago. Sweet, passionate love that sated him completely... or so, Red had believed at the time.

While it was his custom to allow the woman to wake naturally before initiating lovemaking in previous days, his body demanded differently this morning.

Red was a little annoyed with himself, truth told. Usually he was well able to control his carnal
instincts.

Visions kept popping in his head. Ones he attempted to dismiss as juvenile... beneath him.

Watching that little ‘affair of honor and proprietorship’ yesterday, when Lizzy and Natalia had been going at each other... Red felt something primordial... deeply satisfying inside.

Lizzy staking her rightful claim on him, caused his cock to pulse to life...

The occasional sight of Lizzy’s round bottom as she tussled with her enemy, or the fleeting glimpse of her breast as her shirt rode up or was tugged at... had fulfilled a deep seated masculine fantasy he wasn’t even aware of having before.

Red had noted Silas look at Lizzy’s bottom as her jeans had pulled tightly over the delectable little area at one point during the melee.

The fact Silas had shifted his eyes instantly, alerted Red, a male, to the fact. The guard had noticed, as a male, the very same thing.

Silas’ deep frown of discontent and overly gruff rejoinder to both women was another indication that, in the large man’s world, he had inadvertently overstepped boundaries set for his rigid code of ethics... which was troublesome to the extreme.

Silas appeared to the lay person, to be rather lax in his... shall we say, approach, where the ladies were concerned. Any woman.

But Red knew the truth. Silas adhered to an almost archaic, chivalrous, overtly protective attitude where a female he truly respected and admired was concerned.

For him to have noticed Lizzy had a great ass, was an unthinkable breech of conduct on Silas’ part.

Lizzy was taken, by someone Silas both admired and held in high regard. That line was written in blood, never to be crossed.

Silas and Red never spoke of their connection or how it began, or the why of it all.

It just was and would always be.

Enough said.

A part of Red found it amusing, the trouble Silas had experienced.

Silas had moved past the momentary lapse easily in Lizzy’s case.

Red had watched the easy camaraderie return seconds later as Silas had thumped Lizzy’s head... hard, when she repeatedly neglected to obey Silas’ direct instructions to ‘settle the hell down’.

Red had let the ‘thumping’ pass, realizing it’s origins.

Silas need to get back to the ‘sisterly’ side of the equation. He had done so in his own inimitable fashion.

Lizzy had complained, bitching and moaning her lot in life, of course, as was her part to play.

“He struck me!”
“I saw that.” Red had admitted.

“Aren’t you going to do something!” Lizzy had demanded. Those big blue eyes had flashed their annoyance at a reticent Silas.

“If I were him,” Silas nodded to a silent Red, “I would gag you to quiet your ass down, but I have a sneaky suspicion you would actually like that sort of thing.”

Lizzy opened her mouth to retort, before getting lost in her inner most thoughts, pleasing both men for differing reasons.

“You’re welcome.” Silas had mumbled discreetly to his boss, before turning on his heel. “Excellent repartee...” he called over his stocky shoulder to his rival, as he left Red to the opportunity afforded him.

Red had sighed and went on with his task of dutifully calming his little spitfire down, again. Having lost her chance to have her row with her favored guard, and still in a temper over her earlier scuffle with Natalia, Lizzy was in no mood to be calmed down.

The man glanced to his bed partner, the dark mussed hair was splayed across the pillow, the soft tendrils lush and full.

He knew from experience, the strands felt like spun silk. His fingers itched to touch them, even now. His eyes traveled her curves beneath the sheet. He eased closer, his arms embracing the decidedly feminine and very soft form. He tucked his arm under her naked breast, enjoying the sensation of the heavy swell curving naturally to his forearm.

He felt her stir, stiffening a moment before recognition set in.

“I’ve heard vicious rumors,” the roughened voice deepened as the object of his affection pushed her warm bottom against his groin, “that you are notoriously susceptible,” he nuzzled the fragrant nape of her neck, “to morning sex.”

“People say the damndest things...” Liz hummed sleepily, settling more comfortably against his solid body. “Are you my alarm clock now?” She couldn’t help but sigh happily.

“Did you say cock?” It was Red’s turn to move closer, if only to illustrate his ‘point’.

“C-Clock.” she stammered, her cheeks reddening slightly. “I said, clock.”

“Say the other for me.” Red wasn’t going to let it go. “It turns me on to hear you say those filthy words.” he mumbled against her shoulder.

She pushed against his fingers as they filtered through her neatly trimmed pubic hair.

“...No.” she pouted at the request, inhaling sharply as one determined finger slid past her attempts to prevent such a move. The calloused edge ran along the more than sensitive ridge of her clit.

She inadvertently moved into the touch, squirming about irritably in the next instance.

“What’s wrong?” his muffled voice tickled her tender flesh.

“I have to pee.” she grumbled, fighting the urge to allow his every whim.

Red chuckled quietly, kissing her bared shoulder.
“So, go.” he lifted his arm, allowing her freedom to move. “I’ll be here when you get back. Trust me.”

She reluctantly rolled from the bed, staggering a little until she got her feet under her.

“It’s not sexy...” she muttered dejectedly, realizing her faults all too well.

Red tilted his head, watching the woman make her way across the room. His eyes sweeping her naked form... repeatedly.

“I beg to differ,” he disagreed, watching that perfect ass swish hypnotically, before it disappeared around the corner, “…especially from my point of view.”

He leisurely stroked himself, a slow smile overtaking his face... no need to lose such a promising moment after all...

Of all the lovers he had and as provocative and seductive as they had been in their expensive lingerie and perfect hair and makeup.

Moments like these were fast replacing his concept of just what ‘sexy’ was.

There was something so... genuine about what had just occurred. So... real.

Lizzy didn’t have to be anything other than herself to turn him on.

Her tousled hair, the little crease where the sheet left it’s imprint on her side and her sleepy countenance, made for a stunning image in the hazy morning sun.

He could not remember a time when he had been so damned sexually stimulated as he was right at this moment.

He had every intention of making up for lost time. He had a taste of her now and nothing but Elizabeth was going to fulfill the overwhelming craving he had for more.

The feeling grew as he watched the woman come padding lethargically around the corner. His heartbeat quickened as her supple breasts moved naturally with her drowsy stretch. His eyes traveled downward, taking in that small thatch of dark hair on her sex, his dick throbbing in his now doormat hand.

The man smiled softly, watching Lizzy blink the sleep away, scratching her fingers under her thick mane of hair before lifting heavy lidded eyes which transfixed as she blatantly watched the man unhurriedly stroking his shaft.

Red’s eyes crinkled, his amusement piqued as Lizzy’s mouth fell agape for his actions.

She resumed her steps towards the bed, never once looking away from his hand’s activities, as she absently crawled up beside him.

This was natural. Sharing an affection for one another that millions of other couples did on a lazy morning... was normal.

He wanted to give her that. He wanted to give her so much more, truth told...

He wanted to be home every night to have dinner. He wanted to make plans and keep them. He wanted to be there when Lizzy needed him.
He wanted to make a home, a family, with her.

“I told you I would wait for you.” he muttered as her warm soft body lay against his. It felt like he had waited his whole life for her.

Liz moved her hand between their bodies, wrapping her slim fingers around his girth.

“A man true to his word.” she stated breathlessly.

Pressing her into the cushion of the bed, Red made his move, methodically and meticulously kissing and stroking her body into a heightened state of arousal which she reciprocated.

He kissed between her breasts before suckling the full nipples. He sensually nipped a trail down her torso, pausing momentarily to pay particular attention to the cute little belly button with his tongue. Red knew her weaknesses, her vulnerable spots and felt no compulsion about using this knowledge to his advantage.

He worked his way down the satin skin, his mouth lovingly worshiping the heated flesh.

He took his time, enjoying the journey and the alluring sights along the way.

At one point, he felt her body stiffen slightly directly before the woman’s attitude altered.

He stopped, nuzzling the fragrant down of her sex with which he had been playing, to lift his head, asking the rhetorical question.

“I did the...” she crinkled her nose distastefully, “I know the taste is” she trailed away, her expression a forlorn one, “can’t we just... move on to the good stuff?” she asked hopefully.

Red’s eyes held hers masterfully for a goodly beat. “We’ll do the really ‘good stuff’,” his dry, coarse tone made her melt inside, “of a more in depth connection to what I refer to as ... the really ‘good stuff’.”

The woman hesitantly placed a resisting hand over the area he indicated. “You don’t have to... I wish you wouldn’t... really.”

“Elizabeth,” Red’s tone had altered, “I want to taste your pussy.” he shifted a heated stare, scenting the dark triangle beneath him. “Open your legs to me.” he whispered silkily.

“No.” she pouted determinedly. “You will listen to me on this one Red Reddington.”

Red narrowed his eyes at the woman, wishing he’d never said a damn thing about the taste of that fucking spermicide. He had really only said it in jest at the time, to take the pressure off her making a choice she wasn’t ready for.

“Like fucking hell I will.” he was just as determined to have his way. Clasping his fingers about her wrist, he tugged slightly on the barricade blocking what he wanted.

But she was not going to budge on this issue he sensed, by the set of her pretty features.

Red positioned himself more comfortably, lowering his head. He slid his tongue into the tight slit between her fingers. Liz gasped sharply, her back bowing at the unexpected maneuver. The intense sensation sweeping through her weak limbs.

He worked the roughed muscle expertly, fondling her clit insistently. He rather enjoyed the feel of his tongue trapped between her quickly swelling labia as he massaged hard at her throbbing sex.
He could feel the slight pulse of blood flowing to the rapidly plumping organ.

“Never mind...” he made an executive decision, something better having appeared on the horizon, “keep them closed.”

Concentrating his efforts on the tight alcove, he was pleased as shit to feel the woman trembling uncontrollably under him in record time.

Soft gasps of denial and disbelief escaped her throat from time to time as he practiced the art he knew so well...

Pushing his nose into the curls at her apex, working diligently to produce his particular brand of magic.

Inhaling deeply, he savored the scent of Lizzy. So fixated on that, he noticed nothing else.

Crawling up towards the woman, he stilled her movements, drawing a frown of confusion as he rolled Lizzy to her side.

“Will you open your legs to me now?” He was all to smug, allowing he had so easily produced her orgasm.

“You told me to keep them closed.” she sighed her contentment all the same as Red’s masculine body conformed to her feminine one. “And no, I will not.” He would have to work for this one.

“Very well...” Red gently nipped her shoulder as his rampant erection poked at her back side, “then keep them closed.”

He closed his eyes to the sensation as his thickened cock fell heavily against her silky thigh.

“I don’t like to wait,” he reminded, reaching between them, “reminds me of Glen at the DMV.”

“Your numbers up,” she groaned, arching her hips back searchingly, “come to the front of the line,” she stilled as Red pushed himself against her, the feeling too good to pass up, her pride a forgotten entity suddenly, “to be... served.”

Red smiled happily, enjoying how she quickly adapted to any scenario he threw her way. Though, as he slid into her wet heat... the primal urge he had been experiencing when with this woman, made itself very well known, quickly enough.

Grasping her hip, he tilted her back into his intrusion. He jerked against the woman, captivated by the sight of the natural bounce of her bottom impacting with his pelvis.

“Does this feel good to that little pussy?” he gritted, driving his erection inch by inch into the slick, heated cavern. “Tell me what you like.” he commanded his rights, drawing a low steady moan from the woman’s throat. “Say that naughty word for me.”

He wrapped his arm around the woman, palming her full breast, gently kneading the giving flesh. Threading his fingers through the damp curls on her sex, his fingers danced against her clit, her body responding instantly to his touch.

Liz fought to say the vulgar word, wanting so badly to please him, as he had her.

Hearing that man and that deep sexy voice say, pussy, damn near made her come unglued. Really, any vulgarity he said, especially at such moments as this, made her quiver inside.
Red hardly ever cussed, but when he did, emotions were running high. It meant that he was as deeply invested in whatever project that was at hand.

Just the thought of hearing Liz say that, that she would feel comfortable enough to get past the maidenly modesty instilled since birth to most females... made his erection harden inside her. She could feel it swell as he made his request.

“You can feel it inside you, can’t you.” Red persisted, his tone filled with anticipation. “You’re so tight, it can hardly move and it wants so badly to move, Elizabeth,”

The woman groaned as desire swept through her willing mind and body. Damn, he was good at this! She refused to think of how he came about such knowledge... but was ever so glad he had.

“Tell it to please you...” it was coaxed, “hell, I have no fucking control over it any longer.” he had faced the fact days ago. “It belongs to you, baby... do with it as you wish.”

Liz’s mouth parted, trying to form the words bubbling inside her jumbled thoughts whenever the man was near.

A shrill jangling sound interrupted the need. She started visibly as it continued it’s incessant clanging inside her brain. It trilled three more times before stopping abruptly which is more than she could say for the man whose body was cradled so lovingly behind hers.

Red had not lost one beat, his rhythm steady and confident. He continued the wonderful litany of unrestrained dialogue and sounds she elicited from the man.

There was nothing hotter than listening to Red Reddington get off. The deep rumbling satisfied moans he made... literally made the woman’s stomach flip wildly. That she was the one accomplishing such a feat, astonished her.

Red glanced down, drawing his shaft out to the very tip, just keeping the large crown in place, before slowly sliding back inside. The act left him breathless and euphoric.

“Fuck, baby.” his hissed his appreciation. Curling his fingers around her hip bone, he rolled his hips, completely focused on his steady rhythm and the sound of his cock pumping Lizzy’s tiny wet hole.

Just listening to her corresponding whimpers of delight, made his fucking nerve endings raw and alive like they had never felt before. The music they made together when making love was his most favorite sound in the entire universe.

He felt like a live wire, ready to spark at any given moment, especially when that tight little tunnel of her’s clenched desperately around his driving shaft.

It was if she wanted to grasp hold of him and never let go. A sentiment he more than understood.

Tightening his arms about the woman, Red closed the space between them at every possible avenue. He gently moved the thick waves of hair from his path, his mouth sucking feverishly at her damp nape as he literally ‘marked’ his territory.

Liz’s nails dug into his hip, silently urging the man to go, “... Faster.”

Answering the breathless request, Red focused on Elizabeth’s response both vocally and physically until he garnered the needed results.

Enjoying the new tempo, Liz released a sharp cry, arching her back in praise of his efforts, drawing
a low growl of approval from the man’s throat.

“Just there.” he sensed by her response, more than in tune with his partner.

She sighed blissfully, lovingly stroking the large fingers, which were lovingly stroking her.

Red dropped his head into the pillow, groaning his disbelief when the familiar grating sound began anew.

“Answer it.” Liz urged, scratching her short nails over his hip. “Could be important.”

Sighing his aggravation, the man cursed fluently, fumbling for the drawer, blindly feeling for the phone before pulling it free.

“What?” he snapped, beyond annoyed, his large finger softly petted the woman’s clitoris, teasing her mercilessly.

Elizabeth moaned softly, before a large palm was placed gently over her mouth allowing her to smell their combined scents. The sweet smell of sex and show of dominance spiked her arousal to new heights.

And Red felt it. Leaning into her, he continued his unhurried movements, absently listening to the voice on the other end of the line.

“Is he there now...” Red asked somewhat steadily, before lifting the phone away from his mouth, rapidly slapping the dark plastic into the rumpled bedding. The woman had reached between her legs, petting herself and his shaft as it became exposed to the cool air.

“God...” he whispered harshly, before pulling the phone forcefully back. “He can wait, dammit.”

Liz strained for release, pushing her bottom back into the large offering. Opening her lips slightly, she drew one of Red’s fingers inside her warm wet mouth, suckling him in rhythm with her body’s dictates.

“Dear God...” Red sighed shakily, his concentration split between the call and the woman making love to him.

“Now, where the hell do you think I am?” he gritted his anguish, his head dropping against Liz’s shoulder, as he fought for some semblance of control.

“Your cock feels so... good...” she moaned piteously at one particularly hard thrust, “when you d-do that.”

“Oh fuck...” Red’s voice shook noticeably. He hadn’t expected her to say it. Would have been fine, had she not. What it did to his mind, he was having difficulty assimilating.

“Dammit, Mark,” he snapped sharply, “shut the fuck up.” The other man’s constant drone was wearing thin. “I have no damned idea what the hell you’re saying,” it was informed bluntly, “nor do I care.”

Liz whimpered softly, drawing Red’s undivided attention for a brief second.

“Deeper...” she moaned softly, “put your cock... deeper.”

“Son of a...” Red murmured breathlessly, sliding his shaft deep inside. “I’ll be there in an hour...or so...” he panted his involvement, clicking the call off, muting the sound of Mark’s laughter.
Liz held her breath, waiting anxiously as the man dropped the phone to the bed.

“Give me a minute, baby.” Red implored breathlessly.

Grasping a pillow, he slid it against her body, rolling her. Her bottom lifted into his deepened thrusts as she reached out for some sort of stability. Squeezing her fingers around his wrist, the man worked his hand between her and the pillow, fondling her soft spot perfectly.

She groaned as the heavy weight of his cock settled deep in her receptive body, his large crown butting up against her sensitive cervix. The full sensation made her abdomen ache pleasantly.

Red groaned audibly as the woman’s whole bottom shook with desperation.

“Is this what you want?” he questioned roughly.

Liz nodded tightly, concentrating on the man’s thick fingers massaging her sex and the erection intimately encased in her body.

She felt the man move behind her, bracketing her thighs with his muscled ones, holding her legs tightly closed.

Moaning brokenly, she focused intently on his plump shaft pushing against her increased tightness.

Her body erupted in goosebumps as Red exhaled sharply, his hot breath brushing against her shoulders and spine in a rush. Both were fixated on the give and take of her swollen lips wrapped about his hard, wet flesh.

He felt her little toes curl into his shin, a sure sign she was close to coming.

“Like that...” she mewed, bowing her bottom up to take more.

Pushing off the bed, he ran his hand up her sleek back, his fingers grasping her shoulder. Palming her hip, he lifted her slightly.

“Like... this?” he questioned softly, his dark eyes watching his wet erection reappear once more.

“...Yes.” she hissed breathlessly.

“You are so fucking wet for me...” He moaned deeply, his head falling back as Lizzy’s core rippled around him.

They both hummed in contentment when the man nudged her deeply, only exposing a mere few inches to the cool room.

“Do you like that?” he asked quietly, rubbing his free fingers up her spine, groaning at the sight of his darkened hand caressing her lily white skin.

“...Yes,” she sighed dreamily, “... your cock feels so thick... so hard.”

Red’s sack tightened at her use of that word, knowing very well how uncomfortable it was for her to say at this stage in the game. But she was trying to be open, to play...for him. That meant the world to him.

“Touch your clit.” he exhaled amorously.

Though she didn’t really need to, more than pleased with what the man was doing to her, she did as...
urged. Reaching back, she rubbed that hardened nub quickly, clenching hard around the thick shaft loving her.

“...Yes...” he drawled, as he felt her tighten around him. Getting lost in the sweet sounds coming from her beautiful mouth and the vision of him taking her body in the early morning sun... he let the exotic feeling wash over him.

Arching into his quickened thrusts, Liz held her breath, her pussy heavy and throbbing. Her panted breaths came in short, sharp gasps. Her abdomen tightened pleasantly, her thighs shaking against Red’s muscled ones.

His own impending orgasm tingled at his spine, the will to hold back simply too much as he felt his pelvis dampen with her arousal.

“Please,” he wasn’t above pleading at this point, “come... for me.”

The man’s thick, wet erection brushed against Liz’s thighs, heightening the sensation, pushing her to climax. Lizzy tensed under him, her tunnel clenching him so tightly, he felt as though he was splitting her in two as he plunged back inside the creamy little hole.

Curving his hands around her waist, he hastily pulled her back as the first rush of his release warmed his shaft.

Their mingled cries of release was music to his ears.

This was all he wanted to do, all damn day. Watch and feel her in the throes of passion. She was so uninhibited, so free, completely focused on how good it felt, nothing else in the whole fucking world seemed to matter.

He had missed this so much. A partner who lost themselves in their lovemaking.

She didn’t care about anything but giving into her body’s demands and he loved it.

Falling unto his arm, he braced himself, slowing his thrusts. He gently bit into her shoulder, grunting animalistically, each thrust filling her with his cum. A deep moan of satisfaction collected in his chest as he felt the heat of their combined arousal give his pulsing erection a damn slick ride.

“You feel amazing,” he groaned as his cock head pushed through the thick cream, “... best fucking pussy I’ve ever had...”

Liz moved up into the heat of Red’s body, shivering at the roughened texture of his chest hair tickling her back and bottom, his masculinity overpowering her. The feeling intensified when the man nuzzled her over sensitized flesh, his heavy breathing and soft lips caressing her shoulders.

“...Thank you.” he rasped his gratitude, unaware he had as yet.

She chuckled breathlessly, easing her sated body into the bedding.

His fingers flexed about her waist, trembling with the last vestiges of his orgasm, “I’ve been waiting to have you in the morning for so long...”

“We’ve had morning sex.” she reminded. She groaned her disappointment as the thick crown of his shaft slid free, the saturated flesh, sliding wetly along her thighs.

“Arguably, but this... this was different.” the man’s voice deepened with pleasure, stroking his
waning erection along her ass cheeks. “Nor have I thanked you properly for you... cooperation.”

Liz laughing quietly, enjoying his very apparent gratitude and admiration. Red settled down beside her, happily accepting as she nestled herself against him.

“I take Visa and MasterCard.” She quipped, enjoying the sound of his husky chuckle.

“You’ve never done that before.” she thought back to the new position, her cheeks glowing happily.

She drew shapeless designs on his chest. The man pulled the sheet up around them, warding off the sudden chill in the room.

“I’ve wanted to for a long time...” he admitted freely. “A desire which has magnified since you’ve been sharing my bed.”

“I’m so glad I could indulge you in this little... idiosyncrasy.” she stretched, a grin over taking her face.

“God,” Red smoothed his large hand over her shapely ass, his fingers conforming to the suppleness, “so am I.”

Lifting her slightly, he connected his mouth to hers in a languid kiss that left both sighing contentedly at it’s completion.

She giggled quietly, resting more comfortably against his large frame. She hated to disturb the serenity, but curiosity consumed her. “...Hey.”

“Uh hmm...”

“When I first came to stay with you...” she questioned quietly. “When did you...eh,” wondering how to word it correctly so as to receive the best amount of response–

“Know I wanted between your legs?” he surmised the question by her hesitant manner. “Narrowing it down for me, are we?” he chuckled.

She lifted questioning eyes, finding his gaze gentle on her. “I wanted between your thighs long before you came to stay with me.” he reaffirmed. “And you know it.”

She smiled softly, before he returned to the question at hand.

“Well, there were a few times, to be honest.” he admitted. “But the one that stands out is when I had to... take the problem into my own hands, so to speak.”

Liz gaped at the thought that Red had done... that. Though, it was a silly idea to think he never...indulged. What man didn’t?

“Do you mind me asking...” she trailed off.

“When you were doing yoga and fell.” he smiled. “That little ass of yours tuck ed up against my cock and...” he blew out a breath at the memory, “it was either get a moment alone or we would have become better acquainted, right then and there, on the yoga mat.”

Liz snuggled in closer, envisioning the picture painted and felt her body respond accordingly.

“I was already dying to sink myself into your hot little body.” he confessed. “That day, the need to pull down those tight shorts and bare this beautiful ass, was too much to handle.”
Knowing what she did now... she kind of wished he had taken a chance. She may have been shocked at first, sure. But the expertise he would have provided would have swayed her quickly enough.

“I’m sorry, Lizzy.” Red sighed heavily, his own thoughts drifting to another direction. “I should have shut the phone off.”

Hell, she had forgotten all about that, to be honest. She had one goal in mind, and it had nothing to do with that phone.

“It’s not a big deal, Red,” she waved it off. “I hardly noticed, if you want the truth,” she laughed shyly. “I am turning into a major hussy... must be Silas’ influence.”

He had taken calls while having sex in some form or other, before. He had looked upon it as a challenge. Had even unintentionally done it with Lizzy while he’d been with Lexa.

Though, unlike his time with Lexa and partners before that, this time... trying to stay focused had been impossible when intimately attached with Lizzy.

Only a few short moments had passed since he ended the call, and he suddenly realized he didn’t have the foggiest idea what Mark had wanted or even what the man had said.

Red craned his head when he felt her cheek plump into a smile, against his chest. “Is there something I should know?” he smiled softly, picking up the subtle hint well enough.

“It’s kind of exciting, isn’t it?” Liz smiled impishly up at him. “Talking to someone while we... were doing what we were doing.” she laid her head back down, drawing her finger across his torso. “It’s like a secret we’re sharing.”

Though Red was absolutely positive Mark picked up on the fact that he was making love to Elizabeth. He did have to admit that his arousal had spiked... if only because hers had. He had been very aware that she became more involved, her movements more suggestively passionate, she sucked on his finger... said cock for him... after the call came in.

Did he have a little exhibitionist on his hands?

“It is, the best kind of secret.” he agreed. “One I hope to share with you on a regular basis.” he smiled as she chuckled quietly. “Regardless, it was something that certainly could have waited.”

“I understand about work issues, Red.” she reminded. “You are so understanding where my job is concerned.”

“This is what I want to do,” he hugged her closer, dropping a kiss to the crown of her head, “right here. The rest of it, doesn’t mean shit any longer, truth told.”

“So, Ms. Keen,” Liz took on a news reporter tone of voice, holding her hand up like it was a microphone, “how does it feel to have been the catalyst to the downfall of Red Reddington’s empire?”

“Oh, stop it...” the man scoffed. “I could run my empire from this bed, if I so wished.”

Turning to his side, he grasped her hand, wrapping her slim fingers around his length. Without thought, Liz instantly stroked his shaft as Red pulled at the sheet, exposing the woman’s breasts to his gaze.
“So what,” he flicked the rosy peak with his tongue, before capturing it, suckling the roughened nub, “if I’m a little distracted.” his lips muttered loosely around the nipple in his mouth.

“Was that a crack about the size of my breasts?” she sighed, pushing said breast towards the man.

He frowned, taking up an overflowing handful of the giving flesh. “Hell no...”

Reaching between them, Red curved his fingers about hers, tugging at the velvety flesh, pumping the organ quickly.

Pushing his giggling lover flat to the bed, he worked his muscled thigh between her silky ones, maneuvering his bulk easily into the vacant space.

Liz gasped as his growing erection bounced against her center, “You’re gonna be late...” she whispered breathlessly.

“I don’t give a damn...” he groaned against her mouth, stroking his throbbing shaft along his favorite place.

Liz’s eyes opened, staring over the man’s shoulder up into the mirrors. She wriggled in anticipation as he settled his bulk in position and dropped his hips.

Keeping her eyes focused, she raptly watched him inch forward while simultaneously feeling him slide his thick girth past her swollen slit.

“Let them wait...” she mewed, as the man completed their connection.

“Now, you’re getting the hang of it.” he held his smile, glad that they had come to the same understanding.

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Even though Red was a good two hours late to the meeting, he found those in attendance in relatively good mood considering.

Antonio seemed to take great delight in his tardiness, grinning knowingly at Red’s serene appearance as the young man took a seat at the long conference table.

This was the fourth day of tense negotiations and countless revised stipulations.

This was a first, in Red’s memory that the Italian Mafia and the Chinese Triad, had come to any kind of understanding over any issue.

With Red and Company acting as mediators, and eventual partners... the three contributing factions had finally settled on the terms of their agreement.

He wasn’t sure about the others, but he was very interested to see how this panned out in future negotiations. He hoped everyone would be able to stand by said agreements.

As they were completing the end stages of finalizing the deal, Red’s text alert went off.

Absently pulling the phone out, he found a picture text. Another text immediately followed.

He always had appreciated Silas sending these on and off throughout the day, as proof of Lizzy’s well being.
Red had felt neglectful to her, not having been able to spend as much time with Liz this trip as he would have liked.

The pictures often showed Liz having drinks at the bar or riding roller coasters and what not with Silas, Francis and the girls.

They always brought a smile to Red’s face.

In one instance however, Red was given a moment of pause when Silas sent a picture of Lizzy cozying up with someone... only to realize on further examination that it was... Elvis. Or a wax figure of the man.

He was happy to see Lizzy enjoying her time in Vegas.

And today seemed no different as he opened the first text. A smile curved his lips. Lizzy was standing in her blue bikini by the pool, her face twisted with amused annoyance at some unseen person.

Most likely Francis.

Opening the other text, this was a closer shot. His grin widened as his eyes raked the photo. It showed Lizzy fiddling with the ties at her hip. He had a sudden urge to pull those strings to see the treasure that lay beneath.

Silas always knew what would make Red’s heart race.

Scrolling to see Silas’s quip for the day, Red’s blood ran cold as he read the caption...

*Guess who I found. CRVR*

Chapter End Notes

It's been a long couple of day, so any mistakes are totally mine.
May 21

*Guess who I found. CRVR*

“Jesus!” Red stared at the message, his senses reeling. He sat motionless, allowing the emotions to wash over him, unable to do anything else, truth told.

He had felt fear before. Gut wrenching, heart palpitating, mesmerizing fear, but never one so totally paralyzing, so overpowering, so all consuming... that he could not override the factor and continue on with the task at hand.

Another time came to mind when he had felt something similar. The night of Carver’s attack on Elizabeth Keen.

Visions of the woman’s blood stained clothes, her shallow, haunted eyes, blurred to crystal clarity.

“Lock down the hotel!” He barked, his knuckles white from the exertion exuded on the table top he had grasped for, a stay hold of reality.

Even as he said the words, he felt their uselessness, Carver would not be on the premises. The bastard would have made certain of escape before having sent the... or perhaps not.

Hope loomed large in Red’s soul. “No one leaves!”

The son of a bitch was just egotistical enough to stick around to watch the terror his actions could produce.

Shoving back his chair with an abrupt rising, Red Reddington focused all his energies on one thing, Elizabeth’s survival.

“Now!” his commanding tone conveyed an urgency which transmitted across the suddenly silent area, all eyes having turned to the man’s unexplainable behavior.

Christopher was moving before he knew it, issuing similar orders to his Security teams.

Antonio Crocetti arose with regal dignity, his features masked, his body tense, almost coiled, as he watched the younger man’s face.

Red bolted, Dembe close behind.

The Triad members left behind exchanged enigmatical glances as they unhurriedly followed suit.

Rushing for the stairwell, Red and Dembe literally ran the couple flights before bursting out onto the main floor of the Casino.

Running through the gaming area, people jumped back out of the way, scattering almost comically, faces registering annoyance or avid interest.

Red shoved out the back doors, pulling his gun from its holster.
His heart pounded painfully in his chest as he quickly scanned the large pool and deck as Dembe came alongside him, weapon out, searching as well, with the eyes of a trained observer.

He felt his heart stop, a coldness overtaking him and the panic rising the more he scanned the area, for he could not find the woman anywhere.

“Lizzy!” He yelled out over the people milling around. “Lizzy!” He bellowed louder as he moved through the fast parting crowd. “Dammit, Elizabeth!” his fear turned to terror... had Carver already retrieved his target? “Where the fuck are you!”

“There.” Dembe pointed, his calm tone soothing Red’s anxiety.

The older man spotted Silas finally, over by the West wall, the guard’s weapon at the ready.

Behind Silas’ massive frame, Red could just make out the top of a shiny mop of dark hair. The silver haired guard’s beefy arm encircled Elizabeth’s waist with no effort on his part... as she was pressed tightly against the shelter of Silas’ body.

Not much could be seen of the woman. How Dembe had spotted her, Red did not know and at this moment, he didn’t especially care.

Relief washed over the man, the tension in his body lessening by degrees.

Silas had backed Elizabeth into a convenient walled area, limiting access to the woman while simultaneously guiding her to a possible escape route.

Red noted an entry gate far to the pairs right.

Silas always thought two moves ahead in any situation in life. Perhaps it’s why he stayed alive in such a perilous career choice.

Whatever. Red was more than grateful for such clear thinking at present.

Seeing Lizzy secured allowed Red to return his attention to the immediate threat.

The man scanned the faces of the crowded pool area.

There was a low murmur of confusion sweeping those present. Men with guns drawn often silenced the most boisterous gatherings, or at the least, that was Red’s experience on the matter.

Carver could be among those who looked back at him.

Red had noted Francis Holbrook seconds before when the young man had bolted from his longue chair, a Glock swiftly pulled from the folds of a nearby towel.

Lia and Amanda were shuffled more than efficiently into the confines of the bar area, hidden and secure for the moment as Francis took time to survey the commotion taking place.

The young man’s alert eyes cautiously swept his surroundings, making contact with the stoic black man.

Dembe stood, a beacon of reason and calm in a chaotic storm.

Francis shifted a questioning glance Red’s way.

Red had other priorities however, heading for Silas’ position, as he secured his weapon.
There really was no need for the gun as Silas’ Security team had appeared miraculously out of nowhere seconds before.

Hotel security seemed to be onboard as well. Christopher was doing his job as Red knew he would and he was grateful.

When he was close enough, the large man moved from Red’s determined path, allowing access to Elizabeth.

Any thought vanished as Red’s arms engulfed Lizzy’s small frame, crushing her to his warmth. The man closed his eyes to the reality of the woman. She was safe. He could breathe again.

“W-what’s wrong?” Liz stuttered, feeling the man trembling against her.

The horror of another reality returned.

“Carver.” Red’s tone conveyed the emotions he was feeling as he turned to the patiently waiting guard. “He’s here.”

Silas’ expression remained passive. If the news alarmed or surprised, he would never reveal as much.

“I heard you coming.” Silas motioned a few of his men forward with a nonchalant wave of his hand.

“C-Carver?” Elizabeth’s whisper halted all speech, the men glancing her way.

The blue eyes widened, startled, but Red was pleased to see nothing other than that at present.

She could be in shock of course... Red knew the adrenaline he had felt was wearing off. He had time to process, she had not as yet.

Silas returned his attention elsewhere. The sound of lively music on the far side of the pool deck added to the needed diversion he had demanded from his team, leading the befuddled guests away, to a more contained scene.

Hotel Security smiled pleasantly, as they roamed the guests, arresting any fears, as waiters and bartenders offered up free drinks and food, enticing any undue attention elsewhere for the moment.

Mark and Francis approached their position, weapons holstered as to aid in the containment of the crowd’s curiosity but Red knew those weapons could be drawn and ready in milliseconds if the need arose.

Francis discreetly hid his Glock under folded arms, but his expression did not bode well.

“What the hell is going on?” Francis checked on Elizabeth who still huddled in Red’s embrace, her eyes darting about the crowd.

Francis inched closer, sensing something terribly awry.

“What the fuck, Red?” Mark, usually the consummate gentleman around a lady, forgot his manners. “The Triad thinks something is...” he drifted as he witnessed Elizabeth’s face for himself, “this has nothing to do with the business at hand,” he lifted concerned eyes, “... does it.”

Red shook his head grimly, noting the late arrival of several members of said ‘Triad’. All of whom stood patiently, having watched the previous ‘show’.

They were reserving judgement which in itself spoke highly of Red Reddington’s influence and
reputation.

Dembe had sauntered over, for nothing in the entire universe seemed to disrupt the man’s perennial ‘cool’ but a deep scowl on the remarkably handsome face alerted Red to a problem.

Dembe came alongside Elizabeth, craning his neck to the side. Something out of the norm had caught his attention.

Red removed his arm for the large black man was picking at an object below Red’s jacket sleeve.

Dembe pulled at the band-aid like material, removing it with one deft flick.

Liz stood still under his administrations wanting desperately to look over her shoulder to see what the hell was going on.

“Raymond...” Dembe held up the patch, showing the ominous ‘tag’ to his friend and the guard beside him.

Red’s tenseness returned two-fold as he too, read the neatly scripted initials.

\textit{CRVR}

“What the hell is that?” Francis exchanged perplexed looks with Mark Donovan.

“Get her inside, now.” Red hissed, ignoring the question and questioner. He ushered Liz along, his steps hurried.

It was difficult to keep abreast of the man for Lizzy but she managed for a certain type of fear fueled her feet.

Francis was not deterred however. He hastened his own pace, coming alongside the entourage which accompanied his friend.

Elizabeth kept shooting frantic looks his way over the shoulders of the much taller Security people.

Francis motioned curtly, once again and several similarly dressed men surrounded a totally disoriented Lia and Amanda who had watched the unfolding drama from afar.

The two women were ushered into line behind the rapidly retreating Red Reddington who had covered the expanse of ground and was already converging on the upcoming entrance doors that loomed ahead.

Francis marched diligently in step with the contingent surrounding his friends, a million questions filling his head.

When he came abreast of Red, he was of a mind to voice a few, “You want to tell me wha–”

“Not now, Francis.” it was brusquely advised. Reddington had one objective and one alone. “We need to get to the Villa.”

“I want to stay here.” Liz felt an inner anger emerging, balking at the overly rushed steps she was being forced to take. “I want to confront the bastard!” she hissed.

“What basta–” Francis was quick to pick up on the slip.

“On our own playing field.” Red vetoed such a foolish notion.
Both Liz and Francis knew sound judgement when they heard it, falling silent... almost.

“It feels wrong,” Liz protested, but resumed a step as Francis’ hand on her back suggested strongly, she should do so, “like I’m running away. I won’t do that again, Red!”

Red met the stubborn set of her chin, the mounting fury in her stare.

“Pick your battles.” Silas muttered, if only to end the stalemate which had ensued. “Another time, another place without innocents about.”

Red suddenly resented the fact Silas always seemed to know how to reach the woman.

The blue eyes swept the guests absently allowing herself to be escorted forward in the next second with but one curt...

“Don’t stand there, you idiots!” she shoved angrily at Mark and Francis who had flanked her now for some few minutes. “Do you want to be murdered? Do you want to be killed?”

Both men grinned for her mood, nothing more.

“By a beautiful woman right after a night of passionate lovemaking.” Mark quipped to lighten the moment but the remark seemed only appreciated by Francis Holbrook, whose grin widened slightly.

“Preferably in your sleep, right?” Francis stated wryly.

Red’s palm flattened against the glass of the hotel entrance, shoving through the heavy panels, continuing down the long, plush carpeted corridor.

“Get away!” Liz raised her tone and voice for the ‘two idiots’ refused to listen to reason. “Let go!” she tried to jerk from Red’s grip.

“You’re making our job more difficult.” Silas cast a strong look her way and the woman fell silent instantly, her resistance melting into a brooding silence.

Christopher awaited, ushering everyone into a large room at the end of the hall.

A few Triad people had discreetly gathered inside, all standing about, quietly speaking amongst themselves.

A silence fell upon Reddington’s arrival.

Red ignored all else turning to more important matters.

“Transportation?” he issued a taut request.

“It will take a second.” Chris advised just as tightly. “You want to tell me what the hell is going on?” he threw his arms out wide, openly frustrated. “I can’t do my job if I’m left in the dark!”

Red’s eyes lifted slowly, a menace inside the crystal grey depths. He knew Christopher was not to blame for any of this, he could sympathize with the man but right now.... Red need to ‘vent’ and God help any unsuspecting victim who happened to be nearby.

“Hey, man,” Christopher defused the situation as professionally as he knew how, “I’m just wanting to help.”

Red let it go. Dembe stepped in, offering explanations which would suffice.
Red turned his anger elsewhere. “You saw him,” it was surmised, “you must have!”

Liz was startled, unaccustomed to such a tone from the man.

“What did he look like?” the light eyes bore into hers as he curved his fingers cuttingly around Liz’s arms. “Brown hair, blonde?” He snapped in rapid succession.

“I–I don’t know.” She shook in his grasp, wondering at the chill suddenly racking her body. “There were so many people!”

The Triad members milled beside the doorway, disapproving frowns on their eclectic faces as they watched Red manhandling the tiny woman.

“Is there a problem, here?” The leader, Guiren, a distinguished East Asian, stepped forward posing the question on everyone’s mind.

“A slight disturbance only...” Mark turned, explaining the situation, as he knew it anyway... filling in the gaps with acceptable lies.

The man listened, shrewdly seeing past Mark’s diplomatic efforts, understanding Reddington’s fear. He had seen for himself the open affection displayed before this ‘slight disturbance’ had occurred.

If it had been his lady in danger, Guiren knew he’d over react as Reddington was doing now. Reddington would calm down soon enough and love her as much as he was scaring her. He was just that terrified for her, he couldn’t control it yet.

“Think! Who touched you!” Red raised his voice, gripping her tighter. “Focus.”

She closed her eyes, swallowing harshly, when Silas spoke. “A man stumbled against her, medium height, bulky, brown hair, he was wearing–”

“Khaki pants, green shirt.” Her bottom lip quivered under Red’s angered glare. “Like a u–uniform.”

“Delivery guy.” Chris spoke quickly into the radio, relaying the info onward to his people.

Liz wrapped her arms around her body, shivering more in fear than because of the cold air brushing against her wet suit.

She hated this feeling. She was a damn FBI agent for heavens sake. She just couldn’t shake the feeling of dread she felt when that horrible man’s name was mentioned.

“What the fuck were you doing!” Red’s fury was allowed a brief moment of freedom. “How could you not see him!” he yelled.

Liz blinked back the gathering tears, even more scared than Red. That Carver had gotten that close to her and she hadn’t noticed, made her sick. And worse... she felt utterly useless. She had never felt so inadequate in her life.

She was trained to observe. To take in her surroundings. To notice danger around her.

And she had failed, miserably. Her biggest threat in life, not only approached her, but had actually touched her. And she had been wholly unaware.

“He could have taken you away, Elizabeth!” Red snapped angrily. “My God...”

“Reddington...” Antonio’s stern tone conciliated the overwrought man. When Crocetti had arrived,
Red could not have said.

Red’s anxious eyes darted towards the older man, as the full weight of what just happened crashed in on him.

Not only had Carver proved the threat he posed.

Red was berating a visibly unsettled Elizabeth Keen. He had been verbally thrashing an already stricken individual.

Never mind that Lizzy was being stalked and targeted by a psychotic serial killer. Allow Red Reddington to add his own brand of malice to the picture.

The thought sickened the man to the core.

Brushing a hand against his brow, Red was shocked to see it trembling as he grasped the lapels of his jacket to jerk it back into a semblance of order. He adjusted his tone accordingly as the fear he felt for her safety overwhelmed the man.

“He could have hurt you, baby.” he whispered brokenly, the anguished eyes sharing that pain willingly with her.

Removing the warmed linen jacket, Red wrapped it around her small frame, gently tugging her into a fevered embrace. Rubbing his hands up and down her back, he warmed her chilled body. Comforting them both.

Guiren’s frame relaxed finally. There was no real problem between Reddington and his woman. None that existed between the couple at least. Some outside interference, definitely, was rearing it’s ugly head.

He knew this man loved this slight slip of a girl. Reddington’s voice had cracked slightly when he had called her the endearment. He could work with this man, a man not afraid to show how much he cared for those he loved.

Guiren had been trying to get a reading on Reddington since they had first met. He thought perhaps that he would like Reddington from the way Red interacted with the men at his side. He seemed to genuinely like those he employed, respected them to a fault, and care for their well being.

As he watched Reddington’s hand tremble as it pet the woman’s small head, as he pulled her even closer to get a handle on his fear and agitation, Guiren knew this... this was honest emotion.

The head of the Eastern Empire of consolidated crime, and the aged, revered Mobster who had proven himself over the years to be a consummate leader of men, watched Red steer the woman to the couch as he hovered over her.

Chris came alongside Red, his radio raised as he diligently listened to his security chief’s report. “I’ll be right there.” he clicked off the communication, seeking out Red, “They have something for me.”

Accepting a cashmere wrap from Antonio, Red placed it about Liz’s small frame.

“Dembe, can you go and get her some clothes?” Red had noted the slight shiver which traversed her body.

“No, no...” she stilled the large man, “I can change... later.” she had been enough trouble for these
“You all right?” Red asked, kneeling before her, lifting her haunted eyes to his steady gaze. She sat silently, but nodded.

“I’m sorry I yelled at you.” he clenched his jaw, clearly angry with himself for such a lapse.

“You were scared,” She said, her voice steady enough, “rightfully so.”

“I wasn’t scared,” he gently carded his fingers through her damp strands, “I was fucking terrified.”

“Something alerted you.” she had time to consider a few things. “How did you know he was... here?”

“Silas...” he held his hand out, taking the phone back as it was handed over. He scrolled to the first picture. “I got this one first. I just assumed Silas took it.” He showed it to her, remembering how he had smiled, then his expression altered. “Then I got this one.”

Liz shivered involuntarily as she perused the photos.

*He had been that close? Well, of course he had, he had touched her, pressed something into her skin, something she had not even felt.*

*That monster had touched her. Why had her flesh not recoiled? Why hadn’t she become violently ill? She felt as if she would be now...*

“He attached this,” Red hesitated before he showed her the caption, “along with it.”

Liz tightened her arms about her waist, turning away from the phone and all it represented.

“Lizzy,” the man closed the phone, his expression grim, “I don’t mean to keep harping, but if there is anything else...” he implored, “anything that might...” he trailed away, seeing the distress apparent on the pretty features.

“I remember someone brushing against me, but...” she kept her tone even, apologizing with her manner, for not remembering more.

It took all she had because images kept resurfacing in her minds eyes, images of that first fateful meeting.

“It happened so fast.” How many times had she heard that statement? It had been so frustrating then. She could imagine what Red must be feeling. So close... but so far.

“I dismissed it.” she closed her eyes. “It happens all the time,” she tried to explain, “a waiter, a busboy...”

“But it wasn’t a fucking busboy... or waiter.” Red whispered hoarsely, he threw a look at Silas.

“What the hell! I did my job.” Silas was a little off-kilter after all, his temper flaring.

“Stop.” Liz pleaded, “for God’s sake. He’s saved my life any number of times and he protected me today... don’t... don’t do this.”

Red felt the rebuke, shifting the focus of his anger. “I know that...” his tone mellowed if only for the woman’s sake.
He was pissed at the world today, or at fate... or God. Or all of the above. “And of course, now is not the time.”

Francis appeared out of nowhere, a tumbler of scotch in hand. “Settle your nerves?”

He bypassed Red to hand it over, a smile for Lizzy. “Not that you need it!” he held his hands aloft in the universal sign of peace. “Not saying that...”

Liz took the liquor gratefully, sipping the warming serum, feeling it sear her throat.

“I’m going to grab the girls.” Francis motioned to the vicinity needed. “If you guys can manage without me?”

Red waved the request aside. “See to them.” he asked of Dembe to accompany the young man. “See to their safety, Dembe...please.”

The large man accompanied Mark and Francis, all three disappearing out the door in seconds.

“Be careful.” Red called out a hasty reminder.

Liz’s tense muscles were beginning to relax in spite of her better judgement. “Can we say, incompetent?” she muttered dejectedly. “I can just hear the team now.”

“We’ll find him, Lizzy.” Red sounded more confident than he felt at the moment. He would regain his equilibrium, he realized, it was simply taking more time than usual.

“Is there anything,” it was stressed, as the quiet solemn man approached, Guiren was genuinely interested in the reply, “we can do to assist?”

Red stood, offering his hand. “I apologize for leaving the meeting so abruptly.”

“Unfortunately, because of this... slight disturbance, I must cut short my intended stay and will be taking my leave.” Red silenced the woman’s objections with a discrete shake of his head. “You will understand the reasons hopefully but I assure you... another more suitable location will shortly be available for our purposes.”

“Of course... her protection is paramount.” the man understood.
Antonio Crocetti had crossed the room, politely awaiting his turn to speak. His eyes fell softly on Elizabeth Keen as he cradled her small face tenderly.

“No harm will come to you, gattina.” he said, patting her gently. “This I promise you.” the man’s smoky timbre washed warmly over her.

He turned to Red, “If need be, our business can be conducted by... other means.” he waved the issue aside, having consulted his counter point before making the statement.

“Our people are at your disposal, Reddington, which most surely goes without saying.” Guiren offered magnanimously.

“Yes, my men will see you safely to your destination and afterward, to the airport when ready.” Antonio offered sincerely.

“I see it as a most promising sign, gentlemen.” Red was pleasantly surprised, indeed. “That our forces have joined together so quickly and efficiently in a time of such distressed difficulty.”

He once again offered the hand of friendship to both individuals. “Thank you for your understanding and support. It is greatly appreciated.”

Christopher reentered the room, glancing to the others gathered within. He had ordered several dealers on site, tables had been set up. His special guests were once again on a more even keel, some trying their luck, but the tension had melted away.

“We thought we had him, but false alarm,” he relayed the news quickly. “It was a new delivery guy, but he was checked out, besides the guy was like eighteen and scared shitless by all the attention focused on him.”

Red hid his disappointment well, offering a smile for Lizzy when she turned devastated eyes his way.

“I’ve got surveillance pulling the feed.” Chris continued with better news, he hoped. “As soon as they get it collected, I will have it delivered to you.”

Red nodded his gratitude. Maybe the bastard had overplayed his hand this time. A clear image would be a literal God-send.

Red didn’t really hold out much hope however. Carver was no fool.

“The car is waiting.” Christopher finished with a wave of his hand.

Liz placed her unfinished drink on a nearby table, clutching his jacket closer about her shoulders as she allowed Red to guide her with a gentle hand. She hesitated in her step, looking back at Guiren and Antonio.

“Again, allow me to apologize for–”

Antonio captured her hand, laying a gallant kiss on her soft skin. “There are other things in this world more important, yes?”

Elizabeth smiled genuinely, grateful for his gracious acceptance for the inconvenience.

“I hope, if you’re ever in DC, you’ll visit?” she replied hastily to the both men, before stepping impulsively to in turn kiss their cheeks. “You haven’t really seen us at our very best, I would love a
chance to alter your perception of me.”

A soft smile pulled at Red’s mouth as he watched Lizzy charm the older man. But then, there was also something charming about Antonio’s regard for Elizabeth.

Not a lot of the young up and comers wanted to deal with the old world mobsters because of their traditions or way of doing things, but if anyone asked Red, the young ones were missing out on learning some valuable life lessons.

One of which was playing out, right before his very eyes, and that was how a man should treat a lady.

Liz smiled at the man, wrinkling her nose adorably as Antonio placed another small kiss on her hand before slowly releasing it.

“It would be my pleasure, bella piccolina.” the man laughed quietly, gesturing for his men to accompany Reddington and his girl. “Safe travels.”

Guiren bowed respectfully, taking her offered hand, before he too lay a small kiss on her fingers.

“Call when you are secure.” the older of the two requested of Red, his eyes gentling on Elizabeth.

Nodding once again his gratitude, Red wrapped his arm around Lizzy as he followed Silas out the door. All of them safely ensconced by the protective barrier of a couple dozen armed men.

Liz felt so many emotions, walking down that long corridor that day. It was several days later, when a quiet spell hit, that she would have time to recall them all and analyze all that had transpired.

Several times, she had been one of the ‘protective wall’ of agents surrounding a valuable suspect or witness in her capacity of FBI agent.

She had never given much thought to how that individual felt, too concentrated on doing her job.

She herself, had felt helpless, at the mercy of the whims of a madman. So much anger was directed at Carver that day, for interrupting an idyllic time in her life, for intruding into her private space... yet again.

For having the ability to do so...

So many thoughts had run through her head. The foremost being, how very embarrassed she felt because she suddenly realized, Red did not truly trust in her abilities.

While most of those men surrounding her on that humbling walk to the waiting vehicle did not know her true identity, some did. And those few mattered greatly, what they thought... their beliefs.

An agent of the Federal Government should not pander to something like Carver. They should not have to rely on a contingent of protectors. They should not hide behind a wall of sheer force to keep him away.

A part of the woman had welcomed the reassuring presence of so many capable individuals. As Liz studied the purposely averted profiles of the men who walked beside her, she could sense the confidence and virility oozing from the male contingent.
Those qualities were magnified ten fold in the man at her side. She could sense the tenseness, the coiled strength in Red’s body. His eyes scanned and re-scanned every movement, every face they passed...

How could Red trust in her abilities when she doubted them herself? A sobering thought indeed.

She had not forgotten one second of her time spent under Carver’s gentle, nurturing care. She even remembered the even, unhurried breathing as it fell on the nape of her neck.

Red glanced hastily over at Liz’s profile feeling a shiver traverse her body.

“It’s only a few more–”

“I’m fine.” she stiffened, her pride stung by the obvious attempts to reassure. She jerked from his grasp, continuing on her own.

She knew her anger was not for the man but rather the circumstances Carver had orchestrated. But it was human nature to lash out when feeling helpless.

Red allowed the move, his expression unreadable.

As they reached the exit, the men beside them pushed out the doors forming a human wall, blocking sight of their group. A few steps and safety beckoned. She could see a long sleek SUV awaiting.

Stepping out into the hot and arid afternoon conditions, Liz sighed a bit in relief as the warmth seeped into her chilled bones. She startled slightly, instantly on the defensive, as Silas reached back quickly, moving her behind his protective bulk as he cautiously approached the vehicle.

He had wished to double check the identity of the driver, just to be cautious. Upon recognizing the man as one of their own, he swiftly hustled Liz inside the car before stepping aside for Red.

After Red shut the door, Liz batted her eyes, shocked and dismayed as men hopped on the sideboards blocking windows and other entry points of possible attack.

She glanced out the front window, watching people pointing at the car, talking rapidly with the people beside them. A few took pictures, others tried to get closer to the vehicle to see maybe what movie star was being transported, only to be moved away by a Triad strong arm or a beefy Italian.

It was surreal as hell.

“I don’t want this!” she was twisting this way and that, her eyes filled with anxiousness, “I don’t want these men risking their lives for me!”

She tried to convey how desperately she did not wish that eventuality, “Tell them to get off, Red.”

“They aren’t doing it for you.” Silas could silence the woman with one well directed statement, Liz settled slowly, her gaze on the back of the guards wide shoulders and neatly coiffed ponytail.

“Go...” Silas muttered to the driver as Dembe settled in place beside Liz.

She looked around in the interior, bewildered and confused, so much had happened so quickly.

“Where’s Mark and Francis?”

“In the other car behind us. Lia and Amanda are safe.” Dembe expertly eased the woman’s disquiet.
Liz looked over her shoulder, to see the truth of the words. Mark was saying something to a large man before shutting the door, just seconds before their car too, was given the same treatment.

“Why would they do that?” she asked the why of it all, as the cars started off slowly, moving through the gathering crowds. “They don’t even know us and yet, they risk their lives to... they don’t realize what he’s capable of?”

“I think Antonio was quite taken with you.” Red smiled, pulling his jacket more securely around her frame. “It’s just a gesture, and no, it wouldn’t matter the reason or cause.”

“It matters to me!” she gestured to the men hanging unto the overhead rack as they moved along. “…this, this is unacceptable Red.”

“Silas... Dembe...” Red pointed out, “we would gladly return the gesture for Antonio’s wife, his children...”

She gaped as they hit the main drive and the men stayed in place, blocking the hoards of onlookers following, still snapping pictures. None of it made sense at the moment.

The man in a crisp cream jacket craned his neck to see around the crowd which blocked his view.

“My God...” his pleasant tone caught the policeman’s wayward attention.

The off duty cop was earning a little extra money today. Ok, he was making a lot of extra money today. He turned to the older man, sensing nothing amiss.

He had seen it all a hundred times before. Celebrities and their need for attention. It got old.

“I hope that isn’t one of the Kardashians.” Carver sipped his colorful drink from a twisting straw, his manner laid back, more than disinterested.

He smiled, enjoying the cool alcohol sliding easily down his throat. He had to admit, his little prey’s bearded guard did have good taste. This drink was marvelous.

“Some people just have to be the center of attention. I personally, will never understand such a mentality.” he watched valets block oncoming traffic, allowing the large vehicles the right of way.

The police officer was of the same opinion, “Well, people like that,” he crooked his head, thinking the gentleman was a very articulate, intelligent type. He was good at ‘profiling’ individuals. He was studying the exams for the Bureau, after all. “They pay my salary so you won’t hear too much dissension on my part.”

“Understandable.” Carver nodded sagely, he pulled at the hem of his ‘I Love Vegas’ shirt before pushing off the stone pillar he leaned against. “Still, it might prove interesting to be a fly on the proverbial wall in that car... don’t you think?” he smile was a pleasant one. “Wonder what goes on in their minds?”

“Probably wondering where to have dinner.” the cop laughed. “They are rather superficial most of the time. They don’t live in the real world like you and me.”

Carver’s face took on a whimsical look, “Oh, I don’t know. God has a way of jolting each of us into reality from time to time.” the cryptic remark left the cop wondering over the profound statement for some few moments, “Perhaps that is all that is needed for people like that... a good jolt.” his eyes on the rapidly retreating motorcade.
He held his expression as Reddington’s right hand man glanced out the window, scanning the surroundings before inevitably landing on him.

The dark eyes held a moment until one of the Italian men blocked sight of them both and the car picked up speed.

Carver walked back into the lush foliage of the front entrance with a cheerful, “Have a nice day, Officer,” he called back over his shoulder, “Nice speaking with you.”

The cop stared after the guy, slightly bemused.

During the short drive around the property, the people followed even as Red and their entourage pulled into the private drive. The guards held back the gathering crowds as the gates closed, leaving them secure. The men hopped off, forming a line once again blocking sight of them, which Red was grateful for.

He knew the people at the gate posed no threat, they were just looking for a photo op of the ‘celebrity’. But Carver was still out there, and he did pose a threat.

Thankfully, Lizzy was shorter than everyone here and got lost behind the wall they had made as he rushed her into the Villa with the others close behind.

Francis had a few quick quiet words with the girls, gesturing for the women to go play in the pool. They smiled happily, traipsing off through the double doors, followed by an unusual number of security guards which missed their notice completely.

“Don’t you ever do t-that again!” Liz snapped, having swirled about quickly once the doors closed.

Red pulled up short before realizing, she wasn’t railing against him, but the outside world.

Francis and Mark seemed surprised to be the sudden center of the woman’s attention.

“What did we do?” they tried to hold their amusement admirably, Mark designated himself the spokesperson, having gestured absently to the other man, including Francis in the question. “It was Silas’ fault.”

Francis nodded in agreement.

“What?” Liz was momentarily thrown off track. She sought out the large guard who only sighed lightly, shaking his head for he was fully aware of Mark’s ploy. “What are you talking about?”

“What are you talking about?” Mark asked innocently.

“You think this is a joke?” the woman was only too happy to have an avenue in which to unleash her frustration and anger. “You think the danger isn’t real? You think you’re invincible? That you can’t be hurt?”

“Let’s talk about that supposed danger.” Francis was all ears suddenly, but his question was more for Red. “Shall we?”

Liz moved more carefully, realizing Francis was not privy to her true identity. “I don’t need you two going off half cocked, being all macho, getting yourself shot up because of me!”

“We’re prone to flesh wounds.” Francis felt compelled to point out, then narrowed his eyes at a chuckling Silas.
“I’m serious!” Liz was livid. “I am a F–”

Red lifted a warning stare having listened to the tirade, taking it in his stride to this point.

“A–” Liz caught her slip instantly, “a f–reaking grown woman...” she faltered, regaining her momentum slowly, “ and I am not afraid of a...a–”

“A past associate has become an... issue.” Red intoned smoothly. “We have reason to believe he will try and take revenge on me through Elizabeth.”

“I need a name.” Francis’ mood altered visibly, the young man’s tone suddenly cold, almost biting.

Liz looked at him quizzically. “I can take care of myself.” she snapped. “I don’t want you involved in this, Francis.”

Francis shifted his scowl to Red Reddington, “And what do you want?”

Red was grateful for the reinforcement, but he too was given pause for thought.

Was it wise to keep the boy in the dark on this one?

“You’re not dealing with him.” Liz reminded, stepping between the two men. “And you,” she pointed an accusing finger at Mark Donovan, “you’re still recovering! What were you thinking!”

“Lizzy...” Red had noted the gooseflesh on the lovely skin of her legs, “you should get out of that wet suit.” he reminded. “All this can wait.”

“I’m fine!” she iterated, wrapping her arms about her shivering body.

Silas rubbed his eyes. Dembe leaned back into a convenient counter, crossing his arms content to wait out the tirade.

Red quirked a brow, it was his turn to sigh heavily. He wrapped his arms about the woman’s frame, tugging her tightly to his strength.

Liz was comforted in spite of her mood, instinctively snuggling to his warmth, even as she still glared at the other two antagonists.

“I want you to listen to what I am saying,” she tempered her foul mood as best she was able. “I couldn’t stand it if you were hurt because of some misguided loyalty to me.”

Both men were touched by the sincerity she exhibited, despite themselves.

Francis tossed his sunglasses to the table. “That little show back at the hotel was more than an old crony looking for revenge.”

Mark nodded his agreement. “You were shook, Red.” he had noted as much. “Who the hell do we know that could get you in such a state.”

“That we couldn’t handle.” Francis concurred.

Red assessed his choices. “I am in the process of narrowing down that list.” he lied proficiently. “I will let you know when it’s time, until then, I’m asking for your patience and ask that you trust me to do what’s best for all concerned.”

Francis shook his head negatively, “That’s bullshit.”
“I am trying to keep a handle on this, Francis.” Red countered. “If you have a name, I know you...you’ll take matters into your own hands and start an all out war.”

“So what if I do?” was the nonchalant reply. “You know I get the needed results.”

“I trust in your capabilities,” Red did, “but my only priority is her safety.” He nodded to the woman in his arms.

Liz’s brows pulled together at the total confidence conveyed in Red’s tone. *I trust in your capabilities?*

She looked at Francis Holbrook in an entirely different light. It was like they were talking in freaking code! And she had no idea what the encryption key was.

“When she is secure... we will revisit this discussion.”

“Fair enough.” Mark shrugged his concerns aside.

“You’re damn right we will.” Francis huffed his annoyance.

“Antonio wants to be assured of the little gattina’s safety upon arrival in D.C.” Silas held the phone away from his ear, shifting annoyed eyes Liz’s way, “he’s ordered his men to accompany us.”

“We’re going to need a bigger plane.” Mark nodded sagely.

“They have their own transportation, you dolt.” Silas practically snapped.

“Gattina?” Liz had wanted to ask the meaning when Antonio had referred to her as such at the hotel but she hadn’t wanted to appear gauche.

She knew Red spoke countless languages. She spoke English, period. She felt such inadequacies deeply but that didn’t mean she couldn’t learn which she fully intended to do... very soon.

Red quietly kissed her temple, “It means,” he informed her readily, “little kitten.”

“Feral cat, more like it.” Mark seemed impressed. Perhaps he was remembering Liz’s spat with Natalia.

Liz offered the man an old fashioned look. “Antonio is a gentleman... you could take a few lessons.” she made mention. “Especially you, Francis.”

She hoped she had not embarrassed Red in front of his contemporaries by her loss of temper.

She lifted blue eyes to the man’s waiting ones. “I think I should change now.”

Red loosened his embrace willingly, allowing her escape.

She shivered as the cold air conditioner added to her discomfort.

“Let’s get you all warm and comfy, shall we, bella piccolina.” Red stepped back out of her way, watching her progress across the room absently.

Liz halted, her interest piqued.

“Beautiful little girl,” Francis snapped his waning patience, “or in your case, ‘little one with little brain’.” He turned on Red, his feelings hurt. “The minute we get back, I want names Red.” he
stressed, attempting to ensure his displeasure on the matter was at least, noted.

Red rolled his neck and shoulders to ease the mounting tension.

_This was a damned mess._

He would have to tread lightly to keep tempers in check and hurt feelings to a minimum.

The less people that knew he was searching for Carver, the better.

They already had a leak in his organization, how else could Carver have found their location?

Silas would already be tracing possible leads for the fucking traitor.

It made Red sick to think someone he trusted could be a Judas goat.

“When do we leave this place.” The ‘fun’ had gone out of the adventure for Francis Holbrook. He had called after Red’s retreating figure as the man went off in search of Lizzy.

“Night fall.”

“Can’t be too fucking soon for me.” Francis grumbled moodily, going off himself. He had some tall tales to tell where Lia and Amanda was concerned.

He wasn’t worried, he could weave a good tale, he had learned from the master himself... Red Reddington.

Chapter End Notes

Any mistakes are mine... this was a bitch of a chapter.
The Unprotected

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 21

As the door closed behind them, Red stopped Elizabeth in her tracks, an imminent request of importance on his mind now for some few moments.

“I know you’re cold...” he muttered tightly, “I need a minute.” he exhaled shakily, allowing his pent up emotions a small outlet.

Liz smiled, snuggling into the man. “This is warming me up just fine.”

He pulled her tighter into his warmth, calming his still thrumming heart from it’s intense high.

The day’s events had scared the ever living shit out of him.

Relaxing in his hold, Liz’s eyes softened as she felt the small tremors traverse Red’s large frame. Stroking his back slowly, she eased the man’s tension, one breath at a time.

“I don’t know what to say to you?” he muttered quietly against her shoulder. “I let that bastard hurt you.”

“No,” she assured quickly, “he didn’t hurt me.” she pulled back a little, looking up at Red. “He never will, with you here... Red, are you okay? Really?” she knew this incident had unsettled the man.

“No really, no.” he shook his head. “But I will be. Especially after I get you safely back home.”

Red grumbled irritably when the phone rang in his pocket. Liz giggled quietly, in hopes of dispelling his annoyance as he pulled the object free.

“Maybe it’s Antonio,” he rumbled softly, “checking on his kitten.” he lifted teasing eyes.

Liz rolled her eyes, before stretching up to kiss Red’s chin as he flipped the phone open.

“Yes.” he intoned absently into the phone, his real interest with the woman still.

“I can get her anytime I want.” a man’s lilting tone came over the line, causing a cold chill to enter Red’s mind.

“Carver.” Red gritted, tightening his arm around the woman who instinctively stiffened against him, having heard the dreaded name.

“The one and only.” the man’s laughter seemed as genuine as his delight, sensing the other man’s distress even over Red’s controlled manner.

“When I find you,” Red stated, the tone more than brittle, “I’m going to skin you alive.”

“Ahh, taking a page from the Master, are we?” Carver chuckled his amusement. “I should warn you however, as one connoisseur to another, before using the skin, you really should let it bleed for at least a day or two.” He explained knowingly. “It’s much easier to manage.”
“No, no...” Red’s voice lowered intently, “I’m having visions of my days in wood shop, with old Mr. Barner.” the man warmed to the tale. “That man, made us all nervous as hell. Had severe arthritis, fingers curved inwards...” he stopped for emphasis and effect, “we always expected a finger to go flying when he used the table saw.” he reminisced.

“Planning on building a hope chest from my bones?” the man queried lightly.

“No, an ashtray from your skull.” Red’s tone chilled effectively. “The eye sockets will make perfect pipe holders.”

“Now, there’s a thought.” Carver’s throaty chuckle made Red’s muscles tense. “I really should plan ahead like that, I’ll be looking to retire at some point.” the man said conversationally. “I should look into selling goods at a flea market... Craigslist.”

“I wouldn’t put much thought into it.” Red replied coldly. “I don’t believe you’ll be around that long.”

“Oh, I think I will.” Carver countered jovially. “Made very evident by the events of the day.” it was cheerfully reminded. “I can obviously get within touching distance of your fuck toy with little problem.” he explained ever so patiently. “As a matter of fact, I’ve been within arms reach of her for a few days, now.”

Red inwardly seethed, angered with himself for dropping his guard and allowing such a lapse in Lizzy’s protection.

Granted, he only had a general description of what this asshole looked like, but he always felt a inner itch when something wasn’t right. He should have sensed the danger to Lizzy. Or was he fooling himself...

“But today, the temptation to touch all that pink flesh was just too much.” Carver taunted jestingly. “She’s going to make quite a nice project to work with,” he goaded silkily, “her skin is as smooth as a baby’s ass.”

Red curved his fingers into that soft flesh, his jaw pulsing as visions of what Carver could do flashed in his minds eye.

“Oh, I can understand your attraction.” Carver hummed lecherously, enjoying the exchange immensely. “Besides, there’s nothing like fucking a Fed. Is there?” he asked innocently.

Red tightened his hold about Liz’s waist before quickly loosening his hold when the woman winced visibly.

“Though, I guess, in your case, she’s doing it willingly. Can’t say the same for mine.” Carver sighed lightly. “The experience might not be the same for you. Pity.” the man tsked. “Suffice to say, I can’t wait to meet with her in the very near future.”

“Oh, please,” Red asked of the man, “stop by anytime. I would appreciate the opportunity to meet you.” The coldness in the tone surprised even Elizabeth.

Carver laughed quietly, “Be seeing you soon.” He ended the call, leaving only silence on Red’s end. Red snapped the phone shut, gritting his teeth as he fought to control his fear and building rage.

“What did he say?” Liz asked quietly, then shivered slightly. “Never mind.” she didn’t really want to know.
Red shook his head, pushing away the continuing visions of what the man would do to the woman, only to have another take it’s place.

Carver had hurt her once. It was evident, the threat remained, in spades. The sick bastard approached Lizzy... touched her, so easily.

The fucker could just as easily take her warmth... her life. A life Red desperately needed to preserve, at any cost.

He opened his eyes, looking down into the little face watching him so patiently, and felt a sudden crashing wave of terror he would fail her.

The thought of being without her smile, her soft touch, or the woman breathing softly beside him in bed as he held her...

It made his heart hurt in the most painful of ways. Not since he had lost his family, had he felt such despair or anything so distressing.

Before he realized what he was doing, he found himself dragging her back against him, kissing her, hard. The need he felt for her, for her warmth... overpowering.

Liz surrendered herself to his affection, understanding he just needed to touch her. To make sure she was really here... safe in his arms.

His roughened hands skimmed her body, before pushing the jacket off her slim shoulders. Readjusting his hold, he pulled the woman flush against him, feeling her feminine curves melt pliably into his thicker frame.

He curled his fingers into her soft skin... her cold skin.

Red shook at the feeling, the images of how Carver could steal that away from him, suddenly reappearing in his minds eye.

He needed to warm her, to feel that human warmth return.

“I’m here...” she whispered against his mouth, as the man trembled against her, “I’m okay...”

But it wasn’t enough.

Liz shivered slightly, the wet suit clinging uncomfortably to her now, feeling like ice in the cold air.

Red determinedly tugged at the strings settled along her spine, his eyes boldly seeking permission. She nodded, as his large fingers deftly pulled at the bows. Both items dropped to the floor, forgotten.

She huddled closer to his heat, suddenly realizing she was very aroused by the sensation of her naked flesh against the expensive cloth of his suit.

She felt at once, both vulnerable, yet entirely at ease in the sphere of his protection.

Red ran his hands up under her hair, bunching the damp strands in his fist, angling her head to deepen his possessive attack on her willing mouth. Grasping her hips, he pulled her further into the shelter of his body.

“It’s not wrong,” he rasped, “...to want this.” Was he trying to validate the thoughts running through his own mind?
It may not be, but to become aroused so readily after the incident of the day. Shouldn’t she be experiencing some sort of turmoil? But then, the more Red touched her... the more alive she felt.

Lifting the woman suddenly, Red crossed the few spaces to the dresser. Sitting her atop the cool marble, he pushed gently at her knee, stepping into the space between her legs he had created.

Liz panted openly against his demanding mouth, softly tonguing his as it fought for dominance.

Reaching between them, Red ran a confident stroke over her nipple, the other hand delving between her legs, stroking her clit incessantly.

“Let me touch you.” Slipping a finger inside her warmth, he curled it expertly, gently massaging the bundle of nerves inside her.

“Open...” he urged roughly, pushing at her thigh.

Liz opened her legs wider under the onslaught, feeling her body quickly respond to his urgency.

Stroking her sensually, he slid another finger into her core, massaging the sensitive spot he had located until his hand flooded with her arousal.

Liz whimpered as the man pulled his thick fingers free, only to feel the hot spread of his crown push at her as it slid easily into her expertly primed body.

The man grunted his satisfaction as she quickly accommodated the sudden invasion of his girth, the sound producing another rush of heat from her center.

Red gripped her hips, sliding her closer as he continued his steady drive into her body. Working his cock in deeper, he pushed firmly against her cervix, feeling the tissue giving into his pressure until the woman shook at the intense sensation as he pressed his sack firmly against her firm bottom.

“...Red.” she gasped, her wayward thoughts gathering for one brief second, a certain type of alarm sounding in her brain.

“Don’t.” he snarled against her swollen mouth. He didn’t want anything between them at such a moment. He had read her thoughts.

Liz trembled with the intensity she was experiencing. His hard length possessed her almost roughly. The demands he made, so unlike his usual gentle administrations.

“B-But...” a thousand thoughts infiltrated her mind, but her body was making dictates of it’s own and where usually, the man helped her sort out such things, this time the captivating eyes only watched her with a deep contemplative patience bore of necessity.

Watching the maelstrom of quiet contemplation flit across the woman’s rapturous features, Red slowed the movements of his thrusts.  But didn’t stop.

“Give yourself to me.” he whispered harshly against her mouth. “Let me have what I so desperately need, Elizabeth.”

Liz did not hesitate. That sensual tone vibrated throughout her chaotic thoughts, silencing any objections or denial. Her head fell back, she moaned her ecstasy as the man slid his length deep inside her body.

Red growled, thrusting against her hungrily. Hastily freeing himself from his clothing which only
seemed to irritate the man now, his movements abrupt and precise. He lifted her, walking the few feet to the bed.

Tossing aside the blankets, he settled one knee on the crisp sheets. Grasping her tight with one arm, he braced them with the other before lowering her to the bed, never once having left the cradle of her thighs.

“I need this so much, Elizabeth.” he murmured into her neckline, nipping the delicate skin of her shoulder. “You have no idea... how could you?”

His earlier fear was ebbing the more he thrust against her, the more warm she became... the more his trepidation vanished.

“You’re the only one who can calm my heart,” his tone was hoarse, hesitant, as the woman clenched tightly around him, “...you heal my shattered soul.”

Liz grasped him, drawing him closer. His desperate need for her was overwhelming in one way but so gratifying in another.

“If you weren’t here...with me,” he clenched his fists tight, fighting the roiling emotions. “I think...” his voice lowered to a harsh whisper, “I...I don’t know what I would be capable of.”

Liz accepted the heavy weight of his erection.

“I am here.” the woman reminded, her tone a soothing balm to his tortured soul. “I’m not leaving.” she stroked his mouth with erotic caresses. “I want to be with you.”

“...Yes.” he stated simply but the tension was still high in his frame, she could feel it. “Yes, I want that as well. But...” a dark scowl crossed the handsome face, “I need... more.”

Liz didn’t know how she could give anymore than she already was but something in the man’s haunted eyes made her wish to.

“Tell me,” she encouraged, tightening her arms about Red’s neckline lovingly. “I will do... try anything you say...” she wanted to assist him in any manner she could.

“Will you?” he wondered, his expression a brooding one. He had never asked more of her than she wanted to give.

Carver had shook Red to his foundations.

He was loathe to admit just how deep that fear ran. Being with Elizabeth, being in her arms, her bed, was allowing that terror to abate somewhat.

It was selfish of him, he realized. He shouldn’t ask it, the thing which would make Carver’s imprint vanish completely. He knew what he wanted, he knew what it was.

“Of course I will.” Lizzy was all too confident of her ready reply. “You know I will.” she whispered seductively, her calf easing up and down his taut thigh muscle.

How to say it? The man wanted to present his case intelligently without any of the murky emotions coloring the issue but then, weren’t the emotions exactly what had brought him to this moment in time?

“I need to... be with you... in every sense of the word.” he began slowly, his fingers delving into the
lush fullness of her hair, massaging her nape lovingly sending searing waves of pleasure up and down Liz’s spine.

“Without anything between us. Nothing.” his eyes held hers masterfully as he allowed her to read his inner most thoughts. “Nothing, Elizabeth.”

He allowed the meaning to sink in. “Do you understand...”

Elizabeth was slightly shocked because he made it quite clear, “You can’t m-mean...” she cleared her throat self-consciously, “I m-mean...”

“I need you to trust me.” he was asking for so much more.

_To trust him that everything would work out right, that he would be there if it didn’t... to take that leap of faith, with him._

“I want to give you everything I have, Lizzy.” his eyes mellowed for he was speaking of so much more than his monetary worth, and they both knew as much.

A rush of warmth pushed along his shaft and her opening, wetting his pelvis and the crisp sheets.

“Look how wet you are...” he crooned approvingly, his hips pumping her body a little faster, damn well knowing her answer to the question posed. “I think you love the idea as much as I... don’t you.”

Liz trembled hard under his large frame, nodding. “...Yes.” She whispered shakily.

She did love the commitment he was asking of her. She did enjoy belonging to him... with him. She trusted him to her core, which was a very foreign experience with a lover.

That she wanted to share this with him... the sensation was totally freeing. Red made it less frightening. But she hadn’t the foggiest notion as to why.

The man read the serene look which overtook Elizabeth’s face.

“God,” he gasped, “only you can make this feel so fucking wonderful.” he groaned, pumping his shaft feverishly inside her quivering hole.

The heavy drag of his erection rubbed enticingly against and inside her, the slight give of his flesh, exciting her. She had never noticed the heat of his velvety flesh. A heat that was increasing with each passing second. She absolutely loved the intimacy.

Aside from the physical act feeling beyond fantastic... the emotional connection they shared was addictive. She had never been the center of someone’s absolute attention, until Red.

Red made love with every ounce of his being, focusing his entire energy on his partners needs. Drawing his lover in to enjoy the ride, was a concentrated effort on his part.

Everything else was pushed aside and forgotten, she suddenly realized.

She didn’t think about grocery lists, the laundry that had to be done, the case file she needed to complete.... or Carver.

With Red between her legs, the rest of the world faded into the background.

Nothing mattered but the stocky frame warmly sheltering her, the cock pleasing her so perfectly and the deep affection showered upon her.
“Do you trust me, Lizzy?” he panted harshly.

“..Always.” she replied without hesitation, her sweet mouth breathlessly responding to his increased demands.

Red fitted his mouth against hers. All pretense gone as they kissed one another deeply, ardently.

Liz exhaled shakily, tentatively stroking his back lovingly, drawing a husky moan from the man.

He broke the kiss, his heavy breath brushing her swollen mouth.

“Let me...” his voice urged fervently.

Liz tensed slightly, feeling his cock begin to expand and harden further as he neared his release.

“Let me share myself with you.” he felt a tranquility overtake him as the woman beneath him stroked him affectionately.

He gazed heatedly down a the large blue eyes, staring back at him so full of uncertainty and hesitation.

The moment reminded him very much of a virgin losing her innocence. Which in a sense, he supposed in a way of sorts, Lizzy was.

She had never done this before. But by God, she was going to do it now.

“Relax...” he implored quietly, “...let it happen.”

She slowly lifted her hips in response, enjoying the man’s sharp hiss of pleasure to her wordless act of acceptance.

“...Yes.” taking her bottom in hand, he lifted against his downward thrust.

Sharp waves of intense pleasure shot through Liz’s sensitized body. Her abdomen tightened in anticipation, her clit throbbing and tingling with a most exquisite type of pain.

Brushing his lips against her swollen ones, the man eased his fingers into her thick hair, holding her deep blue eyes as he lost himself in her shaky exclamations.

Liz gave herself over completely, surrendering to the intense sensations he evoked.

“God, yes,” Red panted shallowly as the woman’s thighs shook against his sides, “...fuck, that’s it, baby,” the gravelly voice lowered erotically, "come..."

Wrapping her tight in his hold, he pumped her sweet little pussy nice and deep, taking what was freely given... what he needed.

The man released a low rumbling guttural sound of satisfaction that left Liz trembling. Red had always been vocal when they made love, but she had never heard him sound so fulfilled as a heat like she had never felt, surged against her sensitive cervix.

“Oh.. please.” she gasped her awe as the man took her to a sweet crest once more, the rush of his hot cum coating her core. “Please, don’t stop.”

“Lizzy...” he whispered brokenly, “Jesus, that feels so good.”
Liz’s impassioned gaze fell on the man’s face, finding a look of complete contentment that left her quaking under his stocky frame. She sighed blissfully as the man whispered in her ear as he slowed his thrusts.

“Does it feel good?” he murmured softly, his meaning conveying more than the carnal pleasure they shared as he slid inside, pushing their combined juices in and out around his girth, until he was empty and she was full.

Raising slightly, she kissed his lips, languidly flicking her tongue against his in reply.

Red’s lips curved sensually as he took in her sated expression, untamed hair and kiss swollen lips.

He enjoyed looking at her anytime of day, but after they made love... she was absolutely enchanting.

Settling himself against her, they exhaled shakily as he scanned the woman’s dewy flesh, glowing a rosy pink. Her beard burned breasts were a shade lighter against dark tan lines, drawing his attention to the dusky tips sitting erect atop the alabaster mounds.

Continuing his visual journey, he noted the woman’s small rounded stomach undulating against the soft hair on his own belly as she lifted her hips into his, silently asking he stay a few more moments.

More than happy to oblige, Red pushed his waning erection in deep, his smile growing as Liz’s eyes fluttered shut and she sighed contentedly. She pursed her lips, anxiously waiting for him to complete the connection.

He eagerly kissed her responsive lips. Her eyes opened lazily, showing him the light dancing in the azure depths.

She was absolutely stunning.

“Are you warm, now?” Red questioned almost innocently for he knew the answer.

Hearing the deep timbre and pure contentment in his voice, delighted Lizzy. She liked his ‘sex tone’. For the simple fact, it gave her gooseflesh yes, but also because it was present for a damned good reason. And she was proud to have contributed to his wonderful mood.

The woman stretched luxuriously as the feeling of total bliss encompassed her psyche.

“Yeah...” she yawned, blinking sleepily.

Red chuckled quietly, running his finger along her full mouth, “You tired, baby?”

She curled her hands up under his collarbone, snuggling into his warmth. “You take a lot out of a woman.”

“I put a little back in.” he quipped, glancing at the clock, pleased to find more than enough time for a cat nap. He rolled them to their side, grasping the sheet and part of a blanket, pulling it over them.

“Sleep, baby.” his silky tone soothed.

“I should clean up...” she reminded herself more than the man but was loathe to disturb the serenity that had fallen about them.

“Stay...” He pulled her into the cradle of his body, concentrated on her wet center settling against his equally wet cock.
“But we just...” she was a little taken aback by the evidence of his total arousal.

“Leave it.” he refused to brook no argument, other more pressing matters having come to life.

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Red’s mood was more hopeful as he returned to the room. Setting the phone on the dresser, his eyes fell on the soft slope of Liz’s back before catching the soft scent of their time together in the air. A scent that instantly calmed his nerves and beckoned him back to her side.

He eased up on the bed, subsequently wrapping his frame around hers, at length. Her warmth instantly soothed him. He nuzzled her neckline, breathing in her natural perfume.

He grunted his growing arousal, finding not one trace of chemical mixed in anywhere.

He worked hard for that eventuality.

Only their essence was evident.

The way it should be. The way God had intended for a man and woman to be...

Gently kissing her bared shoulders and nape, he silently counted the days again in his head.

He had been very aware earlier when he initiated their lovemaking, that she was still ovulating.

There was a very likely possibility that he had just gotten her pregnant.

And he didn’t give a damn.

As a matter of fact, as he came, he had settled himself deep inside, butt up against her cervix pushing his hot cum against the swollen tissue, for a part of him had been striving towards such a goal.

He had some minor reservations, of course. But not one of them had to do with the woman or any consequences his actions might produce.

He didn’t want to think about it right now. He only wanted to think about them...

It had felt so right to experience the everyday moments normal couples did.

Including this. It hadn’t mattered what he had to do to make it happen.

“Sweetheart...” he whispered softly, easing the woman awake.

“Hmm?” she sighed lightly, shifting in the warm cocoon of the covers.

“We need to start getting ready.”

“Five more minutes...” she grumbled, turning her face into the pillow.

Red’s lips curved against her shoulder, his eyes dancing with pure enjoyment.

Laying his arm around her waist, he edged his hand under the warm sheet, stroking his fingers over the soft tuft of hair between her legs.

He craned his head, watching her eyes flicker open just as her legs had. His large fingers slowly rubbed her clit awake. Her small fingers lay over his, pushing him closer.
“If you stop, I’ll hurt you.” she muttered sleepily, her fingers grasping her pillow tightly when the man rubbed her more insistently.

“Now, why on earth would I stop?” he purred, slipping his thick finger in her body, his earlier deposit, leaving her more slick than usual.

“You did the morning after our first date.” she bitched, then moaned, arching her bottom against his stomach for more of his particular brand of ‘placation’.

“I had to piss.” he laughed quietly, purposely increasing the pressure on her clit.

“Well, if that’s a problem now,” she sighed amorously, moving into the man’s hard working fingers, “hold it.” she snapped. “I’m so very... close.”

“Yes, dear.” the man obeyed the command, pushing her even closer to relief until she shuddered blissfully in his arms moments later.

Liz sighed the tension away, stretching her lax muscles, intently focused on the fact that the stickiness between her thighs felt... different. Terrifying granted... but wonderful.

She had very much enjoyed the closeness she shared with Red earlier. In fact, it had been quite intense. Overpowering, yet somehow comforting, for so many reasons she was having trouble discerning at present.

She had really enjoyed the natural feeling of their bodies coming together. The shared closeness. It felt... right. But scary as fuck. What if he had changed his mind? What if–

“Are you awake now?” he mumbled lazily against the dip of her shoulder.

“Do you want me to take emergency contraceptive?” she asked quietly.

“A simple ‘yes, I’m awake’, would have sufficed.” Red sighed his disappointment, rolling her to face him.

“Red, I think we should discuss–”

“No, I do not.” he replied sternly. “If there is something going on in here,” he lay his warm palm over her abdomen, “it’s meant to be. And it’s going to stay there.”

“And if I’m pro-choice?” Liz questioned softly, drawing a shapeless pattern across his chest.

“You’re damn well pro-life now.” Red growled softly, cupping her flat stomach protectively.

Lacing her fingers with his, she blew out a breath of relief, knowing he was okay with what had transpired earlier.

“You’re scared.” Red surmised.

“Yes.”

“Of what other’s will think?”

Liz frowned, shaking her head a little, “No, I’m...” she darted her eyes to his. “It’s been less than a month, you know.”
“I’ve told you repeatedly of my intentions, of what I want out of this relationship.” the man made it clear in no uncertain terms. “Did you not understand me?”

“...Yes.”

“Do you want to be with me?” his asked, his hand unconsciously massaging her stomach.

“More than anything.” she admitted. “But how can you be so sure you even...”

“I know my own mind. My own emotions” He confirmed. “When you’re ready for more...”

“You’re just gonna wait?” But had he... waited? Had he not just initiated...

“I have been waiting for you for a long time, Lizzy.” he reminded. “Having you to hold, kiss and spend time with, makes the waiting bearable.” he smiled softly then, altering his mood for her sake. “Time isn’t going to change how I feel about you, only make my feelings grow.”

Red snarled quietly as a perfunctory knock interrupted the private moment.

“Dammit, what!” he snapped.

He quickly pulled the sheet up around Lizzy’s body when the door opened without a care, as Dembe and Silas burst their way inside.

“What the hell?” Red grated. “Are you five years old!”

“A five year old wouldn’t knock.” Silas eyed the pair before unceremoniously dropping a laptop on the bed. “Besides, I think we’re all aware by now that mommy and daddy are fucking.”

Liz gasped indignantly but Red only seemed to take the crude remark in his stride.

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” the woman snapped her pique.

“My mother disowned me at a very early age.” Silas seemed okay with the fact.

“And rightfully so!” Liz admonished. “And I assume you were subsequently reared by rabid wolves.”

Silas scratched his nape thoughtfully for the repartee.

“Christopher sent this.” Dembe gestured to the laptop, ignoring the present state of his friend and the woman beside him.

Red sighed heavily, for it was very apparent that he wouldn’t get rid of the men until he looked at what they wanted him to.

Liz looked about aimlessly, feeling definitely under-dressed. She sought an avenue of escape but was also overtly interested in whatever it was Dembe was so insistent Red see.

She pulled the blankets up to her cheeks, fighting the blush she felt from head to toe. Sure, these guys were used to naked women in Red’s bed she supposed but in this particular instance, she just happened to be that woman.

She determined to put on her big girl panties, even if she had none to don, and deal with it.

She threw Silas a nondescript glare all the same for the man’s knowledgeable eyes told her he was
sensing her dilemma.

Sliding to his elbow, Red reached over Lizzy, tapping the screen. Surveillance of the pool came up, showing her warding off Francis’ attack with a water gun before the young man was unceremoniously pushed into the pool by Silas.

Red’s smile fell away as a man came out from the left wearing a green shirt and khaki pants. He headed their way before accidentally tripping into Lizzy. She stumbled forward as the large bulk hit her. Silas caught her instantly before shoving the man hard and away from her. A few choice words of animosity followed but Carver’s hands arose in the universal sign of ‘peace’.

Seconds later, Francis ran at Lizzy, wrapping his arms around her before falling back into the watery depths while Silas scowled darkly at the man who dared approach Elizabeth until Carver was out of camera range.

“You saw him.” Red raised his eyes, meeting the head guard’s squarely, hope shining within.

“Yes.” both men confirmed.

Red darted his eyes between Dembe and Silas, the surprise apparent.

“I saw him, outside the hotel, when we were leaving.” Dembe relayed. “It wasn’t until I saw this, I made the connection.”

“I’ve been replaying it since, getting his face focused more each time.” Silas added his own experience.

Dembe tapped the screen, drawing Red’s focus.

The scene picked back up as Carver sauntered from the pool area, making certain to play to each and every camera available.

Red now knew what the man looked like.

To what ends? He wondered as darkly menacing thoughts reared their ugly head.

Carver had walked the area from the pool, to a nearby trash container.

The man, from what Red could surmise, was in his early forties perhaps and quite stocky. The man removed his shirt, a close fitting one beneath.

Carver glanced at the surveillance camera which pointed down the walkway. He pulled a knife from within the confines of his pants pocket, opening the object, holding it aloft as if he knew, sooner or later... Red would be watching.

The man slit the center of his palm, wiping the blood on the green shirt before stuffing it into the flap of the waste container.

He looked directly at the camera as if to say, ‘There, you have my DNA now, what does it get you?’

Red’s mood fell into a dark abyss.

What did it get him? Red’s own DNA had been floating out in the cosmos for years now and no one had been able to track him unless he had wanted it.

Carver was one smart, sadistic son-of-a-bitch, Red would give him that.
Red sat back wearily, accepting the clear and simple challenge Carver was issuing.

Red cleared his mind. How would he attack this problem were Lizzy not involved?

He had to think rationally to catch this bastard. But how could he do that, when he was too close to the issue at hand?

He would have to find a way.

There had to be an answer.

“Dembe, send that to Aram, please.” he slid the laptop towards the man. “See if he can clear that up, get a more detailed still. We have another shot, as well.”

Dembe lifted the small weight, phone to his ear. “You are referencing to where he discards the shirt, of course.”

“You,” Red nodded his acquiescence, turning to Silas, “call Kaplan and set up a meeting with that artist of hers. Maybe he can do a composite. When it’s done, have Dembe confirm the results.”

Red tilted his head, scowling his annoyance at the head guard when Silas simply stood there, smirking at Elizabeth.

“It smells like sex in here.” the man wafted his hand, waving it about as though clearing a fog.

“Well, I would hope so, since we were having sex.” Liz indignantly replied, pulling her face out from under the cover. “We are consenting adults... well, some of us.”

“Did we want a pickle tickle, hmm?” the guard smirked, recalling another conversation on the same subject.

“Yes, and now I want another one.” she kept her voice steady, even though her insides were quaking. She would not allow Silas to best her in front of Red. Not this time! “Go away...”

Red had to admit, he was proud of the way she held her composure... until she turned and hid her face in his chest, her cheeks a crimson red.

He chuckled quietly at the guard’s quirky expression until Elizabeth’s mound rubbed against his shaft, waking it.

“Get out...” he muttered to the man standing over them, “and don’t forget what I said.” he grumbled, before pulling the now giggling woman and her bare bottom closer.

“Get a room...” Silas muttered as he turned on his heel. “Sex fiends.” he feigned disgust.

“If anyone would recognize a fellow ‘fiend’,;” Liz called out after the man, “it would be you... Feathers.”

Silas quirked his brow at the... rather apt nickname. He had forgotten Liz was present at that little incident. “You want to borrow it?”

“Get out!” Red snarled dangerously, as he rolled to his back, settling Liz astride his throbbing erection.

The woman sat up obediently, more important matters taking precedence. The sheet fell away, giving Silas an unobstructed view of the woman’s back and a teasing glimpse of a plump breast before Red
palmed the full orb, hiding it from view.

Silas’ brows rose with appreciation.

Not so much because of the nudity, though Liz was quite lovely.

But because she suddenly didn’t give a damn.

Their little FBI agent was growing and adapting to her ever changing circumstances like a pro.

And he was damned proud of her.

“I’ve been thrown out of better places.” Silas gave a lazy salute, closing the door behind him.

Leaving the couple to their well deserved privacy.

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Red did not feel any real sense of danger but these days he was questioning his inner warning system. He watched Lizzy and Francis speaking animatedly, his innate sense of decorum coming to the fore.

“Allow me to offer more substantial means of my gratitude.” Red discreetly pushed a thick envelope into Christopher’s hand.

“No, Red. Absolutely not!”

“I want you to have it.” Red turned away from his host without a care, walking rapidly after the woman, catching her arm.

“You wait for me.” Red directed to a reticent Elizabeth Keen.

“We’re just getting–”

“You stay in here.” the notion was vetoed.

“Red, he’s probably in California by now.” she whispered.

“I don’t want to find out the hard way.” Red grumbled. “Wait.” he directed, his tone scolding.

Liz sighed, but nodded her acceptance. She knew the events of the day scared Red somewhat and if this little concession would quell his anxiety, she’d go along with it... this time.

But they would have to have a discussion about his over protectiveness soon...very soon.

“We’ll be going.” Red told the man who had followed along at a more leisurely pace. “Once we’re in the air, I’ll call.”

“I had my men check your plane for any tampering.” Chris said, accompanying them to the exit of the Villa. “It was clean.”

“Thank you.” Red set his hand on the handle, then looked at Liz. “You’re sure you got everything?”

“Yes, I double checked.” she confirmed, before kissing Chris’ cheeks in gratitude for the lovely welcome and accommodations.

Silas took his place in front of Elizabeth. And like earlier, there was a wall of men blocking sight of
them as Red quickly ushered Liz to the car. She climbed up in the back seat, shortly followed by Red. The door beside her opened, startling her a little, she hoped she hid it well enough.

Was Carver getting to her as well?

“It’s just me.” Francis smiled as he settled in beside her. “We have quite the little motorcade.” he grinned, pointing to the men breaking formation, heading for other nondescript dark vehicles.

“Go ahead, Dembe.” Red said.

As Dembe turned the car into the outer driveway, Red groaned irritably when he found the flock from earlier still haunting the gate, though it had grown some. The guards pushed at them, unblocking the entrance, but the people still clamored to see who was in the car.

“Oh, this is getting ridiculous.” Liz voiced her opinion.

Red wasn’t certain if she meant the crowd or the commotion with all the guards and security. He had not known how to say ‘no’ to Antonio Crocetti. Not graciously, at least.

Dembe engaged the door locks before Red could even get the first word out, having anticipated Raymond’s thoughts.

Flashes of lights from overzealous photographers brightened the interior as other’s rushed towards the vehicle as the car cleared the gates. Sure enough, the sounds of the handles of the doors being pulled at, came in rapid succession as Dembe eased out the driveway. People cupped their hands on the dark glass of the windows, straining to get a look inside.

“What the hell?” Liz giggled her dismay. “This is beyond bizarre.”

“Come here, Lizzy.” Red wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her closer against him and out of sight of the window until they hit the street.

Their faithful followers ran after the car as they came to a red light. The camera flashes resumed making the woman laugh nervously.

“They’re going to be so disappointed when they see the end results.” she chuckled as Dembe rolled slowly behind the lead vehicles.

“I don’t know...” Francis shrugged, “they may have got a few shots of our resident felon.”

“You?” Red’s mouth tweaked.

“I meant you.” Francis straightened his tie, shrugging slightly. “And okay, maybe I fit the bill to an extent.” he preened his hair in a side window.

Liz had not understood the exchange, frowning at Francis Holbrook for the fact. Laying her head into Red’s shoulder, she relaxed more fully, ignoring the crowds’ repeated tapping on the dark windows.

The light changed and Dembe floored it, having felt Raymond’s agitation sucking the air from the car.

Only when they got into a good roll and the security offered to them by Antonio and Guiren surrounded the vehicle, did Red release the breath he’d been holding.

A street down, flashing lights came into view in front of them. Liz tensed as Silas cussed in the front
“Shit.” the large guard grumbled, looking over his shoulder.

Red turned, finding three other police cruisers taking position around their car.

“Aw fuck, man.” Francis whined, hanging his head dejectedly. “What have I done to deserve this?”

“How much time do you have?” Red asked rhetorically.

“Is this Lia’s doing? Did I get married?” Francis demanded. “Is she really that vindictive…. ohhh.” a thought had suddenly occurred.

Liz shook her head at the demented outlook.

“Dembe, keep going.” Red advised tersely.

Liz looked up at him, her eyes wide with trepidation. He rubbed her arm soothingly, softly kissing her temple as they drove.

Liz startled as the sound of a phone blared in the otherwise silent car.

Red pulled it free, flipping it open. “Yes?”

“Is your escort there?” Christopher laughed at his own wit.

Red shook his head, a smile pulling at his lips. “Yes, and you about made poor Francis shit himself.” he put the phone on speaker.

Christopher’s laughter filled the car, easing Liz’s shoulders back down from their tense position. “I told him I’d get him back for scaring poor Rosalie.” the man chuckled.

“What did you do?” Liz hissed, embarrassed and didn’t know why as yet.

“He blinded my poor housekeeper by walking around naked.” Chris snickered. “With a full on woody.”

“Hey!” Francis was quick to voice his side of the story. “I was in my damn room!” he defended.

“Where else can I walk around naked, except in the privacy of my own room?” he demanded.

Liz tried very hard not to, but she could suddenly picture the young man, naked wearing the huge glasses, bow tie and hat he wore at the wedding for the keepsake photos.

“You were not in your room,” Chris corrected, “you were at the bar.”

“Which is technically attached to my room!”

“There is twenty foot gap from your door to the bar.” Chris once again corrected.

Francis shrugged flippantly, pouting out the window.

“Anyway, the very helpful police department here believes they are escorting a celebrity.” the man said. “Once at the airport, they will keep a distance, but stay until you are boarded... Antonio insisted.”

“Antonio has influence with the Las Vegas police?” Liz was baffled.
“Antonio has influence with everyone.” Silas threw a look at his employer. He too, believed this spectacle was overkill.

“Thank you for the escort.” Red replied. “And damn you for the visual burned into my mind of naked Francis,” he grumbled.

“I have a very nice body, thank you very much.” Francis protested. “I don’t see what the big deal is... Rosalie acts as though it wasn’t a pleasure to see my nakedness.”

“Yeah, I heard it was no big deal...” Christopher snorted a retort, “Safe flight, guys.” the man signed off.

Francis rolled his eyes, even as he readjusted himself, as though confirming, if anything, that it was indeed a ‘big deal’.

Liz smiled, patting the man’s leg consolingly as they approached another red light. The lead cop blipped his siren, bypassing the red light and all the others they encountered as they meandered their way through the streets, until reaching the tarmac.

Dembe pulled alongside the plane, lining the back door up with the stairs.

“Get on the plane, Lizzy.” Red again directed tersely. “Don’t hesitate, don’t stop.”

She had no intention of arguing. Once they got on the plane, the cops could return to their jobs. She felt horrible, pulling them from their real duties.

Red pushed the door open, taking her hand, ushering her quickly up the steps. The other three quick on their heels.

As the plane was being loaded, one of Antonio’s men came to the door, quietly conferring with Red and Dembe. Handing something to Red, the man waited as Red opened the box.

Liz watched the exchange discreetly. Red laughed his delight and the woman’s tension lessened.

The handsome Italian grinned, before bouncing down the steps, which were raised a moment later as the plane warmed up its powerful engines.

“What was that about?” she asked as Red took the seat next to her.

“He was told to assure your safety onboard.” Red stretched his legs out in front of him, finally relaxing now. “He also was told to deliver this,” he smiled, handing her the box. “It’s from Antonio.”

Her brows crinkled, but she took the offering, opening it expectantly.

She chuckled quietly, pulling the necklace free, holding it up to get a better look at the diamond shaped cat.

“How cute...” she smiled, then looked at Red wincing. “Should I accept it or...”

“Yes, you should accept it.” Red confirmed. “No matter who you are, you don’t turn down Antonio,” he whispered, “besides, he meant it as a compliment.” it was explained.

The bathroom door shut behind them just seconds before Francis plopped down in the seat across from them. The man straightened his jacket, then sighed.
“Seriously, did I get married?” he asked again, not having received an earlier answer to his probing question.

Red shook his head woefully. Liz looked at Francis in open disbelief.

“It’s a hell of a time to bring it up,” Liz squawked, “seeing as Lia is not on the freaking plane!”

“Well, I have her number!” Francis countered. “I’m not a complete louse.”

Liz snapped her eyes towards Red searchingly, looking for help.

“Lizzy...” the man sighed, “just...” he sighed once more, looking for the answer, “it’s Francis.”

Once they were in the air, drinks and snacks were served before Red settled back beside Lizzy, relaxing. He sat up suddenly, looking around, cursing under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” Liz muttered around her cheese puff.

“Where the hell is Mark?”

Francis cackled, slapping his knee in open amusement. “You forgot Mark...”

Red pulled his phone free, hastily dialing Chris. “Do you have Mark?”

“Yeah, he was with Amanda, didn’t realize it was that late.” Chris shrugged the concern aside. “He’s flying out with Antonio.”

“Tell the moron to call me later.” Red grumbled, closing the phone with a snap, before narrowing his eyes at Francis. “You two...”

“Are going to be the death of you?” Francis finished, snatching Liz’s last cheese puff.

“Stop!” she snapped, throwing a grape at the man, nailing him in the forehead with deadly accuracy. “That’s not funny!”

“At this stage?” Red disagreed vehemently as he watched the boy ferret around for the wayward fruit before popping it in his mouth. “I would pay someone to put me out of my misery.”

Francis’ laughter echoed throughout the plane.

Chapter End Notes

It was suggested in a Facebook PM that I add my email address for readers wishing to make anonymous story suggestions. I guess I’ll add this in every couple chapters for quick reference for you guys. :)

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Facebook PM: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978
This is in no way political.

We hope you’ll indulge us this remembrance of people lost to us. It is our small way to cherish their memory.

In Memory of:

Marine Pfc. D. Coleman

And to those we lost after their service:

Army Sp/4. J. Thompson
Army SSgt. M. Payne

We will never forget the impact you made...

Memorial Day is a national American holiday for remembering the people who died while serving in the country's armed forces.

Many people visit cemeteries and memorials, particularly to honor those who have died in military service. Such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and Arlington National Cemetery.

Many volunteers place an American flag on each grave in national cemeteries.

MAY 25

Red and Lizzy spent half the flight home reassuring Francis that he had not been married in Vegas.

Regardless, Red was amused as Lizzy continuously prodded Francis, on the flight home for information... although to Red, it seemed more like the latest juicy gossip, concerning Francis’ inexplicable ‘break’ with the cute little morsel the man had picked up along the way in Vegas.

Lia was absent at any rate and Elizabeth was perhaps understandably curious as to the circumstances surrounding the fact.
“Things happen.” Francis was more than vague when pressed for details however.

Which was completely opposite of what Red knew of the man’s usual methods of over sharing, which made him wonder, was the young man yanking Lizzy’s chain?

“I love her, she’s my whole reason for existing.” Francis continued.

Red sighed heavily, settling deeper into his seat for the farce he was positive lay on the horizon, for some reason or another.

“What things?” Elizabeth had demanded. “Did you hurt her, is she all right? What have you done now!” it was exasperated.

“Of course Lia is all right.” Francis took exception. “Why do you instantly assume it’s something I did?” he demanded an answer. “I didn’t do anything.” he replied in earnest. “I love her. She’s my whole reason for existing.” he repeated emphatically.

“Me thinks he doth protest too much.” Dembe stated in that deep, silky tone and even Red halted his drink mid-sip to acknowledge the impact of the Shakespearean quote from the dark man’s lips.

“I don’t even know what that means.” Francis snapped. “Dembe, speak English for God’s sake.”

Red rubbed woefully at his eyes, before rolling them to an amused Dembe. The man popped a Sunchip, turning his attention back to the entertainment at hand.

“Do you even know what the hell happened between you and the girl?” Silas prompted the question on everyone’s mind. “Do you know anything at all, for that matter?” he muttered, though loudly.

“Why does everyone assume that something happened?” Francis fell into an effective brooding mode, seeking solace at the far end of the plane. “You act as though I purposely set out to sabotage my love life.” the crisp sound of a bottle opening cut the air, dulling the statement somewhat.

“As I said,” the man stressed, flicking the bottle cap into the trash can across the way, pumping his fist when he scored, “I love her, she’s my—”

“Whole reason for existing.” all on board finished in unison.

Silas was given pause for thought, the statement or perhaps more... accusation, puzzling the man somewhat.

“Do you know what they hell he’s rambling on about?” Red queried, seeing Francis was genuinely upset in this instance. Or perhaps not, as the one in questions sulky mood was suitably waylaid by a simple bowl of trail mix the in flight attendant was passing around.

“Does anyone,” Silas quipped jovially, “...ever?” his eyes fell on the man in question, finding the boy digging into the food like a raccoon raiding a trash can. “Does he even know what the hell he’s talking about.”

“Should I comfort him?” Liz felt bad for all her badgering now, worriedly looking after her friend, frowning in discontent down at the bowl in his lap.

“Oh, I think,” Red watched Francis’ dour expression alter instantly to an enthusiastic smile as he pulled a couple M&M’s from the bowl before eating the treasures with relish, “he’ll pull through just fine, whatever the given circumstances.”
Liz sighed heavily, plopping back in her seat, her own expression rather foreboding.

“Men!” she exclaimed rather disgustedly to Red’s way of thinking.

“Am I included in that dire category?” he turned his attention where it was needed.

“You have evolved.” Liz threw a caustic look Silas’ way.

The large guards face took on an innocent air, which to Red’s way of thinking was ludicrous in itself. Silas’ innocence was lost many decades back.

The rest of the flight was finished in relatively good humor after Lizzy’s own mood mellowed.

Upon their arrival, the mob of security, and he meant that in the literal sense, that greeted them rivaled what it had in Vegas.

And Red was more than fine with that.

Once they were in familiar surroundings, his sense of security returned. It was a more confined space, easier to secure.

Which, after having received a relatively reliable tip concerning Carver’s location, made the difficult decision to fly back out the following morning leaving Lizzy in the very capable hands of Silas and Francis, an easier one.

He felt infinitely better knowing that Francis, while not privy to the real state of affairs, was there within arms reach of Lizzy and would protect her, which would allow Silas to do his job to it’s fullest.

And the woman really enjoyed his visits, so that was an added bonus.

As for Liz, when Red wasn’t there, she fell into a structured routine. She had returned to her profiles. In the interim, Silas had constructed a program of rigorous physical training. He infiltrated new defensive techniques and a certain street savvy awareness not present before.

Truth told, she gravitated towards any sort of activity to fill the time in between training and profiling.

Red had been gone a few days now. He called frequently, letting Liz know of his whereabouts and of his rising frustration always being one step behind Carver.

She had shared in his frustration, and it wasn’t just because Red hadn’t caught Carver.

She missed the man terribly.

Especially today. It was the beginning of a three day holiday for her.

Having worked yesterday, splitting her time between profiling and running background on yet another Blacklister for her team, Cooper had assured them all that work would be on hold until Tuesday. Meaning no calls, no working on profiles...

Just rest and relaxation for the next few days.

And Red wasn’t here to share it with her.

She wouldn’t begrudge the man attending to his business, or this Carver issue, but she did wish he
were here to share in the downtime.

A bright spot was that Francis, and even Ben Gilchrist, were coming to celebrate Memorial Day weekend with her and were planning to take her to the Rolling Thunder Motorcycle Rally. It was an event she had never attended in the entire time she had lived in D.C.

The morning of the planned activity, Francis had called to say he was on his way, so she went out to wait in the front garden with Silas. A short time later, a low rumble of motorcycles filled the air.

The sound came closer then three cycles actually pulled up into the drive. The three riders slowly approached.

She threw Silas a questioning glance, but her guard didn’t seem fazed by the third rider’s presence.

The bikes rolled to a stop, the men removing their helmets.

She gasped her surprise, joyously rushing across the driveway as Red’s face came into view.

Red kicked his stand, then eased the bike down before sliding off the seat.

“Hey, baby,” he laughed quietly, opening his arms quickly to wrap the rapidly approaching woman up in a tight hug.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home!” she hugged him right back, before pulling away to seek out the humor-laden eyes.

“I wasn’t sure what time I would get here.” he murmured softly, kissing her smiling lips gently.

“Why didn’t you tell me!” she turned on Francis accusingly but her happiness shined through.

“I know you love surprises.” he grinned. “Or... is that me?”

She chuckled, remembering they had lost a better part of an afternoon watching videos of soldiers returning home, surprising their loved ones.

They came up with a convenient excuse for the quiet sobbing which had arose. Nora was fixing lunch and Francis swore she must be chopping onions and that the essence was filling the room.

Liz went along with they fabrication, a little embarrassed herself by the powerful emotions the reunions had stirred.

Red squeezed around her waist, holding out the other hand to the large guard behind her. “Silas?”

The man grinned and pulled out her own helmet and jacket from thin air.

“Ohh! How cute!” she clasped her hands together excitedly at the stylish, though rather heavy jacket.

“Won’t it be too hot?” She asked as Red helped her slide the small jacket on.

“No, these are for warmer weather. Plus, once we get going, the wind can be cool.” He pulled her hair out from under the jacket. “And they have armor in them in case we have an accident.”

Ben and Francis smiled as they watched Red pull her hair back.

“What are you doing?” She turned, only to be stopped when he placed his hand over her head, turning it back straight.
“I’m braiding your hair.” he was already deeply invested in the task, a fixed scowl on the rugged face.

He expertly wove Lizzy’s hair into a braid his daughter would have been proud of actually.

Jennifer had always got on to him about her crooked braids until she made him sit down and practice one day until he got it down pat. She had been four and a little bossy tyrant.

And he had done it without protest, just so he wouldn’t get the “Daddy! It’s lopsided again!” followed by a huff of aggravation.

Though he had secretly found it amusing.

“Would you do mine?” Silas held out a piece of pretty pink ribbon, Red had chosen for Elizabeth.

Francis frowned his annoyance. “Do your own.” he pushed Silas’ offering aside. “This isn’t a slumber party.”

“The way he and Dembe gossip, it may as well be.” Red mumbled.

Silas’ reply was interrupted by Dembe’s arrival on scene. The nondescript SUV slid into it’s usual parking space.

“Duty calls.” Silas shoved the ribbon into Red’s waiting hand, motioning to the other men who crossed the spacious driveway, headed for the vehicle.

The back hatch had been opened and Dembe was already unloading case after case of beer and soft drinks.

“Are we having guests?” Liz was sticking wayward strands of hair beneath a snug fitting helmet.

“So to speak.” Red helped the woman mount the large, sleek Harley. “Don’t touch that pipe, it’s hot.” he indicated.

Liz situated herself, marveling at the shiny chrome and cushy leather seat of the jet black bike she occupied.

Red had donned his own helmet, the dark tinted visor down. He looked every bit the sexy space hero.

“Can you hear me?”

Liz twirled her head this way and that as Red’s sensual voice resonated deeply inside her helmet.

“Stereo!” she giggled.

His quiet chuckle surrounded her. “We’re wired. You’re coming through loud and clear.”

“Can they...” she enquired of the other ‘bikers’.

He shook his head. “I want you all to myself.”

She smiled prettily for him, the words pleasing her. Red smartly fingered her visor down, sliding into the position in front of her.

The huge bike roared to life as the man hit the ignition button. Liz felt a powerful, thrumming
vibration between her legs. Not an unpleasant sensation at all.

“This could prove interesting.” she lifted stylish brows enjoying Red’s throaty laugh which met her statement.

“That’s my girl.” he nodded slightly as they waited for their companions to join them. “Keep that thought uppermost in your mind, will you.”

“I don’t know how I couldn’t.” she philosophized. “This is the most expensive vibrator I’ve had the privilege of having between my thighs.” she admitted freely, her reward, yet another rumbling chuckle.

“So far anyway…” Red murmured intimately, “the day is young.” he said, acknowledging Silas with a lift of his hand as the passed the impressive figure.

The small pack headed out, Francis eager to take the lead. Red took his place just slightly behind the two men as they headed down the sloping driveway.

“Silas isn’t going?”

“He likes to spend the day alone.”

Liz fell silent, sensing an underlying cause but didn’t want to pry unless Red further quantified the statement. Which he didn’t. Liz let the subject go.

It seemed they were riding the streets at a rather leisurely pace to the woman, which was pleasant enough. Liz realized they must be allowing her time to get the feel of the bike.

“How you doing back there?”

“It’s very comfortable.” she automatically nodded a ‘hello’ as yet another bike rider passed. Red had not failed to acknowledge one when approaching, with a slight lift of his hand.

“Do we greet each guy on a bike?” she didn’t want to be remiss in her manners. “I’m assuming that’s the proper etiquette?”

“Just a friendly gesture…” the man concurred. “It’s part of the code.”

Liz narrowed her eyes. “What code?”

“How much time do you have?” she could hear the humor in his voice. “Hold on tight.” it was warned. “I’m going to see what she can do.”

Liz tightened her fingers into the fabric of his jacket, leaning closer.

They hit a stretch of road, the man shifting gears. The large engine responded instantly with a burst of speed.

The corresponding vibration rumbled deep into the frame, traveling instantly into the area between her legs.

She gasped at the strength of the powerful thrumming, trying to ignore the deep, raspy chuckle from the man.

“Enjoying yourself now?” he queried.
“Where are we going?” she snapped a little peevishly. He had done that on purpose. What’s worse, he had guessed at her reaction.

“Are we there yet?” his teased, allowing the moment to pass. “We’re going where ever good American should go.” it was told. “Now relax and be a good little girl. I’ll give you a gift at the end of the day, if you do.”

She wondered at the present. “I was going to say the same of you, but if you don’t behave... perhaps I’ll change my mind.”

She could not see Red’s response which was a wide grin of appreciation for her wit.

“What a concept.” he wondered aloud. “I’m usually generously rewarded for being a bad boy.”

Liz clamped her lips tight, holding her reactionary giggle. She had to admit, she did crush a bit on Red’s bad side, more than she probably should.

“With that being said, I could just ‘take’ that highly coveted gift,” he reminded silkily, “if I really wanted.”

The deep timbre in his voice and the insinuation, made Liz’s stomach flip about wildly. She did enjoy when the man was a bit... demanding in his attention. But he didn’t have to know that... right now at least.

“This isn’t 50 Shades and you aren’t Christian Grey.... thank God.” she rolled her eyes at the disagreeable thought.

“No, from what I’m to understand, I’m more...” he pondered the comparison, “like that guy in that movie you want me to watch. What was it again? The Administrative Assistant?” he grinned in wry amusement.

“It’s Secretary.” she huffed, then sighed lightly.

Red turned his head slightly as the woman edged forward, tightening her thighs about him.

“Now Mr. Grey...” she purred her approval, “I could really get into.”

“Like to be spanked, do we?”

“I don’t know.” she didn’t. “Never tried it.”

“Oh, Lizzy,” the deep sigh ran along her spine, “your sexual education has been sorely lacking. I see we will have to remedy that fact.”

“Soon, I hope?” she was feeling rather light and flirty today. It was a beautiful sun-filled day and getting out of the house was refreshing her spirits. And Red was back and all seemed right with the world.

“I could stop right now.” he offered. “In fact, nothing would please me more than bending you over this bike in one way or other.”

Liz smiled as Francis sped by.

“There are children present.” she reminded but certainly wondered what it would feel like? Red’s large palm stinging her toned bottom.
She had felt a fleeting glimpse of it in Vegas, but had been too distracted by mutual jealousies to concentrate fully on whether it had been intensely pleasurable or not.

Red chuckled again. “I have a long memory, it will keep. But I won’t, I give you fair warning.”

Liz warmed to such a promise... and the playfulness, the experimentation she found within Red. “You’re getting too big for your britches.”

“The more you talk about spanking your perfect little ass,” the man adjusted himself in his tightened jeans, “...yes, you are correct in that assumption.”

Liz’s cheeks brightened in pleasure, admittedly loving the affect she had on the man.

“Speaking of britches,” his thoughts turned to other interesting matters, “are you wearing any?”

“You sound like Silas.” she grumbled, shifting more comfortably into Red’s body.

“Since when does Silas make enquiries concerning your panties or lack thereof?” Red’s pitch altered slightly much to her delight.

“Are you jealous?” she teased, the thought thrilling the woman.

“I can trust, Silas.” it was his turn to grumble. “It’s you I have reservations about.” the banter turned wry. “He is a thing of beauty after all.”

“He is that, he tells me as much, constantly.” Liz laughed musically. “As for your reservations, I wouldn’t want you to get too sure of yourself where I am concerned.” she baited.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that.” his manner had turned introspective. “You always keep me on guard...” he murmured quietly.

The softly stated declaration actually pleased Liz to no end, in fact, it excited her to the very core. To think, after the likes of Madeline Pratt and Dr. Lauren Kimberly, that she alone held Red’s interest was quite a commendation.

Softly clearing her throat, she looked about, having lost track of their whereabouts.

“Seriously, Red, where are we going?” she had enjoyed the ride through the stately streets for some few moments now.

As they drove the quiet area of the older section of D.C., misshapen beams of light shined through the grand oak and maples lining the road. The hazy glow left her feeling warm and peaceful inside. A feeling she was experiencing more of late, especially when in a certain person’s company.

“Right now?” he shot down the on ramp of the Interstate. “The Freeway.”

Liz, having not anticipated their trek, tightened her hold considerably about Red’s frame as the bike easily picked up speed. The powerful machine held it’s own with the fast moving cars and trucks. If anything, it overtook them.

“Relax.” Red soothed having felt her tension as a semi whizzed by.

She tried to relax but the concrete below flashed by at dizzying speeds.

“You’re as safe as a babe in arms...” he kept his voice even and calm in hopes of easing her nervousness.
She recalled how Red had been with baby Sam and instantly felt better.

“She’s with baby Sam...” the velvety timbre helped further calm her nerves. “It’s not far.”

She took him at his word and soon, having put her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, the anxiousness subsided.

Soon all she could feel was the return of the tingling vibration between her legs and the alluring scent of Red’s cologne. She nuzzled into the pleasurable diversion, her muscles loosening by degrees.

“That’s my baby...” the man smiled warmly as her little body conformed to his. Her soft breasts pushed into his back as her shapely thighs cradled him. He sighed his contentment as the heat of her pussy moved snuggly into his backside.

After a few seconds of listening to her evened breathing, he tapped her knee.

“Look at Francis.” Red’s voice held a slight hint of pride.

Liz lifted her head, instantly grimacing her dismay.

The young man was weaving in and out of traffic as smoothly as a skater maneuvering slick ice.

“Red, he’s gonna kill himself!”

“I think God has reserved that privilege to me.” he chuckled. “No, he’s really quite good. He races the strips sometimes.”

Liz was constantly amazed at the layered depths to Francis Holbrook. “Drag strips?”

“Yep, watch Ben.” she could hear the amusement in the man’s voice. “He’s constantly trying to best Francis.”

“They’re going to race?” Liz was mortified. “Out here?”

“Those bikes will leave everything else behind.” Red informed. He beeped his horn as Ben Gilchrist had come alongside Francis, bikes abreast of one another.

“Red, stop them!” she protested, but the riders were off.

But it was over before it began really. Francis had a clear shot and took it, leaving Gilchrist in the dust.

Liz could barely make out the tiny dots in the distance but Francis had lifted an arm in the universal sign of ‘victory’, so she assumed him the winner.

“I am so going to give him a piece of my mind!” Liz was sure of the fact. “What are you men thinking!”

“I’m thinking,” Red closed the space between the other riders easily having gunned the cycle now for the last few miles, “…he cheated.”

“He did not!” Liz automatically championed her friend, disregarding her earlier ire. Her face broke into a grin as she saw Francis’ joyous expression.

The young man had lifted his visor, chatting amiably with his competitor over the seventy mile an hour wind rushing past them. Until the man started hacking and spitting on the blurred road beneath
Ben wove dangerously for a second before regaining control as he laughed hysterically at his friends predicament.

Red laughed heartily, shaking his head.


“Francis’ wide open trap just acted as a bug screen.” Red’s gravely cackle amused her, she didn’t think she had ever heard such a laugh from him before.

“Eww.” she crinkled her nose. “You are such a child!” she yelled as they sped past the men.

“Baby, he can’t hear you.” Red took the next off ramp and the men followed suit.

“But they can hear each other out there!” she squeaked.

“Your visor is down.” he shook his head to clear his ear drums. “Please remember to put it up next to should you wish to berate someone... save my hearing, humm.”

“Oh!” her fingers came to her mouth, over the visor, reaffirming that it was indeed down, “I’m sorry...” she winced in sympathy.

He chuckled, “You were in the moment.”

He brought the bike to a stop at the red light, waiting for the other men to come alongside them.

“Are you missing it already?” he asked lightly.

Liz was momentarily lost until the man rumbled the engine for her benefit.

“Don’t knock it.” she advised. “It may get you laid.”

Red hands immediately lifted.

“Conceding defeat already?” Ben Gilchrist seemed to take delight in the concept.

Liz glanced over to the man, wondering how he had even been aware of their discussion.

Red flipped his visor, turning towards the man. “I never concede defeat but I’ve found,” he corrected the misconception, “where a woman is concerned, it’s often better to picks one’s battles if you intend to win the war.”

“War?” Liz questioned his vernacular.

“The eternal battle between the sexes, sweetheart.” the older man soothed any frayed nerves. “I speak only in generic terms, you understand.”

Liz thought he handled the situation well, considering.

“Uh humm.” was her only reply, however.

“Yea, let’s talk about something more important.” Francis was getting bored, obviously. “Did you see me out there?” he looked back to the Freeway. “Was I amazing or what? Loser.” he goaded Ben gleefully. “Winner.” his thumbs turned inward to his chest area. “Loser...” he pointed at Ben yet
“We get it.” Ben was a good loser in this instance. “There’s always next time.” he grumbled his defeat.

“Bring it on... loser.” Francis cackled evilly.

Red smiled and Liz knew he approved of Francis’ gloating.

“Did you see me, Lizzy?” the man preened.

“Yes, I saw you play Venus Fly Trap to a defenseless bug.” she grimaced, taking the man down a notch, even as she heard Red snort in her ear.

“Speaking of which, you got any gum?” the man suddenly remembered his earlier unexpected snack. “He tasted nasty!”

Red slapped his visor down, hiding his laughter from their companions but not Lizzy, as the light changed, thankfully allowing them to move on.

The next few blocks were traveled in congenial and welcomed silence.

Red followed the other two men into a designated parking area, as each chose a slot, coming to a stop.

Francis and Ben were already disposing of their gear before Red slid off the bike, discarding his helmet before assisting the woman.

“Was it too hot for you, Lizzy?” he teased as her pink face came into view.

“I’ll let you know if I reach that point.” she chose to ignore his insinuation that the vibration he caused with the bike had turned her on.

She took his hand, as he helped her off the bike. He pulled her into a quick embrace placing a sensual kiss on her unsuspecting mouth.

“I am very interested in learning what your limits are.” he stared down into the light blue depths, his own mellow.

He nuded her nose with his own, grazing her mouth yet again.

“What about that bike, Liz.” Francis was admiring the gigantic, gleaming Harley beside Red. “Did you like it?”

“Oh, I think she liked it just fine.” Red stated innocently but Liz was sure Francis picked up on the ‘why’ of it all even though the young man held his peace for once.

He did offer a sheepish grin however.

“Actually...” Liz topped Red with a rather smug, “I would like a little more power if it’s out there.” she lifted innocent eyes to a very amused opponent.

“More power?” Francis was stymied, totally forgetting the previous tone the conversation held. “This is it! There is nothing that will compare to this baby!”

“Yes, Red always manages to obtain the best... don’t you, Red.”
“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Red pulled Liz to his side.

“So you enjoyed the ride though.” Francis was anxious she do so.

“I liked the bike ride very much, Francis.” Liz answered demurely. “Was the outing your idea?”

“I thought you’d been cooped up with Silas too long,” Francis replied seriously, “you were starting to wear your hair like his.”

“I thought the look was flattering.” Liz feigned surprise.

“Any look on you is flattering.” Ben stepped up to compliment.

“Thank you, Ben.” she smiled pleasantly. “What a nice thing to say.” she smiled, even as she narrowed her eyes at her best friend.

Red had turned a little at the way the man had stated the remark but Liz’s handling of the matter calmed him.

“Hey, Red.” Francis broke the tension further by pointing out some new arrivals.

Liz tensed however. Striding towards their group was an ensemble of very large, very menacing looking gentlemen.

Their dark scowls did not bode well but soon enough those expressions altered.

“How’s it hanging, Red?” the obvious leader of the men stepped forward, hand clasping hand. A sharp sounding clap echoing between them as they connected.

Red rubbed his arm subconsciously after the greeting. “To the left, Mad Dog,” was the ready reply which brought convivial laughter all around, “... to the left.”

Francis and Ben fist bumped several of the younger ones, before being pulled into bear hugs by the older.

“How’s your old lady? Pining away for me still?” Red continued his bantering.

“Nah, I’ve moved on, man.” Mad Dog denied the accusation. “Susie is old news, we parted way back in April, right?” he checked with his posse.

“That was only a month ago.” Francis was confused which brought another round of good hearted laughter.

“Whatever, man.” the man shrugged. “Is this the little lady we’ve been hearing about in all the better circles?” Mad Dog had politely turned his attention to the lone female of their party.

“Elizabeth,” Red made the introductions, secretly amused at the woman’s slight irritation for the term used... little lady, “this is Maurice Morrison.”

“The baddest mother this side of the Pecos.” Francis was obviously smitten with the huge man’s reputation.

“Do you even know where the ‘Pecos’ is?” Red was curious.

“Do you?” Francis countered.
“You have me there.” Red conceded.

“The Pecos River runs from New Mexico to Texas, emptying into the Rio Grande.” Mad Dog readily informed both men, before turning his attention back to Liz. “You can call me, Maurice, Miss.” the large bearded man spoke with gentility that almost shocked her. “Now, I’m not kin to that Morrison puke from The Doors, mind you, just saying.”

“You don’t like Jim Morrison?” the woman was taken aback. She thought such people would naturally enjoy anything from The Doors, but then she realized that she was judging by appearances.

“Well of course I do, why would you think differently?”

“Well...” she sought out Red hastily, needing input, but the man only seemed to be listening intently as was the rest of the imposing clan, “you called him... a puke.”

“I call Francis here a puke too.” The young man was suddenly grabbed into a crushing, yet affectionate, headlock while Mad Dog playfully rubbed his knuckles into Francis’ head... quite hard actually.

“Hey, man!” Francis squirmed about hastily from such gentle administrations. “Not the hair!” he quickly rushed to the nearest side mirror, checking his ‘coif’.

“Don’t mean I don’t like the boy.” Maurice explained patiently to the chuckles which ensued from his actions. “I’m quite fond of the lad, truth told.”

Liz glanced at a suitably miffed, Francis Holbrook.

“Aww, man! Look at that!” he was busily combing his hair back into perfection.

“It’s a pleasure to meet such a beautiful woman.” Maurice was suddenly the consummate gentleman. “Red is a very fortunate individual.”

Liz blinked for the cultured manner seemed totally out of whack with the image portrayed.

“Thank you.” she hastily remembered her own manners, “It’s very kind of you to say.”

“We’re over here, I take it?” Red got things back on track.

The enormous man bowed minutely, “We saved you a spot.”

Liz glanced to the indicated area and the others who sat about with coolers and chairs aplenty scattered everywhere a spot was available.

“No one seemed to mind?” Francis asked tongue-in-cheek.

“No one said anything.” Maurice shrugged massive shoulders.

They made their way across the large greens and through some makeshift barricades in order to get to the others who were taking up quite a bit of viewing space.

Liz noted a multitude of every kind of bike stretching for what seemed like miles in a neatly organized section over to their right.

“How many people are here?” she meant bikers, but didn’t want to ruffle feathers if feathers might be ruffled.
“There’s a few of us here today,” Maurice was the spokesperson for the group, obviously, “but there won’t be any trouble, don’t you fret.”

“I wasn’t fretting...” Liz was quick to reassure. Red grinned accordingly.

“She’s never been before.” he explained. “And she doesn’t fret.” it was assured, even if Lizzy was ‘fretting’ slightly. “Just be yourself Mad Dog. You know how I love it when you are. Always makes for an interesting day.”

Mad Dog seemed to relax, a hearty laugh escaping his frame.

Liz looked about trying to get her bearings. She was totally surprised when several of the women who were seated in a long aisle down the fenced off area smiled up at her in a friendly manner.

She smile right back. Out of nowhere, someone offered her a folding patio chair. Immediately she was drawn into a long questioning session, the women inquisitive about any aspect of her relationship with Red.

Normally, Liz was rather private about such things but the ladies were so open and humorous when discussing their own relationships, she instantly found herself divulging more than she had intended.

She cast hasty glances to Red, whose eyes always seemed to wander to hers as well.

It was odd to watch her well-coifed men mingling and laughing boisterously with the burly, bearded bikers. Francis with his four hundred dollar haircut was having a shoving match with a long-haired surfer looking ‘dude’ which ended in a more laughter and an easy camaraderie that seemed an alien concept on the surface.

Old friends at a long anticipated reunion. That was the impression given by this gathering. And maybe it was exactly the reality in this case. Red seemed to make friends where ever he went.

The men rejoined the women after a fashion, passing Lizzy an ice cold bottle of water that seemed to materialize out of nowhere.

A deep rumble of approaching thunder vaguely echoed in the back ground of conversation and people enjoying themselves.

Liz glanced up at a clear blue sky, puzzled as the white fluffy clouds drifted slowly overhead. She scanned the area absently having noted the crowds gathering on the opposite side of the street.

In the center median, a tall man in a dress uniform took his place. He stood quietly as if awaiting the arrival of something or someone.

“Who is that, do you think?” Liz enquired of no one in particular, her eyes locked, stationary on the imposing figure.

“He’s the ‘Lone Marine’.” a man mumbled respectfully next to her, then fell silent as the sound of rumbling growls grew louder.

All faces turned expectantly, looking down the still empty street.

Liz had to stand, for everyone had risen. A line of police escorted whatever was to come, all dressed in their very best uniforms, she noted.

A movement from the corner of her eyes caught and held. She turned to see the tall, stately Marine
lift his arm, smartly issuing a crisp salute.

The sound was growing louder and louder. It echoed through the crowd and around the inauspicious buildings off in the distance.

Liz now recognized the source of the din, but she was having a difficult time adjusting to the scope of such a concept but sure enough... within a few seconds, the first of many motorcycles to come, came into view.

Hundreds of motorcycles neatly lined both sides of the meridian where the Marine stood. They sped by at a good clip and Liz was to learn the why of it all, hours later. At times one or two Veterans would bring their bikes to a halt, smartly returning the salute offered.

Several times, ‘Oorah, Staff Sergeant’, was called out to the honoree.

“He’s done this tribute for years now.” Red’s voice was close to her ear. Liz almost started, so involved with the events had she been.

Liz’s eyes always returned to the ramrod straight figure with his arm raised high and proud, his eyes forward, scanning the multitude of Veterans as they passed.

Francis and Ben whistled loudly from time to time, a continuous clapping applause resounding from the spectators.

Red stood stoically, his eyes never leaving the lone Marine for any great length of time.

They continued to stand and the Marine continued to salute.

The heat was already wearing on Liz but suddenly there was blessed shade.

She glanced up to see an umbrella over her head and yet another bottle of water was handed over.

Liz glanced at the perspiring plastic container, the icy feel making her icy inside. She had shade, she had water...

Her eyes lifted to the Marine, who only kept holding his salute as Veteran after Veteran passed on the rumbling bikes.

She felt her eyes well with tears, her fingers gripping the water bottle tightly.

“Lizzy,” Red had noted her condition, his eyes sweeping her frame with open concern, “is your leg bothering you?”

He knew Silas had demanded a particularly grueling training the day before which had affected her weakened limb.

“Silas shouldn’t hav–”

Liz shook her head curtly, her own spine stiffening accordingly. She admired the stamina of the Marine across the way. She wasn’t about to bother with her own insignificant aches and pains in the light of what that man was honoring this day.

The hour topped with the bikes still roaring down the barricaded street... the sun still beat down... the Marine still stood but at one point he swayed slightly, just for a millisecond. Liz grasped Red’s arm.

“Red...” she refused to look from the man across the way.
Red nodded and two men in their party removed the barricade, heading for the man in question.

They crossed the street dodging the bikes who also dodged them. Having reached the Marine, they blotted his neck and face with wet bandannas and held up water, allowing him to drink.

All the while, he held his salute.

The Marine nodded his gratitude.

The tears rolled down the woman’s cheeks.

Every person present must be feeling the honor and solidarity of this day, not only for the Veterans passing by, but for this man so stoically honoring his brothers-in-arms.

“Drink your water, sweetheart.” she raised the drink automatically, secure in the knowledge that Red would see to the Marine’s comfort.

His friends kept continuous treks to the Marine, cooling and hydrating the man when there was a gap. But even then, he refused to relent.

As they entered the final riders, his arm shook visibly but his stance was strong, his will determined.

Liz could feel his pain. Her own leg had started cramping a while ago, but she too, refused to relent.

It felt like a sacrilege to not only the Marine, but to those who they were there to remember and honor.

Even drinking the ice water Red placed in her hand felt like a slap in the face to those who had fought in some damn hot jungle or barren desert.

“Drink it, Lizzy.” Red raised the bottle himself, tipping it into her warm mouth.

As the final rider passed, the Marine slowly eased his arm down. And Liz found herself quietly crying.

Red turned her chin, making her look at him and away from the man marching proudly, though tiredly, off the center median, as crowds rushed to shake his hand or acknowledge his service.

Liz was ever so glad that soon the man would find shade, a part of her was angry for the people who kept him from his destination but she understood the need to touch this individual.

The shade...

The shade had been over her the entire time she stood there.

Red on the other hand was hot and sweating but smiling warmly down at her.

At his own sacrifice.

While he had suffered, he had shaded her from the hot sun. He had kept her hydrated.

She wrapped her arms around him, weeping brokenly into his chest and he didn’t seem to mind, though he was blistering hot.

She let go, then spun hastily to a nearby ice chest, dousing a handkerchief with water before wiping his face and neck with the cool cloth. Taking the umbrella from his hand, she held it over him as she continued to try and cool him down.
“I’m fine, Lizzy.” he assured quietly.

Her fingers shook as she doused the cloth again and again repeatedly wiping down his arms, until he caught her hand in mid-flight.

“I’m fine.” he repeated and turned her hand, kissing her chilled fingers. “Don’t forget, I wore a uniform too.” he laughed quietly. “I know what it means to suffer.”

Liz mentally slapped her forehead, remembering. He had served in the Navy, of course.

Because of his criminal history, his military record had been sealed, redacted. She knew he had served on a ship, but something in his eyes bespoke of more. She often wondered of his past, perhaps one day that would all be laid open to her.

“T-Thank you...” she said with great difficulty around trembling lips.

“Yes, it was a great difficulty to hold an umbre–” She reached up, covering his lips with her fingers, shaking her head once.

“Thank you for taking care of me and for your service.” she wondered if anybody had ever said that to him. “For your sacrifice.”

Red reached out, brushing her bangs from her eyes, smiling softly, “The sacrifices are worth it when what you cherish most in this world is safe from harm.”

He dabbed away the remnants of her tears, his eyes gentle, “Now, let’s go pay our respects.”

Red gestured the way and she took a step, grimacing, hobbling once. The next thing she knew, she was spun around then soundly deposited over a sturdy shoulder.

“Francis,” Liz giggled, pushing off the man’s back as Red laughed at her predicament, “stop jostling me, I’ll puke.”

“If you’re going to,” the man called back, “you better warn me.”

Each of their companions mounted their own rides, even as Red and his friends mounted theirs.

Before she knew it, they were gliding in behind the Veterans they had just watched pass by, continuing on.

She took in the sea of people, taking great interest in the patches on their vests and jackets. Many of these people had come from very far away to pay tribute to those who had fallen, and she felt even more touched by such dedication. Some, even from Alaska, she heard tell.

That they remembered...

She realized as they walked along with the throngs of people milling about, she didn’t quite know where they were.

They had parked the bikes and then joined in with the others.

Having been too busy looking at everyone and now, being shorter than many people around her, Liz couldn’t really see any pertinent landmarks.

“Where are we going?” she asked quietly, for those around her had adopted a low din of conversation.
“The Wall.” was Red’s solemn reply.

In the time she had lived here, she had not visited The Wall, but then, she hadn’t done much else either. She had just been too busy with work and her crumbling home life.

It seemed only fitting that the first time would be this day.

Liz had always looked at Memorial Day simply as cookouts and a long weekend.

She had forgotten that it was because of these men and women who surrounded her now, that she had the freedom to do such things. What better way to observe their service, but to visit a monument made in their honor.

She looped her arm through Red’s, listening to the smattering of conversations around her. From all walks of life these people had emerged.

Men in uniform spoke amiably with their counterpoints, some laughing, some not.

The new and old generations, connecting on a level only so few could understand but the brave and courageous individuals who had experienced the devastation of war.

As they followed the line of people, Liz’s interest was torn in so many different directions. Off to her right, some women posed next to a statue honoring nurses... while a group of men, all different in age and ethnicity, yet sporting the same platoon badge, did the same next to a statue of three men of varying race.

And as they neared the Wall, the diversity became even greater.

Old war buddies remembering their fallen comrades, lovers mourning their long lost loves... and children, now well into adulthood, connecting with the parent they may very well have never met at all.

Each of them touched the dark slick surface, as though looking for solidity or to even feel just a moment closeness with the one lost to them. They ran their fingers over the etched names reverently. Their eyes searching for something they could not possibly find.

She looked at Red to see his reaction to what was happening around them, only to find him searching the panels. His dedication paid off. He took her hand, guiding her to one section.

He quietly scanned the area, the Wall stretching well above his head. His eyes fixed on a point, then just as the others had, Red reached out, reverently touching the black granite wall.

She watched his finger tracing an etched name, revealing one letter at a time.

JACKSON R REDDINGTON

“My Uncle Jack.” Red said, his solemn voice filling the silence. “I thought he was the next best thing to chocolate milk.” he smiled fondly.

“How old were you?” the reference alerted her to an early age.

“I was five when he left the first time. By the time I reached twelve.... he was gone.” his eyes misted, before refocusing on the point of interest. “A month away from the end of his tour.”

“Jack Reddington.” she repeated in a hushed whisper as she stretched uselessly, attempting to reach the name. Red wrapped his arm around her waist keeping her steady as she tip-toed, her fingers
finally joining his to trace the engraving.

“Reddington?” A man next to them spoke up, stepping forward slightly for he clearly had not wanted to intrude on the private moment, “...I knew Red.”

Liz’s ‘Red’ turned to the man, with great interest. “You did?”

“I sure did,” the proud Vet stuck out his hand, which Red took immediately, “great guy...damned prankster. He was always giving one of us the business in some way or other.” the man laughed in remembrance. “We always kinda appreciated it though, you know.” the guy drifted off for a second. “Once, after coming off a hot mission he...”

Liz zoned off into the tale the man told, listening intently but her eyes focused on Red who was unconsciously rubbing his Uncle’s name with his finger while reliving the man’s life through the stories being told.

The older gentlemen obviously had been fond of Jack Reddington and he spoke of him in tones that made Red chuckle or grow intently quiet.

Liz smiled warmly having caught Francis and Ben, as they too listened avidly. She caught site of a volunteer carrying flowers and what looked to be pamphlets.

She tugged on Francis’s arm and he inclined his head so he could hear her, “Give me some money.” She whispered urgently. She had left her belongings at home.

He pulled out his wallet, absently handing it to her, then laughed his delight at the old Vet’s latest description of one of Jack’s shenanigans.

Liz walked over to the volunteer, requesting some items before heading back to Red. She inched up behind him, then tapped his hand gently. He automatically moved it, probably thinking it was someone looking for their own loved one’s name.

Liz had witnessed several occurrences of the same incident happening.

Francis, still enthralled by the stories, stood casually beside Red so she slid his wallet in his back pocket, then discreetly placed the bouquet of flowers in his hand. She smiled softly when his fingers curled instinctively around the bunch, holding them out of sight.

She turned back to the Wall, keeping a running check on Red. The man seemed totally engrossed in learning everything he could concerning his Uncle.

Having placed the paper against the Wall, Liz discovered she was just a little too short to get a proper tracing of the name. She looked about fruitlessly then tapped Francis on the shoulder.

She pointed at the Wall, silently asking for his assistance.

He handed off the flowers to Ben, crouching down, waving her forward. She instantly understood his meaning.

Sitting on his shoulders, the man gripped her thighs and stood effortlessly. She was raised to a perfect height to get a really good tracing without strain.

She checked to see how to do it properly as others were already deep within the process. She softly rubbed the black stick against the white paper until the name started to appear.
“Is this your wife?” she heard the man say, looking down from her concentrated effort.

“No, this...” Red had turned, obviously hesitating when he saw her activity. The man was touched by her thoughtfulness, “...is my fiancée, Elizabeth.”

“You know, if Jack was here you’d have some competition. He did love his brunettes.” the old Vet laughed his delight. “Especially one as pretty as her.”

“He’d have a damn good fight on his hands...” Red grumbled, making the old gentleman laugh out loud.

“You know, I was there when he...” the old guy hesitated, clearing his throat, shaking his head, as he pushed away the visual, but not the memory, “I don’t know if they ever told you, since you were so young... but he fought hard. Saved a lot of lives that day. If it wasn’t for him...” the man looked at the etched name Liz was still tracing, sighing heavily.

“I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for him. My tour ended a week after he...” the man nodded once, swallowing hard, “he saved my ass more than once. I will be forever grateful to have been in combat with him.” he fell silent for a moment, before chuckling softly.

“You know after he...” the man trailed off then smiled wistfully, “we got back to base and found that he had short sheeted all of us. How the hell he did that before we left...” he shook his head in sorrow and amusement. “He was a damn good guy.”

“Yes, he was.” Red replied solemnly.

“I’ll let you get back to...” the man gestured, then held out a card, “but if you’d ever like to hear more about him, call me.”

“Thank you, Sir.” Red took the card offered, placing it carefully in his wallet. “It was very kind of you to tell me something about him.”

“My pleasure.” they clasped hands, gripping them. “Ya’ll have a good Memorial weekend.”

Liz was just finishing up her tracing when Red inched closer to her and Francis. He watched the ceremonial gesture silently.

Francis slowly bent his knees, easing the woman down. Red reached out, gripping her hand until her feet were on solid ground. Francis backed away, holding out a long slim folder to Red.

The man opened it, allowing Liz to place the tracing inside, before smoothing it out respectfully.

Ben held out the beautiful flowers, giving them to Red.

Red had of course, seen Lizzy’s movement out of the corner of his eye earlier, but had not known her intentions exactly.

Now he knew.

Red nodded his gratitude to them all, more than touched by the offering, then knelt, placing them at the foot of the tall structure.

He bowed his head for a few seconds, lost in silent thought or maybe even prayer before he stood back up.

“Thank you, Lizzy.” he hugged her enthusiastically before murmuring against the soft skin of her
He loosened one arm, shaking Francis’ hand then Ben’s.

“You’re welcome.” she smiled up at him, then kissed him, holding it for a moment before dropping back to solid ground. Red was after all, a good five inches taller.

They walked the rest of the Wall together, as he pointed out objects of interest as they passed. He was surprised to realize at one point, that they had been holding hands the entire time.

He raised their clasped hands, kissing her fingers. She smiled at him softly, before pointing at something which had caught her interest.

While Francis and Ben occasionally stopped to help people get a tracing of a name, he and Lizzy looped back around to get a better look of some of the statues as they headed back for their bikes. The two men easily caught up at the reunion point.

“Are you tired?” Red asked as he helped Liz onto the bike.

“No, I’m okay.”

“Your leg?” he questioned, having been aware of her favoring it for some time now.

“Silas is trying to kill me.” she replied, then smiled. “I’m fine.” she adjusted her helmet then slid closer to Red as he started the bike.

Red gave Francis a thumbs up before heading off.

Liz was surprised that more than twenty of the bikers accompanied them.

As they approached the bridge, she realized their destination was not home.

“Where are we going now?” she was more than curious.

“Arlington.”
Arlington

May 25

Liz had never been to Arlington National Cemetery before either. She now felt remiss for the fact. So many took for granted the price others had to pay that they could simply ignore the fact, if they so chose.

She assumed on this day, they would visit Jack’s grave?

*Damn*... she wished she’d known. She would have bought more flowers or something just as fitting.

Glancing back at Francis, wishing there was some way to convey just how horrible she felt for arriving too such a solemn occasion without adequate–

Francis pulled the zipper on his jacket, showing a bouquet of flowers. The young man had remembered, where she had not.

But Francis had known where they were going, thankfully. She knew Red wouldn’t have thought badly of her for not having brought anything, but she sure as hell did.

With hundreds of others around them bringing tokens of remembrance, she wouldn’t have wanted their little group to be the only ones without *something*.

Especially for someone Red thought very highly of and a member of his own family who had paid such a high price.

Francis had saved the day. She threw him a grateful wave of her hand before clutching Red’s waist tightly again as the bikes sped along.

After being directed to another designated parking area, they climbed off, each removing their helmets in due course.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I set us up on a little private tour.” Red gestured the group towards a man who waited patiently across the way beside a trolley.

“No, I don’t mind at all.” she smiled, then boarded the spacious vehicle, taking an empty seat, sliding over to make room for Red while Ben and Francis climbed in behind them. The rest of the bikers joined them and soon the train was full.

The guide passed Red a couple folders, one of which he handed off to her. Liz perused the material, having automatically opened the pages. It was a list of all the monuments and answers to frequently asked questions. While the leaflets were passed around, she scanned the literature, surprised by the information she found inside.

Liz had just assumed Arlington was for military members only. She hadn’t realized how many different memorials actually existed. From politicians to scientists... even actors, were laid to rest here. She wondered, however, these people *must* have served the country in some important manner, surely. Or perhaps they were the spouse of one who did.

Red sat back in the seat, resting his arm behind her as they started rolling. Passing by one memorial after another, the trolley stopped at each, a short presentation and commemoration followed before the guide moved forward.
Visiting John F. Kennedy’s grave site proved to be more powerful than she had imagined. Not only due to the fact of how he had died, but Liz hadn’t known that two of his children were resting beside him. Just babies... the poor little angels.

She couldn’t imagine the pain that Jacqueline Kennedy felt, losing an infant son and then a husband just a little over three months apart.

And for both grieving parents to have done so in the public spotlight....

How could they have possibly survived such an ordeal?

What strong faith they must have possessed. Her estimation of the Kennedys rose considerably.

Red came to stand beside her, staring down at the small headstone, sighing heavily. She reached out, feeling for his hand which he instinctively grasped.

“They didn’t name her?” she pointed to the other small grave marker, a deep abiding sadness overtaking the woman.

“She was stillborn. But I believe they privately referred to her as Arabella.”

“They could have put the name.” she turned away, too emotional to deal rationally with the subject.

What was wrong with her today? She was getting so emotional, but then... maybe one should feel deeply about such things.

“They were Roman Catholic, the church would have declined to give a baptism to a dead person.” Red explained. “And since most Catholics give a proper name at the time of baptism...”

“But they named Patrick?”

“He survived for two days, John had him baptized immediately.” Red sighed sadly, his eyes resting quietly on the two small headstones, “All I know is that I feel extreme sympathy for anyone who has ever lost a child. That is a pain no parent should ever have to face.”

Liz gripped Red’s hand in hers, squeezing his fingers tightly. Red may have not lost a child in the traditional sense, certainly not the way the Kennedy’s had, but that didn’t make his pain any less relevant.

As they headed back to the trolley, Liz came alongside Francis asking discreetly, “Did you find it?”

“No sweat...” was the quiet response.

After once again loading back into the cart, they rolled around a corner. It was then, Liz felt the air leave her lungs, her eyes growing wide with wonder and... incredulous disbelief.

There were so many.... so very many. Far too many graves.

A sea of pristine white stones, one after another as far as the eye could see, stood in all directions.

Red massaged her shoulder consolingly, sensing the impact.

Liz wrapped her arms tightly about Red’s waist, clutching him closer the further they traveled the hallowed grounds in stunned silence.

The area was quite beautiful and serene. Each visitor very respectful of this sacred, dedicated,
consecrated grounds. She did hear laughter a time or two, but even that was oddly subdued.

The people weren’t meaning to disrespect the dead, only treasure a memory of the person they were honoring. Much like how Jack’s friend had done back at the Wall. The old Vet had laughed, but there was a tinge of melancholy to the sound as if he was wishing that Jack was there to share in the laughter, rather than just be a cherished memory.

They pulled up alongside a large open auditorium all disembarking. Each person examined their surroundings as they drifted in a common direction.

“The ceremony will begin in a few minutes,” the guide informed in due course.

“Thank you.” Red set his hand on the small of Liz’s back, ushering her around the building to a set of stairs which was rimmed with a black rail. He guided them to the center, then fell silent.

“Where are we?” she whispered reverently for the place seemed to warrant such respect.

“The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.” he motioned to a lone soldier walking the black path. “The men who guard it are called Sentinels. It is considered the highest honor to be chosen.”

Liz could not take her eyes off the one solitary tomb before which the soldier trod, its’ significance magnified now.

“Only a small amount of volunteers are accepted, and an even smaller amount pass the training.”

“Do you have to be a specific rank?” Francis leaned to speak quietly, a question of his own coming to mind.

“No, as a matter of fact, they wear no insignia when guarding the tomb.” Red continued the narrative. “The occupant’s identity is known only to God, so ‘Rank’ is not a factor in this particular instance.”

“Oh, so they’re equals.” Francis got it. “Doesn’t matter... brothers-in-arms... eternally.”

“Exactly.” Red scowled at a group down the way who were talking above the whisper that Lizzy, and even Francis, had instinctively adopted, even though they had not been told to otherwise. He was proud of them both, even more so of their values and moral conduct.

But he knew, having visited here many times, he need not intervene.

The Sentinel would handle the matter just fine.

While Red didn’t like why this happened, he did enjoy the flush of embarrassment that colored the faces of the guilty parties when publically called out on their disrespect.

Red directed his eyes towards Lizzy, anticipating her reaction when the soldier paused in his steps and turned to the loud people before snapping off a loud and clear rebuke.

“It is requested that everyone maintains a level of silence and respect!”

The man held his belligerent pose, staring at the offensive people until they fell completely silent, totally embarrassed when everyone stared at them with the same level of disgust and contempt, Red was feeling.

Some offenders would bow their heads and hide their faces, ashamed and rightfully so. Others left the area completely after being called on their complete lack of respect.
This group... left.

Red grinned when Lizzy, initially startled by the Sentinels reaction, scowled darkly at the offenders, eyeing them until they were out of sight before turning her attention back to the guard.

Red heard movement off to his right. He tapped Lizzy’s shoulder, pointing to a Superior Officer and the Sentinel’s relief coming on scene for the Changing of the Guard.

“We are to remain silent and standing throughout the ceremony.” he whispered. “Lean into me if you get tired.”

She fell silent as she watched the men change positions. They were so precise in their movements, she could understand why only a few elite were picked for this post. It had to take someone with great discipline, dedication and respect to show the proper dignity due to this sacred place.

She quietly shuffled in front of Red, leaning back into his chest. Red wrapped his arms low around her waist, taking more of her weight until she sighed with relief.

She was going to kill Silas when she got home. She hadn’t realized just how bothersome her previous injuries could be... until Silas put her body to the test.

After the ceremony was completed and two of the men left, she craned her head, whispering again, “Is this an hourly event?”

“Today, I assume they will change the guard every thirty minutes.” Red replied. “It will be expected.”

“When do they stop for the night?” she was curious.

“They don’t.” Red looked at the fresh guard. “The Tomb is guarded twenty four hours a day, year round. Regardless of rain, snow, or heat.”

She watched the Sentinel walk to the end of the path, then face East, and stand there staring at the Tomb. “What is he doing?”

“He holds position for twenty-one seconds, marches twenty one steps,” she had to turn to hear the whispered words, “faces East to honor his brother, before repeating the process.”

“Why twenty one?” she was ignorant on the matter, obviously, but Red loved she was taking the time to learn.

“It signifies the twenty one gun salute.”

She watched the Guard, counting off in her head twenty one seconds each pass, and he was never wrong... not once.

“He’s very dedicated.” she was amazed at the stamina it must take, the discipline.

“Yes, very.” Red smiled softly.

“What?” she obviously had missed something, if his tone was any indication.

“He knows who I am... he’s recognized me.”

Liz expelled a startled breath, her eyes flying to the Sentinel.
“Relax, Lizzy.” it was calmed. “He realizes what he’s doing is far more important than breaking his post to collect the substantial reward on my head.”

Liz watched the guard turn in their direction, his attention instantly focused on Red as he held his pose, before starting back their way. She had to give it to the Sentinel, he didn’t fault his steps once as he bore his eyes into the man behind her.

She looked back up at Red expectantly. The man returned the Guard’s gaze steadily before he inclined his head slightly in openly expressed respect.

The young soldier was visibly taken aback, not having expected such a congenial reaction from the nations number four most wanted criminal.

“With that said, perhaps we should vacate the area,” she smiled gently for the exchange, “if only to put him out of his misery.”

Red nodded his acquiescence, offering a lackadaisical ‘salute’ to his supposed adversary before taking his leave.

Once back on their trolley, they hit a few more memorials. Monument and monument loomed large on the horizon and suddenly Liz was slightly depressed to learn there was a need to commemorate so many battles... so many wars...

Rounding a corner, the trolley slowed. Francis pushed up from his seat, bypassing a confused Red. The guide pointed out, directing Francis where to go.

“Francis?” Red asked what the man was doing.

“We should go over there.” Francis pointed to an area down the path. “Just wanted to pay my respects.”

“What’s over there?” Red’s brow furrowed. “I didn’t know you had people here, Francis. Is it family?”

“Just something I want to check out, if we have time for a detour.” Liz spoke up quickly.

“Of course, baby.” Red consented instantly. “We have all the time in the world.”

Liz leaned towards Francis as the trolley slowed to a stop down the way, “He doesn’t know?” she whispered.

“In case we didn’t find it,” Francis explained his reasoning, “I didn’t want to get his hopes up.” he shrugged. “I didn’t think they’d find him so quickly.”

“The digital age...” she replied.

Everyone departed their seats in due course. The burly men seemed to know the place by heart, heading this direction or that, searching out the people they had come to remember.

Liz walked the grounds aimlessly, giving Francis the time he needed. She was confused by some of the lettering on the headstones, saying as much to her companion.

Red pointed out one, deciphering it for her. “BSM is Bronze Star Medal, PH is Purple Heart.” she was suitably informed.

She enquired of another headstone impression.
“DSC is Distinguished Service Cross,” Red replied quietly, his eyes lingering on the whitewashed stone for a long moment before moving on to the next. “Silver Star.” he pointed to the SS on the marker.

“OLC?” the woman muttered aloud.

“Oak Leaf Clusters.” the decipher was forthcoming.

She nodded sedately. “Okay...” her fingers traced a star on the warmed stone.

“This soldier was Jewish.” Red watched her actions. “The Star of David.”

She looked from one cross to the next and still, the next one over, “Why do they have so many symbols?”

“Well, he was Presbyterian,” Red pointed out the first grave, “ but the one next to him,” he gestured accordingly, “this man was Episcopalian. I think next one over, was Lutheran.” he lifted a hand.

“How do you know all this stuff?”

“When you attended enough funerals here, you start to pick it up.” his tone held a heaviness not there before. The man stood, his gaze taking in the scope of the spiritual idols again. He hoped, whatever faith, they had found peace with it.

They finally caught up with Ben and Francis to find them standing and looking down at one in particular.

Ben gestured from across the way. Red guided the woman carefully between the well kept graves.

Francis’ intent gaze told the woman, as she neared... they had found the person she had asked they locate.

Liz neared, approaching tentatively, not certain what to feel or if she would feel anything at all. She had not known the man personally, after all.

She inhaled sharply having rounded the stone, her hands curling into tightly balled fists.

Seeing that name printed on white granite, bothered her greatly. She closed her eyes and turned away from the sight. Crossing her arms tightly under her breasts, she fought the conflicting emotions.
besieging her mind.

She had not been prepared for such a powerful reaction... not at all.


Liz examined the expressionless features with a critical eye. Perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea, after all.

“You were named after him?” she asked a generic question, floundering a little herself, truth told.

“Each generation carries the name. It is tradition.” Red muttered, tracing the etching, slowly, carefully. “Though, in my case, I really wished they had stopped.” he reached out, setting his hand on the warmed stone, rubbing it. “I thought he was laid to rest... I didn’t think he was here.”

“You never looked?” Francis surmised. “I took a shot. I hope... it’s okay, Red?” the young man was anxious. “Did we do right?”

Red gave the younger man a vague nod of recognition as he knelt and looked at the carving, his eyes silently tracing the letters and numbers. “I never knew he was awarded the Bronze Star.”

Red shut his eyes, placing his hand over the name then felt a smaller hand lay over his and rub his fingers gently.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Red.” Liz leaned into his shoulder, murmuring quietly, her words heartfelt and sincere.

Red smiled gently. “You’re the first person to say that to me.” he curled his fingers, tightening them into a fist but the action was prevented by the slender fingers intertwining with his thicker ones.

“They thought I was too young, didn’t understand what happened.” he had long ago come to terms with the fact. “Maybe they wanted me to hang on to my innocence.” he shrugged. “They came here for the funeral,” he looked around at the trees, then back at her, “and left me home with a neighbor.”

“But you did understand?” the woman half way questioned.

“Yes, I knew.”

“You were just a little boy.” her heart hurt for that little boy.

“With a war vet for a neighbor.”

“He told you?” she was shocked.

Red nodded absently, “In great detail.”

“Why would he do such a thing?” Liz was incensed for that little boy Red had been.

“I don’t think he meant to hurt me, Lizzy.” Red soothed, finally realizing the tale unsettled her. “I think he just answered my questions, like he always did.” he remembered that old grizzled face fondly. “Actually, it was through talking to him, that I was finally able to mourn Jack.”

Red lowered to the freshly mowed grass, stretching his legs in front of him, leaning back into his arms. Liz glanced about for a spot as well, wondering where she should sit when Red moved his legs apart, waving her closer. She moved into the open space, leaning back into his solid frame.
Leaving Francis and Ben to sit opposite sides of the marker.

“I wish I knew what he looked like.” she stated wistfully.

Removing his wallet from his pocket, Red rifled through its contents until he pulled a small picture out, handing it over.

She stared at the black and white photo, her smile a gentle one. “Look at that baby face.”

Liz perused the fresh faced kid in his crisp uniform in a standard pose for that time. He looked proud and erect, but also young as hell. Completely unaware of what he would be facing in his short life.

Liz traced the man’s features, seeing a lot of Red in them. They both shared the same eyes, nose, cheek bones and lips.

“He was quite handsome, wasn’t he?” she voiced her thoughts.

“He thought so.” Red chuckled. “When he came home after boot camp, he thought he was a ladies magnet.”

“Was he?” Liz’s brows rose.

Red sing-songed his head, grinning, “Yes.”

He craned his head, looking over her shoulder at the picture, memories surfacing. “When I was old enough, and he was home, he’d load me up in the car and hit the hang outs. While I played games, he was trolling chicks.” he sniggered at Lizzy’s soft huff. “Seemed like every time I looked up, a new girl was on his arm.”

“He let you tag along?” she asked, handing the photo over to Ben.

“Yes. His mother thought since I was there, he wouldn’t get into trouble.”

“Did he ever...” Liz wondered because, after all... things happened between a man and a woman, especially when so young and it was a reckless time anyway... the sixties and seventies.

“Not to my knowledge.” Red had half expected some woman... okay, several, to show up with such a claim against Jack. “I’m sure if there were, they’d stay away now since the Reddington name is tarnished.”

Liz screwed up her face, annoyed beyond belief but not really knowing why. She stayed silent otherwise.

Red pulled out another photo, “He sent this during his first tour.”

The clean cut face had been replaced by dirt, sweat, a scruffy shadow on the still handsome features. His crisp uniform had been replaced by filthy fatigues which now hung open revealing a masculine chest rippled with muscles.

There appeared to be a leech sticking to his well-toned arm, which made sense, since the man was standing in a knee deep swamp.

In just the short time Jack had been there, he had lost some of his baby fat and gained a tiredness in his eyes. His helmet rode low on his forehead, blocking what appeared to be a blazing sun though not very well, seeing the man was squinting harshly as a cigarette hung from his smirking mouth.
But that wasn’t what grabbed Liz the most, it was how he went from looking like some young optimistic upstart, to a seasoned man in less than a month. For each picture had been hand dated on the back.

The things that kid must have seen had to have been horrific to change him so visibly. The things he would have had to do... must have done.

*War makes you grow up fast.* That’s what they said. Liz was seeing proof of that statement.

“He did two tours?” Ben asked, his tone a reverent one.

“Yes, well really, three.” Red acknowledged. “He came back after his first tour, took a short R&R and went directly back.” he explained. “He took a longer break after the second, then re-upped.” he fell quiet for a long beat. “The family was not pleased.”

Some would say that Jack hated how he was received back home, the things people called him. Or that he couldn’t acclimate. But Red thought, it was because of the media coverage at the time. The war was so publicized.

They would do a segment that Jack would catch on the evening news. He would see a buddy or know that particular region they were discussing and he’d go silent then head out on to the porch for a smoke.

Red hadn’t understood it until he had been labeled a traitor, the turmoil Jack must have felt. But when he did, Red understood better why Jack had welcomed his company with open arms.

He remembered his father arguing with his Uncle continuously. While his mother was always pushing some new girl on Jack.

And his grandmother, who was thrilled to have her boy home alive and safe, fusses over the man to the point of smothering. Red, even in his child like innocence, kind of understood why Jack wanted to escape to the boardwalk everyday, even if it meant having a kid tag along.

While the adults wanted him to talk about it, or, “Just let it go... move on boy, it’s over...”

How many times had those words echoed in Red’s head. Had he been older, he could have told them all to shut the hell up, that they couldn’t possibly know or understand *any* of what Jack was going through.

Red had wanted to discuss a new comic book or movie. He hadn’t expected anything from Jack, except to shoot the shit.

It was no wonder soldiers were so great with kids. Their innocence, their light conversation, was a relief in comparison to what the adults expected of them.

“Why do they go back?” Liz always wondered. She could not fathom a reason.

“Guilt, anger.” Red shrugged, having felt many of the same emotions for different reasons in his own life. “He couldn’t sit at a desk while his buddies were dying.”

“I bet his “welcome home” was another reason.” Francis scowled, having heard the stories, of course. He was ashamed of that generations lack of support for men and women who were fighting an impossible war so that the creeps ‘had the freedom’ to kick dirt in a soldiers face when he came back from hell.
“I would imagine.” Red nodded.

“Your family wasn’t happy he was home?” Liz questioned, recalling Red’s previous words.

“No, they were happy. It was everybody else that put a damper on his homecoming.” Red remembered she hadn’t lived through that era. “Sweetheart, returning soldiers were labeled a baby killer the minute they stepped back on American soil.”

Liz grimaced, recalling something about that in an old war documentary Sam used to watch continuously. She was so used to welcoming soldiers home, thanking them for their service, now. She had forgotten that Vietnam soldiers were spit on and called terrible things.

She wasn’t naïve enough to think that some of them probably earned the label placed upon them, but the majority of the soldiers were just doing their duty. They did their tour to the best of their ability, survived and came home... to what?

“I can’t imagine he was happy to have gone back?” Liz looked at the photo. When did it become common place to stand casually in a mosquito infested swamp with a leech neglected on one’s arm, she wondered. But the man in the picture seemed totally resigned... he “fit” now.

“He felt it was where he was supposed to be... his duty.” Red could relate to such thing.

“Do you have more pictures?” she suddenly needed to know more about Jack Reddington.

“Only this one.” Red gave over another picture, though this one was in color. “This was a month before he died, though we didn’t get it until two weeks after.” he tapped the man sitting next to Jack in the photo. “The FNG sent it.”

“FNG?” Liz frowned her confusion.

“Fucking New Guy.” Red smiled, almost impishly, readily relieving her state.

“Red!” she admonished, chiding the man’s responding chuckle. “He was kind enough to send this and that’s what you call him?”

“Well, that’s how he signed the letter, FNG Johnson.” Red shrugged any concern aside. “Apparently, the title was how Jack referred to the kid... PFC Johnson explained it all in the letter. After six months in company, a newbie ‘graduates’ to Vet status, at least in Jack’s eyes.” the light eyes twinkled with mirth. “The kid wanted to honor the ‘code’, that’s all.”

Elizabeth shook her head, sighing, “You men and your ‘codes’!”

She refocused on the photograph. Her finger tracing the outline of Jack’s image.

All traces of the boy that had gone over there were erased. Which was made apparent since the newbie, who had very much looked like Jack did at the beginning of his tour, sat next to him. What a contrast.

The young, wet behind the ears, ‘new guy’ next to the hardened, now... seasoned war veteran and really, only years separated them in age.

Jack made Johnson look like he had just come off the field after scoring the winning touchdown in the high school football game.

Jack had bulked up considerably by this point, his body honed to perfection, probably from carrying
what looked to be a hundred pound sack on his back. The sinewy muscles in his arm and neck were taut under his tanned skin.

Though his uniform appeared to be drenched, his face was beaded and running with sweat. The pronounced vein in his temple spoke of a painful headache or overwhelming tension.

But his face... she could see so much of Red in his stern expression. Jack’s jaw was tense, his mouth pinched under the shadowing and dirt on his face, and his eyes... they looked haunted. The man was exhausted, spent.

Jack sat, leaning his head into his filthy hand, the other held a radio, his fingers gripping the dark plastic in open frustration. There was a certain resignation to the set of those broad shoulders... as if he knew, sooner or later, the jungle which surrounded them would eventually be the death of him, which so far... he had managed to escape.

The new kid looked gun ho, fresh and eager. Maybe a little scared, but the determination to beat the enemy was alive in his eyes.

While Jack knew the harsh reality of a never ending war... a never ending day.

“He was only twenty-five?” the woman scowled darkly, perhaps she had miscalculated while computing the math on the headstone. The man in the photo seemed closer to thirty-five.

“Death and destruction ages a man.” Ben philosophized. “As does an enemy army out to kill you, I should imagine.”

“He was still handsome though.” Liz smiled fondly, her fingers still tracing the man’s image, as if in doing so, she could connect with him somehow.

“And don’t think he wouldn’t have told you as much.” Red’s mouth turned up in wry amusement. “One of his last letters said, that while it was true, he had jungle rot, he was still damn fine looking.” He snickered under his breath. “Forget the fact he smelled like hell, he still thought he was a catch.”

“So he and his nephew have that in common.” Francis chuckled as he took the newest picture Liz passed him.

Red looked affronted, “Is my cologne that bad?” he sniffed at his arm. “I’ve been thinking of a change.” he admitted playfully.

Liz giggled and leaned in, “Don’t you dare!” she whispered just for the man’s ears.

He smelled so good.

Francis and Ben nudged each other, catching the spirit which had settled over them.

It was as if Jack himself was present saying, ‘Lighten the hell up, people.’

“Does he pass inspection?” Ben asked, amused at her attempt at privacy under such circumstances.

“He most certainly does.” Liz leaned back into Red, resigned to her fate. “Which is more than I can say for you two...”

Both men automatically sniffed at each others scents.

“But Old Spice assured me that had my grandfather not worn it, I wouldn’t exist.” Ben seemed genuinely perplexed.
“Well, English Leather assures me that women want me to wear this or nothing at all,” Francis nodded sagely, “and since you people frown upon me displaying my magnificent body for public viewing...”

“You and Jack would have gotten along just fine.” Red was relatively sure.

“You know, you look an awful lot like him.” Francis was struck by the resemblance as Ben took the photo. “So, Liz, who would have won the battle? You seem to think Jack is pretty hot.”

“You’re a pain in the ass, Francis... have I told you lately?”

“So Jack would have won.” Ben surmised.

“I’d like to see him try.” Red muttered darkly, before accepting the woman’s tender kiss.

The other men were instantly satisfied with themselves, having managed to get Red’s goat, as it were.

Red checked the sun’s position in the sky, then looked down at his watch. “Damn.”

“Something wrong?” Liz asked solicitously, sudden concern on her pretty face.

“No, I just remembered I promised Danny I’d get him something from the vendors after the rally and I forgot.” He stood up extending a helping hand for Liz to arise from her seated position by the gravestone. “I think we still have time to...”

“Oh, wait.” Francis held his hand up, stilling the words. He unzipped his jacket, handing over the flowers to Red.

Red seemed moved by such a gesture. He nodded his head in deference to the action then for the second time that day, Red arranged the flowers with Lizzy’s help. The man’s eyes closed as he leaned, settling an arm on the top of the white stone for counter balance.

He grew stoically silent for a long moment, his eyes focusing on Jack’s name. He struggled for something profound to say, which for Red Reddington, wasn’t usually a difficult task but today, the words failed the man.

“You were a great guy, an amazing Uncle,” Red swallowed hard at the lump rising in his throat, “and I miss you... so very much.”

Liz’s eyes misted as she pressed her lips together tightly to halt the need to weep at such an emotional exchange.

Red shifted his stance, his eyes still on the boldly inscribed name. “But... you’re not ever going to get my girl.”

Liz chuckled brokenly, the moment lightened somewhat. “Don’t I get a say?” she quipped.

“No.” Red put an end to the issue. He stood a moment, before lightly tapping the headstone, pointing that they could now take their leave.

Liz glanced back, impulsively touching the stone herself, almost caressing it. “Thank you.” she whispered.

*Thank you for your service. Thank you letting a kid tag along with you, thank you for being so kind to Red, thank you for loving him.*
Red cocked his head, wondering over the private interchange. He watched her contentedly as she rejoined him in the present.

She lay her head upon his shoulder as they walked slowly away. This new open affection she was bestowing on him felt wonderful. He pondered it’s origins but was too wise to question his good fate closely.

There was something different about their connection however and it was a... ‘good’ something although it could not be defined as yet.

Oh, they were affectionate while in a group. She was warming to the expected displays their ‘act’ called upon to preform. Sharing a kiss, holding hands, even embracing was becoming a natural part of the woman’s everyday habits.

He respected her and was more than aware of decorum when with their acquaintances. Red would never trespass on such an obligation.

But today, Lizzy seemed to be within his sphere, not for any other reason but that she just seemed to want to be there.

In other instances, in the past... she had always been upset or scared.

While she did seem emotional today, she didn’t seem sad. Contemplative, maybe. But nothing to warrant actually needing his affection or attention.

But then... perhaps she thought he would need hers?

She liked a shoulder to lean on when she had visited Sam’s grave. Did she think that he would appreciate the same?

Because he did. He appreciated her presence more than she realized.

Jack may have been gone a long time, but this was the first time Red had been able to say good-bye, properly. It meant a great deal to the man to have someone as kind and understanding as Elizabeth by his side this day.

They matched steps as they walked down the hill to the cart, and by the fourth row of headstones they passed, she had looped her fingers casually through his belt loop while she chatted with Ben. And by the time they got to the cart itself. She was trailing along, fingers still holding firm, blindly, yet trustingly allowing the man to lead her safely to their destination.

He almost wished the cart had been further away, because he was really enjoying such closeness.

He wasn’t afraid to admit, he enjoyed the touch of a woman. Even if it was as innocent as this.

Maybe because he had never really experienced such things. His ex-wife, in the early days, would cuddle up to him, but into their first year of marriage, such displays had tapered off. Aside from a peck as he was leaving for the day, sex was the only time she ever really touched him... how had he not noticed that until years later?

He suddenly became acutely aware that with all the women in his life, sex was the only time he had been touched. But there was always something lacking... something missing from the equation. Not that he didn’t enjoy the sex itself, who wouldn’t?

What he had been looking for was... this.
He was never going to turn sex down, especially now that he had Elizabeth. That was a given.

But having a deeper emotional connection, on a daily basis, was just as much a need as the carnal delights a woman could offer.

“Earth to Red?” Lizzy snapped her fingers in front of his face.

The man jolted to reality from his musings.

“Where were you?”

“Just thinking.” he shook off the question.

“Are you ready to go?” Liz pointed to the waiting guide.

Red nodded and helped her inside then slid in beside her, “To the bikes, please.”

They got on the road a few minutes later, heading for the rally’s Vendor Row.

She had been silent since their return to the bikes. As they headed back over the bridge, she sighed, “Why didn’t you ride in the rally? You’re a Vet.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure what I’m considered, Elizabeth.” he replied all too quietly.

“Technically, you are.” she debated.

“No, I’m relatively certain the act of treason laid against me has stripped me of my Veteran status.”

Not wanting to start an argument over a dead issue, Liz turned the conversation to her original point. “I guess what I meant was, you should have ridden in honor of your Uncle.”

“To ride for him would have been a slap in the face.” he stated flatly, maneuvering the bike artfully through traffic. “I managed to do the exact opposite of Jack. He honored the Reddington name... I tarnished it.”

“There were extenuating circumstances.”

He didn’t have to see her face to know she was pouting.

“Lizzy, you and the boys helped me honor Jack today in a way that was very meaningful, I think, to both of us,” he pointed out the positive. “Jack would have liked how we’ve spent the day.”

Liz sighed, resting her chin on his shoulder, “You think so?”

“I do.” he concluded. “We celebrated the living, remembered the MIA’s and POW’s.” he lifted an expressive hand but the bike didn’t wobble one bit. “We visited the Wall and found a buddy of Jack’s who spoke very highly of him... that was very special to me.”

He turned his head slightly, moving over a lane.

“We paid our respect to the Unknown Soldier.” she had enjoyed that tremendously. “And we found Jack’s resting place... then spent an hour talking about how wonderful and handsome he was.”

He grinned when he felt her laugh against his back. “He would have appreciated that we took the time, Lizzy.” he patted the leg nestled against his comfortingly.
Pleased that Red seemed content in how they had honored his Uncle, Liz watched the scenery go by, listening to his soft breathing in her ear. She had missed that sound.

“You are staying with me...” she questioned, “while you’re here, right?”

Red smiled at the hesitancy in her voice. He had been hoping that she would extend an invitation to stay with her.

Or he had hoped she would accept his invitation to stay with him...

“I would love to spend the weekend with you.” he replied. “Would you like to stay at the safe house or...”

She pondered the question a moment, “We better stay at my place.” she decided. “Nora and Silas—”

“Yes, you’re right.” he agreed. He had forgotten that they were expected.

“So you’re here...” she paused, “just for the weekend?”

“Well, I had no definite plans, except to spend this holiday with you.” he said. “I only meant, if your team should call after the fact or...”

“Right, yes.” she nodded. “I understand.”

She smiled happily, knowing for the next three days, Red was hers. If no calls should come in from her team or his associates, he would of course stay longer, if she wished it.

It was a heady feeling, having Red Reddington at one’s beck and call.

She tightened her arms about the man, hugging him. He rubbed her exposed hand slowly, just as happy with their confirmed time together, steering the bike in behind Francis and Ben.

After setting down their gear, they walked into the Vendor section, casually strolling the area.

“What did Danny want exactly?” Ben asked, seeing all sorts of goodies, he himself, was dying to search out.

“Oh, some leather goods. I forgot the damn name, but he said it had a Marine...” Red looked searchingly about the numerous stalls, suddenly brightening, pointing to makeshift shop. “That’s it. I’m sure of it.”

They purchased the goods, continuing their aimless wandering, looking at the other products available.

Francis and Ben bought some leather items, new wallets, several new belts. Red bought Liz some pretty little bracelets that had caught her eye.

“You don’t have to do that.” she complained, all the while allowing him to place the items on her slender wrists. She was enchanted by the craftsmanship and beauty.

“You didn’t bring your wallet.” he lifted a teasing stare. As if he wouldn’t have bought them for her anyway. “How convenient, eh?”

“You can afford it.” she waved the issue aside playfully. “Plus lunch, I’m suddenly famished.” she exclaimed half-way through their shopping expedition.
They sat down in the shade of a large tree, watching the people milling by.

“You can’t expect me to finish all of this, right?” Liz waved an enormous turkey leg in the air.

“You do realize that you’ve finished half of it and you’re still eating, yes?” Red turned his own treat around, tearing into the soft flesh vigorously before sipping his lemonade.

“What am I, chopped liver?” Francis was annoyed. “It’s a rule, I take care of any leftovers.” he piped up. “We’ve discussed this.”

“Yes, I remember now.” Liz rolled her eyes. “You’ve been breathing down my neck for the last five minutes, lying in wait, like the vulture you are.”

She took one last bite and held the meat over her shoulder for the man, startling slightly with how fast it vanished from her hand.

Red shook his head as he watched the pair, then stood wiping his hands on a paper napkin, “Knock yourself out.” he handed over his own turkey leg, which was greedily taken from his fingers.

“I’m amazed at that boy’s capacity for food.” He seemed genuinely so as he watched Francis make small order of the object.

Liz chuckled seeing Red’s expression, arising as well while she brushed crumbs off her jeans.

She took a step back, only to collide with a passerby. She turned apologetically, “Oh, I’m sorr–”

She halted mid-statement, her eyes widening with shocked surprise. “Res–” she covered her glaring mistake hastily, “Donald!”

Ressler was better at such things, a plastered smile coming to the fore instantly. He took in the scene with experienced eyes, covering the awkwardness with a professional air Liz suddenly envied.

“Liz...” he nodded his greeting, “good to bump into you like this.” he brought his companion forward with a gentlemanly hand. “This is, Dana. Don’t judge her too harshly please. She’s fresh out of law school,” it was emphasized as a cautionary nod to Raymond Reddington who stood unobtrusively off to Liz’s side, “and delights in flaunting her new found knowledge of criminal behavior.”

“Oh, Donald.” the woman laughed. She was a petite little thing with dark hair and eyes that seemed to take in the world in one fell swoop. “He’s always teasing me.”

“She’s spotted six of the ‘most wanted’ just at this rally alone.” Donald sent a look Red’s way.

“Well, they could have been, you don’t really know.” the slight Texas accent was rather charming if Liz hadn’t been so on edge. “You look familiar too, sir. Have we met?”

“I have one of those faces.” Red stepped, offering a hand. “Although, I do actually spend a lot of time in Texas.”

“What are ya’ll doing in this God forsaken part of the country then?” she quipped, laughing gaily at her own joke.

“I imagine we’re all here as one today,” Red glanced about aimlessly, “for the same reason.”

The woman quietened demurely.
“Dana’s Uncle rode in the rally.” Ressler intoned, casting another oblique look to the two men beside Red.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Liz recovered quickly. “And forgive my manners, Francis... Ben.” she included the others into the introductions. “This is my... eh, friend, Donald.”

Red smiled pleasantly at nothing in particular.

“They surprised me with today’s events.” she beamed, squeezing Red’s hand overly stressed by the unexpected turn of ‘events’. “And they brought a better surprise,” she lifted soft eyes to Red’s countenance, “they brought Ray home.’

“You were traveling?” Dana asked politely as a minute of subdued silence fell. “To Texas, I hope? I’ve been gone only a short while but I do miss home already.”

“Alas, no.” Red grinned charmingly. “Not the Great State, but yes, traveling... for work.” he nodded once, his eyes confident on the pixie like face. “I finished earlier than expected, and I too, am glad to be home.” he squeezed Liz’s hand, raising her soft skin to his lips.

“That is so sweet.” Dana practically gushed, smiling at the couple. “Surprising her like that.”

Ressler frowned slightly at such a warm display from Liz and Reddington, but dropped the façade quickly, not wishing to blow his partners role in Reddington’s masquerade.

“So how do you two know each other?” Dana asked of Liz and Donald.

Liz side-glanced Red, feeling the slight edge of panic start to creep in.

“We used to work together.” Ressler filled the space, smoothly. “A few years back.”

“Oh!” the woman smiled brightly over to a hesitant Elizabeth Keen. “You worked for the F--”

Red dropped his lemonade, the cup exploding on the ground on impact.

“Shit...” the man cursed, quickly wiping at his and Liz’s pants legs. Dana had gasped, rushing to a nearby food truck, grabbing a wad of napkins before hurrying back to the pair. Ressler, who received a good splash himself, dabbed at his shirt front with a fixed scowl.

“Oh my, what a mess.” Dana was dismayed, handing over the remaining napkins.

“Thank you...” Red sighed heavily. “This damn jet lag...” he explained such a lapse, “it hits at the most inopportune times.”

“I know what you mean.” Dana shook her head woefully. “Don’t you hate it? And the TSA.”

“He does actually.” Francis stated.

“It’s why he has his own jet.” Ben smiled happily at nothing in particular.

“I’m sticky...” Liz grimaced, holding her hands out as proof, as she searched about the grounds surrounding them. “Is there a bathroom or...”

“There’s a water station.” Dana pointed the needed direction, “just on the other side of that blue trailer there. You own your own jet you say? My, I’m impressed.”

“He gets that a lot.” Francis nodded sagely.
“I’m just going to...” Liz gestured, desperately wishing to flee the awkwardness, “it was good to see you Donald, and nice to meet you, Dana.” she inclined her head to both before stepping off with Red by her side.

“Yeah,” Ressler adopted another smile, “have a good holiday.” he offered as he directed Dana in the opposite direction... as quickly as humanly possible.

“Those are such nice people, Donald.” Dana was heard to say in passing.

Liz and Red walked quietly towards the water station, intent on keeping the story alive and flourishing. Red reached out, grabbing more napkins from a vendor as they passed, adding to the effect.

“Who was Dudley Do-Right?” Francis gestured back to the couple who was rapidly vanishing into the crowded venue.

“I–” Liz stumbled slightly over a wide strip of electric cord, giving her a few seconds to think of a logical explanation.

“It was Donald...” Red grumbled, his stern expression holding Francis’ quizzical one.

Francis frowned slightly at the man’s angered features before his eyes widened with recognition.

That was the Donald, Liz fuc–

Fuck....

“What the hell is it with you two and awkward situations?” Francis threw his hands out at his side.

“Upset you didn’t get to record it?” Red asked pleasantly before leading Lizzy to a nearby tent filled with shiny things sure to distract Francis. He was neither surprised nor disappointed when the ploy worked.

They continued on with their shopping, until Red noticed the woman was once again favoring her leg. “Your leg hurts.”

“I’m okay.” she was quick to deny the accusation.

“No, we’re going.” he gestured to Francis that he was taking her to the bikes.

“Red, I’m really okay.” she protested. “We can keep looking... this is fun.”

“You’re limping.” he motioned. “You don’t want to strain your leg anymore than we already have. We’re going.”

They looped back around slowly, walking through the soft grass, amid those milling about.

“I’m sorry...” Liz was, “but remember, it’s Silas’–”

“Fault, yeah I know.” The man completed the statement, his gentle eyes on the woman.

“Damn leg!” she grumbled her irritation. “You guys don’t have to leave, I’ll just sit here.” she pointed to a bench, hope gleaming on the pretty face. “I don’t want to be a downer.”

“Lizzy, it’s okay. I did what I came here to do.” he had accomplished so much to his way of thinking. The day had brought them closer. “We can go home.”
One of the large biker guys came up to Red, breaking the stalemate, mumbling in his ear. Red frowned, his expression altering visibly. The man sighed heavily.

“Tell him I’ll be right there.” The burly biker took his leave.

“What’s wrong?” she sensed something amiss.

“An old shipmate of mine is here and saw me.” Red motioned in the needed direction. “He’d like a minute.”

“Okay, well like I said. I’ll just sit here and when you’re done...” she smiled, then sat on the shaded bench.

“If you wouldn’t mind?” Red glanced around finding what he sought, Francis and Ben were only a stall away but... the man curtly crooked his hand and two rather menacing men appeared out of nowhere.

“Yes. Now, go. I’m fine.” she raised her foot to the bench, sighing in relief, her eyes watching the mammoth individuals approach. And she had thought bikers were large men.

“Stay with her.” he muttered to the new arrivals. They stood on opposite ends of the bench, smiling and passing out hellos to buddies as they walked by, seemingly cordial, passive beings. She would not have wanted to cross either, personally.

She tracked Red as he walked across the greens to a man who was smiling as Red got closer. She could not see Red’s expression, but he seemed to hesitate when the man stuck out his hand in greeting. Seconds passed before Red finally lifted his hand to make the expected contact.

Was his hesitation due to his dislike of the man? It was obvious, no love was lost on Red’s part. Perhaps Red just assumed that everyone he had worked with believed him to be a traitor and wouldn’t give him the time of day. Not that she thought Red would care either way. But this guy must give pause for thought, surely.

She would enquire on the matter later, of course. Red probably wouldn’t answer, but he had surprised her a few times.

She relaxed back into the curved bench, breathing in the warm air. It wasn’t so bad here in the shade. The wind was coming through pretty well down the path, even with the crush of bodies, so she was cool, for the most part.

It had been an eventful day. Thought provoking, to say the least. Remembering what Memorial Day was really all about.

And more importantly, Red had shared a little of himself with her.

She was surprised that even with his sullied military past, the man seemed to hold high esteem for his one time comrades.

She would have thought he would shun those who had shunned him.

Liz reflected on moments throughout the day. Red had seemed... different somehow. She couldn’t put her finger on it.

The way he stood just as erect during the rally as that Marine had and how he had been so very respectful when visiting Arlington. His aggravation with those who had disrespected the Tomb of the
Unknown Soldier... had been admirable.

More to her surprise, she had gathered by the information he had so easily imparted, that he visited the grounds frequently. She wondered what drew him back so consistently.

Was he missing being a part of the military, regardless of what he said. Or was it an ingrained respect he had carried over from his childhood, for the Uncle he had admired so much.

She felt her heart warm at the thought that Red had shared something so very personal to him... with her. Something that wasn’t in his file.

She knew so little about his family, but today, he had let her inside his world a little bit more. And because of it, she felt closer to the man than ever before.

It had been a good day, full of wonderful surprises.

“Liz...”

The woman started at the recognized voice.

This was one surprise she could do with out.

“...Tom.” she muttered dejectedly.
Sanctuary

Chapter Notes

Get a snack, a good drink and relax... this is going to take a while.

May 25

“I was going to just come over and say hello, but you’ve got quite the entourage there.” the man who was around Red’s age, but did not hold the years as well, had inclined his head to the ensemble across the way.

“So I just caught the nicest looking one of the bunch’s attention and made an appointment, so to speak.” he held out his hand until Red finally took it. “It’s good to see you again, Red.”

“Is it, Matt?” Red’s tone was acerbic.

“I never believed the shit they pinned on you.” the chill in the air was dispelled by a careless wave of the hand. “And not many of the others did either.” the man’s eyes held a certain sincerity that surprised Red.

“You are maybe one of the very few.”

“Not so few. A lot of us think you got the shaft.” Matt Henson was pleased he could set the record straight. The guy had hem and hawed about approaching Red Reddington after so many years but now, was glad he had. “We’ve been watching your progress over the years. We didn’t know how to show our support... exactly. But we would have given you a pat on the back.”

It was still a touchy subject if Red’s expression, or lack thereof, was any indication.

“Yes, well. Not all I do is reported.” Red replied irreverently.

“I’m sure.” the man chuckled. “Look, I just wanted to say, hey.” the awkwardness was lessening on both parts. “Let you know you got some supporters out here. Speaking of which,” Matt searched out his wallet, extracting a card, handing it over, “take this.”

Red read the neat script absently before returning his arresting gaze returned to the man’s earnest face.

“It’s got my number on it and we’re all linked on the Net. You ever need anything... really. You have help.”

“Are you my groupies?” Red grinned, placing the card into his own wallet.

“Well, a couple of us do have your wanted poster pinned to our walls.” Matt replied pseudo-seriously. “I’m not one to blow kisses at it, but I can’t say for the others.” he nodded amiably. “You know, don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Red chuckled quietly, this day was proving most interesting in more ways than one.
He wasn’t sure how he felt about this new development but, who the hell knew... what he thought would turn out shitty, even become confrontational... was taking a different slant.

“You’ve done well, Red. Sticking it to the establishment and all.” it was chuckled appreciatively. “Hear tell, you’ve made a little on the side as well, huh?” Matt could tell the man’s clothes were of an expensive cut.”

“I do have my own jet.” Red replied straight faced, though his eyes were lit with merriment. “Well. It’s just a small jet.” he regretted his impulsive jibe. “And the gas mileage will kill you.” he made the man laugh.

“Okay,” Matt nodded amiably yet again, “anyone can own a jet, you’re right but still, I’m even more jealous truth told.” the man’s eyes cut to the cute brunette across the way.

“I’m a dirty little traitor. What’s to be jealous of?” Red’s brows furrowed critically.

“You are that.” the ruddy faced man chuckled greatly to take the sting out of the words. “I meant,” he pointed with a lift of his head to the approximate ‘subject’ at hand, “I saw you with that girl earlier, the one kissing you.” impressed brows were lifted.

“She’s a little... young, isn’t she?” he teased but admiration showed in his envious eyes.

“Young?” A slow smile crept over Red’s face. “...not for me.”

Matt took the veiled insult in his stride, “You’re right there.” a slight scowl appeared on the still rugged face. “I couldn’t handle the pressure... say, it looks like you may have a little competition there bud.”

“I doubt it.” Red’s reply was lost in the din of engines approaching, as a formation of WWII planes thundered overhead, the deafening sound disrupting further conversation.

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“It’s okay...” Liz held up a restraining hand to the two guards Red had left in charge. “It’s just my ex.” she pulled a disgruntled face which subsequently allowed the men to relax their vigilance to a degree.

Two pairs of belligerent eyes scanned Tom’s frame with the open threat of mayhem should anything out of the norm prevail in the upcoming minutes, however.

Tom chose the better part of valor... discretion. “Liz, we desperately need to talk.” he threw a cautionary glance at Red’s back, which was still turned from the, the man’s attention elsewhere for a moment, “Away from here!”

“Don’t you get it?” the woman was mystified by the guy’s lack of common sense. “I don’t want to talk to you... not ever, ever again!”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re doing! Trusting Red Reddington, for God’s sake.” Tom was beside himself. “What is in your head?”

“I will tell you what is out of my head,” Liz kept her voice low that passerby’s might not be pulled into yet another endless confrontation, “all the lies and pretense you put there... you better leave if you know what’s good for you.” she glanced hastily to Francis and Ben’s location but thankfully, both seemed occupied.
“You’re ruining a perfectly amazing day, if you must know... as usual.” her tone turned angry as did the light blue eyes. “I don’t want these innocent people pulled into one of your sick attempts to turn me to the dark side.”

“You know my abilities, Liz.” the man’s own eyes chilled, “you think these big apes will stop me? I have information about your little friends you need to hear. We can do this the easy way,” he shifted, showing a weapon inside his light weight jean jacket, “or the hard way. It’s up to you. You want them hurt, permanently, because quite frankly, I’m in no mood to suffer one of Reddington’s noble attempts at rescue.”

“It wouldn’t be an attempt.” Liz sneered. “One of these days, he’s going to take your ass down and I fervently hope that I am there to witness it!”

“Yeah, whatever. Are you going to get these people in between a fire fight just because you’re afraid to hear the truth?”

“I know the truth.” she disgusted. The woman cast a hasty glance Red’s way. He looked so relaxed and happy today.

She wasn’t going to let Tom spoil that. “You’ve got three minutes.” she shot the man daggers.

The man jerked his head indicating a secluded spot in which to speak.

Liz felt relatively safe, it was just a hundred meters away over a small knoll.

Small grassy knoll... bad things happened on small grassy knolls.

“Hey guys,” she forced a brightness and big smile for the guards Red trusted to watch over her, “can I have just a few seconds?” she pointed out the spot. “I won’t go far, I promise. You can see me.”

The two men exchanged guarded, wary glances.

“Come on.” Tom put on his best ‘normal guy’ guise. “He knows me, we’re old acquaintances.”

Liz’s forced smile remain fixed. “I’m just going to be right over there.” she reaffirmed. “It’ll be fine. Take just a minute... really.”

It was clear the men did not want to relent but... in the end, they did.

“No further, ma’am.” a dark scowl followed the warning but if was for Tom, clearly.

Tom held up his hands in a sign of ‘peace’.

Liz hobbled a little, the rest had helped her leg.

“What’s wrong with you?” Tom had noticed the slight injury.

“You!” she turned on him instantly. “You’re what’s wrong! What is this information you–”

“No, your leg.” Tom snipped, gesturing.

“My horse threw me on my usual morning ride, what’s it to you?” she was hanging out with Silas too much, Liz had to face facts. “Alright,” at Tom’s confused face, she continued, “what is this great truth you are to impart, oh, Sage One?”

Tom was antsy and impatient, constantly throwing glances Red’s way.
“Yeah, you better err on the side of caution.” Liz had noted the comical state, amused by the man’s jitters. “He catches you within ten feet of me, he’ll kick your ass from here to New York.”

“You mean he’ll have someone do it for him?” Tom’s eyes shifted to the two guards who watched him like a hawk.

“He doesn’t need assistance for the likes of you.” Liz disdained. “He would have put you down years ago if it hadn’t been for me, and you know it.”

“What I know...” the man had more important things to discuss, “is that you are in grave danger and you’re too stupid to see the fact. I have proof!”

“Oh, you do...” Liz nodded sympathetically, smiling tightly for the guards sake only. “If you mean from your feeble attempts to lead me to the Cabal...”

“I mean from him!” Tom gestured angrily then calmed seeing the guards inch closer. He got himself under control with stressed difficulty. “Look, we can’t talk freely here.”

“Spit it out.” the woman snapped her waning patience. “I’m not standing here all–”

“The evidence is in my car.” he gestured just as snippily. “You think I would bring it here in case Reddington–”

“There is no way in hell,” Liz was positive, “I’m moving from this spot, so you had just better–”

Tom’s patience snapped, seeing her intractable stance was a genuine one. He pulled his weapon, aiming with deadly accuracy.

A formation of WWII planes thundered overhead, masking the sound of the weapon firing.

Following the planes path until they flew out of sight, Red’s movements continued, glancing over his shoulder searching out Matt’s meaning. His body tensed instantly, coiled for action.

“Son of a bitch!” Taking off at a clipped pace, racing across the crowded grounds in a desperate dash.

“What the hell?” Matt scowled at the unexpected turn of events. Shots rang out and like everyone else in the immediate vicinity, he dove for cover.

One guard fell heavily, clutching at his knee, blood spurting between clenched fingers.

Tom snapped off another clean shot, taking the other rapidly approaching guard out of commission.

He could see Red Reddington making rapid progress, the man having a clear path now that the crowd, like a herd of wild mustangs, scurried in all directions, seeking shelter from the raining gunfire.

There was only one other man in his field of vision that seemed to have any balls whatsoever. Tom could recognize Liz’s partner in the distance, weapon drawn but the man was too far away to be effective.

Tom sneered his contempt. Stupid people! They got in his way most days. They were useless in the real world. The world he lived in at least.
They went about their meaningless little lives, heads stuck in the proverbial sand, not one of them having any clue about what went on behind the scenes.

In the murky, shadowing depths of those who called the shots... made the plans, guided the future, kept it all afloat.

So that these pitiable creatures could turn a blind eye. The had their cookouts and soccer practices, day in, day out, none the wiser for the simple fact, men like him protected their fat asses from the harsh realities of the world.

He was questioning himself more and more these days... why did he even bother?

The man gripped Elizabeth’s arm in a tight clench, one objective in mind as the rapidly unfolding drama played out.

Francis Holbrook was stuffing the treasures he had purchased today into the compartment on his bike.

He laughed jovially at his biker friend’s telling of a bar fight gone wrong... as if one had ever gone right when the man’s tale was overshadowed by a rumbling roar filling the air around them.

Halting his actions, he craned his head, glancing up at the impressive sight of the enormous planes overhead until they were out of sight.

Sharing a pleased smile with the man across from him, Francis shifted alert eyes when he heard a the subtle popping sound as the planes engines muted.

It had sounded like firecrackers at first but the young man knew instantly, that was not the case.

His eyes darted to the bench where he had last seen Elizabeth Scott.

Several people crouched beside the flimsy makeshift cover, their faces drawn with terror and stress.

Francis’ eyes scanned frantically... out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Red shove someone from his intended path.

The man was moving with remarkable agility.

Another shot followed, cracking crisply in the still air. People scattered or hit the deck, allowing Francis a clear view.

In the back of his mind, he took stock of the situation as it now stood.

Francis followed the natural path Red was taking, spotting Lizzy.

Guards were down, rolling in agony.

She was just past the grassy knoll, being forcibly dragged by some fucker. The woman was not going softly into that good night.

“Fuck!” he rasped hoarsely, his body in motion before he was aware it had taken command.

He was moving with grace and speed of a young athlete, easily clearing the chain lined fence that ran along the sidewalk.
He made quick work of dodging the innocent people taking cover on the ground, bouncing over them as if they weren’t even there.

Red was gaining ground, closing the distance between Elizabeth and her assailant. Francis would reach her first, but he had another target in mind.

“Elizabeth!”

Tom and Liz looked up when they heard Red yell her name to find the man gaining quickly on their position.

“Come on!” Tom grated his growing annoyance. “Stop fighting me, dammit!”

“No!” Liz pulled at her arm, as she planted her feet uselessly. Her right foot stuck, but her left couldn’t withstand his relentless tugging. He had already dragged her a good twenty feet away from her original position.

“Let go!” she struggled against his iron grip as he pulled her across the greens. She would have to revise her options. His car loomed in the very near distance. She always hated that ugly thing!

“You’re hurting me!” she pulled uselessly on her arm, unable to break free.

“Dammit, Liz! Come on!” he didn’t want to hurt her but she was narrowing his options.

“Leave me alone!” she swung out, only to have Tom knock her arm away, backhanding her across the cheek.

It was for the greater good, surely. He disliked striking her but he had priorities.

A group of onlookers protested the action. A few of the more courageous, regaining their equilibrium. A large ensemble grouped, starting for the pair.

Tom fired two shots to discourage such a stupid recourse.

Liz had spun about with the hit, losing her footing for a moment. Tom dropped the weapon to his side, unceremoniously jerking her back towards him. Swinging her arm in a vicious arc, she caught the asshole across the mouth, drawing blood.

Tom brushed at the red dribble with his knuckles, tightening his hold on her arm. He could make it... the car door was a few feet away, if he could just get inside...

Liz punched out again, knocking him across the windpipe like Silas taught her, causing the man to release his tight hold, but also strike out himself.

He choked, coughing, sputtering helplessly for a beat.

Stumbling back, Liz snagged her heel on a concrete parking block, falling to the ground. She winced painfully, shaking off the hit and uncontrolled drop. She felt hands grip about her waist as Tom bent over, yanking her lax body up off the ground.

Just as he gripped her thigh. Meaning to boost her over his shoulder and end all this ridiculous, useless struggling once and for all... a heavy blur hit him out of nowhere, the momentum of the hit, tackling Tom to the rough texture of the parking lot.

Liz fell from his hold, hitting the ground hard again, knocking the air from her lungs and jarring her jaw painfully. She pushed back with her feet, distancing herself from the altercation that was now
taking place when large hands reached under her arms, lifting her to gently to her feet.

“Time to go...”

Red guided her away from Ben and Tom. He pulled her close against his chest, dodging Francis, who had arrived on scene like the Seventh Calvary. The young man eagerly joined the brutal skirmish.

Pushing through the crowds, Red steered her forward. Liz ducked her head, mortified, embarrassed, by what had just occurred. She hid from the gawking, mouth gaping onlookers.

Protectively shielding the woman, Red held his temper admirably. Not for the crowd, his fury ran deeper and it was for one individual alone.

The sound of running feet gained on them quickly. Instinctively reaching for his weapon, he dropped his hand hastily when he realized it was Ben and Francis who approached.

The crowd once again crouched quickly, becoming unseen entities at the sight of the glinting metal of the gun.

“He got away?” Red demanded tersely.

“I flung his ass towards Francis and he got up and bolted.” Ben apologized. “That bastard can run!”

“He’s had a lot of practice.” Red seethed quietly. “It was her ex-husband.” he spoke in deference to the questioning faces.

“The stalker asshole?” Francis scowled irritably. “I should have popped that fucking bitch harder.”

Liz hobbled quickly, wincing with each step, commencing their trek which had momentarily been waylaid.

Red snagged her elbow. “Slow down.” he advised calmly. “We are leaving, baby. But we are not running away... there’s a difference.”

Liz who was still attempting to acclimate herself to all that had happened in such a small span of time, took a cleansing breath, nodding minutely.

“No, we are not.” she was determined to adopt the same stoic attitude.

Red had pulled up short having reached the motorcycles, his face a grave etching of studied concern.

“Ben, will you see to the men?” he motioned to the crowd that had gathered across the way around the two guards who lay, wounded, but visibly conscious.

One was seen to irritably shake off any assistance offered. The other sat up, allowing a pretty woman to attend to his shoulder wound.

Red was later to learn, that the woman was a Registered Nurse out of Walter Reed Hospital.

He sent her an enormous bouquet of flowers with a note of gratitude. Enclosed was more than enough to pay off her student loans.

He was grateful she had intervened for his men when he could not.

“Call Kaplan.” Tossing his phone to Francis, Red continued, absently packing away their packages
that Liz had left on the bench.

His acquaintances, the ones who had accompanied them on this outing earlier in the day, had arrived on scene moments ago.

“We just heard, man.” Mad Dog was expressing his regrets. “We got here as fast as–”

“No worries.” Red dismissed. “Thanks for these...” he held up the last of the gifts he had purchased which had been retrieved by one of the ensemble. “Danny would be upset if I had forgotten it.”

“Ah, Danny can suck himself.” Mad Dog was of a mind. “You better haul ass, the cops have to be en route by now.”

“Why is it,” Francis wanted to know, “they are always the last to know about anything when it goes down?”

“They saved our asses a few times over the years.” Red reminded, his eyes scanning a reticent Elizabeth, reading her closed off body language easily.

“Not on purpose.” Francis chided.

“So what’s this all about? Who started it?” Mad Dog allowed Red to mount his bike. “You want we should talk to them for ya, Red... explain how very rude they have been?”

Red grinned, his mood mellowing.

“Do you fucking believe this?” Francis pointed, his mouth agape, his features incredulous. “That mother fucker is standing right there!”

All eyes turned.

Tom Keen took the new notoriety in his stride.

He shifted into a more comfortable position, clearly favoring his right side. The one that had hit the pavement with Ben’s less than gentle tackle.

“I’m going to cap his fucking ass.” Francis started off, incensed for such blatant disrespect. Ben by his side.

“Francis!” Liz was aghast. “He has a gun!”

“So do I...” the young man resumed his determined steps. His eyes, had Elizabeth been able to see, turned a glacial green.

“What do you mean you will ‘cap his ass’!” Liz hurried to halt any further advancement.

Tom Keen stood, watching... nothing more.

“Cap him...” Francis clarified, gesturing accordingly, “as in, I’m gonna put a slug right between his beady little eyes.”

“You will do no such thing!” Liz snapped. “Stop being ridiculous... Tom is...” she trailed off, seeking Red’s assistance but none was forthcoming.

“You expect me to stop them?” the man’s voice was brittle. “The fucker hit you... again!”
“This is my fault.” Liz relented, feeling the weight of her words, glancing shakily back to the two fallen men.

“...Yes.” Red grated his fury for one alone but his anger was expressing itself in boundless capacity, “it is.”

Liz was stung by the words and his actions.

“Two men are down because you decided it was okay to let that bastard near you again!” Red motioned curtly to the patiently waiting individual.

“What is this spell he has over you?” Red was beside himself. “That you feel you must give him every opportunity to prove his sincerity?”

“It– it wasn’t like that.” she faltered.

“Then what?” Red exploded, gripping the handlebars of his motorcycle in a death grip. “Explain it to me. Why would you put yourself... my men, in such a position?”

Red knew he was being unfair, unreasonable, belligerent... all of the above and Lizzy’s stricken face tore at his heart strings, but dammit to hell... enough was enough.

He pushed off the bike, standing over the woman. His dark eyes steadily holding her searching ones.

Tilting Lizzy’s chin up to look at her face. Red’s grey eyes twitched angrily, finding her cheek swelling and reddened. His thumb gently stroked the injury, a stark contrast to Tom Keen’s touch.

“Why do you allow him to do this to you?” the roughened voice lowered painfully.

Liz’s eyes fell to his mouth, willing the answers that swirled about madly in her head, to come into focus. Her brow furrowed painfully, trying to make sense of the madness... to find a starting point.

“You still love him.” Red accused...concluded bitingly, after the long silence.

She jerked back, shaking her head slightly, as though not having comprehended the words.

“No...” she whispered her shock.

Red lifted his eyes, staring out over her head... the distrust apparent to her way of thinking.

“He threatened to start something.” Liz disliking being placed between a rock and a hard place, found her focus... her backbone. “What was I supposed to do!” she raised her own voice. “He could have killed any number of those people!” she lifted a pointed finger to the holiday crowd. “Just as he could have the men he shot.”

Red was reminded of Tom Keen’s lack of empathy for other’s than himself.

“I thought if I at least... placated the son-of-a-bitch,” she was close to tears, “I might save some lives... you know what he is capable of.”

“Can you guess my capabilities?” Francis did not like to see his friends hurting, more determined than ever. “He’s trying to drive a wedge and you’re letting him!” he accused Red to his face. “Now, let’s end the mother fucker.”

Francis and Ben began the needed journey with a few decisive steps yet again.
“...No.” Red stated all too quietly, knowing truth when he heard it.

Francis turned, flabbergasted.

“He will hurt you...” Liz’s eyes beseeched.

“No, Liz,” Francis was more than incensed, “he will not.”

Ben stood staunchly by the young man’s side.

“You don’t know him,” she couldn’t explain, not here, not now...

“He doesn’t know me.” the confidence almost convinced the woman.

This was not swagger. This was a cool, calculated rejoinder. The man’s eyes held a confident, calm inner composure that Liz could not define.

“Francis,” Red had tempered his anger. He straddled the bike, his shoulders set, but resigned. “We’ll handle this in another fashion... later. We have to vacate.”

Sirens could be heard in the distance. Speculative gestures and attention from the gathering crowd was growing.

“He will tail us.” Ben reminded. “You want her location known?”

Red weighed the options given him. He shifted non-committal eyes.

There was a leak in his organization. Their whereabouts had obviously been broadcast to the lowlifes in the city....

He already knew Carvers methods. The man would never really attempt anything in the light of day. The Vegas incident had been ‘play time’ only.

Had he not been so shaken, Red would have remembered the bastard’s M.O.

Red had felt confident in the holiday outing. But Tom Keen was a different type of psycho.

A psycho that may or may not have a certain magnetizing pull, the likes of Charles Manson.... with Elizabeth Keen.

She had stated her case as to the why, but there was still doubt...

He had voiced that fear in Vegas and it was a fear that came true today.

How could he protect her, when she blindly followed after that psychopath.

It hurt that there was this wedge... this distrust... between them.

He lifted a steady gaze which Tom returned.

There had to be a reckoning. This had to stop, one way or another. Red refused to live under another man’s terms or conditions.

“Are you coming?” he asked quietly.

Elizabeth’s heart hurt. He had to ask?
She stepped slowly, taking her place beside him.

Mad Dog helped her mount the large bike. She could feel the tension in Red’s body as she settled in behind him.

“There are lots of ways a car can take out a few bikes.” Mad Dog remarked casually, glancing over to Tom Keen then flipped him off absently, which was the man’s way.

Keen’s slight shake of the head said, ‘Consider the source’.

Mad Dog smiled happily, “Want an escort?”

Francis was the one balking this time. He paced restlessly back and forth, having a decision of his own to make obviously, his eyes never having left Tom Keen.

“There are too many witnesses man.” Mad Dog laughed at the absurdity of the move Francis was contemplating.

“Don’t end her day like this.” Red asked rather than told, his eyes placid now. “Don’t end her day with you in cuffs.”

“Oh, now you’re solicitous of her feelings?” Francis was glad to have an outlet for the fury he felt. “Look at her face, man!”

Red hesitated then shifted slightly, turning his head.

Liz’s cheek was swollen more than it was moments ago, a nasty red welt marking the lovely skin.

Red eyes closed, fighting the return of the rising fury.

“He fucking belted her!” Francis snarled. “Don’t you think that was a mood killer in itself!”

Red took a deep breath, quelling his desire to blow Tom’s fucking head off himself. There was a certain pleasure to be derived from standing over a foe... watching the life drain from their eyes... when had that started?

He curtailed such pleasant thoughts, instead turning his attention to his gut feeling. He had always trusted his gut and right now, it was gnawing at him... telling him to leave and get Elizabeth to the safety of the house.

“Getting her home safely, is more important.” Red rationalized to them all and himself. “We’ll get him later.” he promised the boy,... and himself. “I give you my word, Francis. Will you take it?”

A battle of wills ensued for along beat. Liz held her breath wondering what more she could say to sway Francis’ will.

“Francis, we need to go.” Red jerked his chin towards the people pointing their way and the uniformed cops taking note of them in the distance.

Francis cursed under his breath, signifying his displeasure, but nodded curtly, stalking to his bike.

“We’ll get you home, little lady. Safe and sound.” the large biker stated, grinning. “Don’t you even think about it for another second.”

“Thank you.” Red replied, firing the bike to life. He watched all take their mounts, then nodded to the boy who watched with a sullen expression. “Francis, you lead.”
“There’s no need to get these guys involved.” Liz was remembering the guards. She had watched Red don his helmet, before following suit. Mad Dog’s words haunted her. ‘There are lots of ways a car can take out a few bikes’.

“I don’t think he set out to hur–” she trailed off, sickened. It sounded as if she were defending him. “I can handle Tom.”

Red pulled out behind Francis and Ben. As they hit the street, they were immediately surrounded by a veritable sea of Harley’s and Indian’s.

“No, Lizzy. You can’t handle Tom.” Red shook his head. “You’re too emotionally invested.” he sighed heavily. “Tom will always hurt you,” he grated the words. “That’s what he does and will always do. Be it emotionally or physically.” he growled low in his throat, the anger returning with a vengeance.

Liz knew he was right, and what’s worse, she didn’t know how to break the chain. She thought she had been doing well. Had pushed Tom from her mind.

“You could walk away from me...” his jaw pulsed at the remembrance of their earlier relationship. Truth told, he had always liked her spunk. How she didn’t kowtow to him.

“Where is that Lizzy? The one who called me on my bullshit.” Red questioned. “Why can’t you walk away from him?” he finished quietly.

Silence fell between them. Red searched his mind for something to say to lessen the impact of his words but he was too distraught and besides he had to keep his prospective.... he knew Tom Keen would not give up so easily.

He would make things right with Elizabeth when he could... when the emotions were not running so high.

They finally hit a good stretch of road that offered him a straight shot, allowing him to get good speed. Glancing past their plentiful escort in the rearview mirror, his eyes darkened when he saw a dark blue car, fishtail around a corner.

“So it begins...” he muttered absently, his mind working the logistics of the new problem rapidly. He caught Francis’ attention, jerking his head to the rear of the roaring pack surrounding them.

Francis glanced in his rear view mirror watching a blue car gaining momentum toward their little entourage.

Mad Dog had picked up on the commotion, signaling his people who instantly were alerted. The signal passed down the line, one after another having glanced back at the ‘blue’ car fast approaching their locale.

Liz heard the loud rumble as they sped up and before she knew it, they were on all sides of them, blocking sight of their bike.

Ben slowed, having sensed a problem. Francis kept craning his neck, keeping tabs on Tom’s location.

Francis let go of his steering, gesturing to Red, something Liz could not quite ‘get’. Red’s low chuckle thrilled the woman after such a long silence, but couldn’t enjoy it to it’s fullest as she had other priorities at the moment.
She too, kept a running check on the recklessly weaving driver of the blue car.

Mad Dog had understood Francis’ ‘gesture’ all too well, a heavy laugh escaping the individual. He held up his hand, waving his fingers outward and in an instant, his riders parted like the Red Sea, giving their tail car ample time to pass.

Mad Dog even offered a gallant sweep of his burly, tattooed arm as Tom took the ‘opportunity’, gunning his engine, steering the vehicle thought the heavy Harley’s.

He offered a tight scowl as he passed, sensing a trap but it was a chance he would have to take to reach his objective. He was used to taking risks in life.

“Hold on tight, Lizzy.” Red instructed, watching Francis drop back behind their position.

She squeezed Red’s middle, tightening her thighs around his as he ‘hit it’. They flew down a long stretch of ramp, merging into traffic on the interstate without slowing, one iota.

Why make it easy for the asshole, Red philosophized. There was always a good chance Keen would lose control of the car, after all. Pity if that were to happen.

“It will be fine.” Red said calmly, feeling the mounting tension in the woman’s body.

Liz inhaled deeply, easing her nervousness just as she caught a glimpse out of the corner of her eye of a flash of blue.

“You asshole!” she growled angrily as Tom came up alongside them. She flipped him off, then hastily wrapped her arm back around Red. “What the hell is he trying to do? Kill us all!”

Red chuckled low in her ear, appreciating her moxie. “He’s rather persistent, isn’t he?” he sighed, as the plan slowly fell into place. “Uh oh...”

Liz turned her head as Francis appeared out of nowhere to their left. The young man causally moved between their bike and the speeding car. He even more casually produced a weapon from the confines of his jacket... before steadying the bike, taking aim and without a seeming thought or care, he fired.

Tom’s window shattered, making the man weave dangerously on the road. Francis let off another shot and glass tinkled merrily on the pavement as the entire passenger side glass disintegrated, the jagged pieces spraying Tom’s front seat and the man himself.

Mad Dog’s men wanted to play as well evidently for several joined in on the fun. Shots from behind shattered Tom’s back glass.

“Who are these guys?” she asked in wonderment, having noted several lethal looking guns being discretely deposited back to their original hiding places.

“Veterans.” Red laughed his delight as Tom swerved radically, his car not really having the maneuvering capabilities to evade the bikers.

Mad Dog looked to Red for a clue. He, personally, wanted to chase the bastard down and make short order of the guy but Red seemed okay with just allowing him to ‘coast’.

But there was a method to such madness. Maurice could see the off ramp fast approaching. Their turn off was just meters away.
‘Blue car guy’ was already too close to make it safely but with this looney, who knew.

To ensure that eventuality not take place, Mad Dog issued a plan of his own. His guys followed instinctively.

His guys had great instincts.

He took the lead, the large Indian passing even Red’s ride easily.

Liz’s head swirled from side to side as the loud motorcade zipped up.

The convoy split effortlessly, forming a well armed line on either side of the three lone riders.

Red understood the gesture, picking up speed, barreling down the opening with Francis and Ben fast on his six.

He veered unexpectedly, shooting down the off ramp while he watched Tom Keen miss the same exit entirely.

The man crossed three lanes of traffic, his plan evident. He was going to take the next one and circle back but by then Red would have the advantage. He swore he could hear the colorful metaphors Tom must be cursing, grinning widely.

“Shit...” Liz clenched her thighs tightly, as she and Red accelerated down the ramp. Francis and Ben sped past them, coming to a light hastily, giving an all clear.

Only slightly dropping his speed, Red took the corner wide, causing the woman to squeal her dismay, before he gunned the big engines which moved them effortlessly forward yet again.

A part of the woman felt elation, it was a thrilling ride after all.

“He won’t give up so–” before the words left his mouth, Liz’s elation had turned to fury.

They got down a couple blocks, suddenly out of nowhere, the blue car came barreling towards them.

Liz had enough! She glanced down, seeing the black metal protruding from Red’s holster, she fumbled with the weapon, determination overtaking her.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Why not!” she snapped her growing rage.

“Because Francis is coming up alongside us.” Red replied dryly. “He’s on our side... I think.” he quipped. Let’s not kill him until he does something to irritate me to the point of doing so, which should be within the hour, if I know him.”

Liz craned her head, finding Francis zooming up alongside, blocking sight of her. He aimed accurately, shooting, taking out Tom’s front glass.

Tom could be seen dodging the shot and dangerously splintering spray of glass. The car jerked hard to the right, hitting the curb erratically, coming to an abrupt and jarring stop.

“Almost home.” Red stated evenly, slowing the pace to a casual speed now.

The entrance to the driveway loomed closer. Dembe, Silas and the guys rushed towards the street. They had heard the shots, always the vigilant group, wanting in on whatever action which might be
heading their way.

Red slowed, though not by much as he sped past the gathered throng, all with weapons at the ready.

Ben rolled to a stop, his hand going up in the sign of ‘victor’. He turned to a late arrival, another time coming to mind. He gestured triumphantly, his thumbs to his chest, “Winner!” he informed Francis who was just now pulling alongside. He pointed an accusing finger, “Loser!” he gloated.

Francis’ mouth fell agape, “This doesn’t count, I was shooting at a prick!” He defended his stance. “I should get points for that.”

“You do get points.” Ben graciously conceded. “But that does not take away from the fact that I am a winner,” he pointed to his chest, then back to Francis, “and you are a loser.”

Francis wasn’t about to take this sitting down, checking a higher court.

“Take it like a man Francis.” Red advised stoically, helping Liz from her perch.

She eased from the seat, with a slight grimace, her backside abuzz.

She didn’t have time to worry about aches and pains. Fifty rumbling motorcycles were following them into the spacious drive. Silas’ head man acted as parking valet.

Silas was more interested in the blue car, replete with numerous bullets holes and minus any window glass whatsoever, limping to a slow crawl outside the gate.

Mad Dog skidded to an artful stop just outside the looming gates, offering a friendly wave to Tom Keen.

“Why aren’t they shooting at him?” Liz demanded an explanation.

Red sat his helmet on the seat, turning his attention from the scene.

“I told them not to when we pulled up. This means,” He held up his fist, “don’t shoot the fucker or I will shoot you... in very painful places.”

“But–” Liz was incensed, taking on Francis’ viewpoint now that she was safe at home. “Why?!”

Red sighed, “Because Lizzy,” he put his hand on his hip, leaning into his weight, “I would like to spend just one weekend with you where there isn’t any blood shed... you think we could manage that, just once?”

Liz felt her blood pressure rise the longer he sat there. “Well, that ship has sailed.” she stared out across the driveway to find Tom Keen staring back at her with belligerent eyes, the downed guards coming to mind.

Clenching her fists at her sides, she took off at a clipped pace towards the gate.

Francis slid off his bike, quickly heading for the woman, his intent clear. A hand gripped his arm, halting him in his tracks.

The young man jerked a warning glare before seeing the culprit who would dared to intervene in any path Francis chose.

“She has to figure this out for herself.” Red reminded himself along with the man at his side. He watched Liz march angrily across the paved stones.
Silas cast a hasty check Red’s way then slowly stepped aside to allow Elizabeth towards the perimeter of the property.

“This is something she had to do alone.” Red reiterated.

Silas pointed an index finger, thumb cocked, aiming straight at Tom Keen who had exited the vehicle and now stood, waiting patiently for Liz’s arrival. Silas ‘shot’, his eyes saying so much more then the gesture ever could.

Tom sensed the guard meant the promise, for clearly, it was a promise as opposed to a threat.

Francis kept throwing tense looks Red’s way, the closer to danger Lizzy walked, he wanted to do... something, anything, but Red knew the value of patience.

In fact, all of them were tense. Though Red tried very hard not to be.

He had protected Lizzy, he had done what he could to bolster her confidence, he had shown her how a gentleman was supposed to act. How someone who truly gave a damn about you... would behave.

Now it was up to Elizabeth to decide how to handle the matter at hand.

Red watched her get ten, fifteen, twenty feet from him...all the while, nearing that fucking gate. He took a calming breath, readjusted his grip on Francis and waited.

The woman slowed, hesitating mid-step, her steps coming to a hesitant halt.

He watched her for a long moment as she glanced around, looking at the sky and trees, then back down at her feet.

Liz was listening to her inner thoughts, trying to push the anger aside. To think rationally as she knew Red would do in any given circumstances, so she glanced about the beautiful tranquility of the grounds.

She looked up at a clear blue sky and fluffy white clouds. The shade of the trees offering a cool respite from the sunny day. She pondered her feet for a goodly spell.

Red released Francis, “Give me a minute.” he told the younger man.

Stepping towards the woman, he took in the tense line of her jaw as he came alongside.

The quiet contemplation continued, but the woman had turned her profile, having heard his approach.

“I was having a good day.” she said after a long moment. “I was really enjoying it, spending time with you and...” she scuffed her toe along the ground, sighing quietly, “and now, he’s come along and ruined it.”

Red held his tongue, letting her work through the emotions. She needed to voice her thoughts. He could only hope what direction they might take.

“But it’s not just him, is it?” she suddenly realized. “It’s me too. I’m allowing him to ruin a perfectly wonderful day.”

Red felt the weight that sat on those slender shoulders. Couldn’t she have just one damn day to be... normal. To enjoy the world around her without these constant intrusions from those who wanted something from her.
While everyone else was enjoying barbeques, touch football and a day on the lake.

Lizzy was faced with the ex-husband from hell.

“He tried to kidnap me in a park filled with hundreds of people.” she fumed. “What the hell?” the small arms flew out from her side, frustration filling her to the very core.

“He embarrassed me...” she snapped her fury. “He hurt your friends!” the blue eyes flashed fire as they sought out Tom Keen.

Her small hands tightened, the slender fingers curling into the palms of her hand.

“The asshole he hit me... again.” There was pure venom in her delivery. She touched her cheek line tentatively, the white teeth clenched tightly.

Red could feel the woman boiling with anger and indignation... rightfully so.

“But he lost.” she nodded once, taking a few deep breaths, her body losing a little of that fury. “I’m home, I’m safe with Silas... and you.”

His heart swelled with a peculiar type of gratitude. He almost choked on the emotions generated by the simple statement.

Tom was sensing something amiss, she was taking too long. He stalked his way to the fence line.

Silas smiled pleasantly and Tom stopped his steps ten meters outside. Silas waved in an incongruous manner, motioning for the man to enter, but Tom was no fool. He could do what he had to from this safer distance.

“He’s mad.” Liz’s tone deadened, having watched the man. She half smiled, “No...” she corrected herself as Tom came a step closer and she could read his face, “he’s livid.”

Red side glanced the asshole, finding the boy in a fine state, indeed. He was about to blow his top and part of Red hoped he did. Tom’s face was reddened, blotchy with growing rage. He was shifting from one foot to the other, repeatedly. He was glaring at Elizabeth. He was steaming mad.

“His job is to take me to his employers and he keeps failing.” Liz quirked her head to one side. “Poor baby.” she felt nothing for the man in reality, except a certain type of loathing.

Red’s mouth lifted minutely as he watched her spine literally take shape.

Tom was confused. What the hell was going on? Why had she stopped? What was Reddington saying but... Tom knew, Red had said very little in actuality. He sensed Elizabeth needed his particular type of encouragement.

He glanced at Silas, chancing another step forward. “Liz, can we talk? Just the two of us?”

“I have two options here.” she stated quietly to herself, disregarding everything else for a moment. “I can go out there, thereby continuing this never ending cycle of lunacy,” she sighed, the slump in her shoulders returning with a vengeance, “lash out and fight, which obviously will get me nowhere...”

She lifted weary eyes to the man unwaveringly, as was his custom, looking through her.

The air was suddenly awash with the savory mix of barbequing meats, which Silas had been toiling over all morning and the pungent sweetness of blossoming flowers.
She felt a sense of peace, the weight on her shoulders lifting once more.

Her eyes suddenly unfocused, staring sightlessly at the man across the way, an unexpected tinge of excitement tickling at her.

*But why?*

Her subconscious mind had just made a discovery, but what?

She replayed the last few moments, thinking everything through analytically. Was this Red’s type of thought process? How he always seemed two steps ahead of everyone else. Weighing his options...

*The weight...*

She had felt relaxed, carefree and content all day.

Now Tom was here and her shoulders were tight. Her gut was in knots. She was agitated. She felt suffocated.

She literally felt beaten, both inside and out. Downtrodden.

Tom was a heavy burden that she felt in every fiber of her being.

Her eyes slid shut of their own accord, her senses savoring the unusually clean air, the smell of leather and the comforting scent Red’s cologne.

The sudden cognizance hit her full force.

“...Or I can take the high road.” she whispered, the strain ebbing in waves.

Red watched the process meticulously.

“He doesn’t care about me.” she had finally understood, all too well. “He never has.” she should be hurt, but she wasn’t. Just resigned to the fact, she had wasted too many years. “It’s all about the money, the power... the end game.”

The words were like music to Red’s ears.

“I can keep having a wonderful day, surrounded by my friends.” she shifted a serene glance. “I can spend time with you...”

Red’s eyes met hers, careful to show no expression, in no way swaying her thought process one way or other.

Would she lash out, confronting personal demons as was her custom, or in this instance... see the futility of such actions.

Liz searched out Tom Keen. Her own expression rather bemused. A slight smile broke through on the full lips.

“I can stay here, with you.” she repeated, another thought occurring. “While Tom has to go back and tell his Masters he fucked up again.”

Red sing-songed his head, “It won’t be the first or last time.” he reminded.

Liz nodded agreeably to the statement.
"I am validating his existence by standing here." It suddenly dawned.

The revelation shocked the man even though it was exactly what he had hoped would happen.

Red blinked once, then stilled. It was a universal signal which most, if not all, of the men present picked up on.

*Blink once for yes, twice for no.*

Dembe smiled gently having seen Raymond’s secret little message, one obviously missed by Elizabeth.

But Raymond, having had his say, though silently, was now totally relaxed and tension free.

Elizabeth must have conveyed her decision somehow. Tom felt his power over the woman evaporating into thin air.

He had one last ploy, usually the most effective of all. Ignoring the large looming guard, he actually retreated a few steps, his hands going out to his sides in an almost submissive manner.

His anger visibly diminished, although inside, it still simmered deep. He softened his eyes forcing a sympathetic face.

The man’s brows furrowed as the ploy seemed to fall short.

The woman shook her head disgustedly. The chameleon had adapted his skin to his new surroundings. Literally shifting personalities right before her very eyes.

“He thinks I will forget he slapped the shit out of me in front of all those people back at the park.”

She supposed that he believed the sad eyes and solemn expression would still work.

Her body tensed, the anger renewed but in the next instance having taken a few deep breaths she was able to let it go.

She smiled gently for Red Reddington.

“I’m hungry...” she announced cheerfully.

She sought out Tom Keen, one last time. She flipped the bastard off, spinning on her heels. She was symbolically turning her back on the fucker, but more importantly that chapter of her life.

Red smiled, all the worries of the incident put behind him as well. It was with great enthusiasm he loudly announced to one and all who had been waiting patiently throughout the entire introspective soul searching.

“Gentlemen, we have food on the grill.” he waved to the house, inviting her protectors inside. “Silas, show our guests the way.” he deliberately chose the large guard for such a task, glancing back, his expression a solid one.

“I’ll be right there, Boss.” Silas had other priorities. “After I take care of this guest.” he started for Tom who instinctively retreated, his survival instincts well honed.

“Silas.” Red’s word stopped the man in his tracks.

“Aw, come on!” the suggestion was met with childlike disappointment. “Are you kidding me?” Red
was petulantly consulted.

Tom waited the moment out but even now, he was checking available escape routes.

“...Please,” Red knew how to get around the anger, “if you wouldn’t mind.” he extended a hand to the waiting crowd who seemed to take great delight in Silas' predicament. Especially Maurice Morrison.

“You hired me to do a job.” Silas wasn’t above pouting, Liz was stunned to see. “Why don’t you let me do it?” he gritted. “I’ve had enough of shit for brains here to last me a lifetime and now the little fucker... pardon my language ladies,” he was gentleman enough to acknowledge the ‘ladies’ gathered who all shared a good laugh over the small breach of etiquette.

“Yeah, fuck you, Silas.” one particularly out spoken lady called out jovially.

“Later, baby...” Silas dismissed with a peevish wave of his hand. “Daddy’s talking business right now.” he clearly wanted to return to the subject of disintegrating Tom Keen.

“Daddy,” Red implored the use of the colloquial term, “has a job to do, granted,” he too, waved an impervious hand, “and that is to make certain that side of beef I purchased doesn’t burn to a crisp. If it does, it comes out of your paycheck.”

“That’s damned gratitude for ya!” Silas asked commiseration from the bikers and got.... none.

“Come on man, my old lady is hungry.”

“I told her to wait.” Silas reminded innocently.

“As if she would want a scrawny scrap of a shit like you.” Mad Dog dismissed happily. “Now where’s the food?”

Silas was clearly torn. He glanced at the man outside the gate, his massive fists clenched at his sides.

Red waited patiently allowing the man his own introspective soul search.

Mad Dog sighed his understanding, sidling closer to the guard who was fighting his natural instincts.

“Next time...” the large biker murmured soothingly. “You can maim and kill the fucker.”

Silas cut stony eyes to the man beside him, the tension radiating off his bulky frame.

“Today is not that day.” Maurice murmured.

“I’m starving and you know how I get when my blood sugar drops.” Francis ended the stalemate, once and for all, drawing a short burst of amusement from Mad Dog.

“You aren’t a fucking diabetic!” Silas snapped.

“I could be.” Francis protested. “I’ve never really been tested.” he reminded plaintively. “Are you going to let me pass out? It’s up to you to take care of me if I do.”

Silas shook his head disdainfully but Francis had caught his attention. “I’d drop your ass in the East River.”

“Why drive all the way to Jersey,” it was questioned, “when the Potomac is right around the corner.”
“Mad Dog...” Francis was crushed, “I’m crushed.”

Mad Dog laughed heartily, physically going out, placing an insistent arm around Silas’ sturdy neck.

“Come on, sweetheart,” he pursed his lips, planting a sloppy kiss on the disgusted guards scruffy cheek, “I’ll let you watch me and my old lady get it on, after you feed us. A man does not live by bread alone... but it helps keep up the stamina.”

“What would you know about stamina?” Silas pushed roughly from the man’s grasp, swiping at his cheek.

“If you didn’t want to feel my soft lips, you wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“It got you to promise to let me watch you and your old lady, didn’t it.” Silas goaded.

Red was happy to see the standoff end. While he would actually pay to see Silas take Tom down a notch or two, today was not the day for such things.

Especially now that Lizzy had come to the conclusion she had concerning her former ex-husband.

Today was to enjoy life because those who were not here had given everything to ensure life was lived to the fullest and Red would be damned before he allowed anything to mar such a sacrifice.

“Francis...” Liz was saying as everyone headed into the opened front portals of the stylish glass entryway, “didn’t you just finish off two and a half turkey legs? How can you be hungry?”

“He’s a growing lad.” Red threw a grateful glance Maurice’s and Francis’ way for the ploy they had used to waylay Silas’ intent. “Shooting out glass takes a lot of energy.”

“I feel faint.” Francis nodded in agreement. “Where’s the food?” he followed the delicious aroma drifting around the house, soon disappearing through the French doors which led to the backyard patio and pool area.

“What’s he doing?” Liz had sighed lightly, turning to Red, the others filed out noisily to the food and planned entertainment.

Red had hired a live band. Liz could hear them tuning up even now, as the audience grew.

“He just sitting out there... in the car.” Red had noted Tom’s retreat.

“It must be hot.” Liz stated absently. “What with no air conditioning or... windows.”

Red shrugged, “Yeah.”

“You hired a band?” the woman turned her head to the sound. “How nice!”

“Do we need to talk?”

“Over all that?” she quipped, the ever growing din outside drowning out all else. “Do we?” she quietened a little.

“It can wait.” he decided. “Would my lady care to dance?”

The heady beat of that ‘Old Rock and Roll’ music rocked the house.

She grinned, extending her hand, her fingers grasped by his stronger ones.
“Do you even know how to dance to this stuff?” she doubted.

“Always doubting my abilities...” he tsked, leading her to the French doors which still stood opened wide. “Come on baby, learn from the Master.”

Liz chuckled her delight. Was there nothing this guy couldn’t do, she wondered.

She stepped out into a beautiful sun-filled day. Friends abounded, good food was plentiful and spread out on carefully laden tables.

It was going to be a wonderful end to an amazing day.

She wasn’t about to allow one bad incident to mar such a precious time.

She was broken from her thoughts, a sharp burst of giggles escaping her smiling face as Red twirled her about unexpectedly.

Red had been correct, he could dance. Very much so. There was something incredibly sexy about they way he moved.

Liz was going to have the time of her life.

Her relaxed and tension free disposition said as much...

♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

After icing Lizzy’s cheek, they enjoyed hour after hour of good food and even better company.

It had been a fun afternoon of animated conversation, laughter and lively music.

The only small incident had occurred when Liz and Dembe had been slighted for slyly feeding the dog and cat table scraps. Both ignored Red’s chiding continuing to ensure the animals had a good day as well.

It was well after sundown when people reluctantly started creeping towards the exits. The men started trickling for the door, their ladies in tow, waving away Red’s attempt to compensate them for all they had contributed this day.

*Best time I've had in years. We should pay you.*

*Call anytime, Red. Had a great time... in spite of Silas' pouting.*

*Glad you guys made it safely... as if there was any doubt.*

*Want us to set up camp out there in case the pecker wood shows his balls?*

*Francis, boy, you can ride!*

*“He sure can.”’ one cute little biker chick intoned.*

Red smiled at them as they passed, shaking their hands, sending his gratitude in his own fashion. Intermittent sounds of engines revving filled the night. Liz and Red stood on the driveway as they waved their guests off into a cooling night before returning to the house.

*“About today...” he turned instantly, once the room was quiet and he and Lizzy were alone. She had time to let it all sink in and process what happened. “...my behavior.”*
He smoothed his thumb over her cheek, pleased to find the swelling had gone down, as well as the
discoloration. There would be slight bruising, but nothing like the last time that son of a bitch hit her.

“I’ve had the best day, ever.” she smiled softly. “The rest...”

“Must be discussed.” he murmured quietly, laying a gentle kiss on the slight wound.

“Is he still out there?” her mouth twisted in wry humor. She hadn’t had time to actually check nor
had she cared, truth told.

Red shrugged, pulling the radio from his belt. “Is our Mr. Keen still haunting the front gate?”

“He is.” Silas confirmed. “I hope you don’t mind, but we took the liberty of ordering Chinese for his
stay.” it was informed. “Joe offered to call a windshield repair guy... does the ‘bird’ mean
‘affirmative’?” Silas asked, allowing his puzzlement. “We’re up in the air on that one.”

Red chuckled and to his surprise, Lizzy did as well. “Ever hospitable, Silas. Good man.”

“Red...” Francis came out from around the corner, followed by Ben, both hesitating in their step.
“Are we interrupting? Well, never mind.” he continued on, with Ben offering a hesitant scowl for
such behavior. “We need to talk.”

“It’s all right, Francis.” Red held his amusement for the boy’s rudeness. “What did you need?”

“I’m staying here tonight. So is Ben.” he invited them both without further consultation.

“...Any particular reason why?” Red was interested but unconcerned. Francis was always welcome.
Seemed he knew as much without actual confirmation.

“In case that dick tries anything.” he hooked his thumb in the needed direction.

Red smiled, placing a stilling hand on the tense young man’s shoulder. “The boys are watching him.
Even ordered food delivered to his car for his stakeout.”

Francis narrowed his eyes, “Are we killing him with kindness?” he needed the game plan explained.

“Annoying him, is more like it.” Red murmured aside. “Enough about that asshole.”

Francis pouted, obviously upset they would not discuss this further.

“Francis, you know you are always welcome here. But I assure you, we’re perfectly fine. She’s
safe.” he assured, “If you are to stay here, it is as a guest, nothing more.” Red held up his hand to
forestall the man.

“You stay, you play. Rules of the house.” he stopped any further protest. “There are multiple guards
here to ensure that is possible.”

at something.”

“Do forgive me, Francis. I wasn’t aware I was stifling your creativity.” Red replied pseudo-seriously.
“I’ll tell you what. If Tom should make it through those doors, you may fire at will... as many times
as you please, to hell with the cost of ammo.”

“Since when do you buy ammo?” Francis frowned his confusion, then smiled happily when he
comprehended what Red said. “Well, okay then.”
Ben seemed okay with the notion too, smiling as contentedly.

Liz frowned critically, nearing the young man, reaching to touch his bottom lip. “He hit you?”

“If he did I don’t remember it?” Francis shrugged. “He hits like a girl. No offense to girls.” he inclined his head towards Liz. “You gonna kiss it better?”

Red lifted a brow, surprised by the request even if said in a teasing manner. But he was more surprised when Lizzy stepped, stretching to caress Francis’ cheek near the small swelling point.

Red tried to halt the tense resentment filling his head.

The boy had meant nothing by the remark, he was sure.

He would have to learn to curb such unreasonable reactions where Lizzy was concerned.

He knew his reaction was stupid, childish even but he did have to admit, the emotions were within him.

Especially as Francis had unconsciously leaned into the moment, the man’s hands coming to land on the shapely hips for a beat.

It was only for counter balance, Red reminded.

Lizzy had to tip toe to reach the corner of the taller man’s mouth, to brace her palms on Francis’ chest.

There was something disturbingly erotic about the scene that Red disliked intensely. Determinedly he pushed such petty emotions aside.

“Thank you, Francis.” Liz mumbled quietly, pulling back from the man, her eyes gentle.

“He’s not gonna mess with our girl.” Francis winked, returning the cheek kiss in open affection. His mood altered rapidly however. “We’re going swimming, you?”

“I’ll be in soon.” Liz smiled at the man.

Francis and Ben headed to the pool, talking animatedly about their day as they went.

Red put his hand on her lower spine, guiding her physically back to his sphere. “If you go anywhere this week, please give Silas ample time to prepare, all right?”

She shrugged. “I’ll try to keep any trips to a minimum, and of course, I will give ample consult time.”

“You live your life, Lizzy. Don’t let Tom, or Silas for that matter, hold you back.” he said, following slowly as she traversed the corridor leading to their room. “I know it may seem a hassle to take Silas with you, but...”

“But what?” she asked, kicking her shoes off, rubbing the insole of her foot. Her leg was beginning to ache again.

“I am in no way saying that you can’t take care of yourself, I just...” he reasoned his protectiveness aside.

“I know you aren’t insulting or disrespecting me, Red.” She entered the closet, dropping her top and
bottoms into the hamper, smiling back at the man. “You just worry for my well being... and that’s nice.” the woman arched a pretty brow, her head gesturing to the bastard outside. “Especially given the alternative.”

Red inclined his head, pleased that she was aware he wasn’t meaning to slight her abilities.

“For all we know,” she said, sliding into her bikini bottoms, “because Tom keeps failing, he may employ assistance.”

Red had been thinking along those lines himself, but hadn’t said anything so as not to worry her unduly.

“Maybe when I’m back on my feet I might try a jaunt to the store...” she turned her back to Red, holding up the ties of her swim top. The man dutifully tied the bows, planting a sweet kiss on her shoulder when finished, “but right now, I’d just end up getting somebody hurt.”

Red’s brow furrowed, having not followed along.

“If Tom or even Carver took off with me,” she touched his brooding mouth tentatively, kissing his bottom lip slowly, lingeringly, “you’d have the entire Eastern seaboard underground hunting for me.” her lips twitched with contained amusement.

“And if people didn’t have the answers you wanted...” she trailed off, both knowing where she was headed. “Well, you can be very determined when you wish. Has anyone ever told you that?”

Red wouldn’t argue the fact. Because that’s exactly what he’d do. “I just want you safe...”

“I know...” she smiled softly, laying a affectionate kiss on his lips. “Giving Silas an extra thirty minutes to prepare for a store run isn’t going to kill me, especially, if it doesn’t kill him.”

“He’s a bitch most of the time,” she crinkled her nose, “I can just imagine what a grump he’d be if he were shot.”

Red recalled one instance the man was shot and had to listen to him bitch for hours, not about the hole in his thigh, but that his cigarette pack had been the real victim in the skirmish.

He leaned into the counter, crossing his arms as he watched her twist her hair up into a bun.

“Sometimes I wonder, why me?” she shrugged almost playfully. “My life is so bizarre. The twists and turns of Fate, hum?” she sought him out.

“Now, are you going to come out and watch us frolic?” she asked, grabbing a towel from the pantry.

Red grinned and pushed off the counter, “I am, yes.”

She knew better than to ask if he was joining them. He was not ready for such an eventuality. So she had backed off... when he felt more secure, maybe he might feel more relaxed with the things life had thrown him. But that clearly, was for a later time.

Right now, she was just glad he was coming out to spend time.

Lizzy floated in the foam lounge chair, immersed in the warm water of the pool. She lay back comfortably gazing at the night sky.
It was a clear, hot night and the stars were out in the black void of the heavens.

She mentally traced the twinkling outline of the Big Dipper.

She felt one with the Universe.

Outside these walls, a real world awaited but for the moment, it felt wonderful to drift along, her cares muddled and far away.

Vaguely, she was aware of Francis passing on another side of the large pool, his powerful strokes slashing the water effortlessly.

Ben had long since vacated the water, preferring to lounge around, enjoying a drink with Red and Dembe on the adjoining lanai.

“You’re going to get ‘pruny’. Silas stopped by on his way to join the men under the covered patio area. “And you know I will definitely poke fun at you for the fact.”

Liz pulled a face and stuck out her tongue.

“There are so many better things to do with that little fly trap.” he chided. “But I’m sure he has taught you all about those by now.” he crooked his head in Red’s direction.

“Don’t you ever think about anything else?” Liz sighed her discontent.

“Not really, no.” Silas replied.

“Look at the stars... look at the heavens.” she implored, hoping he would pick up on her philosophical mood.

Silas obeyed, scanning God’s creative abilities absently. “There are probably all sorts of drones zeroed in on us at this very moment.”

Liz allowed her head to fall back, a disgruntled sound escaping. “You are hopeless.”

“Really? Because the little blonde morsel I had last night said–”

“Go away...” Liz groaned, “Let me be reflective in peace.”

“No, you’ll be interested in this...”

“Red!” she pouted. “He’s ruining my Zen moment.”

Red sighed woefully, knowing that tone. “Silas...” he beckoned, his voice holding an entirely different tone.

The man had done his duty, well pleased he had managed to annoy the woman yet again. He continued on his trek, shortly taking a seat next to Red Reddington.

“You off for the night?” Red knew the man needed solitude. This day was always hard on Silas.

He would spend the next few weeks trying to forget... to not think. The days would pass in a blur of whiskey shots and faceless women.

It was an annual pilgrimage Red had grown to expect and had anticipated, having already made provisions for Lizzy’s safety.
Silas was quiet for an unusual moment. He watched Francis slip up under Liz’s longue chair before upending the woman into the water.

He chuckled lowly for the antics as Liz arose from the pool like a Grecian Goddess bent on retribution. She smacked Francis hard... very hard... with a large inflatable rubber ducky float Francis had purchased online.

The duck wore cool Ray-Ban’s and a devil-may-care attitude which spoke to Silas.

The rubber split with the impact, a high, wheezing sound pitifully escaping the dying duck.

“You killed Buzzy!” Francis gasped his horror.

“Be glad I didn’t kill you!” Liz grated. “Though the night is still young...” she growled.

“She keeps hitting me for no reason.” Francis had swum to the edge of the pool to explain his predicament. He frowned at the limp pool float in his hand, sighing his woe.

“Yes...” Red nodded minutely. “I saw the entire episode.” the man’s brow arching.

“Oh...” Francis took the news exceedingly well, lifting his well toned body out of the pool, traipsing across the still warm concrete absently. He jerked a towel off the nearby chairs, “then never mind.”

Silas’ grin widened.

“It’s all right, Silas.” Red returned to the previous subject, “we can spare you... take as long as you need.”

The man looked to Dembe for some obscure reason.

“We understand, old friend.” Dembe inclined his head, the faint accent lending a lyrical quality to his words.

Silas remained quiet... pensive.

“You worried about our little visitor outside?” Red thought he had hit on the reason for Silas’ hesitation.

“He’s asleep.” Silas informed one and all. “Probably resting up for what he thinks will be an eventful night... nah, my guys can handle him.”

“Do not underestimate an opponent.” Dembe advised regally.

“Just know my own capabilities, especially with one so utterly stupid.” Silas explained.

The guard watched Liz rearrange her raft and climb back on, stretching out lazily again. “She needs me.”

“She needs... him.” Francis pointed.

Red scowled to be the sudden center of attention.

“Hey, boss....” Silas’ instincts picked up on the direction Francis was heading. “You want we should vacate so you and your little cock pocket can share some quality time?”

“Quaintly put...” Dembe shook his head slightly, which signified his disapproval.
Silas’ good humor had returned, “We know you’ve been needing a good—”

“Silas...” Red warned. He didn’t know if Lizzy could hear the conversation but he wasn’t going to take any chances.

“Moment to exchange...” Silas rephrased.

“Bodily fluids?” Francis added helpfully.

“...A cultural reciprocal of ideas and life harmonies.” Silas halted, stunned into silence, his own rhetoric amazing even himself.

Dembe scowled deeply at Silas’s statement, a noble brow lifting disconcertingly.

Francis went back to his drink for solace. “I liked mine better.”

“On that sad note,” Ben arose, “I shall take my leave with gratitude for a ‘harmonious’ day well spent with good companions and... Francis.”

Francis waved his drink dangerously about, the liquid rimming the edge. “My room is the one on the right, remember.”

“You’ve only told me fifty times.” Ben called back over his shoulder. “What’s so special about that room?”

“I can hear almost everything that goes on in Red’s room.” the man shrugged. “Must be the vent...” he muttered absentmindedly.

“Oh...” Ben nodded his understanding, “you want to be on the alert for the douche bag out front, if anything goes down tonight.”

Francis was confused for a beat, “Eh... ok, sure.”

It was Ben’s turn to be confused.

“Don’t.” Red sighed heavily. “Best to just let it go... trust me,” he advised.

Dembe shook his head disapprovingly once more, his look a stern one for Francis Holbrook.

“What?” Francis staunchly defended himself. “Wouldn’t you want to learn from the best if you had the chance?”

“Then you should be rooming next to Dembe.” Silas stated quietly.

“Thanks...” Red took umbrage. “Dembe, what is it about you that women find so irresistible?”

“Perhaps it is the fact that he reciprocates the feeling.” Silas surmised.

“Why the hell are you so philosophical tonight?” Francis wanted to know.

“She started it.” Silas smiled mirthlessly, then sighed. “Yeah, I wonder...” he fell silent.

Red signaled the others to ‘let it go’.

“So, Silas, the barbeque was a success, thanks to your incredible ‘secret sauce’,” he began, “thank you for staying behind and lending Nora a much needed hand.”
Silas cast him a bemused look, “I should be thanking you, man.”

“What the hell is going on?” Francis was lost. This was the first holiday he had spent with Red and the guys. His friendship with Lizzy had meant an all exclusive invitation this year.

Silas seemed odd... off-kilter. Something was up and Francis hated being kept out of the loop.

“Nothing, kid.” Silas arose, his shoulders lacking a little of the usual starch. “Look Red, if it’s really okay... maybe I will take a day or two.”

He hesitated, “The guys can handle–”

“Silas,” Red halted the man, “go, we will be fine.”

“Go my friend.” Dembe insisted. “I will find you if you are needed.”

Silas nodded then exited slowly, his massive frame moving into the shadows of the night with no further word or even a glance back.

Francis was more than confused. “Did I say something wrong... again?”

“No.” Red smiled gently at the young man. “He does this sometimes, this is a... difficult time of the year for some.”

“Oh, you mean like Christmas.” the man instantly cringed realizing he had just inadvertently reminded Red of the time of year that his family had disappeared.

Red acted as if he did not pick up on the fact.

“Survivors guilt.” Ben stated, sensing Silas’ predicament and Francis’. “Can we do something?”

“Man...” it was Francis’s turn to fall silent, for all of two seconds. “I’m sorry, Red. I should learn to keep my big mouth shut.”

“He will be fine, he just has some demons to fight.” Red had tried, in the beginning to offer any type of assistance he could but he came to the realization, it was something one could not ‘help’.

Truth told, each year was proving more and more uncertain. Last Memorial Day, Silas disappeared for two weeks and no one could search him out.

Red used every avenue open to him and still Silas showed up looking like death itself has taken a tumble with the man.

Hollowed cheeks, haunted eyes... he had lost weight, his usually immaculate clothing appeared as if he hadn’t changed since his departure. A full growth of grey and white stubble covered a haggard face.

Silas had been through his own particular type of hell.

Red hadn’t been certain how to handle the issue but he had taken his cue from Dembe who had greeted Silas as if he had only been gone a few moments.

In the days following, slowly the old Silas started to emerge from whatever cesspool he had been wallowing in.

And every year, thereafter, a ritual of sorts was born. Silas was the epitome of efficiency and grace
under fire most days.

Could Red really fault the man for a small lapse? A tiny chink in the shining armor.

He didn’t, nor would he ever.

He was only grateful to have the man back or more importantly, that Silas chose to return.

And then life would go on.

Red had demons himself. He understood all about being haunted by ghosts of his past.

He looked out over the pool, pleased to see Lizzy dragging her raft to dock. She had played enough for one night.

Francis crossed, lifting the cumbersome float clear, sitting it alongside the surrounding greenery with his own dead rubber ducky.

Red mused quietly, watching the two converse.

His own demons seemed, for the most part, kept at bay these days and he knew it was because of his new formed association with the woman across the way.

He had never felt so comfortable or natural with another female.

Oh, he had women in the past, of course. It would be unnatural had he not. And he could truthfully say that most, if not all, had satisfied him in bed.

Lately, there was a emptiness inside, however, one he could not label. An illusive something that was missing.

That something, as it turned out, was Elizabeth Scott Keen.

He realized, in effect, that he had just been going through the motions with the others, playing a role expected of him.

When had it all changed?

He smiled as Elizabeth neared, absently arising to seat her in one of the vacant chairs.

He could smell the fresh scent of lavender. She always spread the delicious smelling lotion on after her quick rinse down at the outdoor shower area.

“It’s a lovely night.” she seated herself next to Dembe. “I thought it might be too hot after today.”

Red pulled his attention from the soft curve of her neckline. She liked to be kissed just right there, where the shoulder met the lovely slope.

If he breathed out, warming the flesh, he could usually illicit a soft moan of arousal.

Francis was babbling on and on, some tale about a bar fight gone wrong. Red preferred to look at the vision seated next to him.

Soft tendrils were escaping Liz’s carefully arranged top-knot. The silk moved gently in the slight breeze. They framed her face, softening the line.
She laughed musically, the sound like tinkling ice in a fresh glass of lemonade.

Red so enjoyed that laugh. She so seldom... no, that was no longer so. Liz’s laughter was a constant these days.

She had grown accustomed to this place, the people who frequented it. She liked them all and was liked in return.

Was she considering this her true home finally?

Red hoped as much. And even though the outside world, at times, intruded upon the sanctuary the man had built for her, Liz still was able to maintain her perspective.

She still had good days, good times. Red would see to it those continued, no matter the obstacles or set backs... or price paid.

The woman’s body held a certain mystique for him.

His eyes slid delicately over the curve of her breast. The bikini top had moved slightly allowing him to take note of the darker tan line.

“Are you undressing her with your eyes?” Francis had watched the man now for some few moments, having actually stepped back, allowing someone else to take center stage.

Liz halted her own tale from college days, glancing at the man seated beside her. “He is talking about me, right?” she demanded confirmation.

All attention turned to a slightly disoriented individual.

“I was... musing.” Red corrected. “And of course, he meant you. Who else would I be undressing with my eyes.”

“Dembe is a fine specimen.” Liz reminded tongue and cheek.

“He is that.” Red agreed. “But I’ve seen him sans clothing, the picture was titillating, granted. But evidently I don’t swing that way.”

“You told Maurice that you swing to the left.” Liz had excellent recall abilities.

“I told him I hang to the left.” Red scolded.

“There’s no doubt in my mind, that he prefers chicks.” Francis scoffed. “If he were a Vampire, he would have sucked you dry in seconds, the way he was ogling your neck.”

“I never do anything in seconds.” Red was positive. “And don’t be bringing Vampires or Zombies into this conversation.”

“I’m just saying, if we are holding you back from any debauchery you had planned...” Francis magnanimously offered.

“Well I didn’t want to upset your delicate sensibilities...” Red sighed.

“What sensibilities?” Liz wanted to know.

“Hey, I’m a sensitive guy.” Francis stated for the record. “But I would really like to see you suck her face.”
“Why the hell do I feel like I’m back in Marcie Breckman’s basement playing spin the bottle?” Red grumbled.

“Would you like to do that?” Francis asked excitedly.

Red’s eyes darkened.

“Do I take that as a, no?” Francis asked, slightly deflated, much like his rubber ducky.

“Would you like to go get an ice cream?” Red turned to the woman unexpectedly. His question an earnest one.

“Uh,” Liz was a little taken aback, “I thought we were going to have sex?” she checked with Francis to make sure.

“That is a given on any day or night.” Red was not adverse to the idea. “But right now, my aspirations run to a more lofty goal.”

“Sure...okay.” she was flexible. “Is anything open? It’s a holiday.”

“I know a couple places...” Red assured. “Go get dressed, I’ll meet you back here.”

A few minutes later they rolled up to the moving gate. The woman looked over her shoulder. The usual guard was conspicuously absent.

“The guards aren’t going?” she was flabbergasted.

“No...” He stopped at the edge of the drive, looked right, then sighed as he looked left.

“But,  Tom...” she grimaced her disappointment.

“He can’t go either.” Red replied, as they rolled past the man who sat ostensibly as they passed. “We don’t need a third wheel on our date.”

She heard Tom’s engine turn over as they rounded the first corner.

“No.” she shook her head. “He’ll just cramp your style.” She did secretly wonder how Red would get rid of the pest, however.

Red raised her hand, kissing her fingers, then winked. “Get comfortable, sweetheart.” he advised. “It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

She settled into the seat, smiling as he pushed on the gas, pulling far ahead of their shadow.

Liz looked in her side mirror as Red took yet another corner, before laying on the gas, furthering the gap between them and Tom.

As she got more comfortable with Red’s ability to drive, the man maneuvered his way through the streets like something she had seen in a Steve McQueen movie.

She giggled as they fishtailed around a cul-de-sac. Her laughter increased to pure joy as the man expertly hooked the wheel, sending them into a spin which landed them pointing in the direction they had just come from.

*Where had he learned to drive like this?*
Red punched the gas, speeding past Tom as he headed directly toward them but at the last minute Red swerved avoiding a possible collision.

Red had a straight shot of several blocks while Tom was left to maneuver a difficult turn around. Taking another tight corner into an alley, Red shut down the lights, leaving them completely in the dark. He spun the car around, quickly backing into a loading dock area... then waited.

Moments later, Tom came creeping by, looking every which way available, before slamming his hands on the steering wheel, in open frustration, obviously pissed.

Red chuckled quietly, his eyes crinkling with his amusement. He shook his head, shrugging slightly over the other man's lack of skills.

He craned his head, following the man's path until Tom's car was out of sight. Red settled back, then searched out the woman beside him.

"Now, I said something about ice cream, didn't I?"

"You did." she grinned, more than impressed with this man's skills.

A short time later, they were loaded down with their sweet treats and back in the car.

"Are we going home?" she asked, licking at the small drips which had already managed their way down the side of her cone.

"I thought we could take a walk along the river?" he suggested instead.

"That sounds nice."

Red meandered through the streets, as they quietly concentrated their efforts on the fast evaporating cones.

The spot he chose was quiet, with only a few late night visitors milling about. They leisurely strolled down the decorative brick pavers until arriving at the boardwalk.

"This area is closed." she had noticed the signs as they approached.

"Yes, which is why I chose it." he took her hand, helping her over a particularly difficult slope in the grass which led to a walking path.

She impulsively took a long lick from his ice cream.

"Don't leave it hanging out there, if you don't want to share." she wrinkled her nose playfully.

"If you really are in the mood to lick something..." he let that hang in the air for a spell.

"When you mix them together it tastes like caramel." she ignored his insinuation, her cone held up as a peace offering. Red took a bite, shrugging.

"It does." he agreed.

"I'll have you know, Red Reddington," she did finally allude to his mischievous remark, "that I don't feel comfortable doing that here." he was summarily informed. "It is always an option for later, if you're interested."

"Oh, I'm interested." she was assured.
She squeezed the hand in hers as they walked the deserted path. “It’s pretty out tonight.” she had taken note.

“It is, nice breeze, quiet.” Red agreed, allowing the move away from the more controversial subject. They walked another couple of minutes, their hands swinging together comfortably. Red gestured to a bench, guiding her to it before sitting.

“You like the water, don’t you?” she looked up at him, smiling softly, the warm breeze catching her freed hair.

“What makes you think so?” He was quietly evasive

“The only time you go quiet, is when you’re near it.” she remarked, just as evasively.

“Was that your polite way of saying, I talk too much?” he prompted.

Liz giggled quietly, slapping his thigh softly. “No.” She crossed her legs, turning towards him. “I didn’t mean to profile you.” she sought him out, suddenly embarrassed for some reason, “you just seem so at peace... so something.” she sought the word.

“I like the sound of the water.” he quelled her awkwardness. “I find it soothing.” he replied softly. “Much more tranquil than me blathering on about something trivial.”

“You never blather.” she disagreed with his assessment. “Do you miss it?”

He looked out over the glassy sheen of the water, staring at the lights shimmering in the dark ripples off in the distance.

“Miss what?”

Liz sighed heavily, signifying he had said something amiss.

“I was never one to get much sleep. A couple hours at most.” he conceded, actually answering the question. “Sometimes... at night, I would go out on deck and listen to the water, watch the swells.”

He held out his ice cream silently amused when she didn’t hesitate to accept the offer. Red stretched his legs out in front of him, leaning more comfortably into the bench. “If we were lucky, we would be moving off into an approaching storm.”

“Why is that a good thing?” it hadn’t sounded like it to her.

“The seas were more alive.” there was a wistfulness to the man’s manner.

Liz watched Red’s shoulders loosen slightly, “The sea spray, the clean air, the heavy wind.” his eyes fluttered shut, his chin lifting as though he could actually feel the salty mist on his face. “It was very relaxing.”

“It helped you sleep?” she didn’t want to disturb the moment.

“... Yes.”

“You do realize you’d be a pirate back in the day.” she munched happily around her cone, the image not at all disagreeable to her way of thinking.
Red guffawed quietly, “Oh, most certainly.” he chuckled. “I do love getting my hands on some good... booty.”

Liz tried, she really did, to not laugh. “What a filthy scoundrel.” she tsked. “Ravishing those innocent virgins.”

Red grinned his amusement, “I really need to read more of your books.” he shifted, laying his arm along the back of the bench, allowing Lizzy to inch closer to him. “Are you cold?”

“A little bit.” she held up her half eaten cone as to the ‘why’ of the matter.

“You want to go now?”

“Not yet...” she begged off.

It was so rare they had quiet time. Just the two of them, where he talked about his past, especially. She wasn’t ready for it to end just yet.

Red gestured her closer, wrapping his arm around her then patted his thighs. “Put your legs over.”

Liz scooted closer, settling her legs over his, instantly feeling his heat as his hand rubbed against her legs, warming the surface. He fell silent for a moment, getting lost in his thoughts.

“You’re thinking.” she popped the last of her ice cream in her mouth, sighing her disappointment. His half eaten cone entered her line of sight.

“If I don’t eat it, it will just go to waste.” She took the treat, diving in. “This is one leftover I can not save for Francis.”

Red chuckled softly allowing the moment to pass. He returned his attention to the dark murky waters for a goodly while.

“What did you say to Jack?” he prompted.

“I... thanked him.” she replied just as pensively. “For his service... for taking care of you.”

Red tilted his head, looking at her, then nodded. “I’m glad I got to spend as much time as I did with him.”

“Was he...” she hesitated, unsure if it was a direction she should take, “was he dating anyone?”

“He was, yes.” Red recalled the dark haired woman who visited... afterwards. She had been crying at the kitchen table with his mother. It was a visual he would never forget.

Jack had been a skirt chaser for his first two tours. Probably fucking everything he could in a hundred mile radius to keep from becoming truly enmeshed in a relationship.

But after his second tour, he had met her... Rachel.

Having been in Jack’s shoes himself, Red knew Jack figured, having survived two tours of duty and not intending to re-up for another, he could safely get seriously involved with someone.

Rachel was from a military family and understood the call of duty...

Red vaguely remembered hearing Jack talking to his father about asking the woman to marry him. Red always wondered if Jack had actually gotten around to posing the question?
Because shortly afterwards, Jack had received word that a buddy of his had tripped a booby trap and lost not his life, but he had lost the use of his limbs.

In retaliation, Jack impulsively re-upped, intent on nothing more than payback.

While Rachel wasn’t happy, she had understood. She had stood by him.

Red recalled every time she came over to the house. She would often share a letter from Jack before her and Red’s mother would set off to the kitchen, to bake Jack cookies or some other treat.

Only in this case, the third time had not been a charm.

As the year had slowly dragged on, Rachel had stayed faithful, determined and supportive.

And then they got the news.

Red carried that with him, even to this day.

Jack had been just twenty eight days away from his “wake up call” and died. And it had crushed Rachel.

They had been so close to sharing their lives, making a family...

And it was ripped away in the blink of an eye.

“Did she ever marry, do you know?” Liz’s voice seemed far away, distant.

Red was shocked to realize, he had just voiced all of that, out loud.

“I lost touch with her. Or maybe, she moved on.” Red shook his head. “I really don’t remember. I assume she did. She was only twenty four.”

“I don’t know how she...” Liz stared off into the water herself, “it must have been incredibly painful.”

“Time heals all...”

Liz thought the man sounded rather aloof for a second, but the truth of the matter was, he was right.

In the short few weeks without Tom invading her space, she felt completely different about the man. She felt differently about a great many things...

But now she saw how unhealthy and damaging their relationship had been and all she wanted now, was for Tom to leave her alone.

She wanted something more for her life than... she didn’t want to dwell on this anymore.

Liz wiped her hands on her napkin, symbolically washing her hands of the mess.

Enough.

“I’m glad you brought me.” she leaned into the man, hugging him.

Red craned his head, laying a soft kiss on her brow in response.

“I’ve had a nice time.” she glanced up, kissing his cheek.
“So have I.” And he had. It was so simplistic an outing. But he could tell, Liz meant what she said. She had just enjoyed their time together.

It was quite a change from Madeline Pratt say, who always said she could never be truly happy if not surrounded by luxuries of every sort, lavished with gifts from admirers and especially if there were not a new car sitting in her garage every Christmas morning.

He looked over at Lizzy, his mouth lifting slightly. “Actually, I’ve had one of the best days of my life.”

And then, her mouth was on his.

As a man, Red really enjoyed that she made the first move. Not only because she was comfortable enough to do so, but it solidified that they were a couple.

The man’s large hand slid under the heavy, dark tresses. His fingers carding through the soft strands before settling her small head in his palm. He felt her absently playing with a button on his vest.

Edging closer to him, Liz sighed happily as the hand on her rib cage slid upward, the large palm encompassing her breast.

“Ahem.” a throat cleared behind them, as a flash of light skirted over their bodies. “A little old too be necking in public, aren’t you folks?” a man in a officers uniform was suddenly looming over the pair.

“Why is everyone disparaging about my age.” Red winced when the man’s high beam flashlight waved his way, he was more disconcerted by the fact he had not heard the man’s approach.

“He means...” Liz drawled, “we’re just having a date night, Officer.” she explained, then flushed, “not that we would have... I mean...”

Red folded his arms, settling back on the bench allowing the woman to work her way out of the situation herself.

The officer jerked his head back, enlightenment setting in.

“Ah, getting away from the kids.” that concept he could understand.

Red patted Liz’s arm consolingly, holding his amusement. “Our little Francis just never gives us a minute alone, does he, honey?”

Liz dropped her face into her hands, hiding her embarrassment.

“He tells us continuously that we kiss, every five minutes.” Red stressed the words, accentuating them with an eye roll.

The officer chuckled, “My little boy does the same thing.” he clicked off his flashlight, letting it hang by his side. “Only, I get the gagging face along with it.”

Red chortled, truly amused by the statement. “And of course, they want to know why you kiss mommy so much.”

“If they only knew.” the other man winked playfully. “This section of the park is usually closed this time of night, but...” he checked the surrounding area to see if other offenders were about, “I’ll let you slide, just this once.”

Red tightened his hold on Liz, patting her knee. “Thank you, this is our first date night out in
“Have a good night.” the officer smiled, then walked off, only to hesitate a few steps away. “Just for future reference, there’s a area off down a mile or so,” he pointed in the proper direction, “a thicket that is sort of a designated adult only spot that we meticulously avoid.”

“Oh my God...” Liz whispered into her hands.

“Thank you very much for the information Officer Peters.” Red replied seriously having noted the man’s name plate earlier.

Red watched the man get to the corner of the building, then look back at them, throwing up a quick ‘thumbs up’ to Red before turning the corner, vanishing from sight.

He laughed quietly, then out right chuckled when Lizzy groaned into her hands.

“I haven’t been caught necking since the tenth grade.”

“Well, you know...” Red teased in his own manner, “they say history repeats itself.”

She tsked, swatting him playfully. He arose his humor still high, offering his hand.

They walked the short distance to the car, hands clasped, until they reached the passenger side door.

“So, you want to go neck in the car, baby?” he stared down at her half hoping she would take him up on the ridiculous notion.

“Not that it doesn’t sound like a thrill.” she rolled her eyes as the man opened the door for her.

“Could’n’t we just go home and make love in our own bed?”

“That does sound more enticing than having a gear shift rammed up my ass.” the man conceded.

“Or mine...” she mentioned in passing.

Red hesitated to close the door a moment, visualizing Lizzy riding him in the car, naked. Suddenly wondering if he had grown a touch of auto-erotica.

“Why are we not doing this again?” he questioned.

“Because we have a big comfortable bed awaiting us at home.” she hoped that was the reason.

Red nodded quickly, “Right, yes.”

He closed the door, walking to the driver’s side. After situating himself, he hesitated visibly.

“Don’t tell Silas and the guards about that spot.” it was advised. “I have to wonder how much bail money I would be out if they knew.”

“Damned peeping perverts.” she was in total agreement with his assessment.
When I started Focal Point it was with the hope that someone out there in the Cosmos would take a look and understand the story I was hoping to convey.

Given this is the time of year when we are to look back and reflect... I find myself doing just that.

I wanted to take a moment to thank all the readers who stayed with the story through this past year.

I can’t believe how blessed I am to have met such wonderful and supportive people. Your encouragement has meant the world to me.

I wanted to thank you personally for making an amateur writer’s dream come true...

Most importantly, I need to express my heartfelt gratitude for the donations given to St. Jude’s Children’s Hospital. There can be no better gift or better people who give it, in my humble opinion.

Hope everyone had the best Christmas ever and each of you made some happy memories.

Have a Happy New Year!

Daniel

May 25

After their return home, Red was met by a very determined and very large, black man.

“Why did you allow him to follow Elizabeth?” Dembe had finally voiced the doubt on everyone’s mind.

Red knew instantly that he could not side-step the issue any longer. Dembe had a valid concern, of course.

“Keep your enemies close...” Red reminded. “I know where he is, I know what he’s up to, Dembe.”

“It must go deeper.”

Red turned away, not certain he wanted to get into it. It had been a nice day... so far.

“I know you.” Dembe persisted. “Are you hoping he will try something stupid that one of us, or preferably you, will be justified in putting an end to him?”

Red sipped his scotch slowly, taking his time in cultivating an answer. “Would it be so bad?”

“I do not know.” Dembe conceded. “But neither do you. You have withheld any harm to the man
because of how Elizabeth might react to you.”

Dembe knew how Red thought and the man did not deny the statement for clearly, it had *not* been an accusation.

“So many times, Raymond, in the past,” Dembe continued, “the opportunity presented itself and each time, you hesitate.”

Red knew all this, sitting his drink aside.

“Do not allow your concern for Elizabeth’s reaction, to get you killed, I beg you my friend.”

Red was silent.

“Do you think he will hesitate to do so?”

Red shook his head minutely, “...No.”

“No, he will not because he believes you are Satan when it comes to Elizabeth’s welfare. Never mind he has been hired to do a job.” Dembe dismissed with a curt wave of his hand. “It would do irreparable harm to the woman were she to lose you at this stage. I implore you...”

Red turned his head, seeking the man out for the words had both pleased and shocked him.

“If the choice must be made, allow me to make it,” Dembe requested, his eyes quiet. “I am in a much more unencumbered position to do so... are you in agreement?”

“You believe Elizabeth...” Red didn’t know how to state something so very personal, “...that I am, good for her? In some fashion?”

“In every fashion.” Dembe never minced words. “I had my doubts in the beginning, as you know... but now,” the man shook his head, “those doubts no longer exist.”

Red swallowed a lump in his throat, hastily glancing aside, needing time to master his emotions. He had not realized how much the other man’s approval had meant.

Dembe, unbeknownst to the man, had become, over the years, Red’s conscious.

At times Red wondered if he ever possessed one, on occasion. There were moments, more and more of late, where he was beginning to feel things he had long ago put aside.

Emotions that got in the way of things he must do to survive out in this icy world of reality that had been forced upon him so many decades ago.

“...It means a great deal, Dembe,” Red could admit, if only to this man, “that you think that now.”

Dembe inclined his head, the dark eyes observing Red critically. “You must not allow Tom Keen to come between what you have created for Elizabeth and yourself.”

“I’m trying to walk that tight rope.” Red acknowledged.

“You are too close to the matter, Raymond.” Dembe advised quietly. “Today, you lost perspective, did you not?”

Red was losing patience, not sure he was enjoying this dressing down although usually, he took them in his stride because always.... always, Dembe was the voice of reason.
“All right, fine.” he waved an impatient hand. “Maybe I allowed my anger to sway my judgement a bit.”

“And when Silas would have ended the obstacle once and for all, you deliberately tied his hands.” Dembe wasn’t going to let this go.

“Elizabeth wasn’t ready for Silas’ particular brand of ending an obstacle.” Red felt called upon to defend his decision. “Did you see her face?”

“I did.” Dembe replied eloquently. “Perhaps what you mistook concern for Tom Keen, as something it was not.”

“Like what?” Red practically snapped.

“Like, concern for Silas.”

Red’s face must have said it all.

“We know Silas’ level of competency exceeds the norm.” Dembe pointed out. “Elizabeth, she only knows what she has seen, which is very little in comparison to what we have seen where Silas is concerned, yes?”

Red was given pause for thought.

“All right, granted but she still is not ready for Tom Keen to be ended.”

A polite way of saying something that wasn’t even discussed in polite circles.

*Ended.* What a nice way to put it. Red wondered who had originated the euphemism? Antonio Crocetti, probably. The guy had class, if nothing else.

“Which is what Silas would have done.”

Dembe did not argue the point, “It is very likely for the best. Keen will not try anything here.”

The cup of coffee was lifted to his lips as he sipped the iced brew. “He has her under surveillance, he can afford to relax for the moment.”

“And we have him.” Red felt better knowing where the little fucker was and what he was up to.

“The stalemate will not last.” Dembe reminded. “His Superiors will expect results sooner rather than later.”

Red nodded absently. “When the time comes,” and the man knew it would, “I will take full responsibility. I don’t want any bad feelings between you and Elizabeth.”

Dembe clearly did not approve of the statement.

“Please observe my wishes on this matter, Dembe.” Red asked. “I trust her only to you if something should happen.”

Dembe lifted his head, keeping his thoughts private.

“Listen,” Red wanted to speak of more pleasant things, it had been a relatively good day. Why end it otherwise, “why don’t you take an evening out to enjoy yourself? Make use of the safe house? It will do you some good, my friend.”
Dembe declined the offer politely. “The off-duty guards and I have elected to watch the Super Bowl game we missed while dealing with your insane off-shore prison scheme.”

“Luther Braxton?” Red questioned.

“Was there another off-shore prison scheme you were involved with set during the Super Bowl that I am not privy to?”

“Dembe, I do believe you are garnering a rather dry sense of humor.” Red enjoyed the jibe to his rather dubious plan. “Go, enjoy your evening.”

“And Tom...” Dembe questioned.

“He can’t join you.” Red managed with a perfectly straight face. “And he get’s no more snacks on my dime.”

“Not very generous.” Dembe pointed out. “Say goodnight to Elizabeth for me, please.”

Red watched the large shouldered man walk away. He moved with a grace of a panther. Few knew what truly lurked beneath the seemingly mild-mannered demeanor Dembe portrayed.

But Red knew and the fact somehow made him feel more secure.

After his nightly ablutions, Red climbed into bed, a rather pleasant weariness settling about his frame. He could hear Lizzy rustling about in the master bath.

Why did it take that woman so long to do something so simple. But the end product was well worth the wait, in his opinion.

He stretched luxuriously, reminiscing about the last twenty-four hours. It had been an eventful day.

Whatever had possessed him to suggest such a common place thing as going out for an ice cream? He usually could come up with something totally original, off-the-wall entertainment. He recalled one such outing with a young lady of his acquaintance which ended the evening at a sky-diving establishment.

Needless to say, even though the woman was game right up to that point of actually diving out of the plane... she did not return his calls the next day.

The memory brought a smile.

Red’s thought’s turned to Jack Reddington.

After all this time, given a chance to say a proper farewell had meant a great deal.

His friends, especially Lizzy, had seemed interested and sympathetic to his loss. He had appreciated that fact.

And Lizzy... a shoulder to lean on, a hand to hold... there had been something special about that little hand tucked inside his today that he had truly needed.

To keep the fallen foremost in one’s thoughts, was a difficult task, for life was meant to be lived.
But what did it say about someone who could blithely sail through that life with no serious contemplation or thought to those who had sacrificed their life, their good times, their together forever moments with family, friends... so that another person could go on in his or her stead.

It boggled Red’s mind that such people existed. So wrapped up in their own little sphere, they truly could not grasp such a moving, eloquent gift.

Red always thought his father one of those individuals.

*His father.* Richard Reddington.

Great military mind, strict disciplinarian, soulless, empty vessel of a man...

*Bastard.*

A part of Red loved his father, they say every child needs that.

The antagonist, cold, aloof, unapproachable fucker had, over the years, turned that emotion into pure hatred, trumping any affection Red might have given.

It had been him and his mother, a team, united against the world.

They had developed a system, a rapport. A mutual respect.

Then his father came home, throwing everything into chaos and disorder.

For a military family, the break in scheduling was unsettling. What had run like a well oiled machine was quickly thrown into a lurch because Richard Reddington had a better way of running things.

At least, to his way of thinking.

Until of course Jack had let him know in his own special way, what he thought of Richard’s way of doing things.

An argument had ensued, a mother of one. Red had secretly enjoyed the way Jack handled the situation. Taking Red’s mother’s side, telling Richard how wrong the man was to try forcing his methods and beliefs on someone else. Without even having put in the time or effort to learn, if the system already in place, worked.

The bathroom door opened, bathing the room in light, breaking Red from his thoughts.

Red’s eyes followed Lizzy as she shut the light off with her elbow while smoothing lotion over her hands and arms as she walked to the bed.

He rolled to his side, grasping the blankets, pulling them back for her. He smiled softly and the woman smiled right back.

She absently situated herself in bed, rubbing the last of the lotion into her knees and those long shapely legs.

“I’m really glad you came home today.” she said, sliding between the blankets Red was pulling up over her.

“As am I.” he felt a surge of contentment as her naked form slid along his own warm, solid one. “I missed you very much.”
“I missed you too.” she rolled over, slinging her leg over his thigh, getting comfortable.

Red smiled down at the little head laying on his chest, then drifted in the silence, absently stroking her back.

“You’re thinking again.” she stated quietly. She was beginning to know his ‘moods’.

Red had tried without success to think of other subjects, but one kept looming overhead. “I was thinking about my father.”

The way he said the word, father, was anything but warm.

“Why did you say it like that?” she lifted her head to seek out his gaze. “Was your dad–”

“An asshole? Yes, he was.”

“I didn’t mean to pry.” she wondered if that were a true statement.


“Too strict?” she questioned sympathetically, laying back into her comfortable spot, snuggling into his shoulder.

“No, that I didn’t mind.” he could appreciate discipline. “Kids appreciate structure whether they know it or not.” he sighed lightly, pausing for a long beat. “No, he was just a cold bastard. I never understood what my mother saw in him.” it had always puzzled Red. “She was so warm, loving and kind. And he was the complete opposite.”

“Was he mean to her?” Liz asked, stroking her fingers over the soft hair on Red’s stomach.

“If you’re asking if he ever hit her.” Red voiced the question. “No, he didn’t. He was good to her, in the traditional sense.” he admitted. “He gave her a nice home, full bank account and free reign over the house.” he remembered the house being warm and inviting... when his dad was out of it.

“He even treated her to dinner and the like, but I wonder if he was ever actually affectionate with her?” Red purposely thread his fingers affectionately through Lizzy’s hair. “Because, you know, I don’t ever recall seeing them hug or kiss.”

It had bothered Red as a young man, watching his mother go through the motions, pretending a perfect marriage when the opposite was the truth.

“Maybe she was happy with her comfortable life.” Liz shrugged minutely. “It was a different time, another era.” it was reminded. “Secure marriage and that she produced a child, and a son, no less.”

“I suppose,” the man mused, “I don’t think he really loved her.”

“You loved her.”

“There’s a difference between love from a child and from your spouse.”

“Well, not to gross you out or anything, but they did have to have occasional sex... they did produce you.”

“Doesn’t mean it was affectionate or even good.” Red muttered, frowning his empathy.

Liz sensed the depth of Red’s concern.
“Hey, if she was anything like you, and I think that’s exactly where you inherited your kindness and warmth,” Liz snuggled into the man’s warm body, planting an affectionate kiss on his chest, “your dad couldn’t help but love her. Such a thing rubs off on a person.”

Red picked up on the subconscious slip. *Could’t help but love her...*

Did Lizzy feel those deeper emotions for him? Or was it just a mental slip? Was she speaking merely on generic terms?

The woman’s gasp and frantic movement startled Red from his thoughts.

“No!” she whispered tragically, instantly up and frantically searching about, her hands running over the pillows, under the covers. Nudging him to vacate his spot.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Red moved aside, reaching for the light. Her stricken features alerted him to a problem. “What are you looking for?”

The large eyes lifted, tears threatening. “My necklace.” her hand instantly went to her unadorned throat.

“I can’t find my necklace!” she began to search in earnest, mindless of her state of undress.

Pushing out of the bed, he secured his robe following after her as she rushed off to the bathroom and closet, upending the hamper, flinging open drawers...

“Calm down.” he was determined to soothe tattered nerves. “Which piece was it?”

“My...my Journey necklace.” her eyes were glittered with unshed tears, her voice trembling noticeably. “My Journey necklace!” an involuntary sob escaped her throat.

“I’ll take the sitting room.” he motioned for the woman to continue her own search. “We will find it, Lizzy. It’s all right.”

“It is not all right.” she returned to her meandering, a hopeless expression on her pretty features.

Slipping some lounge clothes over his nude frame, Red made his way to the sitting room. Looking over the couch, he haphazardly tossed pillows aside.

“What are you doing?” Francis passed in the outer corridor, having retraced his steps.

“Lizzy can’t find her necklace.” Red stuck his hands between the cool leather cushions of the couch, looking in the cracks.

Francis put his plate of goodies aside, quickly joining in the search. “Her ruby one?”

Red retraced their earlier steps, “It has to be here.”

The effort came up empty, however.

Francis enlisted the help of Dembe and the guards who put their ‘Super Bowl’ on pause to pitch in. One even taking a turn in the swimming pool.

Red returned to the bedroom, his expression alerting the nervously waiting woman.

Liz burst into tears, her mouth trembling visibly.
Red’s heart melted. He crossed, taking her in his arms. “We will find it.” he whispered, wiping her face with gentle thumbs. “And if not, I’ll buy you a new one.”

“But y-you gave that to me for my b-birthday.” He must understand the sentimental value alone far outweighed the monetary. The blue eyes beseeched him.

Francis discreetly tapped on the door facing. “I’m assuming we’ll need the car?”

“And flashlights.” Red smiled tenderly down at the dark expression and wet spiked lashes. “What do you mean, we?”

Red spared the young man a glance. “I’ll go, Francis. You don’t have to–”

“Hey, a near replica of that thing got me laid once.” Francis balked. “It means as much to me as it does to her.”

Liz managed a weak smile and Red was once more indebted to Francis’ incredible instinct at reading the woman’s moods.

Red listened as the kid’s footfalls echoed down the hardwood corridor. “I’ll get dressed, we will retrace our steps...” he broke down the game plan, “we will find it, Lizzy.”

She absently followed him to the closet. “I’ll never forgive myself if–” she gasped yet again, quickly grasping for her matching bracelet to ensure it was still in place. “Oh, thank God!” she breathed a sigh of relief.

Slipping into his clothes, Red could feel the tension clear across the room. He grabbed his wallet. “You keep looking here. You didn’t check downstairs yet.”

She seemed grateful for something with which she could occupy herself. “I can go, Red.” she brightened.

“You stay.” he vetoed the notion. “Tom is still lurking about... I have my phone,” he held it aloft as proof before depositing it in his inside pocket, “if you need me. And Dembe is here...”

His eyes softened on the fretting woman. “Don’t sit here worrying yourself sick. Go watch the game with the guys.”

“I know who won.” she pouted. “I’ll be fine, thank you for this, I owe you...” she added sincerely.

His eyes twinkled, laying a kiss on her pouting lips. “Big time.”

Francis was waiting by the car, “Nothing turned up in there.” he crooked his thumb to the vehicle. “I thought Dembe was going to dislodge the back seat, that man doesn’t know his own strength.”

Red nodded his gratitude, lowering himself into the driver’s seat.

As they passed a wary Tom Keen, who watched their every move, Francis took the opportunity presented to flip Tom off, after a cheerful wave of his hand.

They drove in silence for a goodly beat.

“Is this where we discreetly but efficiently, break into the jewelry store and get a replacement?”

Red glanced, seeing the earnest expression on Francis’ face. “Or... I could simply purchase one tomorrow.”
Francis seemed deflated.

“But no,” the older man continued. “Lizzy knows that necklace like the back of her hand.”

“Are you kidding me?” Francis scoffed openly. “She’s always finding new ‘age spots’, the back of her hand is continually changing or ‘morphing’, as she puts it.” the young man shook his head.

“It was a Journey necklace that Giovanni made especially for her.” Red stated. “She will know, trust me. And I wouldn’t do that anyway... it’s dishonest, you twit.”

Francis sat back, resigned, “Lead on, Bwana.”

“Bwana?” Red questioned the form of address.

“That’s what Dembe called you...” Francis remarked off-handedly then sat up straighter in the seat. “Oh wait... I don’t think I was supposed to tell you that.”

Red sighed mentally, turning his attention back to the matter at hand.

Red’s first stop was the ice cream parlor. He ‘tipped’ the staff handsomely to ensure their full cooperation.

_Extortion_, was the phrasing Francis used but Red preferred to trust in human nature and greed.

He offered a couple grand which he waved around like confetti that ‘human nature’ might rise above the usual level of depravity to which he and Francis were accustomed.

But alas, found nothing. Though, he did tip the workers handsomely for trying.

Next, they swept the grounds and pier area meticulously, the search proving uneventful.

“Oh, you’re back.”

Red hastily prevented Francis from pulling his weapon, planting a welcoming smile on his face.

“Officer Peters, you’re still on duty?” Red absently consulted his watch. The officer smiled amiably, a question in his eyes.

“My wife lost her ruby and diamond necklace.” Red managed a worried expression, “A family heirloom.”

“If it helps, she didn’t have it when you were sitting here.” the officer pointed to the bench behind them. “I noted the bracelet though.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m positive.” Officer Peter’s replied. “Paid to observe and all...” the man chuckled quietly, even as he was _observing_ Francis Holbrook, Red noted.

“My sister is such a pain.” the boy stepped up. “Isn’t there some law that says _she_ has to be the one to come search out something she lost?” he managed a more than convincing lack of desire to be out here at night. “I’m sure that has to be on the books somewhere.”

Officer Peter’s smiled. “Sisters are like that.” he sympathized. “Can’t shoot ‘em, can’t bury them in the back yard with the cats.”
Francis’ face fell, “When the hell did they start that ridiculous law!”

Red relaxed because Officer Peter’s was now relaxed.

“See and you thought Congress just sat on its ass all session.” the cop quipped.

“Well, we won’t take up anymore of your valuable time, Officer.” Red made a leisurely trek past the guy.

“You might try looking in little Francis’ Lego box,” Officer Peter’s suggested brightly, “my wife lost her wedding ring and that’s where it turned up.”

“How did he know I had Lego—”

Red ushered the boy quickly to the waiting vehicle with a sincere, “Good evening Officer, thank you for the suggestion. We will try that.”

Once in the car, Francis felt obliged to explain his earlier reaction. “Sorry, Red. I thought it was that jerk off, Tom, fuck face stalker boy.”

Red sent him a warning shift of his eyes, “Be more circumvent in future encounters.”

Francis nodded his understanding, falling quiet for a beat. “If it’s anywhere, maybe the spot where that bastard belted Lizzy.” he took hope.

Red steered the car, heading in the needed direction.

“Dammit!” Red vented his frustration after yet another fruitless search.

He glanced over, finding the younger man standing perfectly still, his own flashlight hanging motionless by his side.

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Silas says we should all be more ‘Zen’.” Francis explained his behavior. “And apparently he’s right,” the man’s eyes opened, intent on Red. “She had it when we went to the Wall.”

Red was clearly skeptical.

“I remember because I could see it reflecting back when she did the tracing of Jack’s name.”

Red looked at Francis in a new light.

The walk to the Wall seemed to take forever. Once there, the obstacle appeared daunting.

Mementos were strewn the entire length of the Wall. Flowers, rings, bracelets, watches, dog tags and other countless tokens of remembrance.

Red took one end of the black gabbro monument, Francis the other.

When they met in the middle, or more appropriately, under Jackson Reddington’s name panel, the result was the same.

Not one damn necklace.

“We have to be logical here.” Francis warned.
“That’ll be a first...” Red muttered.

“It was an expensive piece, Red. If someone found it...” he let it hang in the air.

Red’s frustration was rising. He too, was a realist but something urged him onward. “You can bail, Francis. Really...”

“Not gonna happen.” the man shook his head vigorously. “Arlington.” Francis shrugged. “It’s gotta be there, unless it fell off during the ride.” the man grimaced.

“God, don’t even say that.” Red replied, then turned mischievous eyes the young man’s way. “If push comes to shove, I’m strapping you to the hood of the car to scour the path we drove.”

“I can dig it.” the man shrugged carelessly. “What? You think this would be the first time I played hood ornament?”

Red was glad for the man’s company, truth told. “Let’s not draw undue attention to ourselves just yet,” he smiled, shoving Francis towards the car, “I’ll have Dembe Google any new laws that may pertain to such actions.”

Arlington was still closed.

Red hung his head dejectedly having been informed of the fact by the stoically, somber guards when he had approached.

He had held up a pacifying hand, explaining their mission.

“The best I can do...” the older guard of the two, shook a sorrowful head, “is thirty minutes before the official opening. We sometimes make exceptions.”

“I got five grand here that begs to ask the question,” Francis begged, “you have one guy here, could you go look?”

The Soldier’s demeanor changed, “I can’t leave my...”

“His post.” Red finished, his tone placating. “Yes, I know, Soldier and I apologize for my friend’s crass remark. Say you’re sorry, Francis.”

“I’m sorry.” Francis obediently responded, putting his wallet away.

“Can I wait over there?” Red motioned to a spot further down the parking area. He didn’t want these people getting antsy. The guard was still eyeing Francis belligerently.

“Hey, I’m really sorry, man. Really.” Francis was sincere.

“It’s five hours before we open, Sir.”

Red nodded, “Is it okay?”

The Soldier shrugged.

Francis got in the car which Red pulled down the empty spaces.

“Don’t even think of sending me back home empty handed.” Francis read the other man’s mind. “I’m not going to be the bearer of bad news. They shoot people for that. Don’t think I don’t know.”
“Just because you do it,” Red said, “doesn’t mean everyone follows suit. Go home, Francis, it’s late.”

“I don’t think so!” Francis barked, crossing his arms over his chest, staring straight out into the night. Red parked, the silence falling.

“I’ll take the front.” Francis ended the stalemate. “I’m used to sticking things up my ass.” he stared morosely at the gear shift.

“I’m sure you are...” Red sighed heavily, jerking the car door open, exiting grumpily.

Francis chuckled his amusement, stretching his frame out comfortably. He rolled down the windows, pleased a pleasant breeze was coming down the open fields.

“It won’t be so bad.” he listened to Red attempt to find a comfortable spot. “Remember Bangladesh? That time we—”

“I believe,” Red’s disjointed voice came from the darkened interior, “we agreed to never discuss that incident again.”

Francis shrugged stocky shoulders. “Just saying, it could be worse,” a sly grin gracing his features, “...could be raining.”

Both men turned their head as the distant rumble of thunder echoed over the solemn area. Red looked at the young man, throwing a dagger or two the man’s way.

“Oh... the irony.” Francis muttered.

“Shut the fuck up, Francis.”

What seemed a very short time later, Red jerked awake, groaning at the crick in his neck but his reflexes were in perfect working order as another car pulled in alongside them.

Red shared a look of communication with a suddenly wide awake Francis Holbrook.

“Oh...” the other man had a better view. Francis re-holstered his weapon. “It’s just the old ball and chain.”

Lizzy’s pretty face came into view, her fingers tapping the top of the opened window.

“The windows are open?” she was ever more distraught. “Are you guys crazy? There are thieves, killers...”

“I have an alibi, I was sleeping...” Francis grumbled, drawing Liz up short.

“Francis, you’re talking gibberish... more than usual.” Red quipped, efficiently distracting Lizzy. “What are you doing here, sweetheart?” he forced the door open, causing Francis to hastily catch himself from tumbling from the vehicle.

“I refuse to sleep in a comfortable bed knowing, all the while,” she gestured to their sleeping arrangements, “you guys are miserable in this sardine can.”

“This sardine can costs eighty thousand big ones, girlie.” Francis took umbrage.

“And how did it sleep?” Liz demanded.
“Well, it was better than Bangladesh—”

“Francis!” Red snapped, silencing the boy.

“What?” Liz’s brows furrowed.

Francis’ mouth clamped closed, sharing a soft titter of laughter with Dembe. Both men’s large frames shaking with the effort to keep it contained.

“Never mind...” Red chuckled.

Narrowing her eyes at the three amused men, Liz sighed heavily, returning to the reason for her arrival.

“Red, the necklace means the world to me but I never, in a million years expected you to go to such lengths.” Liz implored. “It’s gone. Someone found it. Please come home now.”

“Dembe,” Red took her arm, gently guiding her back to the other car, “take her home.”

“No!” Liz balked. “I won’t go.”

“See? She knows what they do to the bearer of bad news too.”

“Shut up, Francis.” Liz grumbled, drawing a smile from Red.

“Lizzy, I need you to go home.” Red pleaded, “I’m fine here.”

“I’m not leaving unless you do.”

She looked beseechingly at Dembe and Francis for some sort of assistance. “Make him go!”

“Should I shoot him in the foot?” Francis piped up. “It will only be a flesh wound, but everyone seems to think they are just fine and dandy.”

Liz’s hopes fell.

“You knew he wouldn’t leave,” she focused on Dembe, “didn’t you.”

“Raymond can be very determined when he wants something.” Dembe opened the SUV’s hatch, motioning for Francis’ assistance to lay down the seats.

“He doesn’t pay you nearly enough,” the man stared at the equipment Dembe believed a necessity for their late night meanderings.

“No, I do not.” Red agreed readily, “and I dearly love you, Dembe.” he too had come alongside the SUV.

“I am spoken for.” Dembe stated in that stoic manner, pulling the air mattress free of it’s carry case.

Liz had come around, her eyes large and wide as she took in all the paraphernalia. “He really doesn’t pay you enough.” she was flabbergasted.

She hit Red in the shoulder, “Give him a raise.”

“A large one.” Dembe grinned, handing Red a cold compress.

“For Elizabeth’s cheek.” Red was amazed. Dembe had indeed thought of everything.
“No, for your neck.” Dembe shut the cooler’s lid. “This one, is for her injury.”

“You make out the amount from now on.” Red placed the coolness on his neckline, experiencing instant relief. “I’ll just sign the damned check.”

Francis gasped, “Cold beer!” he dove into the cooler with relish.

“The little things in life.” Red philosophized. “Take Lego boy home, Dembe. We’ll try to muddle by on what you’ve brought.”

“It’s three o’clock in the morning.” Liz reminded Francis who was guzzling the ice cold beverage with gusto.

“Oh, sorry.” Francis had forgotten his manners. “Want one?”

Liz sighed heavily, turning aside. She glanced over their impromptu camping gear absently. She knelt, sorting through some pillows and blankets, marveling at Dembe’s efficiency.

“I will stay.” Dembe offered.

“Me too.” Francis popped another top, his mood certainly improved.

“Don’t you trust my abilities?” Red purposely put it on those terms. He waited patiently for the reply.

“We lost the parasite.” Dembe made reference to Tom Keen.

“As I knew you would.” Red was proud.

“We will see you in the morning.” Dembe held the keys to the SUV aloft. Red exchanged items, having his answer.

The fast, speedy car was fired to life, taking off moments later leaving the quiet of the night.

Red waved a nonchalant hand to the guards who had diligently watched the proceedings with a cautious eye.

Lizzy climbed into the back, bouncing her butt on the mattress. “This is remarkable.” she spread her hands out. “What will they think of next? And Dembe didn’t even have like a bike pump or anything!”

“Why don’t you take off your clothes.” Red had other inventions on his mind, one’s God himself had fashioned. “Get comfortable.”

“If I wanted to put on a show,” she arched a brow to the guards who, admittedly could not see through the darkened windows, “I would charge admission.”

“But baby,” Red innocently reminded, “you know how you hate to get all wrinkled.” he said, removing his own vest and shoes, sitting them aside.

“That’s you.” Liz was enjoying the moment more than she wanted to admit. “But I admire you for trying.”

Red’s eyes danced with contained delight.

“Besides, you know how I hate to get arrested.”
“You used to be more fun.” the man chided.

The woman laid back into the bed, unbuttoning her pants and pushing at them until her panties came into view.

“May I assist you?” Red asked, his large fingers already curling into the waist of the tight clothing, assisting the woman tugging them free of her legs.

Liz eyed him, waiting. Red grinned, popping the catch on his own slacks before swiftly removing them.

“Much better.” the man sighed his relief.

“Does that sound like thunder to you?”

Red sighed mentally, stretching out on the makeshift bed. “Blame Francis, he conjured it.”

Elizabeth was lost.

“It’s a line from a movie he likes.”

“Oh!” realization dawned. “Young Frankenstein, it could be worse, could be raining.”

“It’s like speaking in code sometimes,” Red moved the pillow about, “having discussions with that boy.”

“But you understood it.” Liz chuckled, taking her spot in the man’s arms, content now.

“I’ve learned a few important cipher keys over the years.”

“Or... you’ve seen the movie.” she corrected.

Red let it go, content to have her close, the night sounds settling about them.

“I couldn’t sleep.” Liz’s thoughts had wandered. “You weren’t there.”

Red turned his head to seek out the woman. He traced the pert nose with an artist’s appreciation.

“I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.” he marveled.

She smiled but the good feeling was soon replaced by a sad one. “Someone else has my necklace, don’t they.”

“You don’t know that.” he soothed, handing over a cool compress. “Here, baby.”

She placed the refreshing package against her cheek, settling more comfortably against the man.

This isn’t so bad, he mused silently. Francis had been right.

The night was dark and quiet, a cool breeze filtered through the nearby trees.

In Bangladesh, they had the cold, hard ground to sleep on.

And he certainly didn’t have this soft, warm body beside him.

“It meant so much to me, that’s all.”
The desolation could be heard in her tone.

“How could I have been so—”

“Never give up hope, Lizzy.” Red advised quietly. “Trust in the goodness of people. There is still some out there in the world.”

Liz didn’t know if she believed that or not. She clung tightly to ‘one’ good person however, because he always made her feel better somehow.

“I’ll try.” she promised. “I really will try.”

“Good girl.” Red brushed his lips on the softness of the silky waves, “I think it was Mark Twain who said, I’ve had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened.”

Liz nodded, trying to assimilate the mind-set, “I’ll keep a good thought then.”

Red tried to do the same, for he had envisioned the night ending in an entirely different manner. But found, he didn’t mind because they were together.

Being home again felt good, it felt right. The quiet ice-cream run, the later conversation in the park, even the untimely arrival of the cop.

It had all accumulated into this moment.

The little things in life meant a lot.

Lizzy was a constant reminder of the fact.

Reading the paper on a Sunday morning, cuddled in bed. An uneventful dinner at home. Watching old classics on TV... sleeping in a parking lot in a SUV...

All were just as important, maybe moreso, than the material or even the physical side of a relationship.

Did the sentimental aspect of losing the necklace truly override the monetary value for this woman.

He believed it did. He truly believed it.

He had planned on an elaborate, romantic culmination to the day, for he had missed Elizabeth greatly and needed to make the extra effort to please her... and himself.

But suddenly, Red realized... being here, in this deserted parking lot, surrounded by the essence of the woman, feeling her warmth close to him... it meant more than anything he would ever own.

Time with her was... priceless.

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May 26

Red awoke with the first hint of day break where the sky took on a hazy hue of twilight. As though the sky fought against the approaching dawn, the dark blanket struggling to maintain the quiet solitude.

Tightening his arm around the woman spooned to him, he nuzzled his nose into her soft hair.
“Lizzy...” she stirred slightly, waking as slowly as the day, “don’t you want to look for your necklace?”

Her eyes slid open, her hands blindly throwing aside the blankets. “I’m awake.”

“I thought that might do it.” he smiled softly, arising in his own time.

After they were presentable, Red pulled the SUV into a nearby parking space. The guards appeared a little more sedate but otherwise, ushered them inside the gates graciously.

They headed off, until they rounded back to the area of Jack’s grave. Searching each grave they passed, looking for even the smallest glint, and yet, nothing.

Red could sense Lizzy’s frustration, but the woman was putting up a brave front.

As they came around the large tree a short distance from Jack’s grave, Red pulled up short, reaching out to snag Liz’s arm, when she would have continued on.

“What?” she looked up expectantly.

“I’ll be damned.” he muttered, motioning with his head.

Liz turned her head as indicated. An attractive older woman was standing at Jack’s grave, head bowed.

“Is that a member of your family?” she whispered.

“No,” he quickly patted his pants and jacket pockets making certain it was still there, but then, when had it not been, “but damn near close.”

He held his hand out, the woman’s small fingers instantly gripping his. Walking quietly towards Jack’s grave, Red pulled up short a few feet away, his gaze gentle on the woman who stood so solemnly quiet. He too, glanced down at the headstone which held her attention so profoundly.

“Rachel?” he ventured softly so as to not disturb the scene unduly.

The woman turned slowly as if returning from a far distance, “Ye–” she hesitated, then halted mid-word, recognition immediate, “Raymond?”

Red’s eyes softened on the woman and he forced a smile, “It’s been a long time.” an understatement in itself.

“And you’ve been a very bad boy.” the woman scolded lightly, old times coming to mind.

How many times had his mother said those very words and this woman had been present on a few of those auspicious occasions.

Red’s face brightened like Liz had never seen before.

“Some things never change, do they.” he held out his hand, clasping the woman’s cool palm to his warmer one. To his great surprise, he was instantly wrapped in a tight hug. He returned the gesture, just as warmly.

“You sound just like him, you know.” the woman muttered into his shoulder, tears escaping the still lovely eyes.
“Do I?” he questioned, rubbing her back soothingly, his voice and manner the same.

Lizzy stood quietly aside, unwilling to intrude.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Red remembered his manners, properly contrite. “Rachel, this is my fiancée, Elizabeth.”

The brunette broke the embrace, pulling back to take in the lithe woman. Liz was looked over, the lovely woman’s brows arching slightly.

“Fiancée?” she grinned infectiously.

“Whatever you have to say...” Red drawled, “I’m sure I’ve heard it before.”

“She’s just beautiful.” warm eyes laced Elizabeth’s face.

“That she is.” the man agreed wholeheartedly.

“And most likely too good for you, you rascal.” It was soundly scolded. A hand was held out, gently covering Liz’s. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

Liz muttered the expected inanities, her curiosity more than piqued by this suddenly ‘mysterious stranger’.

“Your every move is usually posted all across the Internet,” the stranger was saying to Red, “I haven’t heard anything about this lovely young thing.”

“The Internet, hum.” Red was amused. “We come from a different era.”

“We all have to adapt to changing times, Raymond.” slender shoulders were shrugged. “Don’t tell me you don’t make use of technology. Now, tell me all about this pretty lady here. How did you two meet?”

Pleasantries were exchanged, basic information forth coming on both parts.

“And now you’re here.” a smiled was beamed. “It’s like Fate brought us to this moment, isn’t it.”

“Rachel is a beautiful name.” Liz had finally found out the identity of the woman.

“A biblical name.” Red recalled how Jack had said it, how the man’s entire being had softened when he did.

“Oh, that’s enough of that.” Rachel chided, “They were always teasing me. Jack used to say, wasn’t anything remotely ‘Biblical’ about the likes of me.” she laughed gently, her hand tracing lovingly across the top of the gravestone, her eyes filling with a mist which she quickly blinked away, forcing a brightness. “Are you here to visit him too?

“We came yesterday.” Red stated. “Spent some time.”

“I don’t like the crowds.” Rachel’s face skewed for a beat. “It’s better when everything is quiet.”

Red nodded, “Yes.”

“I lost my necklace.” Liz blurted.

Rachel blinked, “Necklace?”
“That’s why we came back.” Liz couldn’t shut up, but the other woman’s pain was apparent. Rachel wore it like a shawl. “Not that it’s the only reason, of course. I mean, of course that wasn’t the...” she looked at Red with desperate eyes.

Red smiled gently, understanding and appreciating Lizzy’s rambling’s for what they were.

He tilted his head, looking at the headstone wishing he could make her feel better... make them all feel better.

He took the flowers from Rachel’s unresisting hands. He knelt, arranging them into a decorative display, interweaving them with the bouquet Lizzy had placed the day before.

“I had never got the chance to say a proper farewell to Jack, Rachel.” he began, squinting up, blocking his eyes from the early morning sun. The man absently switched the fragrant scents about, his interest elsewhere, “I had always meant to...”

A solid clink against the headstone caught Red’s attention. He jerked his head to the sound, amazed to see a bright, shiny glint reflecting from the soft rays.

Elizabeth gasped, her hands lifting to her mouth, her eyes large with wonder.

Red tugged the end of the chain carefully for it was intertwined with the stems of the flowers. At length, he produced the glittering strand of rubies and diamonds, holding it aloft.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” the man shook his head with amazement.

Elizabeth quietly squealed her delight, rushing forward. Red had arisen, examining the piece. She slammed into his chest, her arms going about his neckline.

“That’s lovely!” Rachel commented. “How did it ever get there?”

Red held Elizabeth tightly. “Guess Jack was watching over it for us.”

Elizabeth’s eyes shined with happiness. She turned about, lifting her hair.

Red placed the necklace about the woman’s neck, clasping it securely.

Liz touched the heavy pendant reverently before lifting her arms yet again. “Thank you!” she whispered her joy. “Thank you for giving it back to me.”

“I didn’t.” Red looked down, the name on the headstone emblazoned boldly in the morning light.

Liz laid her head on the man’s shoulder, her arms clasped about his waist, under his jacket.

Rachel watched the pair, her eyes holding a deep, profound sadness.

“Don’t wait.”

Red shifted his gaze, having heard the whispered statement. Elizabeth sought Rachel out as well.

“Don’t let anyone dictate what you should or shouldn’t do.” the woman inhaled shakily, her frail fingers grasping the headstone. “Do what feels right for you both. Don’t give a damn what they say.”

Red liked the spunk displayed but the woman’s eyes told another story.
“Tell them to mind their own damn business.” Rachel’s voice wavered with the need to weep.

“Are you all right?” Red stepped, his fingers gently tracing the side of her face. She grasped his hand tight, her pained eyes connecting with his.

“We waited,” her head lowered, as if consulting Jack Reddington. Then she continued, her tone weary, “to get married because Jack didn’t want to stir rumors.”

She smiled wistfully. “When Jack asked, I was on cloud nine. I would have gone to the Registers office that very minute and he knew it but...” she sucked in a ragged breath, “our families said people would talk, say Jack had... you know.” she motioned absently. “My family wanted the big wedding with all the fixings. A proper joining, they said.”

Her fist clenched. “Jack waited... he did it for me because they said we should.”

Liz clamped her lips together, feeling the woman’s anguish so acutely, it hurt her heart.

“We could have had so many months... together.” Rachel’s words caught in her throat. “I should have told them all to go straight to hell!” she hissed her fury.

Red stepped forward, tugging Rachel into his embrace, holding her tightly, allowing her to cry out her heartache.

Liz crept into the small compact unit, embracing both participants. Red had lifted his arm to allow the move, not surprised in the least when Lizzy’s sobs blended with Rachel’s.

“P-Promise me, you won’t w-wait.” Rachel’s fingers gripped Red’s jacket front, her eyes beseeching them both. “That you will listen to your hearts and nothing else.”

“You don’t know him,” Liz swiped at her cheeks, “or you’d know not to ask that,” she forced a weak laugh, “that man is a force unto himself.”

Red’s features softened. He leaned to kiss Rachel’s cheek. “Jack wouldn’t want you in such a state.” he was concerned. “If me being here has caused–”

“Oh, stop.” Rachel shook her mood. “Seeing you has been the best tonic I could have hoped for. I’m fine.” she breathed in deeply. “It’s just... so good to see you again after so long.”

Liz motioned shortly. A new arrival had come on scene. A tall man was approaching, a dark scowl on his handsome features.

Liz had seen those features before....

Rachel beckoned to the uniformed Marine. She heard Red’s sharp intake of breath as the man came closer.

She cast narrowed eyes at him, “I’m assuming, from your reaction... they neglected to tell you.”

“...Yes.” Red’s jaw pulsed.

Liz’s mouth gaped.

The man was around Red’s age... and the spitting image of Jackson Reddington.

“Mom? You okay?”
“I’m fine, son.” Rachel hugged the man affectionately. “Jackson... meet your cousin, Ray.”

“I know who he is mom.” the Marine stated sheepishly but he offered his hand to Red. “I’ve heard a lot about you...” he mentioned, “not all of it good.”

Red took the news well.

“I prefer to believe what mom says though,” he looked down at the smaller woman. “She’s never steered me wrong yet... on any subject.”

“There’s a little truth in any story, I suppose.” Red knew the media loved to sensationalize.

“Where are you stationed, Marine?” Liz sensed Red needed more time... more privacy with Jackson’s mother.

Jackson was all too pleased to turn his attention to a pretty girl... a fact Red did not miss.

Liz continued to hold the Marine’s attention.

“Three months into Jack’s tour,” Rachel kept her voice low, confidential, she watched Jackson be charmed by the other woman, her smile a gentle one, “he took a seven day R&R in Hawaii. I met him and we got married as soon as his plane landed.” she explained.

“Did Jack know.” Red looked at the dashing Marine standing beside Lizzy.

“Yes.” she nodded. “He got another break before...” she swallowed, “I flew out to see him against doctors advice.” she flushed a little. “Women were coddled back then... ahh, for the good old days.” she chuckled quietly.

“Oh, he knew.” she smiled over at her son. “Jack was very excited. We were both looking forward to...” she trailed off.

She sighed at the lovely memory. “He quite swept me off my feet. It was a precious time, Raymond.” she met his gaze squarely. “I’ve never regretted one second I had with that man and I never will. It’s all I have of him.”

“Not all.” Red made mention.

“Are you jealous?” Rachel teased.

“Of a wet behind-the-ears pup?” Red closed the gap between he and Lizzy. “You done monopolizing my fiancée’s time, Marine?”

The man reddened, and he hastily put a good deal of distance between himself and Liz who grinned infectiously, “Oh, I didn’t mean anything, Sir. We were just–”

Red grinned, “I know, Jackson.” he patted the well-formed shoulder comfortingly. “I just know us Reddington men and their penchant for brunettes.”

“He has trouble of his own.” Rachel lifted a hand to indicate a wad of people coming over the rise. “Well, there goes our private time with your father.” she seemed resigned. “Jackson’s wife and kids.”

Red counted two little toddlers trying desperately to mount the small rise.

“I hate to cut this short...” the man apologized, “it was really nice to meet you.” he stated.
“I can honestly say, it was great pleasure to meet you... Jackson.” Red swallowed harshly before the man stepped back.

Jackson took off to offer assistance to his very pregnant wife.

Rachel turned, a serene smile gracing her face. “I wouldn’t wish that tribe on my worst enemy and Jackson’s wife...” she made a face, “she’s a Yankee, just like you.” she teased Red. “But more importantly, she prides herself on being up on the very latest ‘trending’ topics.”

“She will know you on sight.” Liz warned.

“Well, I do take a good picture if I do say so myself.” Red was accustomed to being recognized and had long since found ways and methods to ‘cope’ with any given situation but he didn’t want to cause any unnecessary scene with Rachel involved.

“If that’s not Jackson Reddington bragging, I don’t know what is.” Rachel scowled slightly. “You have grown up just like him.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Red smiled watching Jackson Jr. chase his little two year old son about the grass. The Marine ‘tackled’ the tot, lifting him high in the air. The baby squealed his delight.

Jackson’s wife was digging in her diaper bag, searching out sippy cups full of refreshing juices.

“He senses I need a moment.” Rachel knew her son well. “He’ll keep them at bay a few seconds more but that Angela is a nosy little so and so,” she chuckled. “You need to ask me something?” she was an intuitive woman.

“Give you something.” Red corrected, fishing in his wallet, recalling the hectic search of earlier. He extracted a neatly folded envelope. Although it had seen better days.

“This thing is brought out every year at this time...” Red apologized for the condition, handing it over to its rightful owner. “It’s been all over the world, probably more places than Jack himself.”

Rachel opened the contents carefully.

“Read it now or later.” Red indicated the worn, faded print on the letter. “He wrote it before...” he trailed off, “it was in his things they sent.’

Rachel stared at the letter for a very long time. Her voice broke when she could finally speak.

“You don’t know what this means to me.”

“There is something else in the envelope.” Red motioned.

The woman’s eyes blinked as she automatically looked inside. A gleaming diamond band slid free of it’s former resting place.

Rachel gasped breathlessly, lifting luminous eyes.

“Oh, Raymond...” she stared transfixed at the beautiful symbol, visions flashing in her mind’s eye of a day long ago.

“Jack wanted you to have that.” Red knew he would. “He wanted a life with you more than anything in this world.”
It was eerie that he understood his Uncle so well... that there was a common ground between them.

Jack had needed Rachel.

And he needed Elizabeth.

Rachel continued to stare at the band her thoughts private, very much so.

“You gave it back... to the family.” Red watched the woman’s face carefully. “I thought, at first, it was because you could not forgive Jack for going back, for not coming home.”

Rachel lifted startled eyes, “No!” she breathed out, dismayed. “No, never. A man has to do what he must to remain a man. I always understood that about Jack.” she earnestly promised.

“I would never try to change him. He was fine.... just the way he was.” she stated proudly.

“Then... why?” Red already thought he knew the answer.

“Oh, Raymond... it’s all water under the bridge.” Rachel refused to hurt the man. “I’ve long since forgiven and forgotten.”

A small defiant moment came into the woman’s face. Rachel slipped the band on her finger, just as Jack had done some forty years ago.

“It still fits.” she blinked back tears, that day suddenly crystal clear in her mind. “He was... handsome,” she smiled. “And didn’t he know it though.” a chuckle came then a serene silence.

Rachel played with the ring, turning it this way and that.

“You were married but,” Red remembered back, “after Jack died, you didn’t come around any longer.” That had hurt, he remembered that as well.

Rachel sensed where the conversation would lead. “I wanted to...” she placed her hand over the man’s, the diamonds sparkling in the sun, “I wanted to see you so desperately, but...”

“What did he do?” Red hissed.

Elizabeth was surprised at the venom in the statement. She glanced over at Red. His jaw was tensing, rigid and unyielding, his eyes cold... filled with fury.

Rachel glanced at her son and his family. The toddlers sat quietly now, in the shade of a large oak. Jackson had his wife’s shoes off, rubbing her feet.

Angela sat on a bench, arching her back to ease the aches of pregnancy.

“You mother was excited for me and Jack.” Rachel took another route. “Grace went shopping with me for a dress.” her face clouded over. “He didn’t like that.”

“He didn’t accept the marriage?” Red wasn’t stupid, putting two and two together. “What the hell right-”

“Richard refused to recognize the marriage because it didn’t take place in a church.” Rachel laughed hollowly. “You know how forceful a personality he was... I guess the rest of the family just didn’t want to make waves, but Grace...” Rachel chuckled, “Grace was a fireball if pushed into a corner. I think it caused a rift in their marriage. I never wanted that, Raymond.” she promised.
“That’s rich!” Red scoffed disgustedly. “As if Richard Reddington ever set foot inside a place of worship! How dare he—”

“Stop.” Rachel insisted quietly. “Richard is... gone. He can’t do anymore damage unless we allow it. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I understand it.”

But Liz sensed, Red wasn’t about to let any of his anger go as yet, if ever.

“Red.” she stepped, settling a comforting hand on his shoulder only to find him shaking with barely controlled rage.

“On behalf of my mother and myself,” Red smiled down at Rachel’s concerned features needing to put her at ease once again, “I need to apologize for the lack of support and empathy that son of a bitch denied you and Jackson.”

“It just isn’t important anymore.” Rachel touched his face gently.

“It’s important,” Red corrected, glad he could salvage a little something today for Rachel, “to me.”

he apologized, sincerely.

Rachel nodded, “Thank you, Raymond,” she freed a bright smile, “for so very much...” the words escaped her.

“You’re family, no matter what that bastard said.” Red continued tightly. “Although why you would want to be associated with—”

“Are you serious?” Rachel quipped to lighten the mood. “I’m the ‘be all and end all’ at the Bridge Club Association because I can lay claim to the notorious Reddington name and lineage.”

Red drew in a calming breath for the woman’s sake, lifting his head slightly.

Jackson sat, rocking his little girl, looking down at the angelic face, his own so blissfully content.

“You’re reputation has earned me a permanent place of immortality among my peers.” Rachel teased. “You keep up the good work.”

She hastily scribbled on the back of the envelope. “This is my number and address,” the tip of her tongue flashed out as she wrote. Red smiled, remembering the habit from when he was a kid.

“I even have an email thingy.” she handed the envelope back. “So that goes right back to where it was.” she jabbed a finger at his wallet. “Only you better not just bring it out once a year.”

Rachel lifted welcoming arms, embracing Elizabeth tightly, “You remember your promise to me, young lady.”

Liz swallowed hard, nodding agreeably, “It was so very special meeting you.”

“Well, of course it was.” Rachel pulled herself together, sniffing gently. “I’m an important person in my neck of the woods, remember.” she chuckled.

She hugged Liz again, “Oh, sweetheart, I’m so very happy to know Raymond has found someone to love.”

Liz stiffened slightly, flushing a tad as her eyes met the man’s.
“You take good care of her.” Rachel gently pushed back. “Take care of each other... and you just better keep in contact with me.”

She had turned on Red.

“Count on it.”

“I will.” she seemed satisfied. “If you don’t, I’ll turn you in myself, if only for visitation rights.”

Red chuckled finally, “Yeah, you’re family all right. Although most would do it for the reward.”

Rachel kissed his cheeks, hugging him tightly, as if she did not wish to let go. “I love you, Raymond.”

The man had not heard that particular sentiment in so very long a time. It touched him deeply.

Eventually Rachel transferred the emotions to Elizabeth.

Looking at the headstone lovingly, she kissed her fingers, laying them gently against the marble. “I love you, Jack.”

Liz’s lips trembled, hiding her face in Red’s arm, clutching him tightly.

Rachel reluctantly took her leave. Red watched her steps as they took her further and further away.

Liz impulsively reached for Red’s hand. She was happy when he embraced her tightly for a long beat.

“I hate that bastard.” there was such bitterness, such vitriol emotion expelled in that one simple statement, that Liz was a little taken aback.

She leaned slightly, seeking out the man’s gaze.

“Rachel was wrong.” Red cast a lingering look. Rachel stopped as the hill sloped downward, offering one last wave.

Red automatically returned the gesture but his eyes were icy cold. “Richard Reddington can do damage... even from the grave.”

He sought out the woman, “Elizabeth, I don’t think...” he managed through gritted teeth, “I’ve ever hated anyone more than I do at this very moment.”

Liz weighed her options, considering the topic was an important one. “Well, that is saying a bit, isn’t it... coming from Red Reddington.”

Red scowled darkly, the insult hitting home.

“To be on your bad side,” she lifted cautious brows, “usually does not bode well.”

The man was speechless and Liz felt cold when his arms dropped away.

She hastened to make her point. “Red, do you remember yesterday, with Tom?”

Red Reddington was reeling. Is that how the woman perceived him... still? As a cold blooded killer who removed everyone in his path who dared go against him in some fashion?
“Rachel was right.” Liz persisted. It was taking everything she had to stand up to the man but she truly believed the truth would set Red free. “You have always shown me that we have choices in this life.”

Red only half heard what was being said, enmeshed in his own misery to concentrate fully.

“I made a choice yesterday, with Tom.” she raised her chin high, proud of her accomplishment. “I think it was the right one.”

Red’s silence was unnerving.

“The world is a bad place at times, filled with crappy people,” she continued undauntedly, “but Rachel and your mother had a sanctuary of sorts, don’t you see?”

Red’s brows furrowed drastically, for he wasn’t following.

“And that was the love you and your Uncle surrounded them with,” the woman smiled gently, her hand touching Red’s cheek tenderly. “In the larger scheme of things, Richard Reddington meant so little because Rachel had her child that Jack had given her and your mother had... you.”

Red was taken aback.

“Don’t you get that?” Liz was astounded. “Your dad couldn’t hurt them, he could never take away what you and Jack gave. It was a constant.”

The tension had gone from the man’s body. The ashen complexion was gradually replaced by the man’s usual healthy glow.

“How the hell did you get so smart in such a short span of years.” he muttered, brushing a stray strand of hair from her eyes.

Liz relaxed visibly, “I had a fantastic support system... that gave me some invaluable insight when I needed it most.” her eyes lifted to his. “If he were to give me advice on how to handle this situation,” she baited, “I would heed it.”

He smiled slowly, “So you’re saying, oh, Wise One, that I should tell Richard Reddington metaphorically, of course, to go straight to hell and get the fuck out of my life?”

“He’s probably already there.” she crinkled her nose adorably. “Why waste more breath on the guy?”

Red actually laughed, his eyes filled with a tenderness not allowed before.

“What did I do to deserve you?” he had quietened considerably after a few seconds, however.

“I don’t know cause we all know what a very bad boy you have been.” she teased now hoping to lighten the mood.

But Red remained pensive, reaching down to trace along the top of Jack’s headstone.

“Elizabeth,” a dark scowl laced his brow, “you said earlier–”

“He,” the woman watched his features religiously, sensing his turmoil, “I try not to be so judgmental any longer. In the beginning...” she lifted resigned arms, “but being with you, seeing your world through different eyes. Now understanding, there are all sorts of grey shades to every situation that exists.”
Red lifted solemn eyes.

“I look back on, well, hell... the last few weeks,” she was stunned, “and think... so much has happened in such a short interval and... I was so naïve,” she chuckled hollowly, “not that I am all that much smarter or savvy now, but...” she searched for the words.

Red listened patiently, so proud of the woman’s growth, he could burst at this moment.

“I know the things you have had to do,” it was her turn to hesitate, “your world is such a harsh, unrelenting, dangerous place. You had to adapt to survive.” the blue eyes were troubled.

Red remained silent, his head turned slightly aside.

“I have a sneaky feeling I have only seen the tip of a very large, hideous iceberg.” she did. “How can anyone possibly judge or condemn unless they have walked in your shoes? What would any one of us have done in similar circumstances?” she was stumped.

“It’s so easy to stand on the sidelines and shout objections, opinions and beliefs but when Fate shoves your ass down into the trenches... what choices would someone truly make to survive?” the woman finished.

Red lifted his head, thinking back on all those choices he had been forced into.

“Jack would have made... other choices.” the man knew all too well. “Better choices.”

Elizabeth looked at the soft green grass covering the grave site.

“Would he?” she wasn’t certain what led Red down this chosen path but she had to wonder at the validity of his statement.

“He was military through and through.” Red had long since resigned himself to what his Uncle would think of the decisions made in Red’s life.

“No matter the reason for my supposed act of treason,” the man shook his head, his body taut, “Jack’s rolling in his grave over my actions.”

Liz remained silently contemplative.

“You don’t know, Lizzy,” Red had to face facts, “the things I’ve done in my life.” he grew quiet again.

“I know you’re a good man.” she knew that much.

“Am I?” he laughed shortly. “Am I indeed.” it was mused.

“Yes!” she snapped. “You damned well are and I’ll tell you one thing, Red Reddington!” she would not hear anymore. “If anyone has a problem with that fact, including Jackson Reddington, let them come and face me!”

Red was pulled from his doldrums by the impassioned little spit-fire by his side.

“I’ll set them straight and in short order!” Liz was certain. “What man hasn’t done things in their lives they regret? Do you think he didn’t come up against horrific decisions in the hell hole he was in?”

Red inadvertently shifted his eyes to the grave site.
The man took his time in reply, for in reality, he had none. Red stopped, turning slightly, seeking comfort.

It was a new sensation for the man. He was the one usually offering comfort.

Elizabeth wrapped her arms around the man’s broad shoulders.

Red sagged gratefully against her, heaving a shudder.

The preceding day had taken a toll on the man, even if he thought he was coping.

Meeting Rachel... Jack’s son.

Emotions collided and in Lizzy’s warm embrace, he found an escape of sorts.

The woman took his weight, both physically and metaphorically.

“He knows, Red.” Liz was certain somewhere, Jackson Reddington was looking down. “He understands.”

Red closed his eyes, mortified to feel wetness building behind his lids. His arms tightened crushingly, his head dropping, his lips pressing into the cotton of her shirt.

He allowed himself to finally experience the heavy weight of grief he had carried for over forty years.

The man sobbed his anguish, the sound tearing Liz’s heart from her chest.

Her own eyes filled with tears when she felt the wet warmth seep into her shoulder as Red unsuccessfully tried to muffle his release of sorrow.

He wept for all the men lost in this most hallow of places... for his own Uncle, for all the men he had personally known over the years... for the life taken from them.

Good men all.

He wept for the lives he had taken, for to do so scarred the man’s soul even if some had deserved to die.

He wept for the life denied him, for his wife and child... a life never meant to be.

He wept for Jack... who would never have a life with Rachel and their son.

He bunched his fists tightly into the woman’s clothing, lost in the agony and anguish gripping his mind.

He was so very grateful to feel the warmth and total acceptance, surrounded by loving arms.

Red Reddington had never felt so vulnerable but in the same instance.... he had never felt so whole.
I just wanted to take a minute to thank each and every one of you that voted for ‘Focal Point’ for ‘Best Lizzington Fic’.

As a lot of you know, this is my very first story. I wasn’t sure what the reception would be but curiosity won out over my nervousness and I went for it.

And I’m so unbelievably happy that I did.

Not only have I had one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life playing with the characters and trying to learn how to better my writing....

I have met some of the most amazing people.

Your reviews have not only guided me but made me laugh, touched my heart and lifted my spirits when I’ve had a terrible day.

When I didn’t think I was doing a good job or never thought I’d get the chapter right... your suggestions to play more, try harder and to keep going were a great source of encouragement!

Your well wishes after my surgery, the care you showed for my Beta after her surgery.... there wasn’t a better medicine I think we could have ever received!

On top of everything you’ve done for me over this last year... out of all the amazing Lizzington fanfics out there... you voted ‘Focal Point’ as the best fic!

Words can never truly express how very much that means to me but I need you to know how appreciative and deeply touched I am by your continuous support.

I sincerely thank you for making this such a fantastic experience...

Daniel

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

MAY 30

Tossing her bag across the room landing it on the bed, Liz leaned into the door frame, her body tensed with frustration.

This had been a hell of a week.

The last day of their vacation had been idyllic. Red had all but sequestered them in the back rooms of the spacious home.

They did nothing but relax and unwind.

In the aftermath of their meeting with Rachel Reddington, Red had seemed more at peace, more...
subdued somehow.

It was if he needed the quiet, the seclusion.

Even Dembe and Francis had seemed to sense a change in the man, leaving them to their makeshift retreat.

It was a total surprise then, when Silas unexpectedly walked through the door of the back office, making his rounds as though he had never left.

Liz thought back on that day, having crossed the room, glancing out on a beautiful spring day. She tilted the slats of the wood blinds, quietly musing.

Red had tensed that day, looking Silas over critically for a long beat. Something passed between the men that she could not read but whatever was ‘said’, Red relaxed, beckoning the guard to sit, join them.

Silas seemed fine to Elizabeth. Francis had mentioned the fact that usually, Silas would go off, sometimes for weeks... on his own version of a spirit quest.

Lizzy would never understand why men had such difficult times with expressing emotions, instead of continuously repressing them.

In a sense, she supposed women were more fortunate in that area. A good cry oft times solved most of the world’s problems.

The day that Red... let go, seemed to have done the man a world of good.

She was probably seeing it from a woman’s point of view, of course. At first, Red had been a little distant, as if he was embarrassed, maybe, by his loss of control.

She didn’t see it that way. And she never would.

The week had went downhill from the moment of Silas’ interruption, not that Liz blamed the man.

She was glad Silas had returned so quickly and seemed his old arrogant, sarcastic self.

Red had received an urgent call from New Jersey, of all places. There had been a disastrous fire in one of his warehouses which required his immediate attention.

Thereby ending a very pleasant and eventful holiday.

She had occupied her days with the usual things but her work could not hold her interest for very long this time around.

Silas sensed her restlessness, inviting her along on his rounds. As she walked the large estate with her constant companion, her boredom diminished.

Liz loved trading barbs with the large man as they discussed a wide variety of subjects.

On that first day, as they had looped around the side of the perimeter, Liz glanced toward the tree-lined street.

Her shadow sat there in his car, looking straight ahead. She stepped back into the confines of the tall rhododendron bushes.
“You don’t have to hide from that bastard.” Silas scolded. “Get out here in the sunlight, show him what you’re made of, girl!”

Liz hesitated, not wanting to cause any undue trouble for her security team.

Silas shook his head slowly, his eyes chastising her. He glanced about, then placing his fingers to his lips, whistling sharply.

Several guards were alerted, coming at the wave of his hand.

Liz noted Tom had been alerted as well however, shrinking back into the bushes even more so as his attention was caught.

Silas gave a curt command and his men cackled their glee as they spread out in a fanning position, clearing the area in record time.

“What are you doing?” Liz watched the men head for the main gate, their paraphernalia changed out for another type of weapon. She tensed, not being able to make out the models.

Silas had not answered, simply stood, his gaze directed to a wary Tom Keen.

Eight guards had been playing laser tag, over at the East end of the complex.

“What?” Liz watched the scene unfold, skeptically chiding Silas’ proposal. “You’re going to have them ‘laser’ him to death?”

“Unique concept but no.” the man muttered quietly.

His men approached the speedy car, taking defensive positions around the parked vehicle.

Weapons were lifted, placed against stout shoulders.

Liz’s brows furrowed and Tom was even more staid. He waited patiently inside the car, for what... neither was quite sure.

A flurry of paint balls suddenly colored the air, the orange and green orbs making loud splats as they ricocheted off the expensive metallic surface of Tom’s car.

Liz burst out laughing as she witnessed Tom frantically attempting to raise the window against the volley of furiously flying projectiles.

The carnage continued undauntedly for what seemed five minutes until finally, the guards halted their assault, each stepping back to admire the damage they had inflicted.

“Silas, you are so evil.” Liz approved, chuckling her mirth.

Tom had taken the effort in his stride although thirty or forty paint splats decorated not only the inside of his interior but... his own personal space.

He pulled his orange and green garment away from his body, staring morosely down at his once white shirt.

Liz was beside herself, dancing about in the sunlit grass, laughing her ass off. “I’m going to pee my pants!”

Silas cracked a sadist grin, “We aim to please.”
Liz waved happily to a disgruntled Tom Keen. She and Silas had continued their trek, the woman’s mood much improved.

Liz smiled in remembrance of Tom Keen’s car. That thing was Tom’s pride and joy. And something that was quickly becoming the butt of the joke to the guards.

Silas had her antagonists car towed, the day after.

His men had dragged Tom from the car, holding him ‘incommunicado’ for about an hour until the tow truck had come and gone.

Tom was subsequently released... as in thrown bodily out of the gate onto the scorching pavement.

Liz had watched her ex’s trek down the shaded street for a block or two. It had done her heart good but then, the next day, the creepy stalker was back... blue car and all.

A car she had passed by today after returning from her mandatory physical training classes.

She hated those dull, useless sessions. Silas was the only one who knew her real capabilities and limitations.

He never treated her like a fragile, incapable child. Silas pushed her and often as not, the training periods wound up with Liz sweating her ass off and panting like a freight train but they were productive.

She had also learned the use of the unique phrase, ‘Fuck off, Silas.’

It had served her well on some of the more strenuous sessions.

Her aggravation skyrocketed not only because there was no way she could skip the stupid classes even though it was more than obvious she was doing far better on her own.

Upon her return home today, she had received notice that her psychologist appointment had been scheduled as well.

She leafed through a romance novel absently, worrying the paper with her thumb. That physiological test had Liz worried a bit.

Those people always read so much into each little gesture or slip of the tongue. She was curious to see if any one of them would pick up on the new changes in her life.

What was the story she and Red would give everyone this time?

She wasn’t going to pretend she didn’t feel emotions for the man. It would be impossible anyway.

She felt far too much these days.

And her team wasn’t stupid. They would see the growth between her an Red.

Ressler had played it close to the edge with that chance meeting on Memorial Day but Liz wondered what conclusions he had drawn privately.

Besides, she didn’t know for certain what she was going to do concerning her job with the Bureau. She really enjoyed profiling on one hand but on the other, she missed her team and working closely with Red.
There was still time to consider all sides to the issue. She shouldn’t stress.

She put the novel aside, crossing the room. She wandered into the walk-in closet, choosing her clothes for after her shower.

Maybe Francis would show up tonight. She secretly thought Red had hatched a plan for the young man to visit frequently if Red was away.

She enjoyed when Francis was about... the distraction he provided. Although she secretly wondered if she was monopolizing his time.

Francis was so energetic, habitually speaking of all the clubs he frequented.

The quiet nights here must be dreadfully boring to him. All they ever did was watch movies, put puzzles together or play board games if they could con the off-duty guards into it.

She would have to confront Francis and get the truth out of him one of these days.

She set the temperature of the water absently, her mind flitting about.

Red called frequently. It was always good to hear his voice.

She missed him terribly. Today more than most days.

Red had kept in constant contact with her and with each call, she could hear his frustration rising.

He had to fly from New Jersey to London. A new Blacklister had been spotted but the bastard had gone to-ground so the team had asked for Red’s assistance for only he had the needed contacts to hopefully make the guy surface again in a timely manner.

Sighting of Carver had tapered off somewhere around Portland, Oregon.

Red was not happy.

Liz was not happy either.

She would have to inform Red about the new letters which had arrived if Silas hadn’t already done so. Liz lathered the creamy soap between her fingers watching the bubbles grow.

He was thousands of miles away, so she hoped Silas wouldn’t have bothered him until Red’s return.

The woman rolled her neck, letting the heated water ease away tension and stress.

Liz was about to reach her boiling point.

Tom was hovering around hampering her comings and goings although Silas was handling that aspect well, admittedly.

He was simply another annoyance she could do without.

Her blood pressure rose as she recalled the office visit. The doctor had been no help today what-so-ever.

After waiting over a damned hour, the PA had informed her, rather condescendingly at that, the information divulged could have been handled over the phone... that she didn’t even need to come in for an appointment.
Liz tried to ease the once again rising tension in her shoulders, her head was beginning to ache.

She really wished Red was here. He always made the world’s little aggravations disappear.

She soaped her body, her hands running leisurely over the slopes of her stomach, arms and breasts.

She closed her eyes. At times, she could almost feel the touch of his lips on her flesh. Soft, gentle, moving confidently from one vulnerable location to the next.

Her fingers slid between the lips of her vulva. She could feel the heat of his tongue, the grasp of his palms on her buttocks as he held her for his pleasure.

Liz gasped huskily, the clock chiming in the hallway breaking her thoughts.

“Ohh...” she swallowed guiltily, feeling the rush of blood to her cheeks.

The woman hastily finished her shower, determined to keep her thoughts on a more stable course.

She applied her lotions and minimal make-up, the woman looking back in the mirror, a different one than she knew.

Liz hardly recognized herself these days which, she had decided, was a good thing.

She had more color and energy and it showed in her face, her eyes and even her posture.

Had she been that... drained before? Had the life with Tom caused damage in ways even she was not aware?

Liz sat back, considering the fact for the first time ever.

She didn’t want to think about it, dismissing the thought instantly. She was with Red now and things were so much better.

Delicious smells wafted into the sanctity of her bath area. Nora was working her magic again.

Liz hurried to finish her make-up, scurrying to dress in her earlier chosen outfit. She always tried to look her best these days. Red noticed a woman’s body, he took the time and effort to comment and those comments always made her feel beautiful.

Liz had always considered herself only average in the looks department, a ‘five’ on most days, a ‘six’ if she put in the effort.

Put up beside Samar, any woman would pale, so Liz tried to put in the effort if only for morale's sake.

Red made her feel like a ‘ten’ just by the way he looked at her. She wanted to be that ‘ten’ for him, of course but also, for herself because dammit to hell, she was worth the effort and deserved it!

Liz smiled happily slipping into a soft silky blouse of lavender and black design. She chose her favorite jeans that brought out her curves to complement the outfit.

She practically skipped down the long hallway through the archway into the dining area, then kitchen.

Nora hummed as she worked.
She made Elizabeth smile. “I know that song.”

“Then join in.” Nora brought a cutting board over, placing freshly washed celery atop the clean surface.

Liz sat on a bar stool in the large island area, dutifully chopping the vegetable for the salad which would complement that evening’s meal.

Nora continued her work and the song. Liz felt at ease a few seconds into the scene adding her voice to the pleasant humming.

“I’ve been up and down and over and out, and I know one thing,” she grinned over at the older woman, “each time I find myself laying flat on my face,” Liz found courage lifting her voice confidently, “I just pick myself up and get back in the race... That’s life!” Liz really belted it out.

They dissolved into a fit of giggles.

“Ah... Sinatra,” Nora’s eyes turned dreamy as she halted her hands activities, “now there was a man.”

“No arguments here.” Liz poured a portion of the celery into a large mixing bowl.

“It’s lasagna and garlic bread tonight.” the older woman checked the oven.

“Oh, God.” Liz sighed blissfully. “Nora, I must have put on thirty pounds by now. You have to stop putting all this temptation in front of me.”

“You’re young. You can work it off.” the woman grinned. “Or... Mr. Reddington will do it for you.”


“Privileges of age.”

“You aren’t old!” Liz objected strenuously. “You’re a vital, beautiful woman and you know it!”

“Well, I’m not dead just yet.” Nora philosophized. “As a matter of record, I’ve seriously been considering taking young Francis up on his offers. That boy needs to be taken down a notch or two and I think I’m just the old MILF who could do it.”

Liz gasped her delight, laughing gaily. “You’re terrible and a bit scandalous!”

“That child propositions me with every pot roast I sit before him these days.” Nora scoffed. “I’ve got sons his age. I feel like boxing his ears good.”

“Oh, come on,” Liz chided playfully, “you know he’s good for your morale, admit it!”

Nora relented, “Well, there’s no harm done, I suppose.”

“How do you do it?” Liz watched the woman haul large trays from the twin ovens.

Nora glanced over at her, “You mean, ‘taking young men under my wing’?”

Liz was tickled, “No...” she giggled infectiously, “I meant... cook for all of us? Those men eat like an Army.”

“Oh, I enjoy it.” Nora dismissed. “I miss when the kids were at home. They were always bringing
friends over for dinner.”

“Well, you’re a better man that I am.” Liz admitted her fallacies. “I would just send out for pizza every night.”

Nora clicked her tongue, “Mr. Reddington doesn’t pay me to sit on my can. And it’s nice to be appreciated again.” she sighed, placing her hand on her hip, looking at Liz thoughtfully.

“What’s going on with that guy in the car out front? Silas came in here and stole all my eggs when he showed up earlier.”

“I don’t know anything about it.” Liz hastily denied any involvement in said crime. Too hastily if Nora’s expression was any criteria to judge by.

“I think they’re planning to egg the car.” Liz had heard the plans being drawn up. “But I didn’t have anything to do with it.”

“So you said.” Nora nodded pleasantly.

“You’d think he’d get the hint.”

“I don’t want to pry.” Nora threw her hands up, crossing to the sink. She ran warm water to wash a few pots in. “Besides, I’ll hear all the gruesome details from Francis, I’m sure.”

“That’s because I keep nothing from my little buttercup.”

Both women turned at the unexpected rejoinder.

Francis Holbrook strolled casually into the kitchen making a beeline for the garlic bread that was cooling on a rack by the oven.

“Didn’t Mr. Reddington almost snap your fingers off the other day for the very same thing?” Nora scolded, smacking Francis’ hand smartly.

“He merely threatened to break them.” it was scoffed before the man made a sound in his throat that was anything but disapproving. “Oh, my angel,” he moved very close to Nora, his tone dropping more than suggestively, “you know it drives me crazy when you discipline me.”

Liz grinned for Nora smacked Francis again as the man attempted to nuzzle her neckline.

“Behave!” it was warned. “Or I’ll tell Mr. Reddington about you and your lecherous shenanigans.”

“He knows I’m madly in love with you.” Francis wasn’t intimidated, trying for the other side of the woman’s nape.

“With my brownies, more apt.” Nora corrected, shoving out of Francis’ playful embrace. “Now, sit.” she snapped, narrowing her eyes at the boy. “I’ll make you up a plate but you better mind your ‘P’s’ and ‘Q’s’, young man.”

“I’d rather watch your rather fetching derriere.” Francis sat obediently, amused for Nora’s annoyed glare.

“You’re incorrigible.” she sighed.

“You know you love me.” Francis flirted openly.
Nora softened, “I tolerate you.”

Francis sent a meaningful kiss her way, having pursed his lips more than suggestively.

The woman groaned mentally, “Here, sweetie,” a large portion was set before Elizabeth, “you dig in before those rowdy men get in here.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Liz obeyed more readily than Francis even. “But you sit, Nora... join us.”

“Now remember, I have that dinner tonight.” Nora reminded. “My daughter is trying her wings... she’s nervous. One of her brothers will be at the table and I should be there to soften the blow if all does not come out as planned.” she laughed.

Liz sucked in a breath, “Oh, I’m sorry, I remember!”

“You can’t just walk out and leave me woman!” Francis managed around a mouthful of lasagna. “I’m so lonely.”

“Clean up that VD and you might score yourself some attention.” Nora patted the man’s hand consolingly, before wiping her hand off on a nearby hand towel.

Liz gasped then struck a line through the air as in ‘one for Nora’.

“Dessert is in the fridge.” Nora continued on as if she hadn’t just cut Francis off at the knees.

Francis mooned happily at the woman, though Liz was unsure why. Because there was dessert or because Nora took him down a notch... again.

“...Along with two extra trays of food.” Nora mentioned aside to Elizabeth.

“I heard that, love of my life.” Francis had.

Nora shook her head, “You leave some for Mr. Reddington and if you don’t,” she fumed, “I’ll tell Silas to... do whatever it is he does to degenerates like you, and that’s a promise.”

“Isn’t she magnificent?” Francis sighed dramatically.

Liz rolled her eyes at the man’s theatrics, shrugging. “You did kind of bring that one on yourself.” she muttered to the other woman. “He did say he liked to be disciplined.”

“Is it any wonder I am so smitten?” Francis continued his passionate soliloquy. “Come here my love!” he stood, a force to be reckoned with. “I’d rather eat you than this delicious offering. Come to me.”

Nora remained, unmoved, “I should wash your mouth out with soap for talk like that, but I fear you may even enjoy that.”

Liz stifled her giggle, well used to the exchanges but she enjoyed the bantering tremendously.

“Have a wonderful time with your family, Nora.” Liz forcefully sat Francis back down on his stool. “I’ll miss you so much.”

Francis slid off the other side of the stool rushing to the older woman. “Don’t leave me like this.” he tugged Nora close to his chest his face all to close to hers. “How can you be so cruel? You know what you do to me.”
“I know what I’d like to do to you.” Nora pinched his ear, pulling him back from her sphere.

“I’d be putty in your capable hands.” Francis eagerly offered.

Liz watched the scene, eyes large and wide, stuffing food in her mouth as if she were taking in a morning soap opera on a rare day off.

“...Yes, you would be.” Nora replied huskily, decidedly positive of that fact.

Francis surprisingly... settled. He watched the woman gather her sweater and purse... his mouth agape.

“Goodnight, Elizabeth.” Nora called back to the woman, walking stalwartly past a still quiet reticent young man.

“Sweet dreams...” the woman swept her hands gracefully down her still voluptuous frame, “are made of this.” she exited with an impertinent smile.

Liz couldn’t be sure but she was almost positive she heard more than an undercurrent of sexual innuendo in Nora’s delivery. She swept a finger through the air once again, giving Nora another mark to her score.

The silence was thick as the man slowly made his way back to his stool beside Liz.

“...I felt that one right down to my toes.” he muttered dejectedly. “She’s just... toying with me and my affections.”

Liz laughed out right, “You’re crazy,” she decided, “you are truly insane,” and she also decided, “and I like you just the way you are.”

Francis shrugged mentally returning to his food, “I’ll break her down...”

“She’ll break you, you mean.” Liz muttered around her fork.

“...It’s only a matter of time before she succumbs to my charms.” he forged on, ignoring his friend.

“What about Lia?” Liz goaded.

Francis waved distractedly, “She’s already succumbed... many, many times,” he waggled his brows, before sobering somewhat, “I love her, she’s my whole reason–”

“...For existing,” Liz rolled her eyes dramatically, “yes, I know.” she nodded sagely. “How very cosmopolitan of you.”

“You going to eat those green beans?” Francis had zeroed in.

“Yes.” Liz held her plate closer, scowling at the man.

Silas sauntered in from the side French doors holding dozens of empty egg cartons in capable arms.

“You’re out of these.” he held the Styrofoam aloft. “What is that amazing aroma.”

Liz beckoned the man over, “Come and get–”

Before she could finish her sentence, the doors swung open again, two burly men pushing Silas aside in the quest for Nora’s manna.
“...Some.” the woman finished lamely.

Francis scooted out of the way, cradling his precious plate protectively as several more men entered, all seemingly famished. Grasping her elbow, the man directed her to follow as he led her to a safe distance and away from the carnage taking place.

Liz watched the large trays dwindle rapidly as each got their fair share.

“How bourgeois!” Silas grumbled accordingly.

Liz adjusted her plate in her grasp as well, following Francis into the dining room.

The seats filled rapidly, except Red’s, of course. The head of the table and to her right. It seemed fitting somehow.

One team would take their break and another would follow.

It was a noisy, hectic time Liz liked best. The house was full with a din of flurry and excitement.

The men had accepted her presence and if they got a little too ‘accepting’, the speech turning too risqué or to questionable subject matter, Silas would always gently remind them a lady was present.

“Shut the hell up!” he snapped over the raucous conversations taking place, putting a faint smile on Liz’s face. The man did not know the meaning of the term... subtle.

“There is a lady sitting at this table and if you want to remain doing the same, you’ll watch your fucking language!”

Apologetic murmurs would follow with Liz graciously offering a sedate, “Yes, you all heard what he fucking said so... watch it! I am indeed a lady of the highest caliber.” she took the garlic bread, running it around the plate, stuffing the sauce covered delicacy into her mouth to prove the point.

Tensions would ease, Silas would reseat himself and the merriment would once again, commence. Just as it did this evening.

“How do you stay so fit?” Liz had turned to Francis at one point, genuinely perplexed. “You eat like a pig.”

“I got stamina, baby.” Francis stole the last piece of her garlic bread.

Liz frowned for the fact but she let him get away with the theft.

“Stamina my ass.” Silas had his doubts on the matter, clearly. “I’ll lay you ten to one, he’s getting Lipo.”

“The only thing sucking on me,” Francis hooked his thumbs to his chest, “are lips.”

“They make blow up dolls with that sucking function now?” Silas lifted innocently enquiring brows.

“Don’t act as if you don’t know that.” Francis continued.

Regardless of the crude topics of conversation, Liz was glad she had instituted evening meals together.

Francis, for all his obvious money and fancy suits, seemed to fit in otherwise with the hardened, military types.
He never put on airs. He could take anything they dished out and frequently returned as good as he got.

Liz glanced over at Silas as he and the younger man talked. It was odd. She really didn’t know all that much about Francis.

Of course, the same could be said of any of the men who protected the house.

“...So,” Francis interrupted her thoughts, as the men drifted back to their duties or went off to enjoy their downtime, “what’s on the agenda for tonight?”

“Francis,” Liz absently watched Silas clear away his plate, “do you really want to be here?”

“That’s a stupid question... where else would I be?”

“Any number of places I should imagine,” she was resigned but not happy over the matter. “You don’t have to be... I know Red has asked you to look in on me from time to–”

“Let’s watch scary movies.” Francis interrupted rudely. “Have you seen that creepy fog outside?”

“Fog?” Liz glanced toward the French doors but lace covered the panes.

“There’s no moon, it’s a perfect night for a murder.” Francis seemed deliriously happy over the fact.

“You want I should murder...” Silas jerked his head in the general vicinity of Tom’s location. “Cause if you do,” he picked up his dessert plate, inhaling the rich aroma, “I have nothing else on my agenda for this wondrous evening.”


Liz sought out the window panes, “My God,” she turned, “it is spooky out there. When did this roll in?”

“So observant.” Silas tsked, crossing to the sink.

“Silas, I’ll get it.” Liz hurried over.

“Oh, I wouldn’t think of denying Junior here of his ‘scare fest’,” Silas pushed up Henley sleeves, “and we can’t have Nora returning to a kitchen sink full of dishes... I got this. I was a Boy Scout once.”

“Sure you were.” Francis’ face said it all.

“Isn’t this... woman’s work?” Liz tested the waters, keeping her humor under wraps.

“You say that to my mama and she’d slap you in the face.” Silas pointed at the woman.

“... You had a mama?” Francis was shocked.

“Unlike you.” Silas retorted. “Didn’t Mulder and Scully find you in Area 51 inside a packing crate labeled, Alien Fetus?”

Francis looked slightly bemused, “Do they label things like that in Area 51? Because you know... it’s a dead giveaway.”

“That’s classified.” Silas delivered the line so stoically, Liz hesitated, almost wondering if he had
worked at the Top Secret base.

“If I told you anything,” he lifted solemn eyes, “... I’d have to kill you.”

“Didn’t you just divulge classified information?” Liz brightened. “But on the other hand, it is a perfect night for a murder.” She smiled cheerfully at Francis.

Silas smiled pseudo-pleasantly which in itself was kind of creepy.

“Stop it.” Francis implored the man to do so. “That’s not funny.”

Liz had to agree, “You’re freaking me out.” she sent her guard a determined scowl.

“I’ll change into some jeans,” Francis plucked at his suit and tie, “and meet you downstairs.”

Curiosity ‘plucked’ at Elizabeth Keen, “You look nice,” she said, making the man hesitate in his steps. Her eyes scanned the man’s expensive threads, while the man preened, “where do you work exactly?”

“No where if I can help it.” the man called back over his shoulder.

Liz glanced at Silas but the large man only returned to rinsing and stacking plates in the dishwasher.

Liz popped some corn and gathered a bowlful of assorted candies, heading off to the large room below.

She situated herself having chosen a few different movies from the correct genre, tossing throws on either lounge in case it got cooler later on. The air conditioning always affected her if she sat still for any length of time.

Francis arrived, a stack of movies in hand. She shrugged indifference as he put a DVD into place.

They settled in after the man shut down the lights.

Bad weather had been predicated coming in from the West tonight and on cue, the wind picked up and distant rolls of thunder echoed deep in the dark skies.

“Told you so.” Francis approved on Nature’s assistance. “Perfect night.”

“Yeah, for a tornado.” Liz had never been in one but had seen the aftermath.

“We don’t have tornados in Washington D.C.”

“Yea, and they won’t travel over water or occur on mountainous regions either.” she cast a doubtful glance his way. Especially since she vividly recalled one a couple years ago killing two people.

“All right, maybe we do,” he conceded, “but not tonight.” he assured. “Don’t be a scaredy cat, sit back and enjoy the movie.”

Liz sighed, deciding to do just that although this particular movie, while having some thrills throughout, turned into a fantastically cheese affair which left them both laughing at the lameness of it all.

The second fare was not so ‘lame’. Several times Liz caught herself scrunching back into the seat, grimacing, unconsciously leaning towards her companion at a key moment in the action.
As the drama increased her nerves grew taut, she bunched the soft fabric of her blanket to her chin even pulling it over her eyes a couple times.

She hastily checked with her movie partner, embarrassed to have done so.

Francis hadn’t even noted, his eyes glued to the screen as he nervously nibbled on his Snicker bar.

Liz returned her interest post haste to the gory happenings on the screen as well, unwilling to miss anything of import.

The actress moved slowly down a creepy corridor, the camera allowing the viewer to walk along with her.

At the end of the hall was a flight of stairs and of course, the actress ascended them, one by one. The eerie music of the score added beautifully to the suspense. As the actress reached for the door handle...

“Boo.” a slow deep voice resonated directly behind the moviegoers, hot breath brushing against Elizabeth’s neck.

Followed by a loud crescendo that signaled the end of the actress exactly coinciding with the unexpected fright.

“Holy fuck!” Francis jerked upright, bolting from his seat.

Liz yelped shrilly, kicking out, her foot accidentally toppling the nearly empty popcorn bowl.

Red Reddington chuckled lowly, having enjoyed the fact that both had come unglued so easily.

“Well, thank God I wasn’t the axe murderer.” he mentioned in passing. “Well... not this time.”

Liz had grabbed her heart, and even now was trying to calm it down from its rapid beating.

Bracing his arms on the back of the couch, Red leaned down, placing a kiss on the woman’s pulse point. He smiled against the soft flesh as the little woman’s little heartbeat fluttered with her perfectly manufactured panic.

“I’ve been standing here, breathing down your necks for a good five minutes.” he continued, holding his grin... just. “You both could have ended up on the butcher block.”

“Very funny, Red Reddington!” Liz snapped peevishly.

“I think I just pissed myself.” Francis ‘checked’.

A loud piercing scream filled the room. Liz made a dash for Red before her brain could assimilate that it had originated from the television set.

She halted mid-rush, feeling foolish. “I... I thought that was Francis for a s-second.”

Red’s eyes were filled with gentle humor. He turned his attention to Francis who was still ‘checking’ if an accident had occurred only he had moved to the back of his jeans this time.

The kid held such a serious expression that Red almost laughed out loud.

“Her,” he motioned to Elizabeth with a jerk of his head, “I can see maybe losing it... she’s just a girl.” he disdained the fact.
Liz pulled a face, crossing her eyes at the man for the ‘slight’.

Red held his growing amusement. It was good to be home. “But you, Francis?” the older man tsksed.

“Hey!” Francis jabbed a finger at the offending accuser. “Contrary to popular opinion,” he made reference to Silas’ earlier remark disparaging Francis’ birthright, “I am only human besides, you have thirty-thousand armed men swarming this place,” the tirade was continued, “if I can’t let my guard down here, where can I?”

Red was making his way around the couch, seeking out Elizabeth who had lifted her arms out to his embrace, lifting on her tippy-toes to meet the man’s intended ‘welcome home’ kiss.

Red wasn’t about to deny himself this little perk.

As a matter of record, the minute he crossed the threshold in the past, he had no qualms with the fact, he readily searched her out. He had been anticipating kissing the woman for hours now.

This little mouth, that tonight, tasted of a slight hint of chocolate and red wine, was rapidly beginning to be his greatest vice.

“You’re home.” Liz cuddled up to him, clinging to his presence. She could feel the warmth of his palm against the fabric of her blouse. She had not realized how desperately she had needed the man’s touch.

“I’m glad your constituents were not here to witness that little display.” Red answered Francis’ retort absently, his true interest for the scrumptious little body tucked up against him.

Something felt... off.

Elizabeth was all smiles but the man sensed a current running below surface... something was bothering her.

“Is everything all right?” he murmured for her alone.

“Why don’t you ask me that, you sadistic bastard.”

Red ignored Francis, concentrating on Elizabeth.

She nodded, smiling brightly up at him. “Everything is great... now that you’re here.” she hugged him harder, laying her head on his shoulder after another brief kiss.

“What have you two brats been up to in my absence?” he would definitely explore this topic further but at another time. He picked up that Lizzy would prefer that option.

He tightened his arms about the small body, feeling a slight tremor rack her frame.

Liz felt it as well, hastily leaving the shelter of his arms knowing how astute the man could be. She helped Francis pick up the spilled popcorn.

“We thought it would be a wonderful idea to scare the living hell out of each other since it apparently,” she sought Red out, “was a perfect night—”

“For a murder.” Francis finished in-sync and a private chuckle was shared by the two.

Liz clutched the bowl to her chest as she arose. “Have you eaten? Are you hungry?”
“No, I haven’t.” the man lifted his arm and Liz came into the sphere created more than willingly. “And yes, I am.” he suddenly realized.

His appetite had been ‘iffy’ these past few days. He found it returning with a vengeance. It was truly good to be home... with this woman by his side.

The house felt warm and inviting. The rain had been torrential on his drive from the airport. Visibility was low. It seemed it had taken forever to get here.

Red settled his hand on the small of Lizzy’s back, enjoying the gentle sway of her ass as she steered him to the kitchen.

“What about me?” Francis pouted, following them if only to voice his rising resentment for being neglected. “What am I all of a sudden? A figment of your imagination?”

“How in the hell can you be hungry?” Liz pushed through the kitchen door, making for the fridge. “You had two plates of lasagna and we’ve been snacking the last three hours.” she was beside herself.

“I’ll get that.” Francis pushed past the woman, extracting one of the large pans Nora had prepared.

Red intercepted the object, much to Francis’ chagrin, placing it on the counter top beside the microwave.

“He has a tapeworm.” Red ignored the indignant expression offered his way, sucking the sauce from his thumb which had dripped from the overstuffed pan.

“I know from past experience, to get first chance at food where you are concerned.” Red cut a section of the dish, placing it on the plate Liz provided. “Want some, baby?”

“Yes... thank you.” Francis batted his eyes coquettishly Red’s way.

“I’m good.” Liz chuckled, crossing diligently to secure another few plates because Dembe had entered the colorful scene.

She handed plates to both men with a beguiling smile, “Hello, Dembe. Good trip?”

“Mediocre at best.” was the quiet reply.

“Will you be joining us tonight, Dembe?” Red handed over the heated dish with relish.

Francis was saddened, watching the plate disappear from his reach.

Dembe’s scowl increased two-fold, snatching the plate from Francis’ vicinity. “...My show.”

Red deftly punched the numbers on the keypad, heating up another slice of the delicious smelling delicacy.

“Ah, yes,” he admitted his memory lapse, “I forgot. Well you are going to miss a cultured event, I’m sure.” the man clearly being sarcastic. “I personally can’t wait for, Night of the Living Dead... it’s right up there on my bucket list of movies to see before I die.”

“We already watched that one.” Francis sulked.

“You enjoy Downton Abbey, Dembe.” Red moved on after a slight scowl in Francis’ direction.
“Downton Abbey?” Francis brightened, sitting straighter on the stool he had taken a few seconds earlier. “Hey! Did you see that part where Mr. Bates rpmh–”

Red’s hand hastily slapped over the young man’s mouth attempting to hush a still muttering ‘victim’.

“Do not spoil it for him.” it was warned tersely. “He about killed a man in London for the very same offense.”

Dembe shot Francis a steady glare.

Francis settled instantly, falling quiet. He smiled sedately for a still glowering Dembe.

Red pulled the piping hot plate from the microwave, turning about.

He pulled up short for Francis was standing there, directly in front of him, eyeing the food covetously.

“How did you...” Red trailed off, measuring the distance from where the kid had been to where they now stood.

Red let it go, reluctantly handing over the plate.

“Don’t you dare!” Liz scolded soundly, “Give it back! Red is starving!” she smacked Francis’ bicep soundly, her expression stern.

“It’s all right, Lizzy.” Red chuckled, returning to the near empty tray to try his luck again. “It’s not like I didn’t expect it.”

“It’s not like he didn’t expect it.” Francis stated, taking his food back to his place at the large island.

“You are impossible.” Liz fumed.

Red started the microwave yet again, sighing heavily. He cut Francis a side ways glance, “Is the fridge in the entertainment room stocked or has the gluttonous pig here cleared us out?”

“How you paint me..” Francis said around a mouthful of food.

“Do I need to take a few beers?” he directed the question to Liz who hastily sat the beer down Red had procured for himself upon entering the kitchen.

“Ohh!” the woman glanced at the half-finished bottle guiltily, “Eh... no, there is plenty down there.”

Francis’ expression said it all.

“Well, I didn’t think...” Liz finished the sentence in her head, ‘he would mind me drinking his beer or Francis taking his food’.

Red grinned over at her, “Baby, you know what’s mine is yours, right?”

“Evidently.” Francis smirked condescendingly.

Liz had the grace to flush. “I’ll get you a fresh one.” she instantly rushed to do so. “You go get some comfortable clothes on,” she turned the man gently, “shoo!”

“As you wish.” Red inclined his head slightly, holding his amusement. He hesitated, having made his trek a few steps.
“Francis, if anything disappears off my plate...” Red’s hand reached, gently running the length of the butcher block full of knives, “I will cut you.”

Francis’ smile faded rapidly and the man took a giant step back from his intended advancement toward the unguarded plate, at the not so veiled threat.

“I will guard it with my life, Red.” Francis promised faithfully.

Liz chuckled, shaking her head at the antics. She heated some sides, searching out a serving tray. “You deserved that one.”

Red continued his trek, his foot steps rather jaunty now.

Liz hummed while she arranged Red’s dinner tray.

“I’ll take that for you, Lizzy.” Francis offered politely.

“Oh, no you won’t.” she laughed at the absurdity. “This will be gone in record time.”

“Come on...” the man pooh-poohed such a notion, “you heard Red, I just want to help out.”

“Help yourself to Red’s food more like it.” she wasn’t buying it.

“I won’t, I promise.” Francis persisted. “Cross my heart and hope to die.”

“Your fingers are crossed behind your back, aren’t they.” Liz lifted the tray.

“How utterly childish.”

“Francis, I can see the reflection in the microwave.” she sighed lightly.

Francis hastily uncrossed his fingers.

“I solemnly swear,” he raised two fingers, as if he’d ever pass for a Boy Scout...

“It’s three fingers.” Liz cocked her head patiently.

Another finger was instantly added, “On my grandmothers grave.”

“I thought you were spawned.” she reminded.

“It hasn’t been proven...” he countered.

“Just get another plate, you dolt!” the woman was stupefied.

Francis mood and shoulders dropped, “It’s just not the same. There’s no challenge.”

The woman shook her head woefully, “There is something drastically wrong with you.”

“Maybe human and alien DNA isn’t as compatible as they thought...” the man mused.

Liz had situated the tray in front of Red’s usual seat, remembering to grab a beer from the fridge.

The man himself entered, instantly crossing to exchange plates with Francis who had switched the large piece for the smaller he had cut himself.

Liz gasped, having witnessed the spectacle.
“Could you get me a beer, Liz?” Francis craned about with an earnest expression.

Liz gaped indignantly. “I will not!”

“I was guarding it...” the man explained his actions.

“Your word of honor?” Liz snapped.

“There is no honor among thieves, Lizzy.” Red reminded, having taken his seat, lifting his fork.

“Obviously.” Liz yanked Red’s garlic bread from Francis’s hand.

“You drank his beer.” Francis accused. “And you stole his bacon the other morning.” he reminded.

Elizabeth’s mouth slackened, her shoulders slumping slightly. There was no retort she could make to that.

She had stolen Red’s beer and bacon.

“Set in judgement on me.” Francis tsked. “Little moocher.”

Liz turned to Red wide eyed and pouty. “I did...” her mouth fell further.

“What ever she wants, she shall have.” Red quoted airily. “These green beans are delicious.” he ate heartily.

And the evening progressed.

“Have you seen this one, Lizzy?” Red approved of the old classic Francis had chosen.

Liz was already deeply invested in the movie, however, not hearing the inquiry.

“S... my dad loved this movie.” she replied off-handedly, catching her error in time. “He was always trying to get me to watch it with him.” Liz remembered she had always been too ‘busy’ with one thing or another.

It saddened her now. She should have made the time.

“It was originally set in 3-D.” Red informed the younger set.

But Liz was gone, off in that world where a good movie could take a person.

Red smiled for the fact returning his own interest to the unfolding storyline.

A small, delicate female ran haphazardly through the dark wet streets of a late night New York. Her pursuer was close behind, a misshapen, crippled hulk of what used to be, a man.

Liz held her breath in the quiet of the room. The female star’s shoes clicked noisily on the cobbled pavement of the streets as she ran, alerting her stalker to her every location.

“Take them off you idiot.” Liz whispered tersely.

Thankfully, the heroine wasn’t as stupid as those in the last movie, tugging the buttoned-up half ankle boots frantically from her small feet. Rounding a corner, having been given a small respite from the harrowing chase, she gathered her senses about her.

Liz’s breath caught and held as the grotesquely marred face came into the light of a street lamp as the
maniacal stalker halted at one point, just feet away from his intended victim who huddle in terror just around the bend of a building.

The tension ended as the killer turned, heading off another way.

Liz quietly bit her thumb nail as the heroine ran to a nearby house, frantically pounding on a gigantic door.

The killer, of course, heard the commotion, now alerted to his prey’s whereabouts.

The man moved with remarkable speed to be so hideously disfigured.

But finally, the door was opened and the actress was admitted into the bright and relative security of a safe harbor.

By the end of the movie, Liz enthusiastically clapped as the credits rolled. “Oh that was fun!” she had enjoyed the entertainment. “I liked that one a lot. No wonder my dad was so disappointed.”

Francis grabbed a box of Milk Duds from the candy bowl, “The boyfriend should have saved her.”

“Charlie Bronson in an early role, playing one of the bad guys.” Red searched the bowl absently, finally choosing a package of peanut M&M’s. Why not get into the spirit of things. “Wonder why they made him a mute?”

“Vincent Price is wasted on these things. He’s a much better actor than credited.”

Francis’ insight surprised Red, “I think so too.”

Liz was concentrated on opening her Twizzlers.

“I’ve got one here,” Francis held up the DVD, an evil gleam in his eyes, “that will even scare you.”

Red spread his hands agreeably, “Bring it on.”

The last show made Liz’s skin crawl. The plot had more holes than Swiss cheese, but the visuals left you feeling squeamish and slightly freaked out.

As an FBI agent, Liz constantly was considering how she, herself, would get out of the impossible situations presented in the film.

By the end, Liz had tunneled close to Red, squeezing her eyes tightly whenever the buzzing sounds would begin on screen.

“Pansy.” Francis mumbled at one particularly gruesome part, opening his newly acquired Kit-Kat bar.

Red dropped his arm which had been held aloft, onto the back of the couch, inches away from Francis’ position.

The boy jumped ten feet in the air, his chocolate bar flying practically across the room.

Liz chuckled the tension in her body away.

“You think he can save you from my nefarious ways?” Francis fought back.

“Red will always protect me from the criminally insane.” Liz proclaimed proudly.
“I’m no petty criminal.”

Red jerked his head, having taken a drink of his beer.

“I said, petty.” Francis clarified.

Liz sought out her cuddle buddy, “What?”

“I was questioning the ‘insane’ part.” Red quipped.

“Oh...” Francis took his seat only to start visibly as a severed leg flew at the screen.

At the end of the gore-fest, both Liz and Francis gave out short screams of exclamation, faces white and strained.

“You didn’t see that coming?” Red has almost choked on his Junior Mints. “Must be the director’s version of a climax.” he smoothed Lizzy’s frayed hair into a semblance of order. “Thank God it isn’t yours.” he murmured sensually into her ear.

“Does nothing scare you?” Francis was beside himself.

“That fact that your reactions might get out and I have to be seen in public with you.” Red commented dryly.

“If it does get out...” the boy replaced the disc in it’s case, “I’ll know who to come after.”

“And you know where to find me,” Liz wasn’t intimidated.

“I meant him.” Francis was confused now.

Liz giggled, her soft socks rubbing against Red’s shin as she cuddled up closer to the man.

She tried to shiver off her eerie feeling, “No more icky movies for me.”

Red took the hint patting her hip, as she struggled off the couch. He followed her lead. “Yeah, I think we’ve all had enough for one outing.”

Francis stretched luxuriously, sleepily traipsing after the two down the dimly lit hall.

His mischievous side emerged however as he saw a very vulnerable victim who had definitely let her guard down.

He sneaked closer, watching Red more than Liz.

Red turned his head slowly, offering an expressionless stare.

Francis feigned ignorance, managing an indignant huff directly before he goosed Liz, making her jump a good foot off the ground.

Francis whizzed past before Red could deliver the death blow, rushing up the stairs to his room, the loudly closed door shutting off his maniacal laughter.

“Sweet dreams, Lizzy!” echoed down the empty hall in his wake.

“There is something seriously wrong with that man.” Red’s tone held a finality with which Liz could identify.
She nodded agreeably, a fixed scowl on the pretty features.

“I’m going to put these dishes in the washer,” Red had balanced the tray and plates artfully, his free hand having secured her waist, “you can go on to the—”

“No!” she replied too quickly. “I’ll stay with you.”

Red chuckled lowly.

“I’m not scared or anything,” the woman stated stoutly, “I’m not...I just missed you, that’s all.”

“I see.” Red finished the chore, and they went, hand in hand to the master bedroom.

The man closed the door, turning. The woman stood, looking small and fragile in the oversized room.

“Going to shower?” he motioned accordingly, sitting his watch on the bedside table.

Liz thought over the last few hours, “You could join me.”

“I could do that.” Red wasn’t adverse. “I most certainly could do that.”

Minutes later, he had divested her of any encumbrances, he himself, joining the woman in the steamy shower stall.

He was charmed by her lyrical giggle as he moved them under the numerous jets of hot water.

The man glanced down her body, his eyes enjoying the visual treat.

“I’m highly distracted right now.” he forewarned, moving decidedly closer to the slippery little frame. “Anyone could just,” his forefinger lightly moved over the tiny bead of her nipple, “walk right on in here...”

“It’ll just be Silas.” She sighed as the man gathered her long strands, administering shampoo after the fact. She stood perfectly still under such arousing antics, her eyes closing.

“He knocks now, you know.” she muttered distractedly as she soaped the man’s pectorals, drawing little hearts into the downy hair.

“Will wonders never cease.” Red leaned, his mouth trailing soft kisses down her nape.

Liz lost herself in the man’s soothing touch. “It’s much nicer when you are in here with me.” she made mention.

Red soaped the pert little breasts, his palms running over the satin flesh onto the flat stomach, into the heated spot between her legs.

“It certainly is...”

Liz reached behind her, feeling the hard evidence of the man’s arousal. She spread her hands, her fingers grasping the thickness of his thighs on either side.

Liz moved enticingly, pressing his hardness into her backside.

A low sound escaped the man’s lips.
Liz turned about, taking his cock in her hand, squeezing the stiffness encouragingly, her mouth parting for his kiss.

His tongue eased gently past her lips, the tip flitting erotically, dancing with her more timid one.

Her touch was like a soothing balm. Red felt the stress and tension that had been building all week bleed away.

He was acutely disappointed when her warm grip slackened, her hand tracing up his torso, kneading his shoulders with a gentle pressure.

“Bad week?” she had felt the change in his body.

“Long week.” he lay his forehead against hers. “I missed you.”

“That seems to be the general consensus with us.” she smiled. “It’s nice to hear.”

She lifted her mouth and he devoured it hungrily, she pressed her breasts into his chest, her arms lifting about his neck.

Red’s arms tightened, bringing the slender frame closer into his hold. Elizabeth felt the bulge between them, her mouth eagerly responding to this demands arduously.

“Did you miss me...” she had allowed the kiss to run it’s course, breathless at its completion. “A lot?”

“Let me show you how much, baby.” the man’s own tone much more edgier than before, low and intense causing Liz to shiver happily in its wake.

Red lifted her bodily, leaning his back hastily against the heated shower stall, urging her to climb his sturdy frame, his palms lifting effortlessly on the woman’s firm ass cheeks to ensure she comply.

Liz hooked her legs about his waist, easing down on the slick tip of his cock as Red held it for just such an occurrence.

The man groaned brokenly, instantly thrusting gently into the delicious pleasure offered. He gasped breathlessly into her parted mouth.

Elizabeth held tight to his solid shoulders, encouraging any and all activity Red’s inventive brain could devise.

And Red Reddington could be very inventive when he chose.

Both watched their romantic interlude. The visual of Red’s engorged cock, wet with her slick arousal, thrusting quickly into her body brought Liz to a nerve shattering climax only moments later. Red followed very close behind, enraptured by the sight and sounds of Lizzy coming in his strong hold.

It felt so good to feel his hot cream explode inside her suddenly aching cavern, to hear the intense groan of the release as it engulfed the man.

How could she not respond to stimuli like that?

Later, laying in bed, his arms about her, was now the most natural thing in the world.

She savored the quiet sound of his breathing. The wind outside howled fearfully but here, in the sanctuary of his embrace Liz felt a contentment like never before.
“I keep telling you, insisting really,” Red’s thoughts were along similar lines, “that this is your house.” he mused. “I guess you’re wondering why I keep just making myself at home... how I constantly wind up here in your bed.”

“I’m just one lucky girl, I guess.” she shrugged slender shoulders. “But seriously–”

“I thought that was a serious statement.”

She smiled, sighing contentedly, “I don’t like that you think of it in those terms. You said, what’s mine is yours.” she sought him out, flipping on her tummy to do so, “doesn’t it apply both ways?”

“As long as it’s truly what you want.” Red was happy with her reply. “I can be... Silas says I inflict my will on other’s, I don’t consciously do it with you. I hope you believe that.”

“It’s part of your charm.” she grinned at him.

“It’s just that...” Red scowled slightly, remembering how he sat his watch on the bedside table, on his side. He hadn’t even second guessed his actions at the time.

He had walked through her house as though he belonged there. Was completely comfortable in his surroundings.

And Lizzy hadn’t questioned it, at all.

“I feel comfortable here, I don’t even think most times...”

“As it should be.” she approved. “It’s very domestic of us, don’t you think?” she smiled happily, pressing her breasts into his chest then sighed at his dour expression.

“Maybe you think too much which is more than we can say for Francis.” she threw the small alarm clock she kept on her night stand at the ceiling, “I’m going to come up there and throttle you Francis Holbrook!”

The man had been making weird sounds up in his room now for some few moments, all of which Liz and Red had chose to ignore.

“How do you throttle someone, by the way?” she lay back on her tummy.

“We’ve never been what one could call... conventional.” Red continued where his thoughts left off. “Nothing about how we came to be,” he motioned between them to indicate his meaning, “has been conventional.”

He personally enjoyed the spontaneity, the off beat path they had traveled which was so very... them.

They had found their own type of ‘normal’, he supposed. The unusual fit somehow.

He had always been a nonconformist.

“We should never have happened, according to logic.” he continued more slowly, feeling his way. “Heads will roll if...when... our involvement becomes public knowledge but,” he scowled, “I guess what I’m asking is... how do you see our relationship for lack of a better word?”

Red had never found himself in such a situation. It stymied him, what was a naïve, younger woman feeling?

He had fallen in love with Elizabeth Keen. Pure and simple but their involvement was anything but simple.
What would she say if he confessed the depth of his emotions for her?

She could not possibly return the sentiment for it was so early on in the proceedings.

His instincts were telling him to take the risk, go on and tell her the truth about how he felt.

But that would force Lizzy into a place she perhaps, was not ready to be.

He could start off small... and build. Actions spoke more highly in Red’s book. He was good with actions but words failed him in this instance.

He had searched high and low for the correct ones but they all seemed to fall flat according to his lofty expectations.

The moment had never been quite right.

What if that moment never came?

The idea did not set well with him. He never gave up hope, he was a realist with a touch of optimistic dreams mixed in. His mother’s contribution, he took for granted.

“Woolgathering?” Liz had resumed her former position beside him, her nails gently writing nondescript trails on Red’s hair covered forearm as she patiently waited for the man to continue his words.

“Lizzy...” Red was getting anxious, fidgety, “are you happy?”

“Yes.” she smiled, happily, her tone soft, a mere whisper of that emotion.

“Do you even know what I’m asking?”

“I’m happy we’ve found each other.” she thought she hit upon it.

“We aren’t exactly like other couples.” he put it mildly.

“What do you mean?” she hesitated. “We go to dinner, we date, we... travel we... make love.” she resumed her pastime.

“Don’t tell me you don’t have reservations about us.”

“You mean,” she didn’t pretend to not understand, “the team?” she had been thinking about that, yes.

She laid quietly for a spell, “It’s none of their business what I do in my private life.” she never pried or interfered with theirs. “Nor am I, in any way, embarrassed by the fact we are together.”

She turned her head slightly feeling his steady breath against the side of her temple. “Red, I’ve done what society expected of me,” the woman heaved a sigh, “all it got me was a psychotic ex-husband with a stalker fetish and anger management issues.”

She turned in his arms, her expression a wistful one. “It’s my turn to live my life how I deem suitable.”

Without knowing it, she had come to a decision and... it felt good.

“I like being a part of...” she motioned to his chest, “I think we have something special here.” she eased up on the notion so as not to startle her prey away. “I enjoy being... a couple. I hope what
exists between us, is an ever growing trust. A mutual respect... it is there on my part.”

Red marveled at the growth the woman exhibited.

“When we first started out, I will admit to a bit of confusion maybe,” she wasn’t sure that was the right words, “it scared me, when you said out right that you wanted to move towards... you know.”

Marriage.” he supplied almost sternly.

“Well, yes. But now...” she pulled her bottom lip into her teeth, “people are always expressing unwanted opinions on my life! I guess I was trying to please them instead of myself.”

A deep scowl graced her forehead, “I’m tired of catering to someone who isn’t even a real part of my life!”

She lifted large blue eyes, “You’re a part of my life. A very, very important part. I hope you know that.”

“I do now.” his body had lost all it’s restlessness.

“You give me exactly what I need, Red.” she gently traced his mouth. “In all areas of my life.”

“Don’t placate me, Elizabeth.” he thought for one horrible moment, she might be. Madeline and Natalia were experts at manipulation. Red had grown wary.

“You would sense if I were.” she lifted a focused gaze. “I wouldn’t do that.” she stopped her antics, her fingers stilling. “After Tom... no, I wouldn’t do that.’

“The thought keeps reoccurring,” Red ran his hand about his neck, “I think, maybe you need something... someone more conventional... more normal.”

“Normalcy is overrated.” she disdained. “Why don’t you ask me what I need?” she taunted. “Because I will say it, right out like you do.”

Red hesitated not able to read the woman who lay so passively in his embrace.

“I’m asking.”

“What I need most... is to know that we’re in this together,” she replied quietly, “that you won’t bail when the going is rough.”

“You know me better than that, dammit.”

“I need to know... and believe,” she ignored his mood, “that what is developing between us is... real.”

Red’s mood evaporated into nothingness. He searched the lovely features religiously.

“I know these are just words right now,” he moved closer to the woman, his breath smelling of mint mouthwash and Junior Mints.

“I love whatever it is we have, Lizzy.” he realized it was clumsily stated. “Nothing has ever felt so real, at least on my part.”

She traced his jawline with tentative fingers, her eyes fretful. “I want so desperately to believe you but you know that.”
“If you will be patient,” he prayed she would, “I will prove my sincerity beyond doubt.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” she leaned, her lips parting his sensually, holding a promise for later. “I guess, we both just need reassurance from time to time, huh?”

The dark blue orbs held her affection. “I didn’t expect that from you.”

“That I would want to know if you were,” he wasn’t sure he followed, “happy with our relationship?”

“You’re always so sure of yourself, so confident.” she nodded slowly.

“In work.” he granted. “With you?” he curled a silken strand of hair about his finger, “This wasn’t supposed to happen,” he mused almost guiltily, “but I’m so damned grateful it has.” the light eyes held a steely determination.

Elizabeth’s heart filled with love for the man. She almost declared the fact right there and then. The man sobered somewhat, “…I get afraid that because I want this so much…”

“It will be taken away.” Liz concluded in the same manner.

He lifted his gaze, a searing intensity in the gray eyes.

“…Yes.” he whispered his despair.

“God would not be so cruel.”

“I haven’t exactly been on His good side of late.” he admitted tightly.

“Don’t think like that.” Elizabeth scolded. “Because God doesn’t... he will forgive us much more readily than we do ourselves.”

“Will he?”

“I want you here, is all I know for certain.” Elizabeth did not want to get into semantics at a time like this. “And I have never been so happy, not ever.”

“We will revisit this conversation in the future, I am sure but for now...” he was more than mollified.

His lips gently coaxed a response for the woman, her arms lifting about his neckline.

Red tightened his embrace, situating himself between easily parted thighs.

A scraping sound much like the effect of nails on a chalkboard broke the delicate moment.

Liz startled jerkily in his embrace, gasping audibly, her eyes large and vacant.

Red glanced irritably toward the Eastern most window, “I told the gardeners to take care of that damned thing!”

Liz breathed a sigh of relief, “Guess they didn’t get around to it.” she listened to the heavy limb tap restlessly against the pane.

“The wind must have shifted.” Red returned his interest elsewhere, “Look at my baby,” he teased, “hellcat one minute,” he glanced covetously down at her bared breasts, “and scaredy cat the next.”
“Oh, you jumped too!” she knew he had not though. She huffed, swirling about, pulling the covers up over her shoulders.

“Does this mean I’m not going to score tonight?” Red feared the worst by the set of the small, huddled shoulders.

“You’ve already scored,” she reminded, rather huffily.

“That was just a pre-game.”

The covers were pulled higher.

The man weighed his options which seemed to be dwindling by the second. He leaned over, grabbing the radio off his table.

Liz was instantly up, a fretful look on her face. “You did hear something!”

“No...” Red denied the accusation, “Silas, have a little job for you.”

“It’s wet out there.”

It was wet inside Lizzy’s pussy too... nice and hot and steamy wet and Red wanted an open invitation... and he thought he knew a way around her pique.

“Could you go bang on Francis’ door, really loudly and then... vanish?”

Silas’ throaty chuckle shivered along Liz’s already tenuous flesh.

“Well that would be downright dastardly, did he frighten our little fawn this evening?”

“Not at all.” Red heeded Liz’s attempts to alert him to the folly of such damaging information in Silas’ capable hands. “Just wanted you to do me a small favor. I’ll owe you one.”

“Pay backs are hell.” Silas was grateful for something to relieve his growing boredom in truth. “I’ll see what I can come up with, Boss.”

“Copy.” Red replaced the radio on it’s perch, well satisfied with himself.

The house fell completely and eerily silent.

The woman had taken her former spot in Red’s arms, her nudity stimulating Red’s already heightened state.

He tried not to let on.

The bed felt good after all the hotel rooms and other not so pleasant places he had laid his head this past week.

Red wondered, because he had stayed a few times in five star hotels... was it the bed or the person in it, which made the structure so inviting.

Liz huddled close, her eyes darting around the room at darkened spots, the shadowing movement of things in the night.

She waited, for what, she had no clue. Silas could probably be diabolical if he put his mind to it.
What did the man have in store for poor unsuspecting Francis, then again, the little shit had been relentlessly pestering her and Red this past half hour now, trying to frighten her, she realized.

She never should have agreed to those spooky movies. She realized her mistake too late.

“Shh, shh...” Red shushed, even thought the woman hadn’t said a word. His tone held a tight glee Liz had never heard before, “here it comes.”

Liz heard nothing, in reality.

She perked her ears up, listening harder.

The woman’s body reacted before her brain when loud stomping, much on the level of Star Wars Stormtroopers, filled the upper landing.

Loud banging thudded the walls, a din of mixed voices lifted, moaning and screeching indistinguishable syllables. A tremendous crash had the woman bolting straight out of bed, a man’s horror filled scream ran the length of her spine.

The woman scrambled back into Red’s arms, clutching him close.

“Gah!” Francis’ response filtered above the symphony of sound.

Running feet pounded the thick carpeted floor above them as the young man flung his door wide.

“You bastards!” Francis was voicing his concerns in no uncertain terms, “I think I shit myself across the room!”

Red’s laugh rang out, the outcome of his little prank better than he could have hoped for. “That kid kills me.”

Liz looked at him as if he had suddenly grown two heads. “You are terrible!” she proclaimed but his laughter was infectious and soon, she too was giggling her mirth.

Dembe’s stoic voice interrupted the melee, “Francis,” the cultured accent drifted through the active radio on the side table, “is there something wrong?”

“Didn’t you just hear that rat bastard banging on my door?” Francis was beyond astonished.

“I heard nothing.” was Dembe’s solemn reply.

Red muffled his chuckle.

“You didn’t hear that?” Francis questioned plaintively.

“I heard you.” Dembe delivered his lines with a staid demeanor. “Nothing more.”

Silence filled the air waves.

Liz could only imagine Francis’ face.

“Good night, Francis.” Dembe shut his door, leaving Francis Holbrook examining a completely empty hallway for possible evidence of paranormal activity.

The radio crackled again which made Elizabeth jump.
“Good night, Raymond,” Dembe’s tone was laced with a smile for his part in the previous deception, “...Elizabeth.”

“Good night, Dembe.” Red’s tone had softened with gentle humor. “I rate your acting abilities right up there with Anthony Hopkins.”

“I was striving for Sir Laurence Olivier.” The radio clicked silent.

“Work on the accent my friend...” Red smiled, sitting the radio aside.

“You people!” Liz felt bad for Francis but she had no clue as to why. She scooted to her side of the bed, wanting no part in such mean antics. “It won’t be so funny when you wake up to find Francis crawling in between us.”

She situated the covers primly, laying back on her pillow, shaking her head ruefully for all the goings on around here tonight.

A thunderous rattle of a large fist against their closed bedroom door had the woman reacting instantly.

Liz scrambled, scurrying across the space between her and Red in record time.

She hid her face in the man’s neckline, cursing soundly.

“Haven’t heard language like that since my sea-faring days.” Red chuckled his approval, brushing her hair out of his face.

“What is wrong with you creepy bastards?” she wanted to know, her breath coming in captured gasps.

Red rubbed her back, calming the panicked woman soothingly. He tried very hard to hide his glee.

“Thank you, Silas.” he called out, always one to remember his collaborators.

“No problem, Boss,” Silas called from the hallway, “figured she was being a little shit long about now, thought you could use some help.”

“You fucker!” Liz sat hastily, glaring at the closed door.

“Women...” Silas’ deep baritone was fading as he walked away. “Can’t live with them, can’t fuck a sheep without some prick judging your morals.”

“What morals?” Liz yelled her retort.

“Want me to use my British or Irish accent tonight?” Red soothed expertly, falling into the latter easily. “Lass, did you hear me now?”

Liz turned, all the anger drained from her mind, “What?”

“You’re as beautiful as a soft summer night,” his eyes swept the shadowed view of the enticing breasts, revealed in their entirety by her rash actions.

Elizabeth glanced down at his meaning.

“Now I don’t know what’s wrong with those creepy bastards...” the lyrical accent charmed and beguiled. The man had crooked his head to his meaning.
Elizabeth stared at him, entranced.

“But,” he motioned again, to his own heightened state of arousal, “I know what’s wrong... with me.”

“You’ve never,” she swallowed hard, “...done that.” she made reference to his newly acquired skills.

“I’ve never done *many* things I’ve wanted with you,” the light eyes were saying so much more than his words, which were provocative enough, “...to you.”

He had arised, the covers falling low about his waist. He lay her into the pillow, “You’re such a wee small thing.”

He lowered his head, his lips pressing lightly to her full ones. Liz felt the contact send a jolt throughout her body. Her toes, nipples and clit humming with awareness.

“And I... am not.” he reminded. “Would you like that?” he questioned roughly. “I think you would rather enjoy the experience of my body pressing yours into the soft bedding.”

The man’s eyes robbed her of any coherent thought or speech, so intense and brooding they had become.

“More so, the heavy weight of my cock,” he murmured in her ear, “sliding ever so slowly into that hot, wet cove.”

His palm moved lovingly over the flesh of her leg easing her thigh along the top of his hip, delighted by the woman’s heightened breathing.

The air hit her exposed genitals feeling deliciously cool.

“Such a wee small hole for a man to lose himself in..” he murmured, his fingers easing into the damp slit teasingly.

Liz inhaled sharply at his touch, lifting slightly to better allow him access.

“Ya like that, do you?” he pressed his lips to her forehead, easing deeper into the molten depths. “I like it as well.”

Liz closed her eyes, moaning softly as his fingers began a distinct slow rhythm. “Squirm for me, Lass. Let me know if I’m doing it right or not.”

Liz’s moans increased as she attempted to widen the gap for him to play but he prevented the act.

“No, no,” his tone washed over her like warm sunshine on a cloudy day, “now that’s my job isn’t it?”

He placed his penis directly against the aching pulse of her clit, inching down to her drenched opening, gently easing the large bulb through the minuscule slot.

Liz welcomed him eagerly, still frustrated for he had situated her to where only he could further any movement.

“There now, is that better...” Red eased an inch or two upward, embedding his shaft into the delicious tightness.

“M-more...” Elizabeth tried to lift, needing all of the hard heat to fill her.
“Aye, you’ll take it…” Red’s mouth feasted on her fuller lips, “every last inch of my cock will fill you, but… not just yet, Lass.”

“Red!” Elizabeth tightened her arms, completely enthralled by this new side of the man, never having experienced it before. “Do s-something!”

She felt all antsy inside as if her very flesh was on fire with sexual tension.

The man pushed roughly, to his full length enjoying the sharp gasp of joy she emitted.

“Is that what ya wanted, girl?” his own breath was becoming more and more shallow. “It’s what I want, now, let me have m’ way with you before Francis comes crawling into bed with us…”

Liz blinked her shock. Was he not as involved as she was? How could he joke at a moment like–

“Shit, Lizzy…” Red was back in full force, his voice laced with his growing lust. “Fuck, it feels so–” he grated the urgency he felt, “amazing, being inside you.’

His thrusts had quickened, his touch no longer gentle but demanding, almost rough.

His eyes dropped, taking in the sight of his cock glistening with her cream in the low light as he slid back into her heat, the low wet sound of his shaft fucking her, thrilling him to the core.

“I love your pussy…” he concentrated hard on his strokes, getting the timing just so. “You’re so hot…” he was feeling the steamy heat rise in her quivering depths, even now, “so fucking wet.”

“Yes…” she encouraged in every way she knew, “…yes, do that.”

Liz gave herself over to his demands, her nails embedding into the hard muscles of his shoulders and chest, the only areas she could reach comfortably.

Red had found a rhythm he liked, his stomach moving erotically, his muscles bunching and tightening, becoming steel under her fingertips.

She could feel him grow inside her, lengthen and thicken, becoming granite.

“Your scent…” he breathed in the fragrant, seductive aroma of aroused female. *His* female. “I dreamed of it…” his husky voice transported the woman to a sensual place.

Liz’s eyes fluttered open, staring at the man’s face which was etched with tensed strain.

“I fucking hate it when I have to leave you.” he hissed the fact, saying more than he should he knew but the declaration bubbled forth unbidden.

He shifted hastily, changing positions. “Can’t get fucking deep enough.” he growled his annoyance, having pushed her thighs wide as he re-entered her core, his thrusts hard and confident now.

His eyes fixated on the place their bodies joined, remaining steady. “Wider, baby.” his voice trembled with desire. “I want to see you come.”

Liz flushed but did not once think of refusing.

Something inside her shifted as the man shoved his penis deep into her vulnerable flesh. The sensation of every ridge, vein, the pulse of his cock rippled through the slick heat of her cushioned depths.
She moaned melodiously in response.

Red wisely left his shaft buried deep for a long breath.

His eyes closed, his head dropping forward as he too, drank in the sensation, a low guttural sound escaping his throat.

Red’s gaze trained on her flushed cheeks, “Open your eyes, baby.” The dark depths of the man’s eyes bespoke of his need. “I’m gonna fuck you like you’ve never been fucked.”

The man’s raspy voice, the vulgarity... and picture presented of his intentions left Liz visibly shaking.

“You’re going to remember it...” he nodded ever so slowly, the dreamy depths of his gaze deepening, “and want me to fuck this steamy little hole of yours again. I’ll see to it.” he pushed in against her clit, increasing the tightness around his cock.

A smile twitched at Liz’s lips, “Oh, I already do, but... you do what you have to.” she lifted seductive brows.

Inhaling shakily, Red keyed his body’s reaction as best he could.

The shapely legs opened, agonizingly slow.

Red’s attention was diverted from the sapphire blue eyes staring back at his so steadily.

He blatantly stared down at the sight of their intimate union, the neatly trimmed fluff of dark curls beckoning him.

Red withdrew his cock, sliding out to the very tip, then eased into the welcoming body with a slow, measured pace. Grasping her knee, he slid it higher up along his hip, allowing him deeper access.

“...Yes,” he sighed his contentment, inching his way inside, “you just relax for me.” he crooned softly.

Elizabeth closed her eyes, relishing the man’s slow, even entrance. She ran her fingers over his chiseled jawline.

Red caught them, turning her palm to his mouth, his lips burning a searing path into the soft flesh, the tip of his tongue flicking suggestively into the slits of her fingers.

His hot breath sent shivers up her spine. She stifled a whimper of delight.

Liz always marveled at the emotional presence this man could carry.

Her body clasped hold of his cock, her muscles contracting around his engorged shaft, holding him deep within her core.

“That’s my good girl...” his ass flexed with his sharp movements, “take what I can give you.” he muttered tightly.

Red trembled at the reaction his actions caused. The blue depths drew him into her space as never before. He could not look from the ardently alluring gaze.

A sudden surge of feeling, both emotional and physical, robbed him of breath.

The tip of her tongue wetted her lips, a sweet innocence accompanying the gesture.
She wasn’t being coy, she was asking him a question. One to which he knew the answer.

When he had taken her, made love with her as God had intended. He had never felt such euphoria.

But the ‘something’ which had passed between them in the last few moments, heightened the passion... the need.

He knew, in their imminent consummation, he would find fulfillment, an incredibly profound emotional stirring, the likes he had never felt before.

The man put all the prose he felt surging through his body into the act he was performing, wishing to give Elizabeth the answer she sought.

Wanting it with a desperation alien to the man. He intertwined his fingers into the smaller ones, bunching a gentle fist into the bedding.

“Do you feel it, baby?” he murmured tautly, did she feel what he was experiencing?

Red flicked the erect little nipple hungrily, his breath hot on her exposed flesh, “How much I missed you?”

Elizabeth clamped her legs tighter about his hip line, moving up into his hardened flesh. She more than felt it... felt him.

“You are such a vital part of my life now...” he could say this much, “without you here... I feel incomplete.”

The woman empathized with him, breathing the words breathlessly, “Yes... I feel that.”

Red kept his movements slow, calculated, beads of perspiration forming on his brow from the exertion.

He caught her mouth possessively, the kiss finished on his terms only. “I feel centered again,” he rasped the declaration, “coming home... to you.”

Liz’s heart quickened, her hips meeting his thrusts eagerly.

Nuzzling her face into the crook of the man’s neck, she inhaled the earthy scent. Her fingers clasped about the muscled flesh of his arm, feeling the corded steel as he flexed.

“This is just for me and you...” he felt her thighs tremble against his sides, “and nothing...” he moved sacredly, “nothing has ever felt so real.”

Liz’s body was tense and coiled, swept up in the sensual world he created for her alone.

The man tilted his hips drawing a sharp gasp of pleasure from her lips.

Concentrating his length and strength of thrusts, he gingerly slid along the swollen nub of her sex repeatedly drawing soft moans of gratitude and awe from the woman.

“Oh...fuck.” Liz felt herself losing what little control she had managed to maintain. “Ohh, G-God, Red.”

“You like that,” he smiled as much, “right there... is it?”

He pushed his throbbing head along the bumpy ridge he felt, “Yes...” He sighed his bliss, “your
pussy likes that, doesn’t it?”

“H-higher.” Liz was not above pleading her cause at this stage.

“As you wish.” he repeated the phrase he had used earlier this evening but now, it held an entirely different connotation.

“You know what I think?” his hot breath caressed her ear. “I think,” the low animalistic growl eased along her nerve endings, “you want to come for me.”

He shortened his technique, increasing the strength of his strokes masterfully.

“And wouldn’t I love the fact...”

Liz rocked her hips, the sound of their bodies impacting turning her own even more so, were that possible.

“Your cock feels so...” she breathed shakily, her moans coming in shallow bursts, “...good.”

“Does it now.” his own labored breathing fanned her face. “Nothing compared to your sweet pussy, believe me, sweetheart.”

Liz reached, wrapping her fingers about his corded neck muscles urging him to her parted lips.

The man devoured the sweet swollen redness eagerly. He broke the kiss mid-tongue, “Oh, shit...” he gritted, “come, baby. Fucking come.” he hissed. “Don’t make me wait any longer.”

Liz arched up into his quickened pace, trembling under the onslaught.

Sliding his hand between them, Red thumbed her swollen clit with enticement to give him what he wanted. He groaned brokenly as the woman’s body clamped tightly around his shaft, grasping hold of the rapidly thrusting thickness in delicious increments that stole his breath.

“God, baby...” he gasped, “...yes, come,” he pleaded, “...do that for me.”

Bowing sharply, she was pushed over the edge by the frantic pleading. Liz shuddered jerkily with the power of her release, crying out into Red’s neckline, her thighs clamping almost painfully against his body.

“Fuck...yes...” Red hissed his gratitude, “listen to you...” he reveled in the beautiful sounds of her completion, “Did you need this, baby?” he hoped to hell she had.

His brow furrowed deeply as he allowed Elizabeth a moment to enjoy the climax she so richly deserved.

“I need to see this...” he gritted, sitting back on his haunches. Grasping her waist, he pulled her roughly against his cock, fucking her hard and fast.

Her breasts brushed against his hands, begging for his touch. Cupping one, he thumbed the pert nipple, drawing the most unrestrained, raw sounds he had ever heard from the woman.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come so hard.” he husked.

Quickening his pace, the man sensed the moment he had needed so desperately was upon them.

A growling moan rumbled deep in his throat, his hips jerking roughly as he stabbed his shaft deep
inside her creamy warmth. His sack spasmed, gifting her with his hot essence.

Liz’s plaintive cries blended with his colorful metaphors, her body shaking erratically once again as she joined the man in a complete union of body and soul.

Red slid as far as he could go, the slick little bruised hole accommodating him easily now. He trembled visibly as the last of his thick cum flowed free of his swollen, still pulsating cockhead.

Liz could feel the tension drain from his frame, his breathing eased at length and he lay still and unmoving, perched above on his forearms to take his weight off the slight body beneath him.

“Welcome home.” she whispered, exhaustion filtering into her tone. “Wanted to say it properly.”

He chuckled sensually, “And so you have,” he ran a gentle fingertip over her cheek, his mouth parting hers languidly, “the best damned ‘welcome’ in the entire galaxy.”

“The entire galaxy?” she was impressed.

“That parts I’ve been too.” he played along.

“And all this time, we thought Francis was the alien creature.”

Red studied her for a long beat, “Let’s get back to important matters.”

“What could be more important than extraterrestrial beings among us?”

“Something is bothering you.” he had felt the instant tenseness earlier. “A turn in my bed usually relaxes you completely, but... you aren’t, are you.”

“I was,” she sighed, her body slumping into the cushy bedding, “it can w–”

“No, it can’t wait.” he halted any further debate on the issue.

She sighed but gratefully gave in because the more she talked, the more the stress lifted off her shoulders.

She offered a quick run down of all that had occurred in his absence.

He listened quietly, allowing her to tell it in her own time and manner.

Once or twice, he had asked a pertinent question but otherwise, he sat upright in the bed propped against pillows and just let her talk.

“And then the PA was shitty.” she concluded the gory tale, “and the damned doctor refused my birth control pills.”

“Why would you want them? They make you feel like shit.”

Liz opened her mouth, gasping her shock. The man had been so supportive and non-judgmental, his statement took her by surprise.

“What?”

“Do you think I don’t remember the migraines? Lack of appetite.” he kept his tone respectful. “The depression? Even Tom noticed but it was only to bitch about your moods.”
“That’s just like the–”

“I don’t want you to take them.”

“I think,” she was starting to get angry, “that’s my choice.”

He was quiet an inordinately long time, “Why did you go to the doctor in the first place? Was it only for the pills?”

She glanced aside hastily, “I wanted information on options available to prevent pregnancy. IUD’s, the Depo Shot...”

“You could have gotten that on the net.”

“I wanted more detailed information.” she shrugged as the man simply continued to stare at her. “I told you it could wait. Now you’re in a mood and I’m getting there, so...”

“This is important, Elizabeth.” Red’s tone implied as much as did the fixed scowl on his face.

“Red...” she moved closer, sensing a way around the man.

He reached between them, stilling her fingers which had begun to twirl lazily about his chest hair, his expression a stern one.

“An avoidance tactic.” he motioned accordingly. “We will discuss this as two mature adults. I’ve stated my ideology on the matter, I need to hear yours, straight out.”

“I don’t know...” she whispered. “I don’t know what I think about it all.” she confessed. “It’s so early on in our relationship.”

The silence was thick.

“We’ve been without protection and all.” she tried again. “And it feels amazing, don’t think I don’t enjoy it.” she lifted her eyes quickly to his, offering assurance. “And you’re saying it’s all fine but...”

“You don’t believe me.”

“I believe you think you mean it.” she rephrased.

“I don’t say things I don’t mean.” he calmed. She was young and obviously scared. “All right,” he sighed heavily, “all right, just tell me this,” he lifted cool eyes, “the truth, Elizabeth.”

Red took a calming breath, controlling what could be a sudden rush of anger.

“Did you do something you believe I would...” his jaw clenched, the muscle pulsing, “disapprove of?”

Liz’s brows furrowed, not understanding the question until Red’s eyes dropped purposely to her abdomen.

“Oh!” she gasped. “No! No I would never...I didn’t...I wouldn’t.” she shook her head vigorously.

Red released the breath he’d been holding, relief washing through him in a wave. He knew it was too early for an abortion, but she could have scheduled a date to...

He reached out, gripping her hand in his, rubbing his thumb comfortably along her fingers.
So the problem he was left with now... or perhaps, he hesitated in his train of thought... not a problem at all, to *him*.

“Are you preg–”

“I’m not pregnant, or...” she had anticipated the confrontation, “Or at least, I don’t think I am? I was the last patient of the day and it’s Friday so...” she would have to wait for the results. “I took one of those home pregnancy tests, it said, I wasn’t.” she lifted wary eyes. “But’s it’s early yet, isn’t it?”

The man was at a loss. Just because he was ready for a family didn’t mean...

“I’m not saying I wouldn’t be... happy if I were.” she had thought about it seriously. “I would want it if... it were there, I *would*.”

“When I initiated making love protection free,” the man stated firmly, “I well understood the possible consequences. And I accept them wholeheartedly.” his tone brooked no argument. “I’m not some asshole you met in a bar looking for a quick fuck, Elizabeth.”

She squirmed about, disliking his anger, although, he didn’t seem angry, worse, he appeared... hurt?

“If there is a child, if *we* have made one,” the thought thrilled the man but he kept the truth under wraps, “I intend to be there with you, every step of the way.”

There it was, in a nutshell. Words that meant so much to her. She hadn’t even realized until he said them and made her believe his pronouncement how much she had needed to hear the words.

He had maintained eyes contact, he reaffirmed his commitment to her in no uncertain terms.

“I will *always* be here... if you want me.” the solemn promise resonated between them.

She threw herself into his arms, allowing the tears which she had held at bay for so long.

“I knew that!” she sniffed holding tight to his neckline. “I did.”

He cupped her head, closing his eyes to the feel of her once again in his arms.

“Francis was right earlier,” he kissed her cheeks lovingly, “not much scares me any longer,” he stated confidently, “so don’t ever do that to me again,” he asked more than told, “because you just scared the fuck out of me.”

She blinked, tears threatening again.

“Not the baby part,” he hastened to explain, though there were aspects of that they still needed to discuss, “God, no, Lizzy. The fact that... something might come between us. Destroying what we have.”

She shook her head negatively. “No, we talk it out... we *will*, won’t we?”

The fear had not abated on either side.

“I pray to God that will be the case.” he grasped the woman in a crushing embrace. “I will never leave you, Lizzy. Not on my own accord, not ever.”

The woman wept tears of joy.

She finally was able to sleep. His arms encompassed her in a cocoon of strength and stability.
The worries of the week... obliterated.

Chapter End Notes

If there's anything wrong with this, it's all on me. There was a lot to edit in so I might have screwed up a couple times.

Oh, and before you ask. I did write most that last part with an Irish accent in my head. :)

May 31

As the night moved forward, the storm outside increased in its intensity.

Elizabeth slept fitfully, bothered by segments of disturbing images flashing in her fractured dreams.

It was well past midnight when the woman jolted upright from these dreams, jostling her bed partner as well.

Red stirred sleepily, a fixed scowl on the handsome face. “What’s the problem, baby?”

Liz stared out into the vast darkness of the night the large bay window allowing a view of a rain splattered pane.

Flashes of lightning lit the interior of the massive room she occupied with streaks of vivid illumination, casting eerie shadows.

“Did you hear something?” she whispered shakily. Sitting her hand on his chest, she leaned towards where she thought the sound had originated, listening intently to the unnatural silence about her.

Red held his smile, rubbing his hand slowly up her back, “No more scary movies.” he philosophized. “Were you dreaming?” he had felt her restlessness all night.

“I’m sure I heard something.” or... she had been sure, before waking from a questionable state of heightened nerves.

“The guards would have alerted us if anything was wrong.” Red reminded tactfully.

The woman sat clutching the covers to her chest, her body unnaturally tense.

“You sure it wasn’t the echoes of all those chainsaws you were subjected to tonight?” the man could not resist the jibe. “Or maybe it’s just Francis clearing us out of lasagna.” he softened the blow deliberately, before stretching lazily.

She turned her head, searching him out, “You really didn’t hear anything?” she knew the folly of the question having asked it anyway.

“I’m sure it was nothing, probably just the wind and that damn tree limb.” he added pressure to the hand rubbing her back, eliciting a burst of goosebumps along the curve of her spine. “Go back to sleep.”

She searched his face carefully.

“The radio has been silent all night long.” he motioned to the side table.

Liz glanced at the object.
“I could check the house.” he offered magnanimously.

“No.” she stayed his intended rising, “no, I’m just... being a wussy,” she realized as much, “like Francis.”

“Oh, you’re not that bad.”

“And as you said.” Liz smiled at Red’s comment, “Joe is out there.”

“He would alert us if your safety was in question... we would immediately move to a more secure location.” Red explained the established protocol.

The woman glanced to the radio. It sat silent, mocking her.

“See.” he lifted the object. “I’m on channel two.” It was set properly. “The guards... on channel three. If anything is amiss, they simply switch over and we’re set to go. Otherwise, they don’t bother us.”

“It’s no bother.” she was quick to assure.

“It is to me.” he chuckled. “My time with you means a lot. I’d like to keep it just between the two of us, if at all possible.”

Liz nodded, “...Yes.” their time was precious.

Red knew recently the guards had apprehended a neighborhood thief while they slept, peacefully unaware.

“Dembe is up and about as well.” Red had not heard any movement upstairs. He was a very light sleeper so he always knew when Dembe was up and moving.

“Oh... is he having trouble sleeping again?” Liz was instantly concerned.

“Dembe’s demons are his own, unfortunately.” Red had long since accepted the fact. “He has informed me, in no uncertain terms, that he alone, must conquer them.”

The woman felt bad for the man, all the same. “He is such a good guy...”

“He is.” Red nodded his agreement. “Lizzy,” he hesitated bringing up the obvious, “those movies tonight, one of those women were subjected to much as you were under Carver’s–”

“I hated that part.”

“Have you considered that you might be suffering from a form of PTSD?” he had been meaning to bring the matter up now for some time. “We’ve never really discussed it at length. Perhaps some counseling. I would not be adverse to attending sessions with you if–”

“The FBI has me scheduled remember.”

“But are those good enough?” was the question of the day in Red’s mind. “For me even... that time... the pictures in my head are so vivid...” he wiped the graphic images away even now.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now, okay.” Liz rose, scooting to the side of the bed. “I’m thirsty.” she bolstered herself, slipping a pajama set over her nude frame.

“I will get–”
“No,” she stated firmly, “I will not give in to these childish feelings. There are no ghosts or goblins.” she said stoutly. “Only in Hollywood’s nefarious little minds.” she shuffled to the door, calling back over her shoulder, “I’m a big girl. About time I acted the part.”

Those brave words diminished after a few steps down the dark, shadowy hall.

“I’ll keep your side of the bed warm.” Red’s voice drifted down the corridor giving her added incentive to move forward.

“Don’t you do anything unseemly on ‘my side’ of the bed.” she warned, her tone scolding.

“Then you better hurry up and get back, huh.”

The woman chuckled, continuing on down the hardwood path. “Stupid movies,” she rolled her eyes at her own foolishness, “jumping at shadows, seeing zombies being every potted plant.”

Pushing her way into the kitchen, she headed for the fridge, the dim light hurting her eyes after the prolonged darkness of night. She secured a bottle of water for herself and one for Red.

She bumped the door shut with her hip, once again left her in darkness. But unlike a few minutes ago, she felt fine in the inky blackness.

The sound of the fridge whirring, the low hum of the air conditioner and the repetitive click of the seal breaking on her bottle cap all left her feeling centered.

Walking through the dimly lit archway, she looked out towards the garden in passing, pulling up short when the shadowy figure of something danced over the windows and lace curtains of the French door.

Squinting out at the darkened recesses of the outside patio, she slowly inched forward. The woman gasped audibly, stepping back, jolted by a blinding flash of light illuminating the room with startling clarity.

Turning away from the stark glare she startled, gulping her shock. The sound of a loud thunderous boom shook the night air.

“Jesus!” she whispered shakily, clasping her chest, forcing her nervous system to calm by sheer force of will.

Lifting her eyes to the arched windows, she saw the flicking light of yet another approaching storm. She became even more unsettled.

She hated storms...

“Great.” she muttered the realization. “Just what this night needs.” straightening her spine, she moved forward.

“You used to chase storms,” she sighed her discontent, “... now you run from them.”

Readjusting the bottles in her arms, Liz took a deep even breath, determined to conquer the unreasonable fear she was experiencing once and for all when the sight of the shadowy figure reappeared out of the corner of her eye.

“It’s just the trees.” she reminded herself. “Just the freaking trees.” but suddenly, the shadow was looming closer, growing in size.
Stepping forward quickly, she grimaced as the vision of a tree hurtling at her flashed in her mind’s eye.

She shook the sensation, her eyes focusing on the reality taking place outside the house.

A rush of pure adrenaline coursed through her veins. Dropping the bottles to the rug beneath her, Liz bolted for the door, yanking it open.

Running across the length of the patio, she ignored the bite of the cobbled stone against her bare feet. Liz jerked back, stumbling on the hard pavement as the combatants lurched her way.

Two men fought ruthlessly against one another, throwing solid punches, swinging hard and fast.

“Get back inside!” a familiar voice growled viciously through gritted teeth as a swift upper cut was delivered to his opponent’s chin. The recipient staggered back, catching his balance on the wall before hurrying himself back into the fray.

Liz gasped with fear seeing the glint of a blade shine in the low light as a sharp crack of lightning streaked across the sky. Kevin, Liz’s newest guard, threw his arm up as the weapon veered in a downward arc. Kevin’s quick action stopped the intended jab.

“Go! Get Joe!” the guard hissed as he grasped the other man’s hand and wrist, sharply twisting the appendage.

Turning his upper body, he gained a small advantage of control then rushed his opponent roughly back and away from the woman. The men toppled over the stone bench, driving the air from their lungs on impact.

Grappling with the hand which held the knife, Kevin threw his head back, connecting full force with his enemy’s face.

Spinning about, Liz looked around frantically for a weapon of some sort... anything! Grasping the heavy metal vase, she neared the melee, cracking Kevin’s rival over the head.

The reverb stung her hands, making her drop the ornate urn to the ground, their foe following suit.

Pushing away from the disoriented man, Kevin grasped Liz’s arm, rushing her back to the house. As they reached the step, the sound of quickened footsteps approached. Pushing Liz aside, Kevin turned, already on the defensive.

Liz lunged for a walking stick which stood dormant by the side of the entrance door. Kevin gasped sharply. She gripped the makeshift weapon, hoisting it aloft, ready for action.

Kevin lurched forward towards the French door.

She watched the man falling as if in slow motion, the blunt end of a knife stuck grotesquely from the guards back.

The glass door shattered with the heavy weight of his impact.

The vague sound of running feet neared her position.

Gripping the cane tight in her hands, Liz swung about, connecting squarely with the intruder’s face. The blow offered a momentary reprieve. Her first concern was for her guard, of course. She rushed to the fallen man only to be grasped bodily and hauled to her feet.
The assailant swung her about abruptly, lashing out with a beefy fist.

The blow knocked her backwards, her cheek stinging painfully with the hit.

Liz’s heel caught on the step, disorienting her. In a useless attempt to catch herself, her hands shoved haphazardly into a potted plant, knocking the thick blue pottery to the ground, leaving it in shattered pieces.

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Red laid his head onto his arm, staring out into the dark room. He watched the clock roll, his brow furrowing.

What was taking Lizzy so long?

Red sat up, too restless to lay still. He absently listened for her footsteps coming down the hallway.

A squawk pealed from his radio, sounding inordinately loud in the silence of the room. He turned his head toward the table, zeroing in on the black device.

“What the fuck!” he was up, grasping his clothes in milliseconds. Having collected his weapon from beneath the pillow, he was on his way down the dark corridor in record time.

It seemed it took him forever to cross the area needed. Red pulled up short, hearing the distinct sounds of a scuffle of some sort.

He eased closer, keeping to the wall, weapon raised.

“Take it easy, bitch.” a male voice was breathing heavily. “You’re wasting my fucking time.”

“Let me go!” Liz’s voice was laced with fury. “I need to help Kevin, he’s hurt!”

“Kevin is beyond help.” the amusement found in the reply struck Red as singularly sickening. “You worry about me... now, let’s go find all those pretty little gems you have hidden in your bedroom, ‘kay.”

Liz stopped struggling for a beat, the statement stunning her senses, “You’re here to... rob the place!”

“I’m not here to redecorate.”

“This house?” she was stupefied, “You pick this house!”

“I don’t discriminate.” the voice was losing patience. “I rob any house. Now, shut the fuck up and–”

“You must be the most stupid man in the entire universe!” she had concluded. “Don’t you know who owns this place?”

“Impress me.” the man did not seem easily swayed.

Liz settled, “Look, if you let me help my guy, I’ll give you anything you want.”

“You’ll give me anything I want anyway,” the tone had turned suggestive, “don’t kid yourself.”

Red’s hand tightened on the hilt of his gun.
“Yeah, whatever but we can do that the easy way... or not.” Liz bargained for time. She knew Red had to have heard the ruckus. “I don’t care about the jewelry... or anything else. Kevin could be bleeding internally. Don’t add murder–”

“What are you, my lawyer?” the man turned the woman about. “Stop playing fucking games and–”

Liz looked at the face. Kevin had done a job on the guy. It was hard to tell where the blood stopped and his features began. He must be hurting.

He was younger than she had thought by his voice but his eyes were hard. He was not a normal run of the mill criminal. She sensed as much.

“I know you from somewhere.” he was studying her face.

Liz glanced anxiously to where her guard lay, so unnaturally quiet and unmoving.

“...Well, I’ll be damned.” the man chuckled. The sound was perverse under the circumstances. Liz returned troubled eyes for the fact. “You’re that bitch everyone’s looking for. I saw your picture.”

The woman was instantly on alert.

“My luck is changing.”

“That’s what you think.” she scoffed. Where the hell was Silas!

“Quite a haul tonight.” he seemed impressed, waving a careless hand about. Liz noticed the glint of the weapon. “Ton’s of shit to hawk and now... a pretty price on your head.”

Liz jerked on her captured arm, “You are a first class moron!”

The man’s temper flared. He pulled her roughly into his arms, deliberately chastising in the worst way possible. His hand ran over her stomach, grasping at a convenient breast.

Liz struggled in earnest preventing his intended move, “You touch me again and I’ll–”

“You’ll what?” it was snapped. “Don’t want a man to touch, don’t show the merchandise.”

Red’s temper flared. Only the emergence of Dembe to his far right stopped his intended advancement.

The large man waved his weapon to indicate another’s arrival on scene.

Francis crept low, coming in from the opposite direction.

Red was able to calm his reactions.

“You disgust me.” Liz’s voice held her contempt.

“Yeah?” the man’s retort was tight with controlled rage. “Bet you’ll change your tune after I’m between your legs for a spell... I could use a good fuck.”

“You’re gonna get fucked all right.” Liz laughed hollowly. “My fiancé is gonna fucking kill your ass. He will end you, you son of a bitch!”

The man laughed darkly, “I believe he’s indisposed, did you forget?”
Liz kept her mouth shut.

“You have one chance of getting out of this alive.” Liz tried another route. “If Kevin is all right, I’ll talk to Red. If you let me go... if you let me get help for—”

“Shut the fuck up!” The man’s patience was at an end.

“You should practice what you preach.”

Red’s head hung forward, relief converging in his body. He recognized that surly, impatient voice.

“You picked the wrong house, asshole.” Joe was continuing to do what he did best... intimidate. “You let her go, you live. It’s that simple.”

“I let her go,” there was a desperation to the intruder’s statement now, “I die.”

“You’re going to die one way or other.” Joe seemed relatively certain of the fact. “Where do you think this fucking weapon is pointed exactly.”

Francis stepped around the corner of the dining room wall, weapon raised and fixed, “Or this one?”

Dembe joined him seconds later. His own gun held in steady hands, aimed at the man’s head.

Red entered quietly from the opposite entrance, his features deathly quiet. He moved forward ever so slowly out of the bastard’s eye sight.

The assailant twisted his head about, sweat glistening on his forehead and upper lip.

“Hey,” he tried for damage control, “this is getting out of hand... tell you what,” he held the gun to Liz’s neck, “I’ll just take the little lady with me and when I get a safe distance away from you gun-totin’ cowboys, I’ll just... let her go.”

“Yeah,” Joe laughed cruelly, “that’s gonna happen.”

Dembe’s eyes were dark and menacing. Francis’ jaw worked angrily, his features cold and distant.

Joe stepped once, purposely.

“Stay back!” the intruder’s weapon trained on the guard instinctively.

Red took the opportunity presented, closing the space needed.

The assailant froze, feeling the cool steel barrel shoved into the back of his head. Red had moved with remarkable agility, his Glock pressing painfully with all the rage he was feeling.

“Let her go.” Red’s clipped and icy rejoinder washed over the man.

The intruder tightened his hold on Elizabeth in response.

“Release her.” Red growled menacingly.

The man stilled all movement, keeping his hold on the woman while he silently weighed the options.

“Sweetheart, you’re gonna be all bloody in a second.” Red warned her assailant more than Elizabeth.

“I don’t care.” she struggled under the man’s tight hold. She heard the click of the hammer on Red’s
weapon pull back.

The man instantly released her, showing his arms to his captors.

Liz instantly rushed to Kevin’s side but Silas was already there.

Dembe stepped casually, relieving the asshole of his weapon having grasped the man’s wrist, twisting expertly until the hold was forfeited.

Men came out of nowhere, one stooping to examine Kevin, the others preparing a transport for the still silent individual.

“...Silas?” Liz’s blue eyes lifted, asking the rhetorical question.

“He’s strong.” Silas muttered, too concentrated on the injured man. “Easy, he’s lost a lot of blood.” he snapped when the medical team jostled Kevin.

Red lifted the woman, his hand gentle on her shoulders. “Let them do their job, Lizzy,” he just wanted to feel the woman safe in his arms.

“We need Mr. Kaplan.” Liz sought out the man. “She will help Kevin.”

Silas’ eyes met Red’s, “We had it under control.” his attitude suggested as much.

“Then what the hell happen–”

“I happened.” Liz turned on the man. “Kevin was watching out for me. He could have handled the intruder.” she realized the fact early on. “He told me to get Joe... to get back in the house so he could do his job!”

The emotions were catching up to the woman. “It’s my fault... I should have listened!”

“Yes, you should have.” Silas gravely stated.

“And you,” Red wasn’t going to allow this, “should never have let that fucker get as far as he did.”

“Stop...” Liz whispered.

Red did, for he knew how upset the woman got when he tied into Silas.

“We need to know the weak spots in our defense perimeter.” Silas snapped right back, ignoring Liz for a beat. “The doors were secured.”

“I wanted to help...” Liz said listlessly.

“How did that work out for you, sweet cheeks?” the intruder chuckled his mirth.

Francis cuffed the man on the side of the head with the butt of his weapon.

“Geez man,” the guy shook the blow off as best he was able, “what the fuck?”

Francis cuffed him again, “Watch your mouth or I’ll shut it for you permanently.”

“What are you guys?” the man squirmed about, unable to wriggle too much as Dembe had bound him up good and proper. “Ease up can’t ya? That hurt!”

Red’s hostile utterance washed over the man, “Keep your mouth shut until I get around to you.”
“Take your time old man.”

Francis cuffed the guy... harder this time.

Red nodded curtly and Francis hit the guy again across the cheek, this time, bringing blood.

“Fuck!” the thief gasped his shock. “What the fuck, man!” the guy seemed genuinely perplexed. “Why did you do that?” he spit blood on the spotless floor.

“Would you like me to do worse?” Red stepped, his weapon placed against the man’s head. “No problem, just say the word! I’m a little hard of hearing though, being so old and all so... speak up.” Red cocked the gun, his eyes cold.

“You guys are crazy!” was the general consensus suddenly. “Just call the damned cops... get me out of this loony bin.”

Red’s eyes met Elizabeth’s, expecting to see revulsion for his behavior. Her gaze was clear, unfettered. “Do what you have to do.”

“That’s cold bitch!” the man squawked incredulously.

Francis lifted his arm, his intention more than evident.

“Don’t hit me again... I’m sorry already!” it was belligerently pleaded. “Are you guys nuts or what?”

“Who are you?” Red demanded.

“I don’t have to answer any questions, Pops. I got rights.” the man smirked. “Haven’t you heard?”

Red backhanded the guy, his fury behind the action.

The burglar fell from the chair Dembe had placed him in, clattering noisily to the floor.

He lay, moaning his despair.

“For someone kissing hardwood,” Joe pointed out, “you could lose the attitude.”

“It could very well be the death of you,” Dembe intoned quietly, “if not.”

“Speaking of which,” Red’s manner indicated stressors were present, “he’s bleeding all over Lizzy’s floor, take him out of here!”

“The atrium has a drain.” Dembe reminded one and all.

“Oh, a drain...” the statement had once again amused their ‘guest’, “yeah, right... a drain. I’m shaking in my boots.” he disdained, squirming about aimlessly in his bonds. “Look, let’s cut the crap. My time is valuable.” he threw a glare at his captors. “Just call the cops all ready. I can make bail and be out in time to make sure this night isn’t a complete bust.”

“He just doesn’t learn, does he?” Francis sighed lightly then kicked the guy in the gut... less than delicately.

The man lay gasping, frantically trying not to pass out, coughing and sputtering, like a floundering fish. “You fucker!” he spat venomously. “I’ll kill you for that!”

“When,” Francis was not impressed by the theatrics, “or if we ever release you from your present
situations?"

“Who are you guys?” it was pleaded plaintively, “just call the cops! I got rights I tell you!”

“Take him.” Red snapped. “Get him out of my sight!” he had enough.

Joe motioned for one of the many guards who had come in seconds after the little shit was taken down. “Boss wants him to wait in the atrium.”

The orders were immediately carried out.

“I’ll sue you for everything you own!” was the hollow threat which echoed after the departure.

Red turned his attention to Lizzy immediately. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, her expression troubled, her demeanor, unsettled.

“Before you explode,” Joe stepped forward hastily, “it was all an unfortunate misunderstanding.”

“Don’t give me that shit.” Red turned, a force to be reckoned with. “Just give me the details.”

“We tracked him as he cleared the fence,” Joe lost no time on preliminaries, “the neighbor’s tree limb is a problem. The rains this year have—”

“I don’t want to hear this shit.” Red was taking his anger out on any and all. He knew it, but he also knew, the man could handle it.

“They are out of town,” Silas intervened, “we couldn’t get clearance to cut the damned thing off and it was too high for anyone to....” he trailed away. Red’s expression said it all.

“The guy must be a fucking acrobat, but we knew of the problem and were trying to handle it.” Silas continued. “You told us, with that fucker out front, we weren’t to cause waves.”

Red calmed because... he had said that.

“People are funny about their trees.” Joe nodded thoughtfully. “We didn’t want to cause any dissension.”

“Cut the damned thing down, tonight.” Red snipped.

“We were tracking the little dick,” Silas resumed his narrative, “like last time, we tracked him to see if the perimeter of the house was penetrable.”

“...Last time?” Liz scowled.

Red glanced at her.

“Did Tom manage...”

“It was nothing, we eliminated the threat.” Silas’ waved a beefy hand.

“You eliminated...” the woman’s eyes were large, “you... killed someone?”

Silas tugged on his ear, “Nah, we phoned in a tip after a few days... I’m sure the cops got him out.”

“Out of what?” Liz wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“Lizzy, please.” Red wasn’t interested in any of that. “Go on.” he turned impatient eyes to his head
Silas had all ready informed him of the ‘incident’. The lawn crew had spilled gasoline in the garage and had forgotten to relock the window. An almost thief had found the vulnerable spot.

“The back yard has no cover, it was hard for Joe to close the distance without being seen.” Silas clearly hated having to explain his methods, “how do we judge our defenses if we can’t allow someone to test them.”

“Kevin was just coming off break,” Joe laid it out, “he came out of the side doors just as the little creep reached his position.”

“The guy was hiding behind the only cover in miles.” Silas’ tone was brittle. “But that doesn’t excuse the kid’s lack of awareness of surroundings.”

Red was more patient now for it was clear, Silas was bothered greatly by what had gone down.

“Kevin has become too complacent.” Silas bitched clear and simple. “He was not alert, his mind was not on the present, on the job.”

“Stop it.” Liz flared. “Kevin saved my life!”

“Again,” Silas snapped right back, “his job... at least he did that part.”

“Don’t you say anything bad about him!” Liz met the large man toe to toe.

Silas shifted his eyes first, “Whatever...” he grumbled, “the point is,” he stressed, “his radio was off. We could have alerted him to the situation.”

“Why was his radio...” Red let it go. Only Kevin knew the answer to that.

“It was off,” Silas gritted, “because he’s been making calls to a little bimbo in Malibu for about a week now. He turns off the ‘static’ so he can really get into the phone sex.”

Liz cleared her throat discreetly.

“He sometimes ‘forgets’ to turn it back on.” Silas eyed the woman noting her pink cheeks.

“Well...” Liz strived for sophistication, “he’s a young man. He was on break. Things happen.”

“Why did you go out the door.” Silas was angry again. “You were safe inside. Why didn’t you get Red?”

“No more questions.” Red snapped for clearly Lizzy was floundering.

“It c-could have been too late.” she had run all the scenarios through her head at the time. “I thought if I could distract the guy long enough, Kevin could...” she trailed away. “I’m so sorry, Silas.”

Red’s temper was at it’s boiling point but he managed to choke back his own ire for Silas’ treatment of the woman.

The head guard sighed heavily, “I know, kid.” he held up a staying hand, all the emotion draining away. “At least you didn’t run from a fight.” he chuckled mirthlessly at his own questionable wit. “Look,” he faced Liz taking her shoulders between large hands, “what’s done is done. We move on from here, okay?”
She swallowed the threat of tears, nodding.

“We all know,” he indicated those about him, his men, “what we are signing up for. We hold no illusions as to exactly what the job might entail.” he referred to Kevin’s predicament, of course.

Liz’s eyes flicked from one hardened face to the next.

“We also know, a moments hesitation, a lapse in concentration can get us dead real fast.” Silas soothed in his own way. “Your only crime was that you wanted to help someone in trouble, don’t let it eat at you. There were extenuating factors which led to the outcome.”

Liz listened attentively, her mood deadened.

“Review the decisions you made tonight, think about the things you could have done differently, remember the mistakes for future reference.” Silas finished the ‘lesson’. “Never repeat an error. Each encounter is a chance to learn... grow.”

Liz hung her head, taking in the advice for all she was worth, “My mistakes could cost Kevin his–”

“Kevin is still here.” he hoped as much anyway. “Don’t count him out so quickly.” he released her shoulder. “She’s cold..”

It was Silas’ way of saying, Liz was standing about half-dressed in a room full of men. Not that he did not trust the guys under him to live up to his expected code of proper behavior.

The woman had been through enough. It was Silas’ protective side coming to the fore.

Red ran his glance over the almost see through fabric of her night clothes, “Francis, could you...”

“Oh,” the kid kicked into action, understanding the two men needed to discuss something, “come on, Lizzy.” he put a brotherly hand about her shoulders.

Liz didn’t argue. She felt she had caused enough trouble for one night.

Red watched her exit, his thoughts varied.

“You were too fucking hard on her.” the minute the woman was out of ear shot, Red let his feelings be known.

“If I had been harder on Kevin...” Silas continued, “maybe it would have saved his life.”

“Elizabeth isn’t one of your men.” Red reminded.

“You want her strong enough to face what’s on the horizon?” the guard stepped closer, glad to have an outlet for the despair he felt. “Shit happens. Tonight’s fiasco for example, we can’t always be there. You know that! No matter how well we plan.”

Red was reminded why he kept competent people around him.

“Don’t tie my hands,” Silas’ inflection was low, almost menacing, “if we’re not there, I want her to be able to defend herself until we are. I thought we were in agreement on this point!”

Red seethed, “Yeah,” he ran a weary hand across his brow, “yeah, we are.” he waved a dismissing hand.

“Best laid plans.” Joe eased the transition for both men. “We can try every avenue of recourse but in
the end, Fate might kick us in the ass. Remember the Cambodia Incident.”

Red remembered it well. “I want to talk to the little bastard, get things straight in my head.”

The men journeyed to the atrium. Even before they arrived they could hear that the fucker’s bravado had returned.

“Silas, upgrade to that new Biometric system you wanted.” Red halted just outside the room, rubbing at the tension in his temples. “He recognized Lizzy, but from where?”

“He mentioned a picture.” Joe reminded and Red nodded.

“Maybe the Ex,” Silas jerked his head in the direction of the street, “could be upping the game. Hoping to catch us off guard by these little diversions. He might be orchestrating them.”

“If that bastard has spread Lizzy’s face to the entire fucking underground...” Red’s temper returned in a flash, “I will put a bullet in what little brains he has, so help me God.”

“I’ve got one that has his name written on it.” Silas remarked helpfully. “Took a while to spell out fucker... but in the end, I got it all to fit.”

Red drew in an even breath, motioning to the trail which awaited.

“If that stupid bitch had just...” Nathan Tuttle was hitting his stride, spewing venom.

Red reached the man in record time, his fist connecting with the upper jaw area of the foul mouth.

Blood split from the gash his knuckle made.

Red stood directly before the guy, his eyes empty of any emotion. “Here’s what we are going to do from this minute forward.,” he spoke almost civilly, “I speak, you respond.”

“If I weren’t tied up like a pig on a spit, old man, I would...”

Red delivered two rapid hits, one to the face, the other to the gut.

“You are tied up and as you so aptly stated,” it was reminded, “like the pig you are. Let’s begin anew, shall we?”

“I’ll remember you, you basta–”

Red silenced the man effectively, his knuckles bloodied and aching from the punishment inflicted.

“I speak,” he repeated patiently, “you respond.”

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“When will we hear anything?” Liz paced the wood floor aimlessly as she had now for a few silent moments.

“Let Mr. Kaplan do her thing. She knows the drill.” Francis advised.

The silence returned for a long beat. “Did you know him?” she inquired, seeking the man out.

“He’s the new guy.” Francis knew that much.

“He’s a nice guy, Francis.” Liz’s eyes softened, “a really nice guy. I was just getting to know him.”
Francis wisely allowed her to vent.

“He comes from a large family.” it was relayed. “Four brothers, two sisters.” the woman smiled, “I always wanted a sister.”

Francis could hear the wistfulness in Liz’s voice.

“His younger sister, Megan, lost her husband unexpectedly.” the room was quiet except for her narrative. “Kevin was taking up the slack, helping financially, being there for the kids... you know.”

Francis nodded his understanding.

Liz grew agitated, “I don’t know what she’ll do if–”

Francis arose from his seat in the comfortable chair by the window. “Stop thinking like that.” he crossed, his manner no-nonsense.

Liz tried to control her thoughts and emotions. She zeroed in on the man before her, something occurring.

“...Francis?”

“What?” he placated.

“I’ve never seen you act like that.” it had seemed so off at the time. “How you were with that... man. You seem almost like two different people sometimes.”

The man lifted his countenance, remaining silent.

“How is it you came to know Red?” she was ever so glad to have something with which to occupy her mind. “You’ve never really said.

The man turned slowly, crossing to the window. She watched his trek. “Do you... work for him in some capacity?”

The moment was regretfully interrupted, however, before any answer could be obtained.

Red walked into the master bedroom, casually removing the bloodied shirt he had donned earlier this night.

“Nathan Tuttle.” Red informed Francis Holbrook who had waited patiently with Elizabeth the entire time Red was tending to business.

Francis removed his hand from the pockets of his pants, his brow furrowed. “It sounds... familiar.” he had to admit. He had heard the name before.

Red washed up in the bathroom, slipping into a new shirt. He returned to the room, crossing to Elizabeth.

She gratefully accepted his comforting embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Thanks...” Francis quipped, throwing her a cryptic glance. “Let me make a call,” he turned to business, his steps headed out of the vicinity, “give me a few minutes.”

Red nodded, glad to have some time alone with the woman.
Liz lifted confused eyes, “Red? What is it Francis actually does for you?”

“You’re favoring your arm again.” the man had noted. “Did that son of a bitch—”

“Silas says it will take time to heal.” Liz glanced down at the weak appendage. “All my training with Silas and at the Academy...” she sought him out, “it meant crap up beside that asshole. I tried everything I was taught.”

“Stop...” he soothed, enfolding his arms about her, his palm cupping her head. “The bastard had a hundred pounds on you, baby. Don’t let it bother you.” his lips traced the dark scowl of worry on her forehead. “Silas will teach you... you’ll learn more.” he leaned back, forcing her eyes, “All right?”

The comfortable silence returned. Liz was content just to feel the steady beat of his heart.

“Are you tired?” Red glanced toward the bed.

She shook her head fiercely, “I need to know if Kevin is... all right.” she forced the viewpoint. “I’m fine. Did... did that creep say anything about anything else? Besides his name?”

“A picture of you has been floating around now for a few days.” Red stated, leading her to the large chair Francis had vacated. He sought a wrap. She had felt cold. “He didn’t know who was circulating it. He gave us a few names to run down but Silas thinks they will lead to a dead end.”

She nodded absently pulling the cover up to her chin, a cold shiver traversing her body.

“He isn’t from the Cabal.”

“You’re sure?” she lifted hopeful eyes.

“He’s just an idiot in the wrong place at the wrong time... with the wrong people.”

The woman processed, “Red, what... what are you going to do with him?”

“What would you like me to do with him?”

She considered the implications of such a statement coming from the man. She took her time in a reply.

“...He... hurt one of my guys.”

“He did that.” Red couldn’t help her on this one, he knew.

“Kevin might...”

Red remained silent, allowing her to work through the dilemma.

The moment was interrupted as Francis came breezing through the door. “He works for Anthony Burke.” the man held the phone from his ear for a beat, then held up an index finger signaling silence as he returned to the phone connection. “...damn right he’s upset, wouldn’t you be?”

Red had arisen from his stooped position beside the woman’s chair, his attention for the conversation taking place.

“This is bad, Tony.” Francis conveyed the general consensus. “He is not happy if she isn’t happy! He could and rightfully so, misconstrue this incident as an attempt on his organization—”
The man listened for a goodly spell, “He is right here if you need to speak personally on the matter.”

The phone was give over, “Reddington here.” he spoke quietly then fell silent.

Liz tried to read his face but it proved impossible.

She exchanged an impatient glance with Francis’ benign one.

“I will expect you then.” was all Red finally said before shutting down the connection.

He radioed Silas of the expected visitors estimated time of arrival.

Liz sensed Red’s anger, “What will happen now?”

“We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Did they send him and if so...” she was stumped, “whatever for?”

“They said they didn’t.” Red muttered.

“Do you believe them?”

“We’ll have to wait and see.” he smiled down at her, reaching out. Liz placed her fingers in his strong grasp.

“They will sugar coat this.” she was positive. “Let me call Ress–”

Red shook his head, his expression silencing her.

“Who’s Ress?” Francis was intrigued.

“A guy who knows a guy.” Red covered effectively.

“Ahh,” Francis nodded knowingly, “we generally like to handle these things in-house.” he informed Liz.

She had closed her eyes for the unconscious slip. “Who is ‘we’?” she turned the tables with one quick-witted move.

“We,” Francis motioned absentely, “as in Silas and Red and well... me.”

Liz had the sense she was being snowed.

“Isn’t that right, Red?” Francis threw the ball into another court, his expression clear and unassuming.

Red let it go for the moment, “Tony will deal with the problem. He has never failed me yet.”

“Yeah, the prick will get what’s coming to him.” Francis seemed to feel better.

Liz clearly was of two-minds. Her instinct telling her to call in the team on this one... but she trusted Red to do the right thing as well.

She was torn.

The radio squawked, intruding in on her thoughts.
“We’ve set up the large living room as the meeting place.” Silas directed.

“Thank you, Silas.” Red had lifted the device, “We’ll be there momentarily.”

Minutes later, Red was comfortably ensconced on one of the long divans in the designated area, drink in hand.

Francis waited to escort Liz who hastily dressed in something more suitable in which to greet visitors.

It was almost three in the morning.

Greeting visitors at such an hour seemed suddenly commonplace in the world in which she now resided.

She entered the room only a minute or two before Silas ushered in the guests.

Even Red stood when he realized Anthony Burke has not arrived empty handed.

“Antonio...” Red came forward to greet the older man, his smile genuine, “you honor our home by your presence.”

The robust man inclined his head regally, still exuding power and vitality, “I can only state how sad it makes me that it is under less than pleasant circumstances.”

He turned to Elizabeth, lifting her hand to his lips.

Liz was charmed by the gesture, her eyes softening.

“Greetings, little angel.” he spoke in his native language but his eyes spoke the universal language that any woman could understand.

“Mr. Crocetti.” the woman’s smile was full of gentle welcome.

“I thought we had decided on, Antonio,” he feigned an imposition. “Has this incident harmed our budding friendship? I will not be pleased if so.”

“Oh no,” Liz was quick to reassure, “not at all.” she cast a hasty glance at Anthony Burke who, until this moment, had stayed in the back ground.

“Rest assured, Elizabeth,” Burke stepped forward now, however his manner seemingly sincere, “if I may be so bold, yes? Rest assured,” he continued, standing, hat in hand, “I will move heaven and earth to ensure that not be the case. This matter will be handled with the upmost efficiency, to the satisfaction of all concerned.”

Elizabeth managed a smile, “Well, you see... one of my guards... he was...”

“We have been given the particulars.” Anthony nodded to Francis who stood unobtrusively beside Dembe and Silas over by Red.

“A regrettable, not to mention, unforgivable act of depravity.” Antonio continued where Burke left off. “One that will not go unpunished.”

“Please.” Red offered refreshments and a seat. Antonio smiled his pleasure, once a Cognac had been placed in his hand.
“The small pleasures in life.” he held up the warm liquor. “The night is chilled, these old bones welcome such a treat.”

Red joined the man, “Salut.”

The wise old eyes had been examining the woman who had crossed to Red’s side for some few moments now. “You were unharmed bella mia?”

Liz’s face fell, a shuddering breath escaping. “No, I am...” she shook the descending depression, “he didn’t hurt me,” she lifted solemn eyes, “K-Kevin,” she needed to convey how very important that aspect was, “he is my friend, my...”

Antonio beckoned her with a wave of his hand. Liz instinctively moved closer, kneeling before the man’s chair.

He studied her face, his fingers cupping her chin, “It is all right now.” his touch was warm and soothing, “I am here... it will be put to right.”

Liz closed her eyes, believing the words. The man gently drew her into his comforting bulk. He smelled of expensive aftershave and cigar smoke. She was instantly at ease.

“I know we can not fix what happened,” the man’s smoky voice mollified, “but we can make certain such occurrences never happen again.” it was a promise, clear and simple.

Liz leaned enough to see those penetrating eyes, “You will trust me with this, yes?”

She read the intense depths as they watched her so hypnotically.

“Yes.” she answered readily. “I will trust you.”

“We will see to this young man, your friend,” he consulted Anthony Burke who nodded solemnly, “we will see his family wants for nothing.”

“I will do that, Antonio.” Red offered quietly.

“I would deem it an honor to do so personally.” the matter was clearly settled. The old man rose, taking Elizabeth in his wake.

He smiled down at her. “Such innocence”, he marveled, “still exists. It warms my heart.” he passed her gently off to Red.

“Now, to business.” his expression and eyes hardened, “lead me to this impertinent fellow... that we may discuss this problem at hand... personally, just he and I.”

Red exchanged cryptic glances with Dembe.

“It’s this way, Sir.” Silas took the lead in the matter.

Antonio stepped kissing Liz’s forehead paternally, “You are exhausted,” he held her hands at length, his eyes softening once more, “you promised to trust me.”

She nodded that she had... and did.

“Then humor an old man.” he released the girl from his care handing her off to Francis, “I will need your fiancé for but a brief spell.”
Red stepped aside, allowing the move.

“Go, allow us to do what must be done.” he glanced to Francis.

“Come on, Lizzy.” the other man took his cue.

Liz hesitated, leaning back to impulsively kiss the weathered cheek, “Good night, Antonio.” she murmured.

Red stepped forward, cradling the small face. “I’ll be along shortly.”

Plucking absently at a button on his gaping shirt, she nodded before accepting his warm mouth against hers.

The men exited, Dembe closing the double doors behind them.

Liz swallowed hard, “Kevin didn’t make it, did he?” she knew for certain.

Francis closed his eyes, feeling his friends pain, “...No.”

Tears welled and were allowed. She bit her lip harshly, “I... I did this.”

“That fucker did this!” Francis manner shocked the woman, so much so, she startled.

“Don’t you be thinking shit like that.” he snapped. “Don’t you dare! He did it! No one else and in a few minutes.... the bastard will realize the magnitude of his actions.”

Liz’s bottom lip trembled visibly.

Francis calmed with visible effort. He sighed, placing his arm about the woman. “Come on, Lizzy, you have to go to bed. Red will kill me if I don’t get you in there.”

“I want to see Kevin.”

He hesitated, “We’re not doing that.” he spoke with such authority and gravity that Liz found herself allowing his lead.

She docilely followed the man to the back, her mood one of infinite sorrow and regret.

In another part of the house, other emotions were taking precedence.

“I am truly sorry Elizabeth is so distraught, Reddington.” Anthony Burke said sincerely.

Red watched the now unconscious man being dragged down the corridor, his thoughts his own.

“If there is anything else I may do to make amends?” he too, had witnessed Nathan Tuttle’s removal, rather impassively at that. “Whatever are we to do with that... trash.” he mused before seeking out Red’s knowledgeable eyes, “Well, of course we know what we will do... a rhetorical statement only.”

He smiled pleasantly.

“He cannot be allowed to return for Elizabeth, which he threatened.”

“They threaten and boast, do they not.” Antonio nodded sagely. “Anyone under my lead will not involve themselves in this so called ‘bounty hunt’.” the shrewd gaze shifted to Red. “I will find who
placed the sum and eliminate the threat. We will make an apt example of Nathan, rest assured.”

Anthony Burke crossed his arms over his chest, his expression a pensive one, “This ex-husband business. I am curious, of course, why have you not eliminated that threat?”

“She’s here,” Red scowled darkly, annoyed for having to explain.

“Of course,” Antonio understood right away. Anthony, not so much.

“Well, it’s your affair but if you wish assistance...” Anthony spread his hands politely.

Red nodded his acquiescence, “Appreciated.”

“Increase your security.” it was not a request, “I do not like many people, as you are well aware,” Antonio would always have the last word, “but your Elizabeth... this woman, I like. I should be most displeased if any harm should befall her.”

“Elizabeth’s safety is paramount with me.” Red assured.

“Then accept my offer of assistance.”

Red could hardly refuse. “I will absolutely do so.” he chanced a glance at Dembe and Silas who had stood stoically aside.

Silas had a shit eating grin on his face. Dembe had lifted a meaningful brow, nothing more.

“Nothing is going to happen to that girl.” Antonio scowled as he headed for the door. “I will contact you tomorrow.”

Red stayed to see his guests off, then returned to the house.

“Arrangements are in the process.”

Red knew Silas was referring to Kevin’s body. He had been notified when Anthony was in the process of chastising his man, Nathan Tuttle.

Red felt the weight.

Another life for which he would have to atone.

It was with a heavy heart, he started off to seek out Elizabeth Keen.

“Raymond...” Dembe halted his trek.

Red followed the man’s meaning.

His hands were once again, bloodied, his knuckles cracked, gashed open from the hits he had inflicted.

He too, had said his farewell to Nathan Tuttle in his own inimitable fashion.

He went to the kitchen to wash up.

But then, he always had blood on his hands, metaphorically speaking. Why did it trouble him so deeply of late?

It never had before... what a somber thought.
“Should I call Kevin’s family now or wait until morning?” Silas asked quietly having stood patiently, watching Red finish his task.

Silas offered a hand towel for the man to dry off with.

“No, we’re not going that route this time” Red wiped his eyes with his fingers, his head throbbing painfully. “We can’t have Kaplan do her thing in this instance, Silas. Let us handle this one.”

Silas, if he had any misgivings, did not voice them. Red was grateful for the fact.

“We need to revisit an issue.” Silas stopped the man in his tracks, for he was in a certain mood now. “Why won’t you let me kill him?”

“He is Anthony’s pr–”

“I’m not talking about that piss ant.” Silas grumbled. “Tom.” the man snapped.

Red lifted his attention, “I told you we aren’t going that route.” he snapped. “Let it go, Silas.”

Silas mused thoughtfully.

“She was going to have children with Tom, she had a life with him...” Red stressed, reminding Silas of the life Liz once had.

“She has gotten to the point she has literally turned her back on that asshole.” he was in no mood to revisit this subject matter. “It would be nice if she had time to process that revelation before I kill the son of a bitch.”

The guard merely shifted to the other foot.

“When that inevitable conclusion comes,” Red calmed a little, “I want it to occur away from this house.”

“It’s just...” Silas rolled his neck, pulling at the mounting tension, “the guy pisses me off. Dembe and I watched those surveillance videos...” the man shuddered. “That fucker is mental, he needs to be put down. Hell, the entire fucking Cabal needs to be put down.” the man seethed.

Liz’s privacy had been invaded to a disgusting degree.

Silas and Dembe had watched countless hours of the video collected from Liz’s last residence.

They had hoped, at some interval, whoever set up the actual surveillance might be caught on camera.

Tom Keen’s dirty work had surprised even the seasoned voyeurs. To have actually seen that fucker turn off the geeky exterior he exuded every time Liz walked out the door was kind of disconcerting.

The Cabal bastard’s had watched as she slept, showered, dressed... had sex with that asshole haunting the gate outside.

Thankfully, she didn’t have to worry about those factions here.

“Do you hear me disagreeing?”

“It goes against my natural instinct. Letting him sit out there, day in, day out.” Silas voiced his displeasure.
“She feels like this is her home now.” Red tried to explain but why he felt the need, he wasn’t sure.

Silas’ brow furrowed, “Yeah, except he’s out there mocking us... her.”

“You feel that as well now, don’t you?” Red knew his way around the subject.

Silas clearly objected to the subject change. It made him uneasy. “What are you talking about?”

“You came back early, after Memorial Day.” Red hadn’t meant to bring it up but it needed to be said. “Why? You didn’t go off the deep end this year, did you.”

Silas was... bothered. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You have found something here as well, just like Lizzy.”

The silence was uncomfortable for the guard.

“She has found serenity... a sense of peace... belonging.” Red continued but less acerbically, “I hope that applies to you as well.”

Silas looked like a brooding child, head bowed, expression petulant.

“I don’t want that taken away from her.”

“If he breaches the property—” Silas warned.

“Lizzy would expect you to do your job.” Red confirmed. “To snipe him as he sits out there innocently minding his own business...”

Red waited for the man to work it out himself...

“Would make me no better than Tom fucking Keen, in her eyes,” the guard laughed hollowly, “... and less than a man, in my own.”

Red relaxed.

“Give her time to acclimate to how she feels about him, to grow wary of his surveillance...” it was advised. “Tom will give just cause at some point, Silas. I know him. I’ve always known...”

Dembe adjusted his stance, lacing his fingers together. The closest the man would come to, albeit silently, agreeing with Red’s assessment.

“When did you get here?” Red teased, in fact sensing the man’s arrival some few seconds ago.

“Stage one,” Dembe ticked off on his fingers, not bothering to reply to the snarky statement, “giving her time away, clearing her head and adjusting to her new independence.”

“Stage two,” Red took up the cause, “breaking the repetitive cycle of mind games... seeing past the asshole’s charade.”

“Stage three,” Silas finished dejectedly, “reconciling herself with past mistakes and hopefully... moving on.”

“This has been a set back.” Red could not argue the fact. “Kevin was not something we could foresee.”
All contemplated the fact.

“She’s becoming stronger...healing everyday,” Red took hope, “in part, due to your encouragement and support.”

“Your combat training.” Dembe injected.

Silas shrugged off the praise.

“She punched Tom in the throat.” Red continued. “She could have killed him and was fully aware of the fact.” he stressed.

“She couldn’t have done that three months ago.” Dembe stated knowingly.

“I didn’t teach her very well if she didn’t succeed.” Silas pointed out the obvious.

“How does one get to Carnegie Hall?” Dembe asked seriously.

Red held his grin, “Practice makes perfect, Silas.”

“Practice doesn’t make perfect, practice reduces the imperfection.” the guard quoted Toba Beta.

“The fact is, she delivered the blow, knowing the consequences.” Red reminded. “Her well being trumped Tom’s and even Tuttle’s.” Red tried not to show his pride. “She tried.”

Silas nodded once in agreement. Liz was getting stronger, self assured.

His thoughts were already swirling with what else he should teach her? He knew she was getting better with the barbs, they were almost second nature now.

A million ideas came to Silas... what he could do to improve upon what he had taught her... to enhance that new found belief in herself. To amplify her empowerment.

Red smiled, he could almost hear the gears turning in the guards head. “Before you come up with a detailed plan to make Lizzy an assassin,” the man suggested, suddenly very tired, “...get some rest. Both of you.”

Bidding both men a good night, he headed back for the master bedroom. Stepping through the door, Red pulled up short. Lizzy was fast asleep, resting comfortably against Francis’ shoulder.

Granted, they were sitting up against the headboard, but still the sight slightly irritated Red.

But Liz needed comfort right now, so he refused to allow his own petty jealousies to take that from her.

He could not shake that old nagging reality, it still bothered him, truth told. They were both so young, vital... they looked so natural together.

Francis waved lamely, careful not to jostle the woman. “Everything back to normal?” he whispered.

Red turned off the overhead light, leaving only the side table lights on. “Everything has been resolved.... thanks in part to your timely intervention with Anthony Burke.”

Francis chuckled quietly, a smile gracing the handsome face. “Antonio put you in your place?”

“Yes.” Red sighed. “How long has she been asleep?”
“Not long,” the man admitted. “She’s run the gambit. She’s feeling the guilt over Kevin.”

Red pulled back the blankets, removing his shirt. He glanced at the picture presented, forcing his emotions aside. “You’re good for her.”

Francis glanced at the unruly top of Liz’s head. “I make everyone’s life better by existing,” he stated emphatically, “Now if I could just convince the lovely Nora of the fact.” he sighed morosely.

“This position is killing my arm, you know.” Francis grimaced. “But I will stoically hold up, regardless the cost to my body.”

“Toughen up you pussy.” Red rumbled his amusement.

“First you praise Caesar, then you disparage him.” Francis extolled. “I’m confused.”

“A constant state for you, I should imagine.”

Liz shifted, mewling softly, Red lowered his voice. He gazed upon her peaceful features. “I do not like people that disrespect women.” the thought occurred to him.

“Especially this one.” Francis smiled, before it slipped away. “Where did that come from?”

“Just thinking back over tonight.” Red admitted. “...I wanted to kill him so badly.”

“I should have killed him,” Francis grated, then corrected himself, “...them.” he looked questioningly at Red. “Why aren’t we killing him? I am of course talking about the human speed bump out front.”

“As I said,” Red half chuckled, “it’s handled... for the moment.”

Francis sighed his annoyance, then brightened. “I’m well within my rights to kill him if I see him outside this area though?”

“As you always say: “I got dibs.”, Red sat in the high back chair, crossing his legs, “I’ve waited a long time for that privilege.”

Francis scowled minutely, then shrugged. “I make no promises.”

Red mused overly long. The silence was growing uncomfortable for Francis.

“I may be leaving the day after tomorrow for a quick trip. Will you be here?”

“Red, I’ll be here whenever, you know that.” he was assured. “Mark has also offered—”

“Besides being the only one that I know for certain won’t stab me in the back,” Red shook his head minutely, “I know Lizzy prefers your company.”

“I like hanging with Lizzy... and Nora,” the man was suddenly all smiles, “a lot! You’ll probably have to throw me out, especially if Nora is making her world renowned chili and beans.”

“She gives you beans?!”

“Soon I will have that woman in my clutches and she will give me anything I want.” he nodded knowingly. “I’ll break her down.”

“*She* will break you.” Red muttered knowingly.
“Why does everyone keep saying that?” his agitation caused Lizzy’s head to slip from his shoulder.

The man rubbed the area soothingly.

She looked around, disoriented.

“Shift change.” Francis slid from the bed, kinking his body this way and that.

Red arose, sitting beside the groggy woman. “Thank you, Francis.” he found he meant the praise, “for taking care of her.”

“Well, it’s your turn now.” Francis yawned and stretched, “I’m going to bed.”

He closed the door behind him when he left with a stifled, “Good night, don’t let the bed bugs bite.”

“Eww.” Lizzy groaned at such a notion.

“Come here, baby.” Red murmured quietly, lifting the blankets for her snuggle closer to him.

“I hate bugs and he knows it.” she frowned her disgust. “Can’t you do something about him?”

Red smiled to himself, “And what would you do if I did?”

The woman raised her head, “Send you a ‘Thank you’ card?”

Red chuckled quietly, his arm bringing her closer. The stillness settled across the room. Outside, the storm still had not abated.

Red glanced to the limb beating intermittently against the window pane.

He checked on Lizzy.

She looked so peaceful, her hands tucked beneath her chin, the naturally alabaster lids closed to the world. Snuffling softly, she inched closer hiking her leg over his thigh, settling instantly. Smiling warmly, he nuzzled her hair line laying a gentle kiss in the thick strands, his eyes softening.

She had exhausted herself, the emotional turmoil of the day taking its toll.

Red lay very still, listening to her breathe, taking a measure of comfort in the sound.

He knew he would have to deal with the consequences of Nathan Tuttle’s actions sooner or later.

The man had touched so many with his thoughtless deeds.

Red closed his eyes, breathing in Elizabeth’s fragrance. The lilac of her hair, the delicate scent of her baby lotion.

His world fell back into place.

He would deal... could deal, now. So simple a thing really. The scent of a woman.

But it now meant everything to the man.

Red Reddington closed his eyes, allowing himself just a measure of the tranquility Lizzy had found.

His eyes grew heavy, lulled by the soft, even breathing of the woman beside him.
They both slept peacefully the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

It was suggested in a Facebook PM that I add my email address for readers wishing to make anonymous story suggestions. I guess I'll add this in every couple chapters for quick reference for you guys. :) 

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Facebook PM: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978
May 31

Red’s expression was a bleak one as he read the headline.

“Armed Robbery Leads to Deaths”

He read silently, his thoughts on the small print. According to the article, a struggle occurred between two men, the result, a robbery gone bad.

An unidentified man had been fatally stabbed during the altercation. Before succumbing to his wound, the victim had rebounded enough to stab his assailant in the chest with the alleged robber’s own knife.

Both men were pronounced dead at the scene. Identification was being withheld pending notification to the respective families.

Anthony Burke had called this morning so Red had already been apprised of how the events of last nights debacle now stood. Otherwise, Red would have just bypassed the article and not been aware of what had happened.

He had wanted to be there when Kevin’s sister received the news but to protect Lizzy, Red had to accept that could not be the case in this instance.

It did not sit well with Red however, that all he could do was offer Kevin’s sister money.

To add insult to injury, he had held a badly shaken, inconsolable woman in his arms half the night.

Lizzy had lost people before in her line of work, of course. Most were fleeting acquaintances, if the woman knew them at all.

Kevin had been different.

With Kevin, it had been personal. It cut deeper, of course, the emotional scars would be more painful.

Red sat the paper aside, hearing Lizzy’s approach. Francis picked up the folded section, scanning the print.

Red smiled warmly upon Liz’s entrance, arising, pulling her chair out.

Elizabeth Keen was not a morning person. She sat wearily, reaching out, clutching his coffee in desperate hands.

She partook almost greedily but soon the velvet liquid soothed and calmed rattled nerves.

She took several long sips of the caffeinated beverage before lifting blue eyes to his patiently waiting ones.
“Good morning.” he bade, his gaze a sympathetic one. “Feeling any better?”

“I’m in the acceptance stage they tell me.” she knew the process, “Who the hell thinks to put labels on such a thing?” she was still mad at the world and it’s injustices... it’s nonsensical violence.

“...I’m sorry.” she apologized, her eyes conveying so much more than she could verbally express in mixed company. “I felt... feel so helpless.”

Red nodded his comprehension, “I try to protect you from things like this and it seems I inadvertently bring it to your door most times.”

“You didn’t bring anything to the table.” Francis took exception. “The little creep–” he let it go, seeing Red’s warning glance, before continuing on. “This is no one’s fault. Life...or death happens. It’s our job to try and make some kind of sense of it all.”

The room fell silent as each occupant considered the words.

“It takes time and distance away from the issue before you can make any headway in that area.” he spoke from experience, Red knew. “The best we can do is... remember the good crap when it’s time and let the emotions run their course.”

He sat back in the high backed chair, folding his arms. “I know one thing,” he cast them both a solemn look, “if it were my time, I wouldn’t want you guys sitting around feeling like shit. I would hate to think you were.” his scowl increased, “I think Kevin would hate it too.”

Red sat back down, admiring the man’s intuitiveness. He knew Francis was trying to make it better for Lizzy.

“I... I would hate it too.” Liz knew in her heart, she wouldn’t want people she cared about agonizing over their sadness and anger... so very lost, floundering through the despair she was experiencing.

“If we want to honor Kevin, we should see to what he would if he could be here.” Francis unfolded his arms sitting straighter in the chair. “His family,” he ticked off, “that was his priority. Red has made it his, monetarily speaking.”

“You mean, Anthony Burke.” Red corrected.

“Yeah...” Francis knew the man better than Red believed. “Who sat up the college fund for the sister’s kids? Anthony Burke?”

Liz lifted grateful eyes to Red’s annoyed ones.

“Why don’t you mind your own business for a change?” he grumbled. “You sneaky little bastard. How did you find out about that?” Red was stumped. He knew Dembe wouldn’t have blabbed.

“My ways are inscrutable.” Francis waved a dismissing hand. “The point is, Kevin can rest easy. He knows we got it covered.”

“I can go visit today...” Liz felt better with something to do on the horizon. “Maybe take the little ones on a special outing, give his sister time to–” she was going to say mourn, but that particular stage would take months, maybe years, “well, a little time alone to let it all sink in.”

“We can rent out Disneyland.” Francis warmed to the notion.

“That’s on the opposite coast.” Red pointed out.
“Okay, so the other one.” Francis rolled his eyes. “Disneyworld... it’s down in Florida. Hours away by your jet.”

Red conceded with a shrug, “We could do that.”

“Rent out the entire park?” Liz was slightly bemused. “Don’t you guys do anything half way?”

The men exchanged puzzled looks.

“You don’t think it’s a good idea?” Red asked, his mood a serious one.

“I’ll think about it.” Liz held her amusement. “Until that time... a simple trip to the park might suffice.” she made mention of her original plan.

Francis scoffed over the suggestion, before sullenly playing with his silverware. Liz clicked her tongue quietly in understanding. He had wanted to go to the amusement parks.

Nora entered, balancing plates. “Oh, sweetheart,” her face fell, “I didn’t know you were stirring. I’ll get your–”

“No,” Liz arose, pushing back from the table, “I didn’t know you were stirring. I’ll get your–”

“No,” Liz arose, pushing back from the table, “I am perfectly capable of getting my own breakfast.” she cut Nora an affectionate glance. “As long as you cook it.”

The older woman sat the eggs and bacon in front of the men.

Francis breathed in the delicious aroma of fresh baked biscuits. “And people wonder why I am so smitten with you, my lovely.”

Red scowled darkly Francis’ way for the side-ways compliment.

“Oh, not that I mean–” Francis was mortified that the remark came out wrong.

“No wonder is right.” Nora sighed despondently.

“Nora, is there something wrong?” Liz picked up on the other woman’s mood. “Didn’t the visit with your family go all right?”

“I suppose.” the answer was a lackadaisical one. Nora topped off the coffee’s around the table. “I received the wonderful news that I am going to be a grandmother... again.” she lifted resigned eyes.

“That’s amazing!” Liz bolstered, her brow furrowed quizzically, “...Isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” the woman grumbled. “I just hate the reminder,” the light grey eyes were rolled expressively, “that I’m old... a grandmother.” she shuddered visibly at the word.

“A damned fine looking one.” Francis rallied, pouring on the charm with deliberate ease, Liz noted.

“...Very subtle.” Red remarked aside.

Nora clearly wasn’t buying the effort.

“Nora,” Red tried his hand, “you are still a lovely, vibrant woman.” he stated the facts as he saw them. “Do not let a label make you think otherwise.”

Nora issued a scoffing sound in her throat, sharing a cocked brow with the other woman in the room.
Liz picked up on the expression, clearing her throat gently. “You know, Red...your daughter would be around my age, wouldn’t she?”

The man shrugged, confusion registering on his face.

“It’s a distinct possibility, is it not,” Liz continued her train of thought having both male’s attention, “that you may very well be a grandfather.” she batted her eyes innocently, greatly amused when the older man’s expression fell at the distasteful realization.

Francis laughed at Red’s chagrin, “Yeah, grandpa, how do you feel about that label now?”

Red’s steely eyed glare silenced the amusement... on Francis’ part at least.

“Not that it makes you any less handsome or energetic, of course.” Nora added innocently.

Red digested the moment, then shifted his interest to his cook.

“You are beautiful and spirited,” he stated eloquently, a wicked gleam shining suddenly in those light eyes, “...no matter your advanced age.”

Nora’s pretty mouth tightened with irritation, she tsked the ire she felt aside.

“I would serve him haggis and monkey brains for that remark!” Liz championed her friend.

“Not at all.” Nora crooned, her manner chiding. “My goodness, no. I am not a vindictive person.”

She turned Red a serious gaze, “I hope you will enjoy the tea I’ve prepared for you this afternoon, sir?” she smiled all too pleasantly. “It’s my own... special blend.”

Francis’ chuckle was contagious.

Red laughed quietly into his coffee cup before turning his eyes to the woman. “This tea, would it be made specially for me?”

“Of course, only you, sir.” Nora’s cryptic remark and her hastily laid hand on Liz’s shoulder, sold the effect.

Liz grinned widely, eyeing the moody man triumphantly. “She still likes me.”

“I’m deeply wounded, Nora.” Red made mention.

“You will be, if you drink that tea.” Francis muttered aside.

“You used to be so unassuming.” Red shook his head woefully, ignoring the boy’s commentary.

“Like you, Mr. Reddington,” the woman prepared to take her leave, “I learned how to screw the system, or it’s head masters...” Nora glanced down at an eagerly attentive Francis Holbrook.

“Among other things, I’m sure.” Francis flirted unabashedly.

“...Yes.” the woman’s voice soothed expertly, as it washed over a very susceptible young pupil, drawing the young man back under her thrall “...exactly.”

Red grinned, sensing Francis’ condition, the kid was all but squirming in his seat.

“Yes, Nora...” Red encouraged, “tell us about your life before we came into the picture.”
“Oh, visions of boarding schools abound.” Francis sat up, sitting his chin on the cradle of his fists, a wistful look on the handsome face. “Strict head mistresses, with hard punishing rulers,” he sighed dreamily, “…Mary-Jane's, pleated skirts,” the man purred his delight, “…knee socks.”

The other three looked at the man, expressions askew.

Then, having noticed Red’s disapproving look, “Don’t even act like the knee socks don’t do anything for you.” Francis mocked.

Red chuckled, lifting his coffee absently. He stared down into the dark elixir, having halted mid-lift.

He shook the notion... old habits died hard. Lizzy had tasted the coffee after all.

“No,” Liz cooed soothingly, picking up on his train of thought, “if it were poisoned, she wouldn’t have let it touch my rather inviting lips, remember.” she pursed those lips suggestively.

Lifting apologetic eyes, Red took Nora’s hand, laying a small kiss on the silky knuckles. “Nora, you know how I love to tease you.”

“I’d love to tease her...” Francis remarked more than suggestively.

“Take a cold shower.” Red scowled over at the man.

“Only if she’s in there with me.”

“Are you sure you want her to see you in that light?” Red questioned, covertly dropping his eyes to the young man’s nether regions.

Francis grimaced, eyeing Red seriously. “…Shrinkage factor.” he whispered his disappointment to the older man. “…Fuck.”

Liz made a disgusted sound in her throat, “On that note,” she steered Nora away from such a bad influence, “we will tactfully take our leave.’

The man smiled, watching the women’s trek into the kitchen. Francis was busy devouring his first plate.

Red pulled his closer, lifting his fork. Liz returned promptly with a platter of fresh fruit and a bagel.

“Chick food.” Francis turned up his nose at such fare.

“Anything special on the agenda today?” the woman questioned both individuals.

“Have a meeting with the Chinese today.” Francis replied glumly. “What is the customary greeting again? Namaste?”


“The first being Hindi, the second Japanese.” Red pulled his ear lobe thoughtfully.

“Ni hao.” Red supplied the correct and simplistic enough greeting for Francis' use.

Liz and Francis both turned expectantly one expression accepting, the other suspicious. Francis clearly doubted Red’s abilities. Red let it go.

“Are you talking about Cheung?” Red’s attention was caught, his mood not so light and breezy
suddenly.

Francis halted his fork mid-stride, “...Yes.” he had caught the tone. “Why?”

Red mused for a moment, “When did this come up?”

Francis put his fork down.

Liz was astonished, her mouth falling open.

“What’s going on.” Francis demanded “What did I not hear about? I hate when I don’t know what the hell is going on... what’s going on?”

Liz looked to Red as well.

“You didn’t hear about Moran or Byrne?” Red was surprised.

“...I know Moran got hit, no one knows by wh–” the light dawned “You think Cheung is clearing away competition?”

Liz watched the man return to his food, nonchalantly shoveling biscuit and gravy into his mouth by copious amounts, seemingly unfazed by the topic at hand.

“Did he say why he needed to meet?” Red had returned to his own food.

Liz’s appetite had abated somewhat.

“Something about wanting to increase his quantity of shipments.” Francis reached for the strawberry jam which Nora had laid out so appealingly in the China serving dish, “Should have sent the bells clanging,” the man scoffed. “As if I would entertain such a request.”

“It’s always a good idea to at least put up the pretense of considering the notion.” Red looked around for Nora, his coffee was dwindling.

Liz made a face, lifting the decorative urn off the raised rest, pouring the dark liquid, exasperated.

Red smiled happily over at the her for the action.

“Hey, hey, hey...” Francis forced his own cup to the fore.

Liz filled it with a wry expression.

“Thank you, Lizzy.” Red remembered his manners, hoisting his cup on high.

“We should check Cheung’s movements for the last couple weeks.” Francis decided. “You gonna eat that?” he motioned to a wayward piece of bacon laying haphazardly on Red’s plate.

Red pushed the object toward the man’s eager embrace, reaching for his phone. “I can contact–”

He scowled, following the warm hand which instantly covered his, up the slender arm, to Lizzy’s pretty face.

“What?” both men asked in unison.

“You’ll finish your breakfast before it gets cold.” Liz motioned. “I think business can wait for an hour at least.”
Red scowled darkly at the fingers which had clamped decisively around his own.

“This could mean life or death, woman.” Francis forked scrambled eggs onto his plate, “For me no less!”

“I don’t see anyone out there at the moment.” she had checked the outside area. “Do you want seconds?”

“I wouldn’t turn them down.” the guy seemed to feel better.

“We should really get the ball rolling on this matter.” Red reminded Francis more than Lizzy.

“Nora has a fresh batch of biscuits.” Liz won the war, Francis was up and out in seconds.

“Bring some blackberry jam.” she called out.

“Lizzy...” the man’s demeanor was serious.

“Red Reddington,” she stopped the tirade with a stubborn hand, “do you recall me asking you just last week—”

Francis returned, treats in hand. He slowed his steps, sensing a chill in the air.

Both participants had shut the hell up with his arrival. He glanced from one to the other as he sat.

“Okay...” he had looked at his plate, in a considering manner, “it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to know there’s a slight dissension in the air.”

Red cut him a, mind your own business, look.

Liz sighed her growing frustration, “I just wanted a quiet breakfast. After last night...” she trailed away listlessly.

Her fingers drew away from Red’s, leaving the phone in their wake.

Red looked at it morosely.

“And he’s a grumpy bastard, just wanting to get back into the game, huh.” Francis stated knowingly.

Red sent another look, this one a little more distinct in nature, all of which Francis ignored.

“Look,” he spread his hands, “the meeting is later today. We’ve got time.” it was reminded.

“Besides, I’ve seen you plan a hostage rescue in five minutes, then execute it in less than ten.”

Red shifted irritably. He was not accustomed to anyone setting limits on his time or efforts... not even Lizzy.

Francis studied the two, “Do you know what she does when you’re not here?”

Liz sat up, ready to be offended.

Red shifted impatient eyes, interested in spite of his mood.

“She sits there,” Francis pointed, “with puppy dog eyes, just staring at your empty chair.”

Red checked the woman’s reaction, feeling a warmth in his chest. She missed... him?
He knew she had said it before, but it was said while they had been making love. He naturally assumed—

“I do not!” Liz defended halfheartedly.

The man fell quiet, “I guess what I’m trying to say...” he amended, “Red, you once told me that, the business will always be there. The people we care about?” Francis glanced at the woman, “Maybe not. You said...” it was reiterated, “we shouldn’t forget how precious that side of our lives is. That we should never take it for granted, right?”

Red’s mood eased. He sat back in the chair, contemplating the words.

“I get what Liz is trying to say. But, she’s saying it like a chick.” Francis spared the woman a supportive smile. “This means something.” he motioned around the table they occupied. “I half keep expecting Kevin to walk through that door,” he motioned, “and try to steal all the bacon and don’t we all wish he would.”

The silence fell. Liz bit back tears.

“It’s the small stuff.” Francis, too grew contemplative. “Like sharing breakfast with the people you...” he trailed away. “Well, this is getting maudlin.” he snapped out of it. “I’ll be damned if I let a would be player ruin the moment.” his scowl was fixed. “Outsiders don’t have a place here. Not if we don’t allow it.” he threw Red a meaningful look.

“She just wants to spend a few minutes with you, enjoying some quiet time. That’s all.” Francis said knowingly. “You can give her that, Red. The rest of it can wait.” he assured. “And it’s my life that’s in the balance, so I get to call the shots on this one.”

The older man knew a life lesson when one was delivered. He reached over, his hand covering Lizzy’s. His eyes mellow.

“Out of the mouth’s of babes,” he motioned across the table. “...and idiots.”

Liz tightened her fingers in his, “Stop being mean.”

“Yeah, stop being mean.” Francis quipped, swiping Red’s biscuit.

The man sighed heavily. “I wanted that.”

“Nora has plenty more.” Francis bit into the succulent bread. “Unless Silas has already been in this morning.”

“I’ll get some.” Liz held her amusement.

“She’ll get some.” Francis was okay with the fact, watching Liz traipse of to the kitchen.

Red lifted his eyes to the woman upon her return, biscuit in hand, “So you missed me, humm?” his eyes danced devilishly.

“Not so you’d notice.” she fought back instinctively.

Red pulled the butter tray closer, searching for his knife. Cutting off a pat of butter, he spread it onto the warmed biscuit, watching the soft yellow melt into the fluffy breading.

This was a treat Lizzy found he enjoyed in the mornings.
This morning he almost missed the opportunity because of a stupid decision on his part.

How could business become more important, to his way of thinking than spending time with her.

“You missed me.” he seemed more than pleased with the fact.

Liz threw Francis a, *you'll pay for this one*, look as she snatched the coffee urn in her grasp.

The woman marched to the kitchen knowing she had lost ‘round one’.

Well, that battle wasn’t over just yet. She swished her backside saucily sensing Red’s eyes the entire way until the kitchen door closed behind her.

“There!” she stated sotto voce, satisfied with her performance one hundred percent.

“That,” Francis motioned, “was for your benefit.”

“Yes.” Red’s smile touched his lips as he chastised his cock for over-reacting. He subtly adjusted the problem to a more comfortable position, sitting back in his chair. “I picked up on that, Francis.”

“It’s a wonder...” Francis mumbled around his jelly laden biscuit.

Red held his tongue because... the boy was right. He may be older and wiser, but he had totally missed the subtle clues right in front of him. Too fixated on business instead of his personal time. A time he had fervently dreamed of having, with Elizabeth.

The man pushed his phone aside, determined to follow through on Francis’ advice for once.

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It was good hour and a half later, after a leisurely repast and even a second cup of Nora’s enticing brew, he and Francis journeyed to the office.

Red stood now, staring morosely at the pile of mail awaiting his perusal.

Silas had given warning. New ‘letters’ had arrived in Red’s absence.

Francis was distracted, phone in hand. The man sauntered about the office, finding all sorts of objects of interest as he went. He picked up each, examining and prodding before moving down the neatly lined shelves on display.

Red’s brow furrowed with each passing sentence he read.

*Your behavior in Las Vegas was sickening. No matter the predicament he has placed you in, there was no need to hang on Reddington like his personal whore. You think his cohorts truly believe that a vibrant, beautiful woman such as yourself would deign to give Reddington even an iota of attention. They’re suspicious of you. Get out now before Reddington gets you killed with this farce.*

Red reread the diatribe, trying to make some sense where no logic prevailed.

He moved on to the next.
Why did you fight? What has Reddington told you or threatened you with that you didn’t come willingly? Why the hell are you cuddling up to him? An even better question, why the fuck are you kissing him? Don’t you understand that Reddington is destroying you, Liz? He’s making you a traitor to your own kind. We’re the good guys, not him. Next chance you get, come to me. You know how to contact me.

Scoffing, Red threw the letters into the ever growing pile and turned his attention to the problem at hand.

Francis.

After a couple dozen calls, Red’s contacts confirmed his growing fears.

“There seems to be a pattern emerging.” Francis grinned over at him. “That makes eight by my count. This guy isn’t being very subtle is he.”

Eight casualties in Cheung’s path, not two as Red had previously thought. Eight shakers and movers, eliminated.

“And you are next.” Red pointed out the obvious.

“No one has been able to punch my ticket to date,” the man laughed at the absurdity. “The thing that gets me... the guy is so pleasant to your face.”

“What has that got to do with anything?” Red was genuinely stumped. “This is business. Knock out the competition.”

“Yeah, if you have a ‘forties’ mentality.” Francis shook his head. “That’s not how it’s done anymore and you know it.”

“It is in Cheung’s part of the world.”

“Well, he’s here now. You have to adapt... or die.”

Red spread his hands, “That was a given, yes,” he smirked slightly at Francis’ put out expression. “Glad to see you have caught up with the rest of us.”

“They weren’t even decent competition.” was what puzzled Francis. “Take Moran. He’s been more than disillusioned for a while. Business wasn’t going well, his family disowned him... his wife took up with... what’s his name?”

“The Irish guy?” Red snapped his fingers as the name came. “Finn...”

“Gallagher, right.” Francis snapped his fingers. “I’d be surprised if Moran even put up a fight when the time came.”

“Byrne’s loyalty was in question...” Red pointed out, “how many of his men had bailed to date?”

“If Cheung’s implying I’m not at the top of my game...” Francis took exception.

“Regardless of their situations,” Red soothed, “I believe Cheung’s fishing for big game now.”

Red shook his head woefully as Francis preened, clearly pleased by the praise for his status in the world.

“Damned straight.” he returned his to his perusal of a particular oddity he had located on the highest shelve to the right of Red’s desk. “Well, now what?”

The kid was clearly, totally unconcerned for the impending threat.

Red pondered for a beat, “Change the meeting place.”

“And if he doesn’t go for it?”

“Then cancel the entire show.” Red advised.

“Which will only postpone the inevitable.” Francis made the call.

It was decided the meeting would take place on his home turf. Francis’ home was located on a large acreage, the house settled far back into a canopy of trees. Away from prying eyes... he hoped.

Red had already sent for Silas. Security would be heavy and hopefully, somewhat unexpected. Well, to the point where an egotist like Cheung would consider it a challenge.

It would also be a bragging right to go up against higher odds if he pulled such a coup off for later times in the Organization.

Liz came into the room while the call was in progress. Red held up a staying hand, the woman took the hint, listening attentively until the call was finished.

“We have a two o’clock appointment with the Grim Reaper.” Francis smirked, replacing his cell into its familiar inside picket of the stylish jacket he sported.

Red nodded absently, Silas appeared, pulling up short behind the still silent woman.

“You’re blocking my path.” his gravelly voice held a touch of menace. “That’s a fire hazard.”

“Go around.” Liz responded, just as short and clipped. She had not found any humor in Francis’ last quip.

Silas chuckled his appreciation pushing his bulk past the girl, careening her into a curio-cabinet as he did so.

Liz swung out, smacking the guy on the broad, muscular shoulder. Her hand stung after the fact.

She cradled it soothingly.

“If you ever hit me and I find out about it...” Silas drawled lazily. “My guys are on their way.” he turned his attention to business, directing the statement to Red. “Medical team will set up near the house but far enough away that Genghis Khan has no clue to their presence.”

“Medical team?” Liz was instantly concerned.

“That’s just standard operating procedure” Silas assured the woman.

“Better to have them close as not.” Francis reminded. “Just a precaution, Lizzy. Really.”

Red watched the woman’s face, reading her body language.
“Oh...” she tried to smile, “yeah, that makes sense... that’s good then.”

“What’s wrong?” Red approached, sensing a problem. He encouraged the woman to voice her concerns with his gentle manner. “This is no different than any other time we’ve–”

“I know that.” she hastened to reassure. “It’s just that...” How could she tell him? It was stupid to even her. The feeling of Deja vu... the uneasiness.

“What?” the man’s hands rubbed tenderly up and down her arms. “Tell me.”

“...The last time this happened,” she blurted, “you ended up getting shot... twice!” her entire body was one coiled tension rod. Red could feel it.

“Nora has prepared a cake.” Silas sensed the two needed to talk. “She wants me to lick her bowl... let’s go, Junior.”

“Lick her bowl.” Francis took the hint for once. “She wouldn’t let you within ten feet of her bowl!”

“Wait.” Liz halted their intended departure. “I may need your help... both of you.” she knew how stubborn Red could be. “I’m very concerned about this. I really am. You should listen to me... all of you.”

Silas folded his arms across his chest. Francis glanced anywhere but at the woman. Liz could see the futility of her pleading.

“This guy only wants to kill Francis.” she tried another tactic. “Isn’t it a better strategy to hit him first? When you are calling the shots.”

“Wait.” Liz halted their intended departure. “I may need your help... both of you.” she knew how stubborn Red could be. “I’m very concerned about this. I really am. You should listen to me... all of you.”

Silas compressed his mouth showing deep indentures along the sides of his handsome face. “I picked up on that, yes.”

Francis fell into his ‘sullen’ mode.

“But I was more impressed with the gangster talk.” Silas confided to one and all. “Get a hit on Cheung first...” he grinned approvingly.

“I’m serious here!” Liz snapped, the unreasonable fear dictating her mode. She settled, her eyes shifting between each carefully composed face. “I know you guys have to... do what you do but does it hurt to have a little common sense sometimes?”

Red motioned curtly with his head.

Silas and Francis vacated the room.

Red sighed lightly, returning his interest. The large blue eyes touched his heart.

“It’s odd,” he smiled down at the little face, “having someone give a shit about me.”

Liz lifted her arms, grasping tightly to the strong shoulders. Those blue eyes closed, a dark premonition overtaking her.

“Please don’t go.” she pleaded her desperation.
There isn’t much I would ever refuse you.” he whispered, his embrace tightening about the small delicate frame. “You know that.” he closed his eyes, exhaling his regret.

He made her look at him. “I think Francis need me, Elizabeth. I think it best if I be there.”

“We can call Ressler and the–”

“The will arrest, Francis.” he cut the suggestion short. “You know that. And besides, when has Ressler ever listened to my warnings? He’ll be the one getting himself killed.”

Liz knew the truth when she heard it. Frustrated, stymied... “Then let me help!”

The man’s manner changed. “If you’re there, my focus will be on you and your safety.” he reasoned. “It needs to be on Cheung.”

“You expect me to just sit here and wait for the news that–”

“That is exactly what I expect.” he interrupted curtly, his expression set.” This is just another normal day in the life.” he cautioned. “You’re going to have to become accustomed to that, Elizabeth Scott.”

She fumed, crossing her arms over her chest. “Like the dutiful woman?”

Red softened, stepping closer, “Odd, the word that seemed fit better was... wife.” he smiled at her stricken features.

“W-what?” the winds were taken from her sails, her arms falling away listlessly from her determined stance.

“Not to worry,” Red hastened to cover the unconscious ‘slip’, “I know my place in the scheme of things.” he stepped back, his gaze an unassuming one. “I’m asking that you stay here... trust me to get the job done. Can you do that?”

She was still reeling from the wife retort, truth told. She felt all warm and tingling inside suddenly but deep in the recesses of her mind, the nagging, dark foreboding still lurked, unabated.

“Do your profiles,” he lightened the moment, “harass Tom, make Silas do aerobics. Which is your normal.” Red shrugged mentally. To each his own, after all. “Such are the Days of Our Lives.” he mumbled, searching the area for a pad and pen.

“Safe to come in?” Silas poked his head around the door making point of checking his watch. “Fireworks over?”

Liz’s face said it all. The guard shook his head. “Hey, Basket Case,” he tried his hand at the problem, “I have sent ten men over to the site.” he ticked off on his thick fingers. “Then we got Francis’ guys to add to the fray.”

“It’s even worse than I imagined.” she wailed her distress. “You need that many men?”

“I err on the side of caution... you know that.” her nerves were soothed. He glanced at the other occupant of the room. “We only have an hour or so. Shouldn’t we get the show on the road?”

Silas turned back the to woman. “Everything will be fine.” his brow crooked. “I’ve done this... we’ve done this... right?”

She didn’t look convinced.
“Well aren’t we smug, Mr. Contingency…” she had a ‘what if’ for them both. “Tell me this. What happens when all of your men are out of action and no one can follow procedure?”

“Then Dembe will save the day, as always.” Silas had an answer, of course.

“You go too… with Red.” Liz pushed on the guard’s shoulder.

“No.” Red vetoed the notion in no uncertain terms. “We’re not going there. Joe and Silas will remain here, at their posts.”

“God, you make me so mad, Red Reddington!” she fumed, her ire reaching a fever pitch. “If I were a man, I’d–”

“Oh, honey, please don’t.” Red cringed at the thought. “You profane a subject intrinsically sacred to me.”

Silas chuckled lowly.

Liz turned on her heel, too upset to even deign a reply.

Red barred her path, hands held high, “I’m sorry, baby.” he had instantly regretted his flippancy. “That was shitty of me.” he confessed.

“You caved awfully fast.” Silas pointed out.

The man attempted to embrace Elizabeth. He thought he would be rebuked but instead, she allowed his tactics, her arms clutching at him almost frantically.

“It’s okay, baby.” he embraced her body tightly. “I was a bastard, forgive me.”

His eyes met Silas’ over Liz’s trembling shoulders. Silas grinned widely offering a gesture any man could read a mile away. Red flipped him off rather curtly behind the woman’s back.

Liz’s fingers tightened about Red’s neckline. She took in the scent of the man, breathing in his essence.

Red rubbed her back consolingly.

Silas cupped her head, “It’ll be okay, little girl. Stop fretting now.” the guard made note of the time again as he exited.

The silence was comfortable once again, but Red could feel the tension emanating from the slender frame.

A queasiness overcame the woman. She swallowed hard. The Deja vu was more than unsettling. Liz tried to reason it away with logic and intellect.

Red leaned, his mouth gently coaxing response in spite of the small tremors wracking her body.

Liz relaxed into the sphere of his arms, eagerly returning the insistent pressure of his sensual lips.

She put her whole heart and soul into that kiss, a part of her, a large part, wishing to convince the man to stay.

Wrapping her free arm about his neck, she moved into his body as his hands slid along her waist. A large palm cradled the small of her back, the other threading through her hair.
Red pulled her against him, the warm curvaceous body edging him closer to a decision he could not make at this time. She was making him want to do so, however. Her tender lips pressed against his, little puffs of breath tickling his cheek.

After all they had done, the intimacy they shared. A simple kiss and embrace still felt brand new. He had never felt anything so wonderful in his arms, as Elizabeth Keen.

She meowed softly, relaxing in his hold. Her breasts pressed into his chest along with the rest of her beautiful little body. He grunted his appreciation. The feminine curve of her pelvis settled against his thigh and he almost lost the will to control his rising desire.

All he wanted at that moment was to turn around, find the most convenient damned wall, press into the surface and get between those velvet soft thighs.

He slipped his palm beneath the fabric of her blouse caressing satin flesh. He moved his inquisitive fingers up the familiar expanse of skin, his fingers hooking on the top rim of her bra.

The delicate lace easily gave way to his insistent urging as the back of his fingers raked gently across the heated surface.

Liz moaned encouragingly when he brushed the rosy nipple into a tight peak of arousal.

Her fingers massaged the back of his head lovingly sending delicious waves of pleasure down his spine.

The tip of her tongue melted to his erotically. She moved enticingly against the straining bulge in his slacks, her mouth parting hungrily for his.

Red broke the contact out of necessity. “You think it’s easy to leave you... at anytime?” his roughened voice scolded, forcing a little space between them. “Don’t do this to me, baby.”

Liz closed her eyes, deeply affected by the pain he allowed her to read in the grey eyes.

“I don’t want to go...” he reiterated, his voice strained, “I have to go.”

Liz nodded minutely, her mouth parting his one last time. “Please come back.”

The blue eyes lifted, haunted with the possibility he might not this time.

“Oh, I’ll come back.” he cast her a look, “if only to collect on your promise... and finish what you started.”

She blinked innocent eyes up at him.

“And don’t even pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

She didn’t. “Then you make sure you remember that.”

A knowledgeable glint returned to his eyes, “Ohh, I’ll remember,” he vowed, “and not Cheung or any damn thing else will stop me.”

Francis entered the room, his weapon out of its usual placement holster. “This clip is sticking.” he complained but finally slid the metal into the slot.

“You have your extra?” Red took the clips the man handed over, placing them into the pocket of his linen jacket.
“Of course.” Francis took umbrage. “This isn’t my first rodeo, you know.”

“Yeah...” Red touched Lizzy’s cheek in a display of open affection, his eyes clouding over, “just don’t forget you have it tucked away this time.”

“Are you ever going to let me forget that one little lapse?” it was exasperated.

“Did you inform Silas where we would be?” Red moved on.

“I thought the sitting room with the fireplace.” Francis had pondered the equation, “Strategically, it’s perfect for our purpose.”

Red handed Lizzy a card, “Here are numbers in case my phone is out of commission. These people will know the situation at any given moment. Just tell them who you are.”

Liz glanced at the hastily scribbled numbers. “Do you expect your phone to be–”

“You said, think of all contingencies,” he reminded her of her sarcasm with Silas a few minutes back. “I broke the screen on my phone the last time, remember?”

When he was with Lizzy’s team, when they cornered Patrick O’Brien, he had thrown himself over Samar, cracking the face plate of the phone on her vest, rendering it useless.

“Everything will be fine, Lizzy.” Francis kissed her cheek. The woman surprised him by offering up a bear hug in return.

“You just make sure you’re beside him...” she indicated Red who was preparing his own gear for use, “when he comes through that door.” she pointed.

“I will see no harm befalls them.” Dembe had come through the archway only to pick up the gear from the cluttered table before exiting yet again.

The man caught eyes with Red Reddington.

“No permanent damage, at least.” Dembe would never promise anything he could not deliver without absolute certainty, but the words had been for Red’s ears alone.

Red acknowledged his friend with a smile as Dembe and Francis left the room.

Liz determined to reign in her unreasonable fear, forcing a smile as well, “Be safe,” she whispered, “and you better not wait to call like last time,” she pouted, “the minute it’s all clear–”

“I’ll pick up the phone... or a phone.” he assured.

He hefted a bag of ammo over his shoulder, “Don’t sit around worrying... keep busy. It will make the time pass.”

The sooner he got this shit over with, the sooner he could get back home.

He paused, his hand on the knob of the door. He hesitated further, his eyes taking in the grave expression on the lovely face.

“I will be back, Elizabeth.” it was more a vow to himself now. “I will always come back to you...” his manner was more than comforting, “... always. I promise.”

The room was inordinately still with his departure. Liz hugged herself tightly but didn’t try to stop...
the trembling, free to experience the troubling sensations now without having to keep up the brave face for the man.

She stared at the opened doorway, her thoughts running a mile a minute, indecision racking her brain.

Red stalked to the car, yanking the back door ajar, sliding into the cushy interior absently, a fixed scowl on his face.

He glanced over, sensing Francis’ scrutiny.

“What?” the car started, pulling down the long drive.

“Red ironically, really isn’t your color.” the guy handed over a handkerchief, motioning, “you’ve got a little lipstick...”

Red blotted his lips, his mood dropping. It felt as if he were erasing Lizzy’s touch.

“What was it?” Francis continued his teasing. Red knew it was the man’s way of coping with the stress of what was to come. “Was she offering incentive to come back or you guys getting into the kinky shit finally.”

Red cast a dark glare his way.

“Incentive it was.” Francis seemed totally disappointed.

They arrived before the opposition, but just. Red didn’t even have time to finish the drink Francis had provided when the doorbell rang.

“Aren’t they polite... and on time too.” Francis seemed impressed.

“You better get this shit over and done.” Red shot the man a warning glance. “No fucking dawdling. No polite rhetoric... just bring it to a head quickly.”

“So you can get back to, Lizzy.” Francis finished, a big grin on his face. “What did she do, promise you a blow if you came back unscathed?”

Red’s eyes slid shut as visions of Lizzy’s luscious lips wrapping about his cock flooded his minds eyes. The images so vivid, a fine sheet of perspiration broke out of his brow and upper lip.

Francis had expected a retort, checking when one was not forthcoming. He quirked a brow, sensing the reason Red had not responded with his usual aplomb.

The younger man laughed heartily, “Oh hell... did she?” he was thrilled by the notion and the fact, Red seemed so affected by the concept presented. “Boy, she’s got you all riled up!” he cackled his glee. “How the mighty have fallen.”

“Francis,” Red was more than exasperated, “I’m about to stick my foot up your ass.” there was teasing and there was, being a pain in the ass.

It was at that exact moment, Cheung and his entourage chose to enter their domain.
“Greetings my friends.” the Chinese man had included Reddington in his salutation. He clearly had not expected such good fortune to smile upon him this day. “Ah, Red Reddington, what a remarkable surprise. And what has you in such good spirits this fine day, Francis? May I enquire?”

Francis could hardly contain himself, “I never thought I’d see the day a woman would lead this guy,” he hooked his thumb to a suddenly impassive companion, “around by his dick.”

“The picture you paint, Francis.” Nothing was going to phase Red now.

Francis knew the man had dropped into his blasé mode. A face Red presented to his business associates.

“You are a regular Gauguin today, I must say, I heartily approve.” Red finished.

The insincere smile was in place.

“I did not expect to see you here.” Cheung took a seat across from the other man.

Francis noted with interest, the two cryptic looking companions situated themselves strategically, one behind Red’s position, one behind his own.

“Has your dear Madeline forgiven all your many transgressions. I assume she is the only female capable of–”

“You assume wrong.” Francis had turned to the matter at hand himself. “Madeline is so passé she’s not even in the picture any longer... you really should keep more abreast of your enemies foibles, Cheung.”

“Enemies?” the word genuinely surprised the man, clearly. “What...” the man arose from his comfortable position, “why, use such a disagreeable word? I thought we were... amiable companions if not as yet, friends.”

“I wonder what Moran and Byrne and all the rest thought?” Red asked cheerfully, brandishing his unfinished drink about with a flourish. “Do you think they shared the same erroneous misgivings as you yourself... right up to the time you stabbed them in the back, hopefully not literally, of course. It’s not your style, is it?”

Cheung sensed trouble, his eyes darting frantically to his back up plan.

The two men who had accompanied him on this auspicious occasion took their cue, weapons rapidly drawn.

Francis was close enough, for he had purposely made a show of placing his drink on a nearby table, which was very close to where he needed to be at this exact moment...

His arm shot out, the back of his elbow connecting full force with ‘companion number one’s’ jawline.

The guys piece went flying and he staggered back from the unexpected blow.

Things went rapidly downhill from there and the odd thing about it was, even though both men expected the deluge of violence, it still shook their foundations.

Red remembered thinking at the time, the day had started rather well considering the travesty of the preceding night’s events... it appeared it would end in an entirely different manner.
Francis lamented on just how swiftly a person can turn on a dime. Cheung had seemed so amiably pleasant there for a moment... before things started to go sideways.

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Liz could still feel the imprint of Red’s mouth, she touched her lips tentatively wishing to hold the moment suspended in time and space.

She paced slowly in the quiet of the room which suddenly seemed cavernous without the presence of the three men she had come to cherish so much over the past couple months.

The nagging fear amplified with each passing moment. Her first instincts were to follow them. To try and assist in some way... some manner.

The last time she had followed those instincts, it had not turned out well at all.

Red was right. She would be a distraction, which could get someone shot... or worse.

She felt so helpless.

And too, there was the question of Tom ‘The Stalker’ Keen.

Silas would prevent her leaving as well. She knew as much, even if she could find a way past, ‘The Stalker Bastard’. Which is how the guards now jovially referred to Tom Keen.

That those were the least of her concerns spoke volumes.

She was sick at heart.

Would she feel this each and every time a ‘business’ meeting was called?

Could she live like this? In a constant state of anxiety and terror that the man she cared for on levels she couldn’t begin to fathom... might not come back to her one day?

Red meant that much to her.

That Dembe and Francis might not walk through that door? She glanced at the object vacantly. They brought so much light and joy into the house. How could she cope if...

She stopped that train of thought but seconds later it was back.

She felt so close to both men. They made her world feel solid, made each day easier to face. In Elizabeth’s life, well, the life before... the statement meant so much.

To have found people she could depend upon... ones she could rely upon.

*And Red...*

My God... that man had changed her entire perspective on... *everything*. Absolutely everything.

The relationship between them had grown in ways she could not have anticipated.

Oh sure, what woman didn’t have a few fantasy moments with a man like Red Reddington?

She had found herself no different in that area.

In those early days, she had staunchly demanded a strictly business like arrangement remain between
them.

But sometimes, at her desk, daydreaming... even Samar had wondered, ‘What was the man like in bed?’

Samar was certain Red would be a generous lover, that he would find sexual fulfillment in any partner’s gratification he might choose, over his own.

Little did Samar know, just how phenomenal the man was in bed, but Liz knew. Liz also knew how affectionate, caring and loving a man he was.

He could evoke such contentment simply holding her in his embrace. For the first time in her entire existence, she had found a secure harbor.

And its name was... Red Reddington.

*If she lost him...*

Liz refused to finish the thought. She resumed her pacing, this time more intently.

It felt like she was standing in a precipice... on edge. She halted instantly, afraid to take another step...

This must be what it felt like... the emptiness, the hollow ache in one’s heart when a woman stood on a pier before the man she adored shipped out to some unknown location, with no set time to return.

Not knowing _if_ he would return at all.

How did all the wives and lovers during wartime stand these conflicting emotions?

How did any military... law enforcement, firefighters... family cope?

The mind boggled. Now that she was actually experiencing the turmoil, the problems seemed insurmountable.

Liz rubbed her temples to ease the building ache, her arms hugging her body to ward off the sudden chill which descended.

What if Red _didn’t_ return? What would she do? Where could she turn for solace... there could be _no_ solace.

They had just begun their journey. So many things yet to experience together, so many things left to explore.

She was suddenly overwhelmed, sitting hastily because her legs could not hold her upright.

She tried to de-clutter her mind, but couldn’t think clearly.

‘...Elizabeth?’

The woman started, shocked from her preoccupation. “Oh,” she breathed easier, “Nora.”

“What’s wrong child?” the woman entered the room, concern on her face. “You’re as white as a sheet.”

“I’m probably coming down with a virus.” Liz smiled wanly. “I’m fine though. Just thinking...
woolgathering.”

Nora’s concern did not dispel, “Can I do anything?”

Liz knew she couldn’t just sit here and wait. That much was crystal clear.

“Red and I had a little tiff,” she fibbed, her conscience tugging at her, “plus he left his briefcase.” she grimaced slightly. “I suppose it’s stupid to want to go apologize... clear the air? I can use the briefcase as an excuse...”

Nora relaxed, “Communication is key to a good, solid foundation... to any relationship.” she mused wisely. “We could certainly make the effort but what about...” Nora gestured to Tom’s position out front, “and too, Silas watches you like a hawk.”

Liz lifted a subdued look, “Nora, surely we’re smart enough... together, to work around these obstacles.”

Nora scowled slightly signifying she was putting her mind to the problem presented.

Liz rushed to her room, grabbing necessities, including several extra clips. She checked her weapon, shoving it in her bag.

Nora was in the kitchen waiting patiently. She checked the outside area motioning Elizabeth to follow her lead.

Moments later, Liz was in the back seat floorboard, crouched low with Nora pulling out the gate, waving casually to the posted guard.

Neither woman noticed the forgotten briefcase.

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“Where did all these wahoos come from?”

Red and Francis hid behind a couple of ornate pillars, dodging shards of shattered vases and bar glasses as they burst around them.

“More to the point,” Red chanced a peek around the cover, firing off a well placed shot which took down another of Cheung’s men as the guy vied for a better position from which to try and end Red’s life, “where are our wahoos?”

He replaced his clip absently, checking on his companion, “You gonna live?”

The man pulled at his tie, wrapping it tightly about Francis’ oozing leg wound.

“Yeah,” Francis kept a running check on the opposition, “it just stings... a lot.” he grimaced, squeezing his arm, stemming the blood flow as Red secured another make shift tourniquet with Francis’ tie. “I swear to God, if anyone calls this a fucking flesh wound--”

Red noted Dembe to his left. The large man fired a sharp volley before ducking back out of harm’s way. A bullet hit the wall directly where he had been seconds before, shattering dry wall dust in its wake.

Red heard another grunt of pain and the heavy thump of a body fall. Dembe had made his last shot count... as always.
“Is anyone keeping a head count?” Red was serious. “These guys are multiplying like termites.”

Red checked on the boy again, his eyes measuring the blood flow from Francis’ wounds.

Francis had taken a hit when Cheung first pulled his gun, but it was Cheung’s right hand man who had tagged Francis.

Red had offered cover fire, tugging the kid to safety but in the interim, Red had taken a shot meant for Francis.

Cheung had grazed the older man in the side.

Another lucky shot, or unlucky depending on one’s point of view, had entered Francis’ leg before they reached the cover of the pillar.

They had been hunkered down in this relative place of safety now for about ten minutes, having been able to stave off any real advancement for the other team to get.

There was a sudden lull in the mayhem.

“This can’t be good.” Red grunted, having stretched too far to check out the competitions intentions.

“You okay?” Francis picked up on the unwise move, glancing Red’s way superficially.

“We’re making some headway, surely.” Red could see the bodies mounting up between their united efforts. “How many men could he have brought?”

Fire fights outside the house broke out sporadically, whether that was a good thing, Red had no idea.

Red pressed the wound in his side. Well, that shirt and suit was toast.

“I’m okay,” it hurt like hell though. He kept it to himself.

“Until Lizzy gets a hold of you.” Francis chuckled his mirth, “You’ll never hear the end of this one.”

“It’s a graze, nothing more.” Red snapped. “I’ve had worse sunburns.”

“Work on that delivery.” Francis braced himself. He had seen movement out of the corner of his eye.

Red had never had anyone to answer to but himself. For a brief second, it annoyed him. That Lizzy would definitely be pissed. He hadn’t listened to her warnings. But it... was what it was.

This was his norm. Which was a sad statement in itself, he supposed.

Yeah, she was going to be very pissed at him.

Then... why was he suddenly smiling? Why did he feel kind of warm inside? A surge of affection caused him to chuckle.

“Really?” Francis was concerned. He looked at the guy askew. “This isn’t my idea of a good time but then...” he lobbed off a volley of shots, “it isn’t my definition of a bad time either.”

Red chuckled again for the man’s statements. “Oh, Francis,” he sighed more than heavily for his lot in life, “how do we get ourselves in these... incidents?”

One of Silas’ men broke a secure position to make a dash towards the side hall. A hail of bullets
followed his trek but the guy was able to dive for the safety of the corridor.

Red wondered why the risk. He and Dembe had offered the requisite cover fire, of course, but–

A single shot rang out from the vicinity of the hall.

Dembe swiveled, weapon raised but there was no need for alarm.

The assailant had almost managed to flank Dembe’s position. Silas’ man had seen the covert action, eliminating the threat.

Dembe inclined his head, showing his gratitude to a slyly grinning comrade. The guard waved hand nonchalantly in reply.

Dembe caught Red’s eyes that softened measurably, “Be more careful my friend.” Red whispered the hope but knew Dembe had received the message loud and clear.

“We have to finish this...” Francis remarked in passing, “I didn’t think it would take this long.”

“The cops.” Red understood the problem at hand.

“No, the HOA.” Francis popped two rounds but they missed their mark. “Not only are the fees exorbitant, the neighbors can be such bitches. Paint the mail box the wrong color, you’ve committed a cardinal sin.” he gritted, popping off another round. “ This particular brand of noise pollution will create anarchy.... there will be riots in the streets... complete chaos.”

Red glanced over thinking the boy was losing it. Maybe it was the kid’s way of coping, an innate defense mechanism. Or maybe Francis was going into shock. He glanced at the blood soaked clothing.

“You have a brick mailbox.” Red reminded.

“You know they wouldn’t let me put my pink flamingoes in my own damn yard?” Francis was taking his ire out on the competition.

Red had noted a stately pair of the birds right outside the front door, now that he thought about it. “However do you cope under such a strict regime?”

“This is America! I can put my damned flamingoes where ever the hell I please!” the man snapped. “You know...” Francis was musing thoughtfully, his hand running over the Italian marble where he sat, “this floor is cold here... that will be a problem this winter.”

He laughed at the absurdity. “If we get to this winter–” bullets ricocheted all about their heads.

“It’s thinking like that which precedes the fall of nations.” Red eased a quick check about the pillar.

Cheung had chosen the exact moment to do the same. Both men returned to cover automatically but Red now knew the bastard’s location.

“I’ve had enough of this shit...” he stepped out, feet firmly planted, systematically emptying his full clip into the wall behind which Cheung had taken cover.

Plaster and dry wall gave way to the power of his weapon, large holes appearing with each blast of the gun he held. He blindly dropped the depleted clip, slapping a new one in its place before retaking his previous position.
“Nice grouping.” Francis had been impressed. “Too much coffee this morning?” he had to give it to the guy. “I wouldn’t want to be your Barista.”

Red chuckled, “Hell, it relieved some of the tension.” he grasped the cool metal in his hand. “And wasted a perfectly good round.” he checked the spot where Cheung had been, knowing he had missed the bastard completely.

“Well, it put the fear of God into the asshole.... or it would have me.” Francis mused. “But I shit my shorts at a scary movie...”

Red turned back, situating himself more comfortably, his eyes lifting casually to the distant hall. His eyes widened with genuine surprise.

“Fuck!” Francis has seen the approaching danger as well, his good arm lifting, taking steady aim.

Everything seemed to be moving in slow motion suddenly. Intuitively, Red reacted of course, but his arm seemed inordinately heavy.

He sensed he would not be able to take a shot in time.

Vaguely, he was aware of Francis’ gun firing, a loud crack echoing in his ear.

He could not look away from the approaching menace. The man was surprisingly small in stature. He wore a grey coat and black pants. A dark hat was pulled down tight on his head.

Red remembered thinking at the time. It was the end of May. What the hell was the guy doing wearing a winter stocking cap?

Red lifted himself, wishing to meet the attacker head-on.

Again, his legs were not responding as they should. He was aware, out of the corner of his eye, that Dembe’s large frame was on the move.

Red was suddenly blinded by a bright flash.

A shooting pain tore through his head. The sound of the room became muted.

Loud voices dulled to a distant murmur. A black void of creeping haze drifted closer and closer. Red pulled back from the ever advancing edge.

There was something he had to do...

You promised... his mind yelled at him sending a lancing pain through his skull.

“L__Elizabeth.” he rasped the realization, a crystal clarity sharpened images.

People were talking to him. Angry voices, concerned voices.

Panting with exertion, Red fought to open his eyes, to focus.

His body revolted, an unseen force beckoning him deeper into the chasm of darkness surrounding him.

Francis... Dembe... they would take care of her. The thought comforted, calmed.

A profound peace descended.
She would be... fine.

You promised!

A wracking burst of pain filled his senses. He lurched gratefully for the looming void of nothingness which awaited.

A startling white haze engulfed the man. He sank into the silent depths.

He waited.

Images of a sweet, beautiful face swam mockingly about him. He tried to reach out... to touch the wondrous illusion.

He could not lift his arms.

Tears came to his eyes as he repeatedly willed his body to respond but in the end, he had to give up the fight.

The lovely vision floated closer, taunting him.

... So this was hell.

How apropos.

♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

It seemed to take forever, the drive over. Liz kept a running check on the cars behind them.

Nora chatted away, offering motherly advice on how to fix the problem with a man.

Liz listened sporadically, a fixed smile on her face.

It wouldn’t take Silas long to miss her and he would know instinctively where she was going.

She dreaded his anger but her entire focus was on reaching Red. Suddenly the urge seemed paramount.

“My goodness!” Nora was genuinely alarmed. “Is someone shooting?”

Liz laughed the concern away, “Heavens no, Nora. Francis is replacing a part of his roof. I guess,” she glanced at the black wrought iron gates, “sound carries out here.”

Nora relaxed because the noise had momentarily subsided. “Well, should we just drive up?”

“It’s a little walk.” Liz grimaced knowing a firefight when she heard one. “I would like the time to get my thoughts in order, if it’s okay?”

“Well, of course.” Nora smiled. “Should I wait?”

“Oh, no.” Liz forced a smile. “Red will bring me home.”

Nora nodded, “I have my phone if you need me.”

Liz exited the car, grabbing her bag. “Thank you so much for this.”
Nora waved the issue aside, “You stand up to that man... give him both barrels.”

Liz tensed slightly, the off remark hitting too close to home. “I’ll make it right.”

“You do that, now go on,” she motioned, “it’s the right thing to do.”

Liz had her doubts but waved a cheerful farewell, walking up the paved slope of the drive.

Nora waited until the woman entered the unlocked gate and disappeared around the high foliage of bushes which hid the rest of the winding drive.

Liz had held her phone aloft, pretending to dial before she found cover behind those bushes.

She hastily pocketed the object, un-shouldered her pack, extracting her weapon, pocketing extra clips in her light weight jacket.

It would be rough going the last few hundred yards choosing a path up to the main house.

Francis had cleared any and all cover. A sound move for Security’s sake.

Liz could see the house which sat up on a rather high incline, over looking a beautifully manicured lawn to the front and sides. She remembered from her visit here a pool graced the spacious back yard and beyond that tennis courts and what looked to be stables.

As if a city boy like Francis would know one end of a horse from the other.

She wasn’t much better, although Sam used to take her riding on the weekends. She trained for a short period of time and had enjoyed the interval until she had been thrown off. The event scared her. She was still upset with herself for not having got back up on the proverbial horse.

That would not be the case this time.

The house was quiet... too quiet.

The gunfire when she and Nora had approached, had come from within the house.

As she got closer to porch which was obscured by bushes, Liz noted a few bodies laying haphazardly close to the windows or the large oak doors.

Several moaned, some were abnormally quiet, she made a dash, expecting to be felled by a bullet any second.

She had noted the bodies as she passed.

One man had lifted a hand out to her, his face contorted with pain.

She ignored the gesture, moving forward.

The house was abnormally quiet.

The front door cracked. She could see a portion of the tiled foyer, an entry table and a lovely landscape which hung above.

The picture was askew, terribly so.

Liz kicked the bag out of her way, inching closer to the gapped door.
She was instantly assaulted by the stench of burnt gunpowder.

There was a metallic taste of blood in the air.

One sharp crack of a bullet frayed the silence.

She heard indistinctive sounds of rapid movement and Francis’ unmistakable outcry.

It was filled with urgency and anguish.

Liz forgot all else, once again moving forward, her own body reacting to the emotional turmoil of Francis’ voice.

Her first instinct was to call for back up. Her training kicking to the fore.

But this wasn’t business. Francis’ tone had told her as much.

*This* was personal.

She scanned the gigantic foyer rapidly, her eyes darting to archways and securely shut doors.

Out of nowhere, a man rushed in from her left, running rapidly to a place of concealment... from *his* point of view.

A Chinese man... an armed Chinese man.

Immediately adjusting her stance for a better shot, Elizabeth did not hesitate.

She trailed the guy as he had run, opening fire when he reached the spot he had sought out.

She rushed to the fallen man, securing his piece in the waist of her jeans, her attention on her surroundings.

Liz arose, alarmed as the gunfire continued but this time it seemed more selective... more focused.

Only one lone shot reverberated about the large Gallery just beyond the foyer.

Suddenly out of nowhere, another large man approached.

He had emerged from the terrace, his direction intent on the Great Room.

She had her weapon trained and steady when their eyes met.

The *guy*’s weapon was by his side.

She had the advantage... for the moment.

There was a tense, silent battle of wills.

She refused to look away from those stony, cold eyes.

The guy surprised her by slowly lifting his arms out to his side.

He held his firearm by one finger, it dangled in the air...

Her heart pounded with indecision, her palms sweaty. Was this one of Francis’ people?
But... no, this guy was... Chinese.

Something changed in the man’s eyes and she knew.

The gun was rapidly turned about, he was making his move–

Liz pulled the trigger in rapid succession, not hesitating for one second even.

The man’s face froze in a grotesque state of shock, his eyes losing their animosity. He slowly crumpled into a distorted heap, his weapon clacking to the expensive tiled floor.

She dropped low, inching the last few feet, grasping that gun, sliding it beneath a nearby table out of sight.

She hurriedly crawled to the first archway. The gun fire had originated here. She took a deep breath, chancing a peek around the corner of the entryway.

Her eyes skittered across body after body, each laying haphazardly about the elegantly decorated room in various positions and placement.

Francis and Dembe were crouched, huddled around something she could not make out.

Dembe was on the walkie-talkie, his face grave, the dark eyes alert and scanning. He lifted his arm, gun trained before cursing his pique.

Liz had never heard the man speak a profanity.

“Dammit, Elizabeth.” he had lowered the weapon rapidly, pointing it safely away.

Francis turned, jerking his attention, his expression one of disbelief.

Elizabeth read the anguish on the whey-faced features. She scrambled up, running the short space.

The woman pulled up short, her eyes falling downward. The blood drained from her face.

Her entire body grew numb... unresponsive.

She stood, unable to do anything more.

Red lay there, still and unmoving. A hideously ever growing pool of blood billowed out in stark red patterns on the otherwise spotless marble floor.

Dembe wrenched her hard, “Get down!” he growled as a couple shots hit the wall behind their position.

She had impulsively covered Red’s body with hers. She felt Francis’ bulk literally fall over her crouched position.

Dembe took down the imminent threat with a well placed shot.

Liz frantically tried to access the situation, the rapid thoughts, dizzying her.

She fired, getting two shots off. One missed her intended target but hit another.

The man grasped his neck, staggering into the crossfire now taking place.

Bullets riddled his body. He stumbled almost comically, falling face first into a glass coffee table.
Unlike in the movies, the tempered glass did not shatter. The guy lay on the cracked glass, having shoved the decorative bronze globe to the floor.

It broke apart from its base, the globe rolling lazily over to the marble fireplace.

The sound bit at Liz’s nerves which were already stretched taut.

Francis dug at his pants leg, producing his spare firearm. He was wholly concentrated, his face a mask of livid fury.

She cradled Red’s body protectively, her eyes scanning the chalky features with open alarm.

“Red...” she whispered brokenly, “my, God!” she kissed his cold forehead lovingly, “dear, Lord.”

“Red’s gonna kick your ass!” Francis spat venomously, chancing a glance her way. “And if he doesn’t... Dembe will.”

Dembe’s impassive features took in the scene, nothing more.

“He’ll have to stand in line.” she wrapped her jacket up, bundling it gently against Red’s head, her fingers trying to stop the flow of blood to no avail.

He gasped sharply.

“Oh, Red...” she held back her terror and tears, “please stay with me!”

The man coughed slightly and his head exploded.

Squeezing his eyes tightly, he fought the rising nausea and pain.

“Don’t you dare leave m-me!”

That voice...

He knew that sweet voice. As far as hallucinations went, this one wasn’t half bad.

If he was dying, doing so with the sound of the woman’s voice in his ear was as close to heaven as he was ever going to get.

The man fought, struggling valiantly, the white haze dissipating somewhat.

Heavy metal scrapped across the floor as Liz slid the extra Glock she had procured to Francis who had run out of ammunition... finally.

The woman ignored shot after shot which zoomed past the two huddled figures as she worked frantically to stop the loss of blood from Red’s head wound.

Windows shattered, bullets tore into the fabric of chairs and couches.

She was focused on only one thing, there was nothing else.

She glanced about frantically seeking out something, anything which would be of use.

Her clothing was useless. It was too thin to staunch such a flow.

Dembe changed positions, his expert placement clearing an over-growing path in the rapidly dissipating opposition.
Francis limped gingerly forward as his cover fire aided Dembe’s intentions.

Liz glanced at the opened door to the back. A dead man lay in her path. The guy had a head wound too, along with other countless bullet wounds. His blood had long since ceased to flow.

What was in that room? Was there something to help Red?

Liz scrambled to her feet, sliding in Red’s blood as she bolted for the open door.

The gunfire seemed to be receding. Had Dembe and Francis managed to drive the others back?

When would the medical team arrive? Where was Mr. Kaplan?

All these thoughts flooded her consciousness. She threw open drawers, searching for something she wouldn’t find. She was wasting precious time.

The bathroom... her bathroom had all kinds of medical supplies.

She tried to remember the layout of the house but at that moment, so rattled was the woman, she couldn’t even remember the layout of her own home, much less Francis’.

A pair of powerful hands grabbed at her shoulders swiveling her about.

She gasped, stumbling, clutching at a nearby wall.

“You’re his woman!” a menacing growl filled her ears as a looming bulk neared. “He won’t shoot if I have you as a shield,” the hot breath fanned her faced, “will he!”

She was huddled in burly arms, physically forced to move along with the insistent shove of his body.

Liz was hustled down a long corridor, she noted the tight grip the guy held on his weapon that was held close to her face as they moved.

His knuckles were white with exertion.

The guy was scared shitless.

She didn’t give a damn. She had to get back to Red–

She relaxed her body, forcing the instinctual need to fight away for a brief second and sure enough the guys hold lessened just a tad, but... enough.

A shot rang out from nowhere and the guy’s companion – the silent, surly one that had been paving the way, went down.

The large medallion the man wore clanged hollowly on the floor.

The other guy had stopped in his tracks.

Both looked for the source, the one who had deftly put a bullet in the back of their companion’s head.

Red lay on his side, breathing laboriously, eyes ice cold, empty of emotion. His gun sight was focused intently on Cheung’s stricken face.

Cheung swiftly swung Elizabeth about, using her as promised... as a shield.
Elizabeth’s gaze lay gently on Red’s face.

“Let h-her...” Red’s tone brooked no argument, as did the deadly look on his face, “...go.”

“No,” Cheung laughed harshly, “that is not going to happen.”

“Yes,” Liz whispered sacredly, “it is.” Red needed her. He needed this all to end so the medical team could come in.

He needed Mr. Kaplan. She would make everything right again.

The woman lifted herself bodily, kicking off the wall in the narrow hallway. She sent both she and Cheung tumbling back. They careened off the opposite wall before crumbling to the floor in an awkward heap of limbs.

Throwing her arm back, as Silas had taught, her elbow caught soundly with the man’s face full force. She was happy to hear the crunch as she connected squarely with the bridge of his nose.

He cursed loudly, but his hold was broken.

Red Reddington had somehow miraculously raised to his feet. Blood drenched his suit and face, running in rivulets down into the white collar of his shirt. His ankle weapon hung limply in unresponsive fingers.

A deathly quiet intentness was on his face.

Liz was fighting for all she was worth for Cheung had quickly recovered, grasping her waist, pulling her roughly down the dimly lit corridor.

For moment she could only think of Red. She grasped frantically at a convenient doorframe, straining against a superior strength.

“No!” she raged, her eyes constantly on Red’s stumbled advancement.

A vague memory flashed, she allowed her fingertips to release.

Cheung did not expect it and again, she was thrown to the floor as the man struggled to regain his feet under him.

*It has to stop!* Liz’s inner voice screamed the urgency, *Red needs medical attention!*

She scrambled on the slick tile, making it to the Gallery.

She was caught by the hair, her eyes briefly connecting with what she needed through the stinging tears.

She grimaced, twisting about as demanded, hands latched unto any part of her person allowed.

She kicked out, her heel landing with accurate precision in the most valuable area a man possessed.

Liz heard the rasped intake of breath. Kicking stoutly with her now freed leg, again connecting between his legs.

The man hunched over, groaning his agony.

Liz crossed the space in record time, her hand reaching beneath the table, her fingers securing the
illusive Smith and Wesson she had stashed earlier upon her entry to the house.

She turned back, as Cheung staggered in his approach.

She blindly emptied the clip, several of the shots going wild but one... one hitting a solid mark.

Cheung looked at her, his eyes raging. He raised his hunkered frame slowly.

Liz looked about, searching in vein for any deterrent she could use.

Cheung’s face contorted as he moved forward.

Liz lifted the candle stick, ready for battle. “I’ll beat your fucking brains out!” she was relatively certain of her declaration.

That eventually did not come to pass, unfortunately.

Red fired, placing a bullet in Cheung’s other shoulder, the one Liz had missed.

The man stopped, his face masked... stunned.

Red looked at him for a long moment, silent communication passing between the two combatants.

“Should have,” Red whispered lowly, “let her go.” he fired again, hoping he shot correctly. His vision was doubled.

Cheung fell, nearly missing Liz’s outstretched legs.

Blood trickled from the perfectly placed hole between his eyes.

Red pressed his hand into his throbbing head, collapsing into the nearby wall.

Liz kicked Cheung’s body aside, rushing to a slowly crumbling Red Reddington. She got to his side just in time to cushion his fall.

She struggled with his weight. “I’m here,” she panted from the exertion of the past few minutes, “I’m here, Red.”

The movement jostled Red’s head, shaking his foundation. His brain swam with the motion, magnifying his nausea to uncontrollable levels. He blindly felt for something to grab hold of, something solid to stop the cresting waves of queasiness rolling in his stomach.

The light eyes were clearly trying to focus. “Find... cover.”

“We’re okay,” she hoped as much, “it seems to be out back for now.”

She looked around for cover anyway.

“Find...” the man was sinking fast, “safety!” his head fell heavily against her shoulder.

“Okay...” she agreed hastily, realizing they were indeed, out in the open, “okay, yes. We should.”

How was she going to move him? She was terrified. He was covered in so much blood. His skin was ice cold, he was trembling from head to toe.

It shook her mentally to see him stricken.
Liz was pondering her options as she fervently prayed for guidance and assistance.

Her prayers seemed to go unanswered however.

Two looming shapes filled the arched doorway, Liz twisted having heard their approach.

She shielded Red, moving closer giving the newly arrived gunmen a smaller target.

Their weapons were pointed and for one brief second, time seemed to stand still.

Her own Glock was left by Cheung over by the Gallery table... Red’s gun, she could not reach in time.

She closed her eyes, embracing the man tightly, “It’s okay,” she suddenly realized, “it really is,” she whispered for the man alone, “we’re together.”

She prepared herself for the bullet’s impact, her body tensing slightly. The woman’s lips gently brushed the man’s temple.

Two shots rang out, Liz jumped, her arms tightening about Red’s slumping shoulders.

She felt no pain, no heat... nothing. She swirled her head about, her senses on high alert.

Both assailants lay on the floor, their bodies blocking the entry. She stared at them, unable to assimilate the proceedings as yet.

A mammoth shadow appeared to take the fallen men’s place. This one practically blocked out the sun which showed brightly outside the cool interior of the Gallery.

“I ought to ring that little neck.”

She knew that brusque voice, her eyes desperately trying to adjust as the giant moved closer.

She sat cradling Red, her eyes large and vacant.

“Move the hell aside,” she scrambled out of the way, helping Silas lay the man flat, easing Red’s legs to raised position.

People began to rapidly filter in. Men with stretchers, people in scrubs. Then with breathing machines... supplies.

A woman knelt beside Red inserting a needle into his arm. Another placed an oxygen mask over his face.

Men lifted him effortlessly. Everyone was speaking at once.

It was controlled chaos.

Silas stood aside, his face grim... set. Dembe was suddenly there, walking alongside the stretcher.

He bent, saying something to the unresponsive individual.

Liz realized Red was being taken from her, she bolted forward.

Silas pulled her up short, “Let them do their thing.”

She pushed hard on his grip, “Let me—”
“Elizabeth...”
The woman halted in her antics, seeking out the calm, collected voice.

“I have him.”

“Mr. Kaplan.” Liz breathed her relief, tears coming to the fore.

“Bring her over in a while.” Kaplan directed Silas. “I’ll call you.”

“No!” Liz pulled away, rushing to the woman. “I have to be with him. I have to.”

Kaplan relented, walking away.

Liz turned frantic eyes her guard’s way.

“Get in the damned car.” he snapped but Liz sensed the anger was not entirely for her.

Liz dismissed the sensation, one objective in mind.

Francis stood slumped by the black SUV, a defeated look on his face.

The large vehicle was crowded, not one space available.

Liz craned her neck. “Red! I’m here!” she lifted her voice over the din. “Francis!” she turned stricken eyes, finally noting his wounds. “Jesus, what happened to you?”

Francis waved the question aside, side stepping the woman entirely to return his interest to what was transpiring inside that damned car.

Liz did the same, both waiting despondently. Both were secretly terrified, trying desperately not to let on to the other.

Neither had ever experienced such ... helplessness.

Red Reddington was larger than life. Always so strong. They were the ones who he took care of and guided, not the other way around.

This was wrong. So damned wrong and backwards.

Francis wished more than anything...

He had vacated the SUV to make room for the newly arrived patient but Red had grasped his hand in passing.

“T-Take...” Francis strived to decipher the slurred words over all the noise of the medical personnel, “care of...”

Francis had panicked, getting the jest of the weakly proclaimed request. “Don’t you dare leave her!” he had grated the statement, “Don’t you fucking dare!”

Red was saying his ‘good-byes’ and it shook Francis to his very core.

The ice cold fingers held to Francis’ forearm, “...Prom...”

“I don’t fucking promise.” Francis had shook his head vigorously, the implication of Red’s words, scaring the living shit out of him., “Looks like it’s up to you then, doesn’t it.”
Red smiled weakly.

Francis blinked furiously at the threat of tears, “You bastard! Don’t you put this on me!” his mouth trembled, a rush of emotions suffocating him. “We both know how shallow and useless I am where women are concerned.”

Red’s eyes fluttered open then shut.

Medics had tried to sever the conversation, they needed to work.

“She’s not strong enough yet.” Francis offered one last ditch effort. “She can’t take it... you’re leaving her to the stalker guy. She’s needs you... not me.”

And then Kaplan had kicked his ass out of the vehicle.

“Let me in there!” Liz wanted to be by Red’s side no matter what. “Make a hole!”

Kaplan motioned and miraculously a spot opened up.

Liz slithered through the air tubes and other medical apparatus, her hand instantly gripping Red’s.

Red felt the warmth spread through his body. *Lizzy was here.* He could sense her presence which calmed his heart.

Silas came alongside Francis, his eyes shrewdly observant.

Francis lifted a haunted gaze. “She’s scared.” he motioned. “Fuck... *I’m* scared.”

Silas’ blue-green eyes fixated on the distraught man, nodding minutely.

“This is my fault.” Francis stated dismally. “I should have never–”

“Stop right there.” the guard cut the accusations short. “This is no more your fault than last nights fiasco was Red’s.”

Francis took a measure of comfort in the words.

“If I thought it was your fault, I’d fucking tell you.” Silas lay a large hand on the man’s shoulder, returning his interest to the proceedings at hand.

Francis felt better... but he didn’t know why.

“Ray...” the soft whisper washed over the man. Red cursed the white fog.

*Stay the hell away from me,* he ranted, *I’m not ready to go yet!*

“I know you can hear me.” Liz felt as much. She leaned close, her face inches from his, her lips brushing his unresponsive ones. “I can’t do this without you.” she pleaded.

Red’s brows furrowed.

“You promised.” Liz wept freely. “You gave me your word and I believed you.” her voice shook. “You go to sleep now and you get better but,” she swallowed hard, “you come to me then, do you hear me?”

Silas took his cue from Kaplan who had motioned at Liz, “We have to let them take care of him
now.” gentle hand encompassed her shoulders.

Liz shook free, “He wants me here!” she snapped.

Kaplan shook her head.

Red liked her spunk. He felt a surge of pride.

“We’re in the way.” Silas’ voice was crisp.

“No!” Liz grated. “Just drive. Get him where ever you have to go!”

In his minds eyes, Red was tracing those delicious little lips with his fingers. He was capturing her face in his hands, kissing that pouty mouth.

Gritting his jaw, Silas wrapped his arms about her torso, bodily lifting the woman. In seconds, he had deposited her soundly beside Francis, the guards expression a foreboding one.

The distraught female had fought with all her strength, kicking and screaming her outrage.

But in the end, it was a fruitless struggle. Silas held firm while the medical team took over.

“I’m going to kill you, Silas!” Liz was proving a handful. “With my bare hands!”

Red’s mouth curved into a gentle smile.

_His little spitfire was staying true to the course... good luck there, Silas._

Kaplan frowned hard at the totally unexpected gesture.

The smile still played about the man’s mouth.

“She waits for you.” Dembe too, had seen Red’s response, understanding it perfectly.

“You must hurry back.” he murmured soothingly. “Silas is only one man... how long can he hope to hold out, my friend?”

Red’s smiled softened.

_How long indeed_

Silas’ gruff impatient demeanor settled the woman somewhat. “We’re going with them!” he hastened to explain his actions. “There is no room... Francis needs medical attention.”

Liz stopped struggling instantly, seeking out the younger man who had stood so solemnly still beside her.

She noticed the blood soaked linen of his suit, the way he listed so off kilter.

“Oh, Francis... I’m so sorry!” she was miserable. “Let me help you to the car.”

Francis started to object but Silas’ curt shake of the head warned the man of his folly. Liz needed something to focus on besides Red.

He did not object when Liz took his good arm, offering a shoulder to lean on.

_She waits for you._
Red allowed the mist to wash over him, the sooner he did whatever he had to do, the sooner he could return to her.

Blackness thankfully descended.

Chapter End Notes

Any errors are mine. Had trouble getting this to paste correctly. Hope everything came out okay...
May 31

The silence in the car was permeated with a tension so thick, one could cut it with the proverbial knife.

Francis glanced over to his companion. Silas’ jaw line was working prophetically.

The man checked on the woman who sat in the back seat, hunched by the driver’s side door. Liz looked miserable and really quite vulnerable. Her hand clutched the handle in a death grip as if by sheer force of will she could make herself instantly transport to Red Reddington’s side.

Francis knew, the longer Silas kept quiet, the bigger, louder and more dangerous the explosion would be when it happened.

He searched for some logical, safe way to gently lead the giant of a man to an articulate, rational means by which to vent the...

“What the hell were you thinking?” the loud, vicious accusation literally boomed in the still of the car.

Even Francis had started at the decimal level of the explosive impact.

“I was thinking,” Liz had come back instantly, sitting bolt upright in her seat, “that one of you idiots should have listened to me and acted upon the assumption that someone was going to be seriously hurt.”

She pointed to the slowly moving vehicle they followed and had now for some agonizingly slow minutes. “Seems a woman’s intuition isn’t always something to be dismissed so easily, huh!”

“Maybe no one would have gotten hurt if you had kept your sweet ass at home, where you should have kept it!”

“Hey!” Francis took up the fight. “Red’s injury happened before she got there, you can’t lay that on her!”

Silas jerked his head to the man. “You keep the hell out of this.” he grated. “I’m dressing down one of my men... it’s none of your affair.”

Both Liz and Francis’ expressions showed their confusion to the odd statement.

“Red’s injury is bad enough. Your ass could be laying alongside him... how do you think that would fly with him?”

“I hate to remind your sorry ass,” Liz flared incandescently, “I am an F-”

“I know what the hell you profess to be!” Silas snapped right back, cutting the sentence short, “Should I tell you just how much that means to me?”

Liz fell silent, well knowing the man’s views on governmental training methods.
“It means shit!” Silas raged on, his hands tightening on the steering wheel even more so.

“I am more than capable, damn you!” Liz yelled at the man’s averted profile. “Red is going to have to realize the fact... and so are you!”

Francis was confused, “Red’s just trying to protect you, Lizzy. You mean a great deal to him... and us.”

Liz’s frustration grew, “I know that but–”

“Can you really fault us for not wanting anything to happen to you?” Francis reasoned. “Is that so very wrong? This life,” he sighed, “...our work, you should never have been subjected to it.”

Francis worried for the woman. She wasn’t trained to handle what happened today. It was pure luck she had survived.

“Stop coddling her.” Silas gritted.

“He’s not coddling me you gargantuan ape!” Liz took up for her friend, “He’s being kind... maybe you should look that word up since it doesn’t seem to be in your vocabulary.”

“Fuck ‘kind’,” Silas waved an impatient hand, “kind will get you killed.”

“Fuck you!” Liz countered. “News flash, I don’t need Red’s approval... or yours. I will make my own decisions in life and to hell with both of you if you don’t like it!”

“You hesitated!” Silas accused, turning half way in his seat, his eyes flashing at her, “that fucker was playing you.” he had come up at the exact time as Liz’s confrontation with the man in the Gallery. He had seen the hesitation.

“If you mean the guy in the Gallery...” Liz defended her actions, “I thought he might be one of Francis’ men but in the end.... who shot whom?”

Francis was impressed with the grammatically correct phrasing, “You shot someone?”

“And if you were there,” she ignored Francis altogether, “why didn’t you shoot him?” Liz accused.

“I was too fucking far away as yet and would have tagged you, but my eyesight is still perfect.” Silas too ignored the man. “The point being, why did you put yourself in such a predicament to begin with?”

“I don’t have to answer to you.” Liz grated, “I am a grown woman who is perfectly capable of making decisions on my own.”

Liz knew she was being irrational but Silas had put her on the defensive. She once again, for the second time this day, found herself fighting back against superior odds.

The car pulled to a halt, the vehicle in front having paved the way.

Liz opened the car door, her temper high. “Consider yourself,” she hesitated only briefly, her eyes flashing fire, “off the fucking payroll. I will speak to Red... inform him we no longer see eye to eye.”

Francis’ mouth fell agape. He cringed at the power of the slammed door.

The silence was deafening inside the interior of the vehicle. Both men watched Liz hurry to Red’s side, or at least, as close as the medical team would allow.
Francis pulled in a deep cleansing breath. He could feel the coiled tension in his companion’s large frame.

“She didn’t mean that.”

“She meant it.” Silas still gripped the steering wheel but his body relaxed somewhat. “I can’t say that I blame her.”

Francis chanced a quick glance at the stoic profile.

The silence returned but it wasn’t so tense somehow.

“...You don’t know what I felt,” Silas’ voice was so low, Francis had to strain to hear the muttered words, “seeing her wrestling with that fucker, knowing that there was no way Dembe or I could reach her in time.”

“What fucker?” Francis was in the dark.

“Cheung.” Silas replied quietly. “And then there were those other two assholes. Standing there, a breath away from... ending both her and Red.”

Francis’ brow furrowed deeply, “W-What?”

“You should have seen her, Francis,” Silas shifted a glance, “she was beating the hell out of that bastard, fighting like a banshee,” he smiled slowly, “kicking, clawing, punching out... just like I taught her.”

Francis could sense the pride Silas felt, “Then why the hell are you riding her ass so hard if she–”

“Because it could have gone the other way.” Silas reminded quietly.

Francis sat back, drained in more ways than one. The pain of the wounds was filtering through the adrenaline.

“So she depletes the clip in her weapons,” Silas chuckled, “picks up a candlestick and threatens to beat the shit out of the guy.”

Francis smiled listlessly. Yeah, that sounded like the Liz he knew.

The silence returned for a long beat, each man to his own thoughts.

“She shielded Red with her own body.” Silas was still impressed with the gesture.

Francis rubbed his eyes wearily, watching the other guards gather outside the large workshop in which the operating room had been set up.

Men milled about aimlessly.

This was the hard part, after the fight... taking stock of the injured, fighting for the will to regroup...to continue on.

“And then the little shit fires my ass...” the guard chuckled his amusement before turning his attention elsewhere.

“We have to get you some help.” Silas could ponder the ‘what if’s’ of today’s events... later.
“I’m good.” Francis waved the issue aside, “let’s go see how Red—”

“Red is being handled.” Silas waved Dembe over. The man had exited the workshop surveying the area critically.

Silas shoved his weight out of the vehicle, crossing around to the passenger side.

Several men passed, one limping visibly. Silas noted the blood from a stomach wound. Two of his men rushed to the guy’s aide after Silas waved them over.

“Come on, cowboy,” the guard offered a sturdy shoulder. Dembe helped Francis from the car, “you look like you’ve been rode hard and put away wet.”

“Sounds like a good Friday night to me.” Francis fought the wave of dizziness descending, holding listlessly to each man’s support. He pulled up short, gripping their shoulders, “By the way, what the hell does that mean? I’ve always wondered.”

“He has lost a lot of blood.” Dembe pointed out the obvious.

“Can the suit be saved?”

Both men looked at the earnest expression on Francis’ face.

“No.” they answered in unison.

Francis’ face fell.

Minutes later, they were filtering through the injured, seeking medical personnel, which was immediately forthcoming.

Francis watched forlornly as his beloved clothing was shredded in order to tend his wounds as they were revealed to capable hands.

Silas fixated on the larger plastic wrapped area in the center of the structure in which they had taken refuge.

He could make out cloudy figures moving in almost ghost like vagueness, all hunched over a surgical table.

He had been here so many times before in his life, hell... a couple times, Silas himself, had been behind that vague wall of polyethylene.

Red’s medical team gave new meaning to the term, mobile surgical units.

And Kate Kaplan....

The small, slender frame was unmistakable, standing off to one side, so gravely vigilant.

What could one say about such loyalty, such dedication. Grace under pressure.... that was Mr. Kaplan.

And then there was Elizabeth Scott...

Pacing the perimeter, eyes never leaving the hushed going-on’s behind that closed off area.

Silas wanted to go to the woman. To comfort her as Red would want.
He had blown that possibility big time.

“Francis,” Silas felt the weight of his responsibility to Red Reddington, “you have to go make it right with The Hot Head.”

Silas motioned to Liz’s vicinity.

“Oh,” Francis sought out the guard’s meaning. He could read the stress, anxiety and fear on Lizzy’s face from here, “...sure.”

“Not now, you idiot.” Silas put a staying hand on Francis’ shoulder, “after you feel better.”

“I feel all right.” Francis was once again confused.

“No.” Dembe was always the voice of reason. “I will stay with Elizabeth until the doctor,” he motioned to the man attending Raymond’s wounds, “has finished. And then perhaps...”

“I think she needs someone now.” Francis sensed as much.

“I will go.” Dembe exchanged enigmatical looks with Silas. Dembe walked away, his destination clear.

“You have to make this right with her, Silas.” Francis implored. “You were wrong to–”

“No, I was not.” Silas stated bluntly. “And she knows as much, but... yeah, I will make it right, kid. But in my own time.”

Francis wasn’t happy with the words, clearly.

“She needs to focus on Red right now anyway,” Silas motioned to the strangely quiet area behind the plastic, “as we all should.”

There was no argument there. Francis sat back, allowing the poking and prodding. He steadfastly ignored the pain.

All eyes were fixed on the make-shift operational section of the high structure they occupied.

It would be a long night.

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Pushing at the fog and pain, Red struggled to make sense of the garbled mess permeating his senses.

His ears felt as though they were stuffed with cotton, his head held below water. Everything was hazy, muffled and jumbled.

Struggling to clear away an obstruction he could not see, he waded through a murky void. It seemed like hours until the muted sounds gradually became more clear. As he broke the surface of the suffocating liquid, he heard Elizabeth’s hushed voice.

Her voice was like a soothing balm, even his pain seemed to lessen. His soul rejoiced for he suddenly realized:

*She was okay...*

He had vague recollection of an already intense firefight reaching a vicious climax.
He had grown tired of the situation that he and Francis had found themselves in. He had made a reckless unnecessary move.

He had promised Lizzy he would be careful... what had he been thinking? But he had never once thought that Lizzy’s arrival would tip the scales to ending it all.

Even through the confusion and disorientation, one thing was perfectly clear. That bastard, Cheung, had tried to take Lizzy from him.

Though the thought of opening his eyes was not an activity he relished in the least, Red needed to see her. He needed to assure himself that Lizzy was truly in one piece.

He willed his eyes to open but the lids were extremely heavy. Was he medicated?

Why was there so much... pain?

“I don’t know what’s right or wrong anymore.” Liz was saying, “I had to go, Francis. I couldn’t just—”

“It’s okay.” Francis replied.

“Silas is mad at me for getting Nora involved in the whole debacle.” Liz was upset.

Red disliked intensely when she was upset...

“I wasn’t thinking clearly, he’s right.”

“I don’t know if there is a right or wrong to this issue, Lizzy.”

*Thank God for Francis.* Red heard the shuffle of a sliding chair.

Where was he? It was warm here, warm and pleasant.

It couldn’t be hell at least, although his head felt like any movement would sever it from its rightful resting place, granted.

“When we care about someone, we sometimes react as our hearts dictate.” Francis was continuing, “Only God can say if any decision we make under those circumstances is a good one.”

Red lay perfectly still. He wanted to keep his head. It was a good decision of which God would approve, he was certain.

“Silas has a lot of responsibility on his shoulders,” Francis could see both sides of the issue, that was what made him so good at what he did, “and he has a short fuse.”

Liz hugged herself closer, “How did it all go so wrong?” she felt miserable, “It’s my fault... again!”

Red’s pain spiked. What the hell was going on? He had to get back. He couldn’t stay here.

Haze drifted before his eyes, a grey mist... he had seen this before.

*The wheels kick and the winds song*
*And the white sails shaking*
*And a grey mist on the seas face*
And a grey dawn breaking...

Red’s pain receded a bit.

I must go down to the sea again...

Of course. He remembered now.

He had been at sea. A cold November’s day. How bracing. How invigorating.

What a wonderful day that had been.

The mist thickened and for one blissful moment, Red had welcomed its embrace.

Pain awaited on the horizon of clarity. It was so good to simply... stop the fight.

“It’s not your fault, Liz.” Francis’ voice floated far in the distance, “Silas might have overreacted a bit but it’s only because he gives a shit about you. If you got hurt, what would that do to his relationship with Red?”

“I love you guys for caring, I do!” Liz did, “But, you have to get it, Francis... if I’m going to be a part of Red’s world I have to learn how to navigate inside it.”

“It’s hard for a guy,” Francis could say it so eloquently sometimes, “to step back, it’s ingrained in our make-up. We don’t mean to be Neanderthals, Liz.”

What had gone wrong there? Were Silas and Lizzy at odds?

Red tried to piece the images together.

“I know that.” the soft voice was speaking again.

Red missed that voice.

“I don’t know how to make it right,” Liz sounded so sad, “saying I’m sorry just isn’t going to do it this time, is it.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I do worry.” Liz was clearly doing so. “He won’t really leave, will he? He knows I was just... angry... hurt.”

“Silas has a hide like a water buffalo.” Francis dismissed. “If he was going to bail, he would have already split.”

“Maybe I can talk to Dembe, enlist his help?”

“If you want but I think Silas will come around when he thinks the smoke has cleared.” Francis said. “You were pretty pissed, Liz. Give him some time to figure out his next move.”

A small hand closed over Red’s fingers, “I w-wish Red was back. I wish he would just open his eyes. If he was awake... everything would be just fine again.”

Lizzy needed him...

There had been such a poignant trace in the softly whispered request.
The gentle touch electrified him. He urged his fingers to move... close over the small, delicate fingers.

“Francis!” Liz’s voice held excitement, “Francis, come here!”

“What?” Red could hear her movement. He desperately tried to open his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“I felt it—” Liz’s hands gripped his frantically now. “I know I did! Red?”

That delicate, light, evasive fragrance engulfed him... Lizzy’s scent.

He fought harder.

“Red please!” that little voice wavered with emotion, drawing him closer and closer to the surface, “Open your eyes.”

Struggling hard against his body’s demands, Red slit his lids, closing them tightly in the next instant from the sharp, harsh glare.

“Lower the lights, Lizzy.” Francis suggested as he neared.

“Red, are you okay? Can you,” Liz tried to keep the tears at bay, “...hear me?”

“...Lizzy.” the parched, raspy tone croaked out unbidden.

He would kill for a drink of water.

“Thank you, God,” Liz’s whispered gratitude filtered into Red’s being, “... thank you.”

She hugged Red’s body lovingly, careful not to jostle the man. “I’m here.” her voice trembled.

Leaning in, Liz nuzzled the rough shadow of his jaw. She had never been so happy to feel the scruff against her delicate skin. He was warm, breathing... alive.


“Some Ovaltine.” Red mused quietly.

Francis chuckled his relief. “Already quoting old movie lines.” he checked with Liz. “Damned good sign if you ask me.”

Liz’s chuckle was more a gasp of release of all the horror of the last few hours.

Red focused his eyes in the dimmer light, “Is it over?”

“A few hours now.” Francis supplied the necessary info. “Dembe and Silas are cleaning up the mess.”

Red refused to move his head. He had made some sort of deal with God about that... he didn’t want God to renege by not holding up his end of the bargain somehow.

“...Lizzy,” he lifted his fingers cautiously, “are you there?”

“Where else would I be, you idiot?” she hastily wiped at her dampened cheek, catching his fingers instantly.

Forcing his eyes open, he found the darkened strands of her hair and the curvature of her cheekbone
in his line of sight. She drew back, smiling down at him.

“It’s about time.” she blinked, brushing quickly at the tear spotted lashes.

“...Francis?” he searched out the kid.

“Like a bad penny...”

Red glanced up, finding the man hobbling into view, looking pale but relieved. “I always turn up... sometimes worse for wear,” he granted.

Scanning the area, he frowned when he saw it was only them in the room.

“Everyone is fine, except you.” Liz assured the man. “Now, what do you need,” she repeated, “ice, heat, pills... or all of the above?.”

“...Yes.” Red murmured quietly.

He knew there was more going on in his skull than the migraine, but knew if he lessened that, he’d be able to function. Think more clearly. And having more than enough of them over the years, he had become quite adept at getting the pain down to a bearable level as quickly as possible.

Easing from the bed to keep the shaking to a minimum, Liz set off for the items, glad of something to do finally besides... wait.

Trailing the woman to the door, Red shifted his eyes to the other occupant.

Francis said without preamble, “You scared the living hell out of her.”

“Long as she’s alive.” he said, his voice hoarse. “Casualties?”

“On our side?” Francis quirked a brow. “None, believe it or not. A lot of injuries but all manageable.”

Red breathed his relief. He was so hoping against hope that would be the case. It was too soon after Kevin... especially for Lizzy.

“Cheung on the other hand...” Francis shrugged mentally because it hurt too much to shrug his shoulder.

“...I hope that son-of-a-bitch is already in hell.”

“You blew that fucker away,” Francis confirmed Red’s hazy recollection, “and in spectacular fashion too.” there was a hint of admiration present, “Leave it to you to get a center head shot with double vision, you damned show off.”

Red dismissed the praise, too tired to do much else. “Are you... are they bad?” he motioned to Francis’ bandaged appendages.

“No, just annoying.” Francis flexed his arm, wincing. “Water?”

“Hell yes,” Red was grateful, “mouth feels like I’ve been in the Sahara a week.”

Francis grabbed the bottle, bending the straw, “Don’t move..” he warned.

Sipping the water slowly, Red hoped like hell it stayed down because there was nothing worse than
retching when your head was on fire. Keeping perfectly still, he pushed the straw away. Gathering his strength and willpower, he readied himself for what would likely come next.

“Nausea?” Francis asked sagely, watching the other man’s face carefully.

“Uh hmm.” Red closed his eyes fighting the sensation.

Francis got a trash can, waiting. “You owe me a fake fern, by the way.” he informed, then explained further when Red’s brow furrowed with open confusion. “You puked on one at my house.”

“My apologies.” he adjusted himself on the pillow, grimacing, “Don’t remember that part.”

“How convenient.” Francis stated his amusement.

Red’s head pounded relentlessly. He was having trouble focusing his vision.

“Man, I thought you had bought the farm today, Red.” Francis’ concern laced his demeanor. “There was so much blood...”

“Guess it wasn’t my time.” Red remarked off-handedly. “...Too bad for you, hum?”

Francis’ brow furrowed, “What?” he questioned the statement, genuinely caught off-guard by the veiled coldness behind the words. “What the hell does that mea–”

Red rubbed his temples with ever increasing pressure, his thumbs and fingers attempting to drive the hideous pain away by sheer force of will.

“You’d have a clear path,” Red grimaced painfully, “to Elizabeth without me... in the way.”

Francis studied the man diligently, “You had better be delusional.” he grated, “Is that what you think?” he accused bitterly, “Is that what you’ve always thought?”

Red shook his head to clear it, grunting savagely for such an unwise move, “No,” he whispered harshly, “I don’t know why... I said that.”

Red hung his head, his palm bracing his forehead. His flesh was hot... did he have a fever?

What made him say such a thing out loud?

“You’re good for her.”

And I am not.

The thought continued to plague the man. “She risked her life today.... she can’t keep doing that.”

A clarity. Finally. She can’t keep doing that.

“Is that why you continually come up with this ridiculous shit?” Francis stepped closer to the bed. “Are you trying to push her away? Is that the plan?”

“...No.” Red grimaced, lifting his countenance angrily.

“Really?” Francis was skeptical. “What other reason could there be? Just tell her...” it was challenged, “you think she would stay one second where she’s not wanted?”

“I do want her, you son-of-a-bitch!” Red raged. “This isn’t about–”
“Then you tell me what it is about!” Francis snapped.

Both men halted the exchange, both hearing the sharp click of blunt, practical heels coming down the outside corridor.

Francis’ anger was masked instantly but his body was filled with unexpressed animosity.

Red blinked the threat of blackness aside, taking in copious amounts of cleansing air.

Mr. Kaplan had slowed her crisp steps, having entered the room, her shrewd gaze settling on one man then the other.

“Well…” she shifted knowledgeable eyes, “Raymond... you are back among the living, I see.”

“Unfortunately, he’s brain damaged.” Francis stuffed his hands into his pockets turning aside.

Kaplan noted the strident remark.

Red wondered on Lizzy’s absence. What was taking her so long?

Hopefully, Lizzy would keep Kate’s most evil torture to a minimum, since she at least was too happy right now that he wasn’t dead. Not that Kate wasn’t pleased, she just had different ways of showing it.

Red felt a cool swab on his arm, a needle prick and sudden warmth spreading through his body.

“You’ll feel better in a minute.” Kate said brusquely. “Or at the very least, like you won’t toss your cookies.”

“Mr. Kaplan…” Liz scolded happily, breezing back into the room, her mood carefree and optimistic now that Red was awake and functioning, “why are you so mean to him?”

“So maybe he’ll take care and not do something so incredibly stupid again.” Kate took hold of his arm, jostling the man as she took his blood pressure.

Red needed to gauge the extent of his injuries, trying desperately to ignore the fact that gentle jostling had sent wave after wave of nauseating pain throughout his system.

“How bad?” he grated the words.

“... You tell me.” Kaplan’s pinched lips quirked irritably for she was clearly a bit perturbed.

“Oh, God…” Red sighed melodramatically, “not the ‘who is president’ ordeal.” he pleaded. “I’m already close to purging the contents of my stomach.”

“Are you a Republican?” Kate quirked a brow. She had never been quite certain of the man’s affiliations, curious by nature, sometimes to a fault, she realized.

“Why pick the side of a crumbling empire?” Red evaded purposely, if only to irk the small female.

Francis was instantly concerned in spite of his present annoyance with the man.

“Is he talking about Rome?” he directed the question to a bemused Elizabeth Scott. “Ask him what year it is.”

Kaplan rolled her eyes.
Liz scowled, “You ask him.”

“Tell Francis,” Red sighed more than heavily, “I referred to the fact that history repeats itself.” he snapped. “And tell him, I think he’s a twit!”

Liz switched her interest from one man to the other.

Francis gladly returned to his brooding.

“Is there something wrong?” Liz examined both men critically.

Kaplan extracted a stethoscope from her little black bag, “You’re hiding something,” she knew Reddington too well.

“I am not.” the man grumbled.

Kaplan’s keen gaze swept the prone man, “Do you know where you are?” she waved an imperious hand.

“I’m at home.” Red shook his head at the absurdity of such a question.

Liz beamed her pleasure for the remark, that he considered this... home.

“Who’s the twit?” Kaplan probed stalwartly, motioning accordingly.

Red locked eyes with Francis, both men refusing to lose the mood of the day.

“And her?” Kate hooked a thumb to the woman standing beside her.

Red’s eyes softened, “...My Lizzy.”

“Your Lizzy?” Francis goaded purposely, enjoying Red’s flash of icy anger.

“What the hell is going on?” Liz demanded. “Francis are you intentionally trying to upset Red?”

Francis remained moot on the subject, his mood still sullen.

Red bit his lip in an unconscious display of anxiety.

He knew Francis’ given name but for the life of him, he could not remember the guy’s last name... nor could he recall Elizabeth’s, which was even more disturbing.

What the hell....

“What happened to me?” he demanded answers.

“You don’t know?” Kaplan wasn’t going to help him in this instance he sensed.

He closed his eyes, welcoming the blissful silence. If he could just rest a–

Kaplan rattled the pill bottle she had extracted from her bag, “Stay with me.”

Raymond winced, “...Jesus, Kate,” he fought the agony, “a Dominatrix has nothing on you.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere.” the woman administered pain meds through the IV line. “Are you having memory issues? Not to worry if so... I would be shocked if you weren’t.”
Liz gently placed a heat pad beneath the man’s nape and an icepack on his forehead.

Red sighed his relief, “…Yes.” he nodded his gratitude, instantly regretting the action, a grunt escaping his throat.

“How did you get here?” Kaplan needed to gauge a few things herself. She crossed her arms, clearly willing to stay as long as it took to secure answers.

“Cheung.” Reddington snapped. “Leave me alone woman. I want to die in peace.”

Liz’s face allowed her shock and dismay, “Don’t say things like that.”

Kaplan was less affected. “What exactly are you feeling?

“Rising annoyance and severe aggravation!” Red opened his eyes a slit to glare at his executioner.

Kaplan’s features betrayed nothing. She merely… waited.

“My head is imploding, I’m going to throw up on your patent leather shoes–”

“Out of spite?” Kate remarked casually.

Red’s eyes narrowed dangerously.

Liz’s fingers scratched soothingly along his scalp. He relaxed by degrees despite the moment.

“Do you not remember some things, Red?” Liz was more than concerned.

“He hit the floor pretty hard.” Francis felt compelled to inform Kaplan. “…When he fell.”

“A hair’s breath and he would have been at Heaven’s gate… or hells.” Kaplan listened to the man’s breathing for some few moments.

Liz’s blood ran cold, considering the off handed statement.

“You lead a charmed life.” Kaplan raised, folding the instrument absently. “You need food.”

Red’s stomach lurched at the notion.

Francis was instantly by his side, trash can in hand for he had witnessed the instant drain of blood from the man’s quickly greying features.

Red settled his reaction, glaring at Kaplan, “You can be a real bitch when you want.”

She smiled wistfully, “Very kind of you to say… now,” she sought Elizabeth, “where’s that woman that erringly believes she is in charge of this complex?”

“…Nora?” Liz had arisen from Red’s side having taking a chair close to the bed’s edge, “she’s in the kitchen, Mr. Kaplan.”

Kate said not a word, merely grabbed her bag before marching diligently from the room without a backward glance… still a little more than put out with Raymond Reddington clearly, mumbling something about, ‘another new scar on that senseless head’.

“Why is she so mad at you?” Liz was confused.

“It’s just her way.” Red closed his eyes, feeling the pain recede gradually. Whatever Kaplan was
experiencing, she had given him the good stuff. He floated in a relatively pleasant place right now.

“So, Francis,” there was one last issue with which to contend, “about what I said... earlier,” he would smooth it over. No need to bring unpleasant matters to light at such a time.

Why he had provoked the guy, Red still wasn’t certain.

“Yeah,” Francis nodded sarcastically, stepping to the opposite side of the bed, “let’s clear the air... shall we?”

Liz stepped back, for the man had stepped far too close into her space, her look somewhat comical, “What are yo–”

Francis’ hands latched about her upper arms, hauling her bodily closer.

“Hey!” Liz objected to such rough handling, or handling, at all. Her senses too overloaded to react one way or other, truth told. She sensed Francis’ intent, stunned and disoriented by the fact...

Red’s body tensed, he too, sensing the direction Francis’ anger would take–

Unfortunately, any movement sent waves of sharp reawakened torture spiking in his head, so at the moment, his only recourse was to glare death rays at the individual.

“What th–” Liz pushed on Francis’ advancing chest, incredulously shocked and rattled.

Francis held firm, leaning abruptly, his mouth connecting soundly with Elizabeth’s slightly agape one.

Red felt the nausea rise, closing off his vision to the sickening sight but it was like a bad car wreck...

He could not look away for long.

Elizabeth, at first, stood tense and rigid within the sphere of Francis’ embrace, her fists curled tight into balls of reaction.

Red’s blood boiled as the younger man deliberately ran his palm over the slight bulge of Lizzy’s ass cheek.

The woman gasped, pulling sharply back, her features livid suddenly.

Francis ignored the fact, grasping her head between firm hands, reconnecting his lips to Liz’s mouth as he purposely deepened the already passionate kiss.

Liz shoved hard, severing all physical connection. “Are you fucking insane?!!”

She smacked Francis’ chest hard, shoving him yet again. “Have you lost your mind!” she was relatively sure he had.

She turned stunned eyes Red’s way. “What the fuck!” she sought answers from... somewhere.

“Did you like it, Lizzy?” Francis taunted. “Did you feel anything?”

Liz turned back, hitting the man again, this time... harder. “You crazy bastard! Yeah, I felt something....” she declared to any and all, “I felt like puking in your mouth!”

“Ewww.” Francis grimaced.
Liz spread her hands helplessly, “What the hell is going on inside your minuscule mind!”

“Not my mind.” Francis shrugged nonchalantly, “...his.”

Liz spared Red a glance, “Don’t you bring him into your sick perverted world!” she ranted. “He’s hurt and... and...” she motioned angrily, “and this is how you treat him... treat me? What the hell, Francis.” she was close to tears.

“Not to worry, Lizzy.” Francis shifted Red a cool gaze, “just a sick little demonstration.”

He stepped to confront Red’s steely ice cold stare, “...All your questions answered?”

“If you ever think about doing something like–”

“I didn’t think it.... not once.” Francis seethed, “And that you would think I would...”

Elizabeth’s wide eyes watched the scene with veiled concern.

First Silas and she were at odds. And now... Francis and Red.

What the hell was wrong with this day!

“Stop!” she stepped forward, pleading, “My God! What is happening to our family!”

Red backed off. Francis pulled his attention back to the man. “Stop seeing shit that doesn’t exist!” he warned.

Red seethed in silence.

“Red...” Elizabeth moved haltingly, “you didn’t think...” she felt sick inside.

“...No.” the man lied on impulse... then hesitated, chastising himself. You don’t lie to Lizzy.

“...Maybe.” he muttered.

Liz gasped her dismay, clearly upset by the man’s distrust in her.

Understanding Red’s turmoil, more so, Liz’s distress... Francis came to the rescue. “Look, the guy has a concussion.” he reasoned, “he’s obviously not himself.” he took the fall for the entire incident. “I... overreacted and I totally apologize for being such a jerk.”

It was hard for Francis to lie to the woman, Red could see by the hesitant attitude.

“I’m... I guess... it’s me too.” he motioned to his injuries. “I’m dead on my feet. I’m not,” he shook his head, “...I guess my brain is scrambled too.” he murmured. “I’m exhausted, actually.”

“Francis.” Liz felt terrible. The man had stayed with her the entire time. Even though he had lost so much blood and his injuries were extensive.

“It’s been a rotten day.” Francis conceded. “It’s me, Lizzy.” he smiled wanly, “God, I don’t know what got into me.”

Liz looked from one man to the other, her face falling. “It has been a rotten fucking day!” she wailed.

She started to go to Red for solace, but when her knee indented the bed, the man sucked in a horrendous breath.

Liz hastily froze, easing ever so gingerly away, “I’m so sorry...” her face showed her empathy, “I’m
so sorry, baby!”

Red took note of the endearment. He lifted a staying hand. “It’s fine.”

Liz chuckled mirthlessly, “Yeah, I’m sure. Look...” she rolled the tension in her shoulders, “you need to rest.”

“I need you.” he corrected hastily.

She closed her eyes, a wonderful warmth encompassing her body. “I’m not going anywhere. But I want you to sleep now, just for a little bit.”

Red could find no rebuttal to voice.

Francis felt insecure at best, uncertain where he stood with the man, “Well, if I’m not needed, I’ll go home.”

Liz lifted vulnerable eyes.

“What?” Red half smirked, “And miss a prime chance to seduce Nora at dinner tonight?”

Francis hesitated, “I can seduce her some other time... I guess?”

He was offering the man an out, sensing Red was trying to make amends with Liz... not him.

Red opened his eyes, “...You’ll stay for dinner,” he half warned, “and breakfast, as long as you like. Got it.”

Francis ‘got it’. A great sense of relief overtook him. “Well, my angel is making my favorite tonight.”

“You think she’d be making mine.” Red grumbled. “Since I pay her to do so.”

Liz smiled sympathetically at the man.

“Hey, Liz...” Francis was suddenly gravely concerned, “you won’t mention that disturbing event to my precious darling, will you?” he mentioned his earlier behavior. “Women get really defensive about things like that. They just don’t understand th–”

“No, we don’t,” Liz was still mystified, “and no, I won’t. Not to anyone.” she vowed, “Ever!”

Francis breathe easier, “Oh, good.” he was happy again.

“And Francis, if you ever try anything like that again without my express approval...” she smiled sweetly at the man, “I’ll stick your gun up your ass and pull the trigger... repeatedly.”

“Understood.” Francis was still perturbed. “Besides, it was like kissing my sister.” he pulled a face, shuddering visibly. “Well, dinner calls.”

Liz shuddered visibly as well, in total agreement.

Red felt suddenly light hearted.

Of course, it could be the drugs Kaplan had supplied.

“We’ll just put this bizarre episode behind us.” Liz warned superficially. “We’ll chalk it up to male testosterone gone awry.”she included Red in the reprimand. “I don’t know what brought it on but let’s just say... it’s a subject that will never be revisited.”
Red shifted his gaze.

Francis scratched the back of his head aimlessly. “It was his fault, not mine.” he had rebounded enough to feel on more comfortable ground once again.

“But you’re right... enough said on the matter.” he pointed pointedly at the open door. “I’m gone.”

He made a hasty exit, clearly glad to be out of such a sticky situation.

Liz waited a decent interval before turning her attention back to the other occupant of the room.

“I’m not going to grill you right now because I know you feel lousy...” she left the subject open for another time, “but I do want to just say... if you believe for one second that there is anything other than friendship between me and that little twirp... I would be very upset with the lack of trust between us after all that has happened.”

Red stared straight ahead. He deserved the dressing down. Didn’t mean he had to like it though.

“I can only assume something untoward went down between you and Francis in my absence to make him do something so ridiculous.”

“Why, ridiculous?” Red had to question, “he is a perfect match for you... if you think about it.”

“I haven’t thought about it... have you?” she was astounded.

“Only to the extent,” he moved cautiously, “that... I wouldn’t stand in your way if–”

“If what?” she was getting angry.

“If you felt, you might be more content with..” he couldn’t even finish the fucking sentence, feeling less a man for the fact.

“Are you trying to tell me something?” she had remained silent for an inordinate amount of time.

Red had started to sweat, it had taken so long for the woman to reply.

He cut an earnest gaze, “What are you talking about?” he was genuinely puzzled.

“Are you evaluating your options where–” had she pissed him off to such an extent?

He had asked for her to trust his judgement... his ability to take care of himself in any given situation. Had she crossed a line?

“Are you crazy?” he checked the urge to sit up and face her, “what the hell is in your head now?” he could never tell which way her thought patterns would go more often than not.

The woman remained silent, her world slowly shattering into tiny pieces.

She kept her features placid even though inside, she felt like shit.

“Lizzy,” Red sighed heavily, “you have to see it from my point of view, please.” his throat was tight with emotion at the moment. “Where all this goes,” he lifted a vague hand, “it really is all up to you.”

She opened her mouth to speak but he couldn’t take the chance of where the conversation would go.

“Just hear me out.” he swallowed the lump of fear plaguing him. “I am, at present... your lover.” he
conceded, or at least he hoped that was still the status-quo, “you’re significant other, if you will. I have no real claim to you... no proper one.”

The woman’s brow furrowed darkly.

“At times...” should he cross this line? Should he lay his cards on the table? “I feel I am at a very precarious stage in our relationship. In that...” he could share this much, “the fact is, you could decide to leave at any given time for any reason you deem acceptable.”

It was true, she could do that even if they had a more permanent agreement. So what was his point?

“I’m very... insecure about some aspects of what we... share.”

The turn in conversation surprised... no, stunned, Elizabeth, “Red...”

He held up a hand, unwilling to meet her eyes as yet.

Red Reddington was insecure? Liz was apprehensive at best. This could not be real... could it?

“The reality is, you are a young, vibrant, beautiful woman who can have her pick of any male out there.”

Well, she didn’t believe that for one second. After all, look what she had picked on the first go round and... why?

Because Tom was the best out of exactly two other men who had shown even a remote interest in her.

Of course, she had decided early on to put her career first. Liz knew she wasn’t unattractive but she was no great beauty either, although Red made her feel beautiful, on most days.

Okay everyday, in actuality.

“Red, I feel that too.” she hastened to inform him. “I feel insecure and out of my depth and at a loss, but...”

He waited patiently now, anxious to hear her out.

“Mr. Kaplan is going to be angry with me.” she knew he should be resting. She glanced haplessly to the opened doorway.

“Fuck, Kaplan.” Red grated. “What were you saying?”

Liz looked at him oddly, “Have you...” she blurted, her curiosity too much to bear in this instance, “...fucked her?”

Red lay his head back, cursing an oath for his stupidity.

“Oh!” the woman commiserated, “God, that had to hurt!” she felt terrible for the man.

“No!” Red grated. “She doesn’t swing that way! And she’s my... friend.” he hissed. “Tell me what you were going to say!”

The light blue eyes beseeched him.

Liz felt bad and embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to...” well, of course she had. Her cheeks flushed yet
again, “Silas says he thinks she could be... both.”

Liz bit her lip seeking an out to the awkward subject, “But through it all I also feel... so many other things. Nice things.” she admitted freely. “Amazing things. I guess I was hoping that,” she paused, considering how to save face, “...you would think the good outweighed the bad, because it does for me.”

It was as if Red’s gaze delved into her soul. She wanted to look away from such an intimate examination but found it impossible to do so.

“I know I shouldn’t have...” she stopped. No, she had to take a stand even if it meant there would be a rift between them, “No.” Liz hardened her stance, “No, I’m not going to apologize for caring about you. I’m not going to do that.”

Red’s trepidation melted slowly as he watched the dour little features.

“You promised me you would trust me.” he had to say it or die and right now, that option seemed like it was still on the table, his head pounded relentlessly. He had to know... he had to proceed.

Liz shifted a guilty stare, “Not technically.”

He lifted a scolding glare.

“Well, I didn’t and I won’t in the future.” she stubbornly held her ground. “I want us to be together. I want that very much but if it means walking on eggshells to please you... no, I can’t do that.”

Red weighed his options.

“I will try to make better decisions but...” she shook her head, “I have to be allowed the right to make those decisions or any I see fit to make, Red.”

He wearily closed his eyes, “Elizabeth, did you forget,“ he opened pain filled orbs but it had nothing to do with his head injury, “you could be carrying my child?”

Liz blinked. The man’s gaze dropped to her flat abdomen.

“You put yourself in grave danger, yes, but also...”

“Oh my God.” she gasped the realization. “I did forget!” the fact stunned her. “H-How could I have forgotten such a–”

“Because it isn’t a reality for you as yet.” he knew the answer. “But it is to me.”

“It isn’t a reality at all.” she defended herself. “We don’t know anything... for certain.”

“Which is my point exactly.” he stated quietly.

She fell silent.

Red would give anything he owned to know her thoughts. She appeared so downcast... so unsettled.

“How can I help?” he needed to do so.

Liz touched her stomach protectively, “I don’t know.” It all seemed so very complicated suddenly. So very terrifying.
Did she have a tiny life inside her? One that would be totally dependent on her decisions?

Liz sat heavily in the large chair by the windows.

She pondered the course of actions she had taken this day.

Realization dawned. She could have died and with her death... she would have ended the possibility of a new life coming into this world.

Was that so bad? It wasn’t such a wonderful world... not the parts she had come to know.

Of course it was bad... it was horrible. Beyond horrible... it would have been unconscionable.

She jerked her head to Red Reddington.

His gaze sat gently on her troubled features.

She suddenly understood his almost pathological need to protect something so small and vulnerable... something you cherished above your own life even.

“Oh my God, Red!” she rushed to him, seeking comfort.

Liz lay her head on his chest ever so carefully.

Red’s fingers engulfed her cold ones tightly.

“It’s okay.” he breathed the breath he had unconsciously been holding, his palm cupping her head soothingly. “I’m here.”

“Yes,” she closed her eyes, laying a minute kiss on his chest, the wiry hair found there tickling her lips, “yes, you’re here.

The silence was not uncomfortable any longer, at least not for Red. He stroked her silken strands lovingly.

The medication was strong, he felt himself drifting in and out of consciousness in the quiet room.

He fought the sensation.

“Sleep now.” Liz could feel the tenseness in his frame.

“I’m... fine.”

She smiled softly, the quietness settling in her thoughts.

“Don’t you ever go away from me.” she whispered huskily. “Don’t you ever do that, Red Reddington.”

The man scoffed at such a concept, “Not...gonna happen.”

She lifted slowly, gazing down at the peacefully sleeping man for an inordinate amount of time.

His fingers had loosened on hers but still retained contact. She stared at the strong, thick appendages, her thumb moving lightly over the fine hairs on the back of his hand.

Liz severed the contact, moving to the other side of the bed. She crept into the space beside the man, careful not to jostle or disturb if possible.
She pressed her cheek to his bicep, her hands clutching the muscular area for security.

She watched the steady rise and fall of his breathing, captivated by the light greyish-red of the hair covered skin.

“When I can stand the sound of my own voice...”

She started, unaware he had been with her this entire time.

“I’m going to yell at you...later.”

She grinned, “…I know.” she whispered quietly.

He could hear the smile in her words, “You could at least pretend a little trepidation.” a slight scowl laced his forehead.

Liz’s smile widened, “I’m shaking in my boots.”

“You and Kaplan...” he drew in a long, slow breath, before releasing it, “biggest smartasses I know.”

“I’m deeply honored to be included in such an elite unit.”

Red smiled reluctantly, his fingers trailing lightly over the flat of her stomach.

The man’s breathing evened out. Liz stayed alert and awake, too afraid to close her eyes.

She watched the man sleep, content to feel his warmth, to be by his side.

It was going to be a long night but she didn’t care because in the morning, she knew Red would be better.

He would be here. He hadn’t gone away, in any sense of the word.

The thought settled her Universe. She would wait patiently now. God had answered her prayers.

But... just in case, she would stay alert, she would keep watch because down deep, she knew that is exactly what Red would do were the situations reversed.

Things were better now but not all issues had been addressed. None had actually been resolved.

There was Silas.

She hadn’t seen the man since their confrontation. She suspected he was deliberately staying off her radar.

It hurt to know she had alienated the man. She had no idea how to fix the problem.

And even though the subject of his over-protectiveness and her impulsive recklessness had been broached, Liz had a sinking feeling, it would rear it’s ugly head in the very near future.

She had to make certain there would be no lasting strain between her and Francis over that stupid stunt he pulled.

Liz sighed heavily, willing the hours to pass.

Red slept peacefully, the sound of his steady breathing soothing the woman.
It would all be better tomorrow because as everyone knew...

Tomorrow was another day.

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It was late into the night when the man finally started awake.

Liz, becoming too anxious to sleep, had slipped from the bed after a few hours. It had felt wonderful to lay next to the man, just to revel in his being after the scare he had given her.

But as time passed, nerves jangled. Mr. Kaplan had instructed Liz awake Red periodically throughout the night.

Concussions were nefarious things. One never knew exactly what route they might take.

Liz teetered between attempting to awake Red or allow him to get the much needed rest his injuries called for.

Mr. Kaplan had threatened to kill them both if her instructions were not followed to the letter.

Red had joked, when informed of said threat that, not only could the slight woman carry out such a fact, but cleverly dispose of the bodies after.

Liz had not really seen the humor of the statement.

She was never so glad to hear Red stir.

She crossed, having been staring out at the dark, starry night, from her perch by the window.

“How’s it going?” she smiled softly down as his eyes focused, fixing on her face finally.

“It’s about...” he swallowed, grimacing, his throat hurting, his headache eased but still throbbing somewhat, “...a six now.”

Liz wasn’t following, too intent upon trying to read his body language, “What was ‘it’... before?” she played along, hoping this wasn’t the start of a delusional episode, her worst fears coming to the fore.

“A fifteen.” Red murmured grumpily.

“Oh!” light dawned. She chuckled lowly, “you mean your pain level. I’ll take a six, Red.” she was grateful for the magnitude as a matter of fact. “Six is good.”

“Not from my point of view.”

“Of course not,” she empathized, “of course, it’s horrible, but considering the alternative....” she gently sat on the side of the bed.

He did not flinch as he had done earlier in the day.

“What time is it?” he asked groggily, his hand running over his head absently. He attempted movement and for a brief moment, he thought he was going to loose his stomach.

“It’s too soon.” she had hastily arisen, her hands going out to prevent such an unwise move, but the man shook it off, at length sitting upright.
He lay heavily back on the pillows she had quickly propped. “Well, that was a stupid move on my part.” he decided.

Liz shook her head, “Could have told you that.”

He smiled shortly, “You do what you have to do in life.”

“Well, you do.” she argued. “Mr. Kaplan wants you to eat something. No more pain meds until you do.” she grimaced a supportive smile.

The thought wasn’t as nauseating as he had imagined.

“That woman enjoys torturing me,”

Liz shrugged, “She’s got you this far... let’s not piss her off.”

“God forbid.”

“Nora has concocted some of her world renowned chicken soup.” Liz sweetened the pot.

“The best cure all ever.” Red had to admit. “That actually...sounds good.”

Liz beamed, “I’ll be right back.” she turned flouncing from the room only to halt in her steps to flounce back to the side of the bed.

She grasped the pill bottle from the side table, smiling happily, leaning to plant a hasty kiss to the scowling forehead.

“There are better places to kiss.” his scowl increased.

“When you’re better.” she promised, flouncing away, her steps light and airy.

“When you’re better.” the man mimicked bitterly, his mood a little surly at present.

Liz’s smile widened at the veiled retort, “You’ll feel better after you eat.”

Red sent a dour glare at the now opened doorway. He settled back, his mood dampening with her departure.

“I doubt it.” he grumbled.

But an hour later, that prophecy proved a valid one.

He actually did feel better, his mood much improved, truth told.

“Where’s the clock?” he realized, his brain fog clearing somewhat, that Liz had never responded to his earlier inquiry. “What time is it?”

“Kaplan confiscated them.” Liz glanced at the vacated spots. She consulted her watch. “A little after two.” she reported.

He stopped his spoon mid-stride. “You did eat dinner?” he held up his bowl of steaming soup.

“Nora made sure everyone was fed and happy.” she hedged for in reality she hadn’t felt like eating anything.

Even Francis’ appetite had waned. After Red had awakened, the guy made up for lost time, of
“Red, everyone was too wired, too worried after today’s events to react normally.” she explained at his confused expression. “Most of the men are in the dining room playing cards.”

“Worried? Francis said we had no casualties.” he remembered that much. “Has something changed?” he sat the soup aside, his expression having altered drastically.

Liz was flabbergasted, “Red!” she spread her hands out from her sides, “You were shot in the head!”

The man surmised that much.

“Don’t you think we would be a little concerned over the fact?”

“You maybe,” he shrugged, returning to his food, “hopefully anyway. Why would the rest care?”

“I’m beginning to wonder?” she snapped. “Is this how you feel about them... about the men that work under you?”

He considered the question, “I suppose...on some level their safety is a factor, but Lizzy, the men I hire, I do so for a specific purpose. That purpose alone puts any supposed relationship on a precarious basis at best, don’t you think?”

She stared at him, wide-eyed.

“The very nature of the employment they seek puts them at certain risk.”

“That is so... cold.” she was losing ground fast, the very foundation of her belief in the man’s moral ethics shaken.

Silas... Francis, and now...

Red put the soup aside, swinging his legs to the side of the bed. He took a moment to acclimatize and to prepare his next words for he had sensed the woman was upset... more than upset.

“I simply question why such men, men I admire and respect granted,” he waved a hand, “but men who usually have no real loyalty to or great connection with any employer they encounter. It’s the nature of the business.”

“And Dembe?” she asked all too quietly. “Silas?”

“Exceptions to the rule.” Red stated.

“...Kevin?”

Red hesitated, “Kevin was different, he was just a kid.”

“And Joe?” she persisted.

Red was becoming annoyed, “Joe’s been with me a long time.”

Liz studied the man evenly now, more settled, sensing something she had to prove to herself if nothing else, “...Thomas?”

“Thomas is an idiot, someone has to look out for him.” Red snapped his growing disillusionment with the turn of the conversation. “My point is—”
“That you’re lying through your teeth... to yourself.” Liz could finally breathe again, “Each and every one of those men mean something to you, Red Reddington and don’t you dare sit there and act like they don’t.”

“Business is business.” he grumbled, glancing aimlessly about for his cigars. “Where’s my cigar?” he was getting irritable.

When the man was agitated, or extremely mellow, very infrequently granted now that Lizzy was about, but at times, he would light up a smoke.

“Kaplan—”

“ Took them!” he lifted pissed eyes. “That woman has gone too far. Get her scrawny ass in here! I want to have a little talk with—”

“What about the baby?” Liz asked innocently. “Isn’t second hand smoke bad for it? I mean,” she glanced at her stomach, “are you going to smoke afterwards?” those blue eyes lifted almost accusingly.

Red settled instantly, “...Of course not, I won’t.”

“Then why are you upset with Kaplan?”

Red threw her a scolding glare, “It’s not really Kaplan I’m upset with and I think you know that.”

Liz rolled her eyes, “Stop treating me as if I were a fragile China doll.” She didn’t want to get into this but... “I’m not, as you, of all people... should realize.”

She referenced to her status as a fully established agent of the Federal Government.

“I made a calculated decision today... true, I had a momentary lapse regarding...” she wouldn’t get into her possible health issues, “had I remembered, I would have reacted differently, I’m sure but—”

“Would you have, Elizabeth?” he clearly doubted her veracity, “look,” he tried again, “this is my job, it is what I do. Shit happens and it’s not always pleasant. Hell, it’s almost never pleasant.”

Liz drew in a cleansing breath.

“It’s hard enough that you put yourself in harms way for the Agency. I apparently have no say in that matter.”

She lifted a defiant chin, “No, you do not.”

He fell silent for a long beat.

“You blithely dismissed my feelings this morning,” she accused, “I care about what happens to you, Red. And it’s not like I interfere each and every time you walk out that door;” she pointed out, “I know what you do, I even accept it to a point—”

“No, it can’t be to ‘a point’.” he cautioned, “Just as I step back when Cooper gives you and Ressler an assignment, even though my instincts are screaming at me to prevent you going somehow, I check those impulses... don’t I?”

The woman had not looked at it in such a light.

Silence came and it was anything but comfortable.
“Do you have any idea what Cheung’s stock and trade is?” Red was remembering the incident in the hallway, “He buys and sells women... you can guess for what purpose?”

Liz was a big girl, she didn’t shock so easily but she was suddenly remembering a day... night... where the team had acted on a tip which led to the discovery of a small back room in some dingy part of the Garment District in NYC.

That room was teeming with young girls, most no more than thirteen or fifteen.

Their faces still haunted her at night sometimes.

“What if Silas hadn’t arrive on time? What if I truly had been incapacitated to the point, I could not have reached you in time?”

Liz felt her defenses rising, “You know, I was giving a pretty good account of myself, there was no way that bastard would have gotten me out of that house?”

“Like Carver wouldn’t have finished his task had he not been interrupted?”

Liz’s eyes misted, “That is... so unfair. I’m better trained now. Silas has—”

“You are a hundred pound woman,” Red sighed wearily, “no training in the world would have stopped a fucker like Carver because... he doesn’t play by civilized rules, Elizabeth and neither do men like Cheung!”

Red’s head was beginning to ache again, the tension in his muscles not aiding the fact. He knew he should be resting his body.

“Would you be speaking to Samar like this?” she placed both hands on her hips, her temper flaring.

“Samar comes from a different part of the world. She has seen and done things you could only have nightmares about.”

“So you think that makes her a better agent than me.”

“Of course I do,” he was dumbfounded, “which is not to say, you can’t learn... but you are not at such a stage as yet, Elizabeth.”

The woman stared moodily off, refusing to meet his eyes, “This is unacceptable,” she gritted, “you are no better than Tom Keen in my book.”

The blue eyes shifted coldly to his, “At least he was openly honest about what he thought of me and my so called abilities... after he shed his snake skin, that is.”

She was hurting. She hadn’t realized how badly she had needed Red’s approval until this moment which made her feel weak and ineffectual.

“I can’t believe I’ve been this stupid... again!” she voiced tightly.

“You’re being stupid, yes,” he concurred angrily, “if you would just listen to me, I—”

“I’m done listening... to any man... ever again.” she reacted.

The woman turned on her heel, one destination in mind and that was... out the damn front door.

She may even ask Tom for a ride... since she was so stupid.
Her footsteps were brought to an abrupt halt as a massive hand shut the door facing soundly.

She gasped her shock, pulling up short suddenly confronted with a very put out Red Reddington.

The light eyes blazed his anger down at her, “I’ve always expected to die doing this shit, it’s a given. No fucking way will you end up the same cesspool.” his tone was tight with fury.

Every part of the man’s body ached, his head was exploding inside, his muscles were bunched into coiled efficiency and his mood... had been better.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he demanded an answer.

“Away...” Liz was only too happy to supply one, “from you!”

He nodded knowingly, his expression bleak, “I don’t care if I have to order Silas tie you to a damned chair,” he threatened smoothly, he was wholeheartedly willing to do so, “you will stay here and listen to reason.”

“I’ll stay because that’s all you Neanderthals understand,” she used Francis’ term for his species, “brute force but it doesn’t mean I have to listen... does it.”

Red leaned heavily against the door facing. He was cold, his bare feet on the cool floor. The satin of the pajamas he wore not enough protection in his weakened state.

Liz noted the white features, the tired lines about his eyes and almost weakened her stance for a beat.

“Elizabeth....” the man closed his eyes, misery flooding his entire being, “I fucking hate being at odds with you.” he grated his weakness.

She hesitated, “You can’t just dictate my actions,” she couldn’t live like that, “you just... can’t!”

“Carver is out there...” he reminded listlessly, “...Tom.”

Liz’s head fell. She studied his bare feet for a goodly spell, pondering her options. As she saw it... there were few things to ponder. “I’ll just have to take my chances because I can’t live under a double standard. I won’t.”

She lifted a steady gaze, “Can I go now.” she indicated her blocked path.

“You’re not fucking going.” Red declared venomously.

She folded her arms, “Say what you have to say. I’m tired. I need to,” she closed her eyes to the sudden weariness that descended, “...rest.”

Red felt his world slipping away. Had he over reacted? Were his fears invalid ones?

He looked down at the flushed, angry features. Her stance so intractable, so solidly set...

“It’s not safe out there...” he had options as well, “you stay, I will go.”

“No!” she vetoed the offer coldly, “I want to go home.”

The words cut him like a knife, “This is your home.”

“No,” she realized, all had changed. In a matter of minutes, all was different... alien, “I’ll find...something. I want to go.”
The man was at a loss. For once in his life he was confronting a situation he could not contrive, manipulate, or control.

“I shouldn’t have started this.” he realized his mistake too late. He attributed his faulty judgement to his injuries. What else could it be? “We can talk about it in the–”

“There is nothing to talk about.” she stated flatly with such a finality, it stunned the man.

He hesitated. He may be down but he wasn’t out... just yet.

“Elizabeth, we have to find a mutual understanding here.” he would use logic and reason. “Different beliefs... opinions if you will, are a natural part of any relationship. We are going to have disagreements but...” he felt himself losing ground for she had folded her arms, closing herself off completely.

“We have to find a way to discuss any subject without losing sight of whatever it is that brought us together in the first place.” he spread his hands out in an appeasing manner, “Don’t you agree?”

“I don’t know.” she ranted the truth, “I don’t know... anything anymore. I just want it to stop.”

Red was not privy to all she had experienced this day. He thought perhaps, he should find out that information, with the utmost haste.

“What is it?” he urged, “Can you tell me what has upset you so deeply today... I think it’s more than...” he motioned.

She glanced at the man, “I’m tired, Red.” she snapped, “I want some peace and quiet! I don’t want to–”

“All right...” he lifted his hands, “all right, we’ll do that, then. All this can wait. It will keep, are we in agreement in that at least?”

She hesitated. Did she really want to leave? Did she truly want to leave him when he was so hurt? Her heart went out to the man for he had faulted visibly, catching himself on the door behind him to cover the fact.

“Red!” she scrambled to his side only to be held at bay.

“I’m fine.” it was dismissed almost curtly, “I’m good. What I was saying–”

“It doesn’t matter,” she was just as curt, “I want you to get back in bed...do you need help?”

Red fluctuated. Her attitude had altered slightly, which was a good thing but he didn’t want his condition to be the reason she...

“I can help.” she offered a shoulder, “will you at least sit on the bed?”

He relented, in reality so pleased... so grateful to have diverted her from the other topic.

The man looked at the structure, “I’m okay but...” the slender shoulder was moved close and he did not hesitate when the petite form slid closer offering him stability.

The warmth of her body seeped into his cold side. It felt wonderful. A tiny hand wrapped securely about his middle, the other resting tentatively on his abdomen as she matched her steps to his faltering ones.
“Should I call, Dembe?” she searched the chiseled profile plaintively, having felt a definite tremor run through his powerful frame.

He shook his head, sitting his weight on the side of the bed. He was astounded when she sat as well, hovering close.

“Is there anything I can get you? Anything you need?”

“I need,” he suddenly realized, turning a somber look her way, “you, baby.” he swallowed hard, “and that’s all I ever will need.”

She misted, her arms lifting about his neckline as she moved ever so close to his bulk, her embrace tightly clutching his stability.

The room was so still. She could feel his heart beat, strong and steady under the palm of her hand.

His scent surrounded her. What a fucking idiot she had been. It was as clear as a bell in her head now... this is where she wanted to be.

No matter the differences between them, no matter the obstacles they would have to face...

Where ever this man was... is where she would always want to be.

“Oh Red, I’m so sorry.” she sniffled softly, swiping at the threatening tears, “I shouldn’t have said... any of those things I did!” she moved enough to catch his soulful eyes.

“No,” he stated quietly, “you shouldn’t have.” he moved a strand from her cheek then smiled warmly, “but I understand why you did...” he admitted quietly, his eyes mellowing, “You damned near finished the job Cheung started.”

“Don’t!” she clutched him tightly, “Don’t say things like that, even in jest.” she lay her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes, appreciating his presence.

The brown highlights of her hair caught his attention. She was such a beautiful woman. The last thing he had wanted to do was alienate her.

He remembered the lovely hue of her cheeks, all rosy and flushed with the passion of the moment. Those blue eyes flashing their animosity up at him.

He loved the feel of her flesh...

He could feel the plump bulge of her breast pressed into his shoulder.

What he wouldn’t give to reach over and touch that sweet, delicious mound. He staunchly resisted the urge knowing she would not welcome the move on his part at this time but his fingers itched to follow through on his imaginings.

At least she wasn’t thinking about leaving him at this moment in time. He had pulled his ass out of
the fire.

It had seemed so important though... he had almost lost her today, twice now.

Once due to her recklessness and unforgivably, once to his own.

How bleak, how unbearable his life would have been...

There was a lull.

A wondrous lull.

He had been given a second chance. One he would never take for granted again. One he would cherish. And one he would fight til his last breath to retain.

“I love you.”

Red Reddington jerked, a spike of pain shooting through his head.

Elizabeth gasped audibly, instantly concerned.

“Oh, God, I shouldn’t have... said that.” she was contrite. “Should I ...have said that? No... of course not!”

Red stared at her, mouth agape... his senses fucking reeling.

Elizabeth flushed scarlet, “It’s way too soon... isn’t it.” the incriminations were sitting in, she couldn’t read his reaction for his face was a mask of incredulous disbelief. “What I meant to say...” she lost all coherent thought for one horrible beat.

Jesus! What an incredibly stupid, stupid... stupid–

“What...” Red had found his voice, even though it was raspy, harsh and coarse, so unlike his normal silken tone. Even he hardly recognized it, “W-What?”

He pressed his temples to alleviate the incessant pulsing caused by his rapid heartbeat, “... Elizabeth?”

“I know,” she held up a staying hand, “I realize I shouldn’t have–”

He leaned, his palms cupping her face, his lips parted hers gently, almost reverently...

The warm hollow of his mouth drew her into the sensual depths. She allowed his lead, even when he lay her back into the rumpled covers of the bed.

Red lifted his mouth reluctantly, his gaze locking with her. “... Repeat,” he whispered ardently, “what it was...” the steady gaze robbed her of any coherent thought, “you just said... to me.”

She licked those luscious lips anxiously, the blue eyes trying desperately to look from that fervent stare.

“Well I...”

Red’s gaze dropped to her mouth, remaining fixed.

“Don’t tell me I imagined it all, Lizzy.” his index finger traced a searchingly slow path. The thick
appendage traveled about the shell-like ear.

Red intently settled his body more comfortably alongside her now outstretched form, his bulk pressed intimately close.

“That this incredible declaration wasn’t all a hallucination...” he lifted a sultry stare, “I’m going to discount that theory.”

Lizzy felt the hard evidence of a very vivid arousal pressing to her thigh.

She struggled, words failing her, his gaze robbing her of any sane, reasonable response.

“I’ve been in love with you,” he cut her protestation short, his voice lowering to a steamy caress, “since before that first date.

It was Liz’s turn to stare mutely, mouth agape.

“I’ve been falling ‘in love’ with you,” it was so freeing to finally be able to express his emotions, “ever single day since...”

She stared at the man’s mouth as it formed the words, captivated beyond scope, “You... you can’t mean that.”

“With every fiber of my being.” he stated simplistically, his lips following the exact same path over the sensitive ear his finger had.

Her mouth trembled slightly, a rush of emotions blanketing her. She couldn’t decide whether to laugh or cry. A part of her felt like squealing with the pure joy his words instilled.

But disbelief held the emotional onslaught at bay.

A shiver ran the length of her body, gooseflesh rising on her arms, the ones his palms now traveled seductively.

“You d-don’t have to say that,” she reminded herself more than the man, hoping against hope he would ignore such advice completely, “just because–”

He lifted a perceptive brow, “You did?”

The flush returned two-fold. Liz shifted about restlessly, “Well I... I... after today...”

The man’s attitude changed. He stiffened slightly, “Elizabeth,” his gaze pinned her under its stern scrutiny, “did you say what you did because... I got shot?”

It was a clear accusation and his hands had halted their excruciatingly pleasurable pastime.

“No!” she hastened breathlessly. “Well of course I was... terrified that you,” she refused to think on that subject, “I mean... before.

He scowled darkly, his body tense, rigid with control, “Before... what?”

“After you left... all the horrible things that went through my head,” she shuddered, “I had to face the realization that...” she shook her head fiercely, dismissing the disturbing thoughts, “I need more time with you! God would not be so cruel to... give you to me then...” she swallowed the lump in her throat, “I felt so... bereft. So lost, Red.” she lifted haunted eyes.
The man read the sincerity. He blew out a tremulous breath, his body visibly uncoiling.

“I didn’t really want to leave you tonight.” she blurted, “I was just so...”

“Pissed.” he grinned slowly, “You were that.” he seemed impressed by the fact. “Turned me the hell on.”

She could feel the evidence returning even as he spoke. She glanced down, the long thick imprint of his hardness once again showing against the rich satin of his pajamas. The rigid line of his stiffening erection clearly visible.

Red had shifted strategically just so she could feel his... sincerity.

His eyes roamed her body slowly, resting on inappropriate places for inordinately inappropriate intervals.

“Say it again.” he prompted, his thigh nudging hers wider, his knee sliding smoothly into the heated valley.

She knew her wetness stained the thin material of his pajama bottoms.

Liz lay perfectly still as his forefinger traced the curve of her upper lip, his eyes contentedly following his movements.

“Put some feeling into it,” his mesmerizing eyes lifted, “make me believe...” he leaned ever so close, his breath fanning her face, traced with mint tea, “...you.”

She licked the dryness from those desirable lips, the enormous violet orbs watching his every move.

“...I love you,” she whispered emphatically, “so very... very much.”

His hardness grew, a painful throbbing replacing the previous once... in an entirely different area of his body.

He nodded slowly, “Very good, Elizabeth.” his approval washed over her, making her nipples harden with... anticipation.

Red fixed his stare on the pert little nubs, his tone lowering huskily, “Very good.”

He bit his bottom lip in a conscious display of indecision, “Do you know...” he wondered at the beguiling innocence staring back at him, “have you any idea...” the small fingers clutched at the lapels of his top in something akin to desperation, “just how badly I want to fuck you right now?”

Elizabeth drew in a shallow, shaky breath. Her body reacting to the erotic stimuli, she closed her eyes to... savor his passionate desire.

“Not... make love to you, Elizabeth,” he wanted that perfectly understood. He lay more of his weight against her lower body, his rigidness shoving hard into her vulnerable flesh.

“Fuck you...” he literally breathed the words, his mouth directly above her parted, trembling one, “that’s what I need to do. That’s what my cock is... demanding, I do.”

She moaned weakly, spreading her legs wider without any forethought or hesitation on her part.

“How do you feel about that?” he asked rhetorically.
“Y-Your... head.” she tried for some semblance of self-restraint. His injuries too extensive for such strenuous activities, surely.

“My head...” his tongue traced a searing path over her bottom lip, “is stocked full of deliciously warm cream just... begging me to...” his mouth parted and he breathed, his hot breath washing over her lips.

Liz lifted eagerly, but he refused any real contact as yet.

“...Share with you.”

She locked her leg over the thick burliness of his outer thigh holding him from any extraction he might decide upon, her arms lifting, winding lovingly about the man’s neckline.

“You have pleased me so intensely, my... love.” it felt so amazing to have the freedom to use that word... finally, “I want desperately to please you in return in every conceivable fashion,” he pinched her nipple teasingly, enjoying the slight tremor of desire the effect produced, “given my rather...extensive repertoire.”

“You can’t d-do that.” she tried to convince herself more than the man at this point. Kaplan would really kill her if the woman found out Liz had allowed Red to–

“Of course I can, baby.” Red soothed seductively, “my memory is fully intact, among other vital organs. I haven’t forgotten one single thing. I know exactly what you like.”

“No, I meant–” was he purposely misunderstanding?

“Spread your legs for me.” he coaxed silkily, “I require more room than that, as I trust you remember.”

He had glanced down to where their bodies intermingled.

Liz fought the urge to obey his every whim, “You just got out of a sick bed a–”

“And now, we are back in... bed.” he glanced about their position. “Not that a couch, chair... or desk for that matter, wouldn’t suit me just as well.” he shrugged stocky shoulders, “Name the place, sweetheart. You know how flexible I can–”

Francis burst through the open door, intently leafing through page after page of stapled readouts, “Red you will never guess what that bastard, Cheung, has been up to–” he glanced up, stopping dead in his tracks.

Liz wished the floor would open up and swallow her whole. She fought her flush of mortification for being caught in such a compromising situation,

Red merely sighed heavily, easing his body into neutral gear. It was a Herculean task in this instance.

“Whoa...” Francis grimaced apologetically, “Hey, who knew?” he defended himself after a moment, realizing his faux pas, “You took a head shot!” he lifted a plaintive hand, “Pardon the hell out of me for thinking you were probably down for the count.”

Red shifted a regally cool gaze, “Not to worry, Francis,” he allowed the woman to scramble up, resigned to his fate, “we were just discussing the weather.”

“Yeah...” the man took in Lizzy’s disheveled state, “Hot and sultry with a chance of tropical
humidity in the wee hours of the night.” he shook his head woefully, a disgruntled look for Elizabeth Scott, “Why don’t you give the guy a breather... a little downtime wouldn’t kill you, you know.”

Liz’s mouth gaped indignantly, “Me?!”

“Oh, like a guy who took a bullet to the head would initiate that rather torrid display?” Francis was a little incensed for his friend. “Come on, woman. I wasn’t born yesterday.”

“But you may die tonight!” Liz hissed.

Francis exited, clearly disillusioned, not to mention, definitely perturbed, “You’re lucky I’m not a judgmental sort of guy. That’s all I’m saying on the matter.”

Liz looked to Red for assistance, her hands spread wide, “Do you believe that?”

The man shook his head minutely, his expression a clear one, “Some people.” he commiserated, his eyes sweeping her frame boldly, “Now... where were we?”

“Oh yeah, right!” Liz snapped, “You just stay right where you are, Mister.” she motioned accordingly, “Finish your soup! I’m going to set that freak of nature straight, that’s what I’m gonna do!”

She turned on her heels, features set. She places to go.

“Elizabeth...”

The woman turned expectantly, her hand on the knob.

His eyes were saying so much more than she wanted to read at such a delicate moment.

“I love you.” the husky declaration thrilled her down to her toes.

Her eyes softened, as did her stance. The woman’s heart melted, an extraordinary affection for the man overtaking her.

“Well I... I love you too.” the words were easier to say suddenly with him looking at her like that, “But you have to get some rest now.”

His color still wasn’t to her liking, “Promise.”

“You’re not coming back?”

“Not until you are asleep,” she scolded primly, “and I mean that now!”

Red raked her lasciviously, “A pity.”

She smiled just for him, blowing him a kiss before shutting the door gently.

Once outside she leaned against the facing for support, trying to calm her still erratic heart beat. A secretive smile worked it’s way to her lips, her eyes gentle.

Red loved her...

She felt a well of emotion bubble inside her. She was experiencing a maelstrom of emotions. Tranquility, serenity, elation... and unadulterated exhilaration.
Granted, there was also nervousness, apprehension...a little piece of her questioning how much he loved her... who could blame her?

She frowned, willing to erase old habits... old insecurities.

She could search the depth of Red’s emotional attachment... later. For now, she was content with the sentiment being expressed, openly, on both parts.

Time... they had time to explore this. To let it flourish. To become fulfilling in ways they maybe both required.

It was with renewed vigor, she shoved herself erect, “Why don’t you give the guy a little downtime...” she mimicked disdainfully, “I’ll show you downtime, you little shit.” she was off in search of her victim.

Red lay quietly keying his body down. He could still feel the heated imprint of that succulent alcove he had settled in.

So close... he had been so fucking close.

He lay for a time thinking up inventive ways to end Francis’ youthful existence.

Lizzy still had her doubts, he could sense the turmoil inside her.

He was up to the challenge.

After what she had declared tonight. He could face down anything thrown at him.

He had not felt that when he had faced her earlier tonight.

He was persistent if nothing else though and anew determination flowed inside him.

_Lizzy loved him..._

It hadn’t happened as he would have planned, in a romantic setting... candlelight, wine...

He was adapting to their way of doing things. Unpredictable suited them.

He personally found the off script by-play exhilarating as hell, even the fear she had instilled in him had been cutting edge.

He thought back over the milestones in their relationship.

How very different his life with Lizzy was from anything he had ever experienced....

His first wife and he had gone the straight and narrow route, living up to societies expectations.

How very status quo it had all been.

Looking back, the man felt as if he had walked through the entire ordeal.

Had it been an ordeal?

Sex on the sixth date... if you could call it sex. She had allowed him to penetrate her. Why did he have the distinct impression it was all a carefully orchestrated plan on her part?

Was he being unkind?
The weekend trip to Connecticut... it’s what couples did. They exchanged keys just a month later.

He had thought that a mistake just a few days later. Water under the proverbial bridge.

Moving in together, the prolonged engagement as her family insisted and he secretly agreed with... then the marriage.

The topic of children was only discussed some time later, coinciding with his bride’s insistence they have unprotected sex for the first time.

Should have alerted him... bells should have gone off... but they didn’t.

*Was he ever so naïve?*

Then came Lizzy.

They had lived together before deciding to try a genuine relationship, had sex on their first date, the weekend trip followed immediately, where upon they had returned to a very exhilarating time with languid lovenaking sessions and in less than a month, he was riding bareback into an ever increasing sexual euphoria.

They may even have a little one in the works...

The thought filled him with such an odd sense of peace and subdued excitement over what might be on the unforeseen horizon.

Red drifted off, unaware of doing so, his mind shutting down to the wondrous possibilities which awaited him upon his awakening.

Chapter End Notes

I *knew* I was forgetting to do something before I posted and it was naming the poem that Red is thinking about. It is:

**Sea Fever by John Masefield**

I just wanted to make sure that the correct person received his just dues for such a wonderful piece of work.
SUNDAY June 1

Liz made her way down the winding path of sculptured stones. She loved this part of the property.

Farther down, the path curved about to a rather large pond complete with a small dock and fishing shack.

Red had said the pond was stocked with a variety of fish. The former owner was an avid fisherman.

Two boats remained docked and ready for use by any interested takers. She and Red had spent several evenings out on the small lake watching sunsets.

While the Main house and Guards quarters she and the guards inhabited now were being constructed, the owners remained in the original homestead.

She shook her head as the sprawling five bedroom Tudor style structure came into view, remembering when Red had taken her on a tour of the grounds and told her that it had been listed as the Guest Cottage.

She didn’t think she would ever understand how the ‘other half’ lived... but she did have to admit, she did enjoy the peak inside their world.

The house and property were picturesque. The house itself sat back into an array of lilac bushes and a rich profusion of soft green fern. Spots of ivy climbing the stone walls, lush landscaping and early blooming flowers bordering the inlaid stone pathway and large trees looming overhead in the background gave the area a storybook feel.

Perhaps she should look into furnishing it with a few essentials... give her and Red a home away from home for a little privacy, she thought wryly back to the previous evening.

The pungent scent of lilac and honeysuckle filled the early morning air as the woman wandered her way to the inviting front door of the house.

The large oak panels seemed a little off putting today.

Sitting on the stoop, Liz unwrapped the croissant Nora had shoved in her hand before she had set off on her walk, most likely having seen that Liz had hardly touched anything on her plate.

But after last night and being surrounded by the boisterous men that regained their lacking appetites, gathered for the first round of the meal Nora managed... she just couldn’t find it in herself to enjoy the bountiful treat.

Breaking off a piece of the fluffy pastry, Liz popped the morsel in her mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

How the petite woman fed all the people under her care, Liz would never figure out. It seemed an insurmountable task to her way of thinking.

Though Nora still had the chief responsibility of planning the meals plus the actual art of preparing them, Red had supplied the woman with sous-chef’s to aid in prep and the like to ease the burden
after a new surge of guards had taken residence.

One particular guard was absent during the breakfast rush, much to her disappointment.

Liz had arisen early hoping to catch Silas this morning.

She had not spoken to, nor seen the man since their last unfortunate encounter.

Letting the rift between them drag on was weighing on her nerves, let alone, conscience.

Dembe had taken off for the airport, Francis informed her... something about, with Red out of commission, Dembe had to take up the slack.

The man had taken the private jet today for a meeting with a prominent associate in the south of France... wine country.

Dembe loved wine and was a frequent visitor to such establishments throughout the European countries which produced the delicate refreshment.

Meaning he would not be returning anytime soon.

With her buffer on a wine tasting excursion, it left Liz to her own devices as to how exactly she should approach Silas.

Francis’ only advice was... cautiously.

Liz wasn’t sure if he referred to Silas’ present mood or the fact that it was advisable to never take the large man by surprise.

Silas never reacted well to... surprises.

Finishing the flaky pastry, she pushed herself up from the stoop, resigned to her fate before walking back towards the main grounds.

She walked quietly, debating her options, staring morosely at the huge double entry doors to the Guards quarters as she neared.

She started when Joe opened the panels unexpectedly.

He grinned at the reaction, “Saw you coming down the hill.” he gestured, radio in hand.

“Saw?” she questioned, before gesturing to the comm in his hand, “Or were informed?”

The large man waved her into the opened concept rooms, grinning, “Both.”

Liz returned his smile, glancing furtively about. She had never been inside the house before.

Off to the right of the foyer, the formal dining room sat with its long oak table and chairs to hold all the guards beefy frames. A Mediterranean style bureau graced the far wall. Large windows at the far end of the room let in an abundance of light.

Joe directed her into the living space, but she waved off the offer to sit on the very large and plush wrap-around-couch that seemed to stretch the length of the room.

David, her evening guard sat at the far end, reading a book. He glanced up, inclining his head in greeting before returning to his pastime.
Following Joe further into the spacious home, she realized Red had obviously went to great lengths to see to their comfort and even amusement.

As they approached what she assumed was to be a family room and a private sitting room, she instead found the large areas had been turned into a home gyms. One complete with weight lifting paraphernalia. The other with treadmills, elliptical machines, bikes and similar items.

Off to her left was a fully equipped man cave complete with bar, pool table, enormous big screen and other entertainment necessities.

She was absolutely fascinated and would like to see more... but she would be stalling.

“Is uh... Silas around?” she unconsciously twisted the ring Red bestowed, her smile fixed, “I don’t want to interrupt it he–”

“He’s back in his room.” Joe crooked his head towards the long corridor which had caught her attention upon entry, “You want I should get him?”

“No.” she decided against that. “Would it be okay if I... spoke to him for a minute? He’s not sleeping or any–”

“Nah,” the suggestion was waved aside, “go on back, first door on your right.”

Liz smiled again, “Are you sure?”

“He’s used to women back there.” Joe teased, sensing Liz’s state.

She relaxed a bit, “More information than I needed to know.” she stated, the dimples on her cheek indented with the slight grimace she offered.

Joe chuckled, “Want some coffee or–”

“Oh no, it won’t take long.” she waved the politeness aside.

“Gonna kick his ass out?”

“Oh my God!” she was instantly contrite, hoping against hope the story had not spread through the ranks, “No!” she hastened to rectify any sordid tales floating about, “Of course not! I intend to beg him to stay.”

Joe pulled a face, “Well, he’ll love that part at least. I personally think he had it coming.” he laughed for the fact, “Someone needs to take that bastard down a notch or two... not that I don’t love him like a brother.”

Liz was growing nervous all over again.

“A big, ugly, mean, obnoxious brother, granted.” Joe shrugged, holding out his had to indicate, “go on... give it to him with both barrels.”

“You are not helping!” Liz whined dejectedly, “Not at all!” she wrung her fingers together helplessly. “Is he in a bad mood?”

“Is he ever not?”

Her hopes fell.
“Just yanking your chain, honey.” the man laughed mischievously, “He’s fine. Go talk to him. Clear the air.”

Liz lifted hopeful eyes, “You think?”

“Yeah, but if things get out of hand and you have to shoot the guy,” Joe offered a solution to the problem, “remember, I don’t see nothing... ever... so, I won’t rat you out.”

She nodded and took a step, before hesitating in her step when the man held her up.

“And if you do have to shoot him,” the man grinned, “aim for the face. He hates that.”

She chuckled in spite of the moment, “I’ve always liked you, Joe.”

Liz crossed the few steps which would lead her to the back where she assumed the master bedroom was. She glanced down the ever growing length of hallway awaiting her.

She smiled at her companion, gearing herself up for the task at hand. She drew in a steadying breath before taking the first steps.

As she neared, she found the door open much to her surprise. She could not immediately see or hear the occupant of the room.

Liz had a few moments to look over the area, she wasn’t certain she had the correct room actually.

Everything looked so orderly, so pristine. The bed was made, the drapes pulled, allowing the sunshine in. It appeared ‘guest’ ready.

There was a tall dresser just across the floor. It was the first thing which caught the eye. On top were a few personal items, unmistakably male.

A watch, a coin dish full of spare change, a black walkie-talkie lay on its side. Beside that, an extra fully loaded clip for a gun.

Silas came into view, a load of clothes in hand which he lay carefully unto the bed.

His head instantly snapped about, a dark glower on the handsome face which instantly relaxed upon recognition of the intruder into his space.

“How’s it hanging.” he nodded minutely after a slight hesitation, the clear grey-blue eyes not giving away his mood or reaction in the least.

“...Eh,” the question threw her momentarily, “fine and you?”

“To the right.” the man had shifted a tad, grimacing slightly having felt the evidence of his proclamation.

“Again,” the woman was always annoyed at just how accepting some males were of her presence, “more than I needed to know.”

“Then why did you ask.” he turned away, folding a shirt up.

“What are you..” she cleared her throat, “...doing?”

“I thought I better wrap up the job before I left.” he ignored her discomfort as was his way.
Liz could see the opened carry case at the end of the bed now as the man lifted the opened valise unto the surface.

He continued to carefully fit boxers into various compartments of the luggage, “I’m assuming Joe will take over until Red can find a–”

“Silas!” Liz stepped hastily into the room, her expression an anxious one. “You *know* I didn’t mean–”

“Well,” his slow drawl stopped the declaration, “I think it’s better if I vacate for a while anyway.” he shifted a non-committal stare. “We seem to have reached some sort of crossroads. It’s good you stood up for yourself. I approve... for what it’s worth.”

He grinned, going back to the walk-in closet to extract yet another suitcase.

“It’s worth *everything*!” she stated plaintively. “I couldn’t stand it if you left...” she implored, stepping closer to the large king bed. “And... and what about Tom? Who’s going to bug him?” she hoped another tact might take for her first statement garnered little reaction.

“You’ve come up with some plan every single day to make his life miserable. No one else could be that maniacal and you know it!”

Silas’ mouth pulled into a wicked grin, “Yeah, *I* know but–”

“No ‘buts’ please.” Liz felt herself losing ground fast for the guy seemed pretty well set in his decision. “I was just reacting yesterday. I was so... upset about Red and...”

“It’s okay, kid.” he held up a hand, lifting another case unto the bed. Liz could see an array of weapons inside, neatly slotted into secure Velcro holdings.

“How many guns are in there?” she hadn’t been able to mentally calculate, astonishment in her tone.

“Oh, those are my favorites. I’ll send for the rest later... if that’s okay?” he thought he should observe formalities for a change.

“You cannot just leave me unprotected!” she grasped at straws, her worst fears coming to the fore.

He chuckled, “This place has more guards than Fort Knox.”

“Silas... tell me what to do to make this right?” Liz was close to tears.

“There is nothing wrong.” he scowled slightly, genuinely concerned for her welfare. “You didn’t do anything wrong. That’s not why I’m going.” he had been trying to lead up to the reason in his own fashion.

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“Of course it is.” she wailed. “I opened my big mouth and got all uppity and you’re pissed... rightfully so!”

“What?” Silas was lost.

“I haven’t even told Red... anything.” she blurted. “He doesn’t know I was an asshole. That I... screwed up.” she murmured. “Can’t we work through this?”
“Sit down.” he indicated a chair in an alcove beside the large picture window. “I was coming up to talk to you in a while anyway.”

She didn’t believe him, but she sat, waiting on tenterhooks. The large blue eyes watched the man religiously.

He sat on the edge of the bed, holding both hands aloft to halt the tirade. “Liz, I wasn’t going to leave because of that little episode but I have to go. Red would understand.”

“How can I believe that?” she was more than upset. “’You’re leaving... you weren’t leaving before my little meltdown!”

“I hadn’t got the phone call before.” he exasperated, then at her expression. “Look, suffice to say,” he cut to the chase, “an old acquaintance got in touch with me. There is an... emergency. I have to go help out.” he waited while she processed. “I was coming to tell you as soon as I packed.”

“You’re packing all those weapons.” she stared at the duffel bag. “Is there trouble? Can I help?”

“You can help by staying here with Red and seeing he gets better faster.” Silas nodded. “He has a tendency to jump back into the deep end of the pool when he isn’t a hundred percent... especially after something like this.”

Liz was following and she didn’t want to pry, of course.

“It’s his way of assuring himself his super powers are still intact.” Silas smiled at the woman, “I was coming to clear the air before my flight out... I promise.”

She wanted to believe that... so much.

“Your face is very expressive... work on that.” he instructed. “You don’t believe a word I have said to you, do you.” he took for granted.

“Well, it all sounds a little,” she sought a word that wouldn’t piss him off, “...contrived, maybe?”

“Well, it’s not.” he sighed, sitting back a little, straightening his shoulders, “Okay, listen,” he clearly did not want to get into it, “this guy called, someone from my... a long time ago... he is a family member of...”

Liz listened attentively.

“I think this guy is in trouble. Hell, I know he is.” the guard pulled a face. “He’s always in some mess or another, but I feel obligated to bail him out, if I can, of course. No guarantees there either but I gotta try. Understand?”

She stared at him with those big puppy dog eyes.

“...He’s my wife’s brother.” he snapped because he sensed the woman was placating him. “My brother-in-law. He’s an idiot! Worse than Francis and not half so capable.”

“You think Francis is capa– you have a wife?!” she gasped.

“No... I had a wife.” he quieted. “As I said, it was a long time ago. She... died.”

Liz’s mouth fell agape, not only because of the unexpected background information on her guard. But that he willingly shared a piece of his history... with her.
“I’m... so sorry!”

The large man pushed up from the bed, walking to the window, “She was in a car crash...” his voice trailed away, his eyes fixed on the window pane.

“Oh, Silas...” Liz was speechless. She was out of her depth and knew it.

“Liz, I was only a kid and so was she.” he rolled his neck, agitated, not really knowing why he was over-explaining the situation.

He never told anyone about Anya. Red knew, of course, and Dembe.

“Hell, I don’t even remember being that age.” he scratched his forehead absently, “Was I ever that fucking young?”

Liz thought the forced chuckle was so poignant somehow. She watched Silas’ eyes cloud over, lost in a long ago memory, her heart constricting.

“We never got a happily ever after.” he sought her out, “I guess that’s why I’m so invested in seeing you and Red get one.”

Liz arose, crossing swiftly, her arms hugging the bear of a man, “God, Silas,” she whispered a sacred vow, “I am so very, very sorry.”

“It’s okay.” he was the one doing the actual soothing, for the woman was in an absolute state of nerves.

“Of course it’s not okay.” she swiped at the tears spiking her lashes. “It’s the last thing from okay.”

“Do you believe me now? That the reason I am going away for a spell is a valid one?”

“You have to let Red help... take Joe... or Dembe.”

“Dembe will have his hands full.” he shook his head. “I want Joe here.”

“You can’t traipse off into... where? Where is this man?”

“Russia.”

“Russia?” she was aghast. “That’s halfway around the world.”

“I know where it is. I lived there for three years.” he shifted patient eyes. “I’ve got contacts over there, they’ll be meeting me, everything will be fine... or don’t you trust my abilities.”

“Of course I do bit you always say, shit happens,” she quoted, “plan for any possible contingency.”

“I have.” she was calmed. “I got it covered.”

“Well who is this guy that he feels he can just make a phone call and you will pull his ass out of the fire?”

“I told you, he’s Anya’s younger brother.” Silas explained once again, “She looked after him... it was just the two of them left after...”

Liz touched his arm self-consciously, “Are you really okay?”
He turned aside, returning to his packing, “This brings up bad memories, that’s all.”

She could only imagine. “Isn’t there anything I can do?” she felt so helpless. “You’re my friend. When you hurt, I hurt.”

His hands halted their busy work for a long beat.

“And I know you’re hurting, Silas.” she could read his body language, sense it in the man’s hesitant manner.

Silas was never hesitant. The man was the most decisive individual she had ever met, including Red Reddington.

He crossed to the window again, looking out on a well kept garden of a variety of colorfully blooming flowers and shrubs, he stuck his hands into his pockets.

“If you want the truth, I don’t really want to go.”

The statement was so simplistic, she really did believe it.

She sought for something intelligent to say, some profound remark, coming up empty.

The handsome profile was turned slightly, she noted the chiseled jaw line, the neatly trimmed beared of speckled grey and white which was so distinguished looking on some occasions.

“And Anya would expect me to... help.” Silas knew as much. “She could never see his faults.” he sighed lightly, his attention still on the beauty outside the window. “She had a good heart.”

“So do you.”

He chuckled pensively, “Some say I don’t have one at all.”

“They don’t know you.”

He glanced at her, an odd expression present.

“I don’t either.” she picked up on his reasoning. “Does anyone, Silas?” she wondered. “You are so closed off about your private life.”

“Didn’t think anyone was that interested.” he shrugged massive shoulders, hands still in pockets of the jeans he sported.

“I am.” she was upset he would believe otherwise.

The blue shirt he wore made the blue eyes more startling, “You’re just nosy.” he teased.

Liz couldn’t argue that point, “Can I ask how... when you met your... Anya?”

“She wasn’t mine.” he grinned. “Well, not at first. She was very much her own person. Took me a while to convince her of my... credentials.”

Liz nodded that she understood. Only such a woman could catch his attention and hold it.

“She lived in Chechnya for a good part of her life. It was hard going after the revolution.”

Liz was putting together time lines. Russia. That part was clear.
The man nodded thoughtfully. Red must have shared a little of that time with her.

“The Wall had come down, the Soviet Union was on its last legs.” he remembered back. “Yeltsin was in... it was a bad time for the Russian people.”

Liz tried to recall her Civics class teachings, coming up dismally empty but this guy had lived it. He and Red.

“Red and I chose the losing side, as per custom.” Silas grinned over at the woman. “Federal troops were trying to cease control of the mountainous regions of Chechnya... the Boyeviki were–”

“The what?” she sat forward from her perch at the end of the bed, her hands braced on either side of her slender body.

“Boyeviki.” he repeated. The Guerrilla fighters of that region... were heavily out-manned. Yeltsin had the advantage hands down.” he ticked off his fingers. “Weaponry, combat vehicles, air support.” he shook his head slightly. “But we jumped in head first again, as usual.”

Liz’s attention was rapt.

“In January, I think it was,” he looked off, lost in the memory, it was all a blur after so many campaigns, “the Soviets were seizing strategic buildings throughout Lithuania. That was the beginning.”

His countenance turned dark, “Bastards were undertrained, undisciplined sons-of-bitches. Looting, raping, even wholesale murder of innocent civilians!” he lifted a thunderous expression, “Using them as human shields.”

He quieted after a fashion. It had taken a few moments for the man to expel the images his words must have conjured.

The room was silent, that silence strained.

“After Grozny, the country was in ruins, 500,000 “displaced” people...” he air quoted, a grim smirk on his face. “Worst euphemism I ever heard for what those people were.”

Liz did not know Grozny but she would Google the place after today. If Red was there, if it was a part of his life, she wanted to know... or did she?

Silas’ expression was bleak but then it softened, “...Red organized an airlift operation. It was the quickest way to get the refugees to some kind of safety.

Liz’s heart swelled with pride, of course Red would want to help the helpless. It was in his make-up.

“Anya and her brother, Vadik Sokolov...” he supplied the information, “were among the first to vacate the city.”

Liz was captivated by the tale.

“Which was a good thing because the airport was under attack about three days later. We had to abandon that tact of rescue.”

Liz tried to imagine the scope of the tragedy the man entailed.

“Anya got our attention from the get go.” he chuckled. I thought for a minute Red would order her shot, she was causing such a commotion.”
Liz liked how he said the woman’s name, all soft and tenderly.

“Red would never do that.” she was certain.

Silas quirked a brow, “... Okay. Anyway, the problem was, Red had stated, women and children for the first few flights and men as we could rescue them, of course.”

Liz felt empathy for the families separated in such a horrible time and place.

“Anya was insistent that we allow her brother to board.” Silas continued, “The kid was fifteen, sixteen,” he shook his head, “and there were so many waiting... kids... little ones.”

Liz was getting the picture.

“Our forces could only hold off the Soviets for so long and we knew that. Anya was taking up valuable time.”

Liz would have just let the kid board.

“Red flatly refused,” Silas relayed, “Anya stepped aside. She wouldn’t leave Vadik. So we boarded who we could and prepared for take off. By this time our supporters had to give up the ghost and bail.” Silas smiled wistfully.

Liz was stunned by such nonchalance.

“We closed the doors, the plane was already taxiing...” he lifted his head, rubbing his chin absently, “I’m getting everyone settled for take off amid the chaos of crying, hysterical women and terrified kids... and I look up and there they sat.”

Liz scooted closer, “Anya and her brother?”

“She had somehow managed to get past me... the little shit. She wouldn’t do it today.” he proclaimed stoutly. “I swear to God, I didn’t see them board, so now I’m sweating bullets. Red’s gonna have my ass in a sling for falling down on the job.”

“He wouldn’t really have cared.” Liz pouted. “What’s two more?”

“With that planes capacity?” Silas seemed incredulous she would make such a statement. “I seriously considered jumping out the hatch to make up for the weight distribution.”

She threw him an old fashioned look.

“Well, that and the prospect of having to face down Red.”

“Yeah.” she wasn’t buying it. “Sure.”

“He was more intimidating in the ‘old days’.” he quipped. “I hid Anya and the troll out of sight until we landed in Minsk. I found a safe place for them to stay until something permanent could be scrounged up.”

“And the great romance began.” Liz clasped her hand together happily, tucking them under her chin.

“Hardly.” the guard scoffed, shifting into the chair once again from his standing position. “She hated men, especially me... after what she had experienced, I couldn’t blame her.”

“Why ’especially’ you?”
“She said I was arrogant, conceited... full of myself.” he held his grin, his eyes twinkling, “My words, not hers. Which were much more damaging to my fragile male ego, trust me.”

“She’s the one who toughened up that thick hide?”

“Let’s just say, I grew as a person.” he settled for compromise, spreading his hands out minutely, “Time passed and... she mellowed a little.”

“It’s your fatal charm.” Liz managed to keep a straight face. “How long were you guys... eh..”

“About a year, on and off. Married about a year.” he replied evenly. “It was... a good time.”

Liz smiled gently. It was clear to see the honest emotion this man had felt... still felt for the woman to which he now referred.

Silas sat in the overstuffed chair with its high back, his hands engulfing the wood carving on its handles.

“She knew what I did... a career soldier but... more.” he didn’t know quite how to categorize his chosen vocation even in his own mind. “I was away a lot... but it never seemed to cause too many issues. I would send for her when it was done and we would see a lot of the world together. She loved that part of it.”

Liz processed all that had been said. She was glad Silas had those good years. At least he had a few good memories. Or it seemed he and Anya had been content together.

The silence had gone on for so long that Liz assumed the story was at an end.

She was acutely disappointed.

“...She was coming to me that night.”

The woman lifted her gaze.

Silas’ face was expressionless. For a moment, Liz wondered if she had imagined the words she had heard.

“I sent for her. She was going to fly to Cairo... to meet me.”

Liz closed her eyes to the realization. Did he blame himself? Of course he did. She stared transfixed at the man’s face.

Silas shifted haunted eyes, “She didn’t want to leave Vadik. People were calling the house...” it was like it happened yesterday, “people she didn’t know, asking for the little creep. She knew he was in trouble again.”

Did he need to talk? Had it festered inside too long?

Silas stood, too restless to continue.

Liz felt helpless. She sought things to say that would make it all better for the man. To heal what was broken.

“I convinced her it would be all right. I told her...” he closed his eyes, the conversation replayed in his mind, fresh as if it were yesterday, “my contacts would take care of the problem, whatever it was, just like the last time and the time before that.”
Liz arose, also too agitated to stay still. She approached the man gingerly, “And they did, didn’t they, Silas?” she implored. “You said, she was her own woman. If she really wanted to stay, she would have. She wanted to be with you.”

A large hand scraped his forehead, “I don’t know why I laid all this on you.” he was mystified. “I don’t even know why I started talking about it.”

“Because Anya’s brother called.” Liz surmised.

Silas seemed to come back from a long away place, “Oh... right. The kid,” he laughed shortly, “hell, he’s not a kid anymore, is he.”

“He acts like one,” was Liz’s opinion, “after all these years, his behavior doesn’t seem to have changed.”

“Or mine,” he stated grimly, facing her. “My instincts are telling me to write this guy off. Should have done it years ago.”

“But you can’t.” Liz understood. “Because of her.”

Silas crossed to the luggage on the bed, fingering the strap of the valise. “...Yeah,” he sighed heavily, “because of... her.”

A dark scowl worried the man’s forehead.

“I know you don’t want my advice,” Liz took for granted, “or my two cents worth..”

He cut her a look, “But you’re going to give them regardless, correct?”

She dismissed the sarcasm, “Is it wrong for this guy to keep imposing on you, yes, of course it is.” she moved forward. “Will he ever stop doing so? I doubt it... the truth of the matter,” she shrugged minutely, “doesn’t matter what he does. You will always honor the bond you and Anya shared. You know that and I know it.”

The grey eyes shifted passively.

“You can’t do anything else, Silas because in truth,” Liz “air quoted” this time in the large guards stead, “Anya is still here... in your heart. She never left. I don’t think she ever will, do you?”

The man’s lips compressed absently as he pondered her words.

“She’s the reason you go through women like water in a sieve.” she finally understood. “She’s why you never get attached. Your heart is already spoken for.”

“If that’s true,” the man folded a shirt he picked up off the bed, “it’s a sad damned statement, don’t you think?”

The blue-grey eyes trained on her face.

“I think it’s the most...” Liz halted. The man did not deal with trite platitudes. “What I think isn’t important.” Liz only hope that one day, Red would love her to such a depth but she knew something else. “If it were me, though, I wouldn’t want you to live in such a state.”

Silas’ hands halted their busy work but he did not seek her out as yet.

“I would hope that you could find happiness and contentment in life.” Did Anya feel the same?
“Wouldn’t you want that for her? If the situation were reversed.”

Silas lifted empty eyes.

“Sounds trite I guess.” the woman felt her inadequacies.

“...I wonder if Red knows exactly what he has found,” Silas’ deep tone washed over Liz, “... in you.”

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Red Reddington reluctantly opened his eyes. It was early yet. The drapes were still drawn but he could see a soft light filtering around the slits of the heavy material.

His hand slid automatically, his palms feeling out to the opposite side of the bed.

Lizzy’s spot was cool to the touch. She had been gone long before he awakened.

He carefully moved his head, searching out the clock by the... Kaplan had returned his property.

He smiled mentally. That woman would have made an excellent Storm Trooper.

Ten o’clock. Red never slept this late but again, he didn’t often get shot in the head as a rule.

Turning his head had not produced the dreaded effect of the previous day. No real nausea, slight headache, no throbbing agony to deal with.

He would take it...

He felt grungy... a nice hot shower would do him just fine.

Tossing the blankets gingerly aside, the man eased to the side of the bed slowly pushing into an upright position.

He stifled a groan, fighting a slight head rush. He felt out the bandaged area of his head. A small patch of gauze and tape replaced the wrap the medical team had first applied.

What the hell has she give him that he had slept through not only Kaplan’s presence, but her gentle administrations?

She must be over her pissy spell. Red knew the woman could be infinitely gentle when she wanted...

He had sat through several bandaging’s in the past. She tartly dressed him down but her touch had been kind, careful and caring.

Red had sat obediently quiet, taking his medicine like a good little soldier but only because of that ‘touch’.

He and Kate had a special bond. The man had never tried to define it. He didn’t think Kate did either... it just was.

Red hoped it could always be like that... but he was jaded enough to know, most things changed over time and circumstances.

What a sad day if it ever came to pass. He genuinely liked and cared for the woman as well.
Red arose, shaky on his feet, his legs feeling like rubber for a few steps.

“Really?” he muttered his annoyance, stubbornly working through the weakness. By the time he reached the sink, he was much more stable.

He stared at his reflection in the mirror for a goodly spell. At times he didn’t recognize himself.

So much had transpired in his lifetime. Oft times, it was like he had morphed into someone else’s life.

Lived some other man’s destiny.

He would not have purposely chosen the lifestyle he now lived.

Red had envisioned another path for himself. But this one had brought him to Elizabeth Keen.

The man cocked his head, pushing the philosophical mood aside.

He reached, ripping the bandage off, tossing the bloodied patch into the trash receptacle under the vanity.

He examined the wound. An angry welt of a slash about two inches in length graced the right side of his head just above the temple.

Someone was looking out for him, he mused.

Why was anyone’s guess.

He accepted what was, more than grateful for whatever time he had remaining because it meant more time with Lizzy.

Not that Red hadn’t enjoyed his life before the woman, he had.

Long ago, he made the decision to live life to the fullest, each and ever day because early on, he was taught a harsh lesson about the cruelties that very life could throw at a man.

There was time, after his world was ripped apart, he considered giving up... losing his daughter had devastated the man.

That sweet, innocent little girl had become his whole world. He had doted on his ‘little angel’.

The circumstances that ripped Jennifer away had almost destroyed him, in truth.

But then the anger had materialized, a rage so deep, so all encompassing, directed entirely at the bastards who perpetrated the atrocity... Red was able to pull it together.

His soul purpose, becoming an obsession.

Find his child.

Bring her home, but as years progressed the man had to confront the decisions he had made in order to accomplish such a goal.

Was he being selfish now? Was her life better without him intruding for it had taken years to establish a workable solution to his problem.

Years in which they were not together. Years of explaining to her why he was not able to be there.
At such a young, impressionable age, would his daughter even welcome him back into her life?

If it was difficult for a grown man to understand or accept the reality that had become his norm... what would it be like for his little girl?

Was he just being a coward?

Did he dread the look on her face when he showed up, out of the blue, once again disrupting a life she had become accustomed to?

He could have found Jennifer had he truly wished. He had the resources but it had taken forever to accumulate them.

By the time his network was finally in place, ten years had passed.

She wouldn’t know him... she wouldn’t remember. Nor was his lifestyle conduit to bringing an impressionable young girl into its midst.

Was it just another excuse? Was he so terrified of how Jennifer would perceive him after he had allowed them to take her from him?

Was the guilt and recriminations so horrendous, he refused to even attempt a face to face encounter?

Red scowled darkly, dismissing the unsettling thoughts which often plagued him over the passing years.

The man automatically undressed, throwing his pajama top into the hamper in the walk-in closet.

He selected a slate blue button up shirt and dark gray slacks... the combination fitting his rather subdued mood. Reaching for a gray tie, he hesitated, bypassing the accessory instead choosing blue boxers and matching socks before heading for the shower.

Five minutes under the steamy spray dispelled his depression which he chalked up to Kaplan’s cocktail of meds.

He stood, eyes closed, hand braced against the shower wall, allowing the refreshing spray to pelt his battered body and mind.

The throbbing in his head eased in increments the longer he stood under the waters soothing effects.

His instincts clicked as he heard the soft patter of feet approaching. The man straightened, his hand reaching instinctively for the weapon laying unobtrusively along the top of the shower ledge.

“Does Kaplan know you’re in there?” Liz’s voice sounded miffed.

“I didn’t know I had to report to her.” Red’s hand dropped, lazily reaching instead for the soap which lay waiting in its regular spot. “Think she would like to join me?”

“Alright, I deserved that one.” Liz’s tone still held a little animosity.

He smiled for the fact.

“You sure you don’t need any help in there?” she had seen the bloodied bandage discarded in the trash.

“Why, you going to send Silas in?” he quipped, lathering his body absently.
“Very funny.” Liz snipped. “Head shots bring out the best in you, I see.”

Red chuckled, his hands running over his cock, cleansing the area thoroughly, “This is an awfully big shower... it’s lonely in here.”

“You sure you don’t need help?” she questioned once more.

Well, this was just fantastic. He had the strongest urge to answer that question.

He glanced down, his groin stirring to life in response to the woman’s breathy voice.

In truth, his mind registered that she was using her vexed tone. But to his ears, he heard a seductive lilt that he could not dismiss.

He scowled at the useless thing irritably.

He grunted a noncommittal response, garnering a heavy sigh from the other side.

“I'll go get Silas.” Liz retorted.

Red rolled his eyes. Okay, he had deserved that one.

He rinsed his body, suddenly wanting the shower over and done. He wanted to see the woman. He wanted to kiss her, to feel her in his arms.

Liz had shed her clothes absently. Stepping through the opened portal of the enclosed shower, she hesitated.

Red was rinsing his body, eyes closed as the steamy spray pelted his face and chest.

Liz’s eyes traversed the masculine form, appreciating the muscular thighs and tight calves.

She admired the stocky shoulders and thick forearms with the abundant honey colored hair.

She felt so safe in those arms.

His suntan was dark and stopped just below his waist before picking up again on those powerful thighs.

He had only recently started laying about with her down at the pond to garner the darkened skin. Though he kept a shirt within reaching distance at all times, she had been incredibly pleased and very proud of him for stretching beyond his comfort zone for her.

The first couple days, he had sat beside her, suit intact. Only during a rather passionate petting session... had he removed his shirt.

The day after, he removed it without the added incentive much to her delight.

The man turned aside, breaking her thoughts.

His bottom was taut, well-rounded and pale. And she found it sexy.

She could see the unmistakable protrusion of an early erection from the side view when he turned slightly to rinse the other parts of his body.

“Looks like you got a little problem there.”
Red’s mood lifted instantly, his actions halting in their tracks.

He blatantly stared at the vision who had entered the shower with him.

“Not so little.” he fought back instinctively but the delivery lacked impact, he knew.

She grinned, coming closer. “Why do you look at me like that?” she felt like blushing.

“Like what?” he prompted, his eyes following yet another path down the lovely frame.

Liz slipped her arms about his neckline, leaning against the stoutness of his body, “Like I have no clothes on.”

He glanced meaningfully, “Well... you don’t.”

He relished the feel of the fact, his thighs moving suggestively forward teasing the soft fluff of her mound.

“You’ve seen it a hundred times.” she brushed her lips gently over his, her eyes moving about his face.

“I’ve seen the Venus De Milo a hundred times.” he shrugged. “God’s creative beauty never fails to enthral me.”

“You can be so charming...” she curved her frame to his, the hardness of his ever growing arousal pressing intimately between their bodies, “but today...” she mused, pouting a little for his benefit, “it’s not going to get you anywhere you want to go.”

“It’s not?” his hand grazed the side of her breast, as he lifted the plump orb with a tender touch, his intent quite clear.

“And you’re not going to persuade me otherwise.” she moved out of his touch artfully, her eyes scolding the man. “It’s too soon after... what happened.”

“I’ll let you know when I’m out of commission but until such time—”

“No, no, no.” Liz wagged her finger at the man, her hands trailing a slow, experimental path down the front of his chest, “You can’t always have your way.”

“I bet I can.” his hand cupped her ass cheek lovingly tugging her back, his cock pushing into her abdomen.

“You would lose.” she wrapped her fingers securely about his hardness, her expression a confident one.

The man drew in a breath, closing his eyes to the wondrous feel. His penis reacted to the heated palm instantly, growing in width and length under her gentle guidance.

“If this is losing...” he sighed his gratitude, “I didn’t know what I was missing all these years.”

He lowered his head staring transfixed at the slender fingers surrounding his girth, manipulating his cock to her will. He instinctively pushed into the touch, groaning painfully.

“Let me do it...” she scolded, “you’ll make your head ache.”

“My head is aching.” he grumbled only to sigh his relief seconds later when her fingers eased the
growing ache in the engorged crown.

“Good things come to boys with patience.” Liz admonished, slowly kneeling before the man, making herself comfortable in the slot between his parted legs.

“You’re not dealing with... a boy.” Red’s eyes flamed with suppressed desire. Liz glanced at the evidence in hand, her fingers unable to fully encompass the thick appendage she rhythmically stroked.

“I certainly am not...” she leaned, her mouth trailing a searing path down the side of his rigid hardness.

Red situated his body to block most of the water unable to look away from the drama unfolding before his very eyes.

Liz felt her way, enjoying the shape and texture of the man’s heavy organ, not shy in exploring or touching whatever she pleased.

Red gently cupped her head, his fingers tracing the full mouth covering the flesh of his cock lovingly.

“Kaplan said, no fornication.” Liz frowned up at the man, the blue eyes full of innocent inquiry, “That doesn’t mean this,” she sucked the tip of his arousal teasingly, “... does it?”

“No,” he gasped, leaning heavily back into the heated wall, “Hell, no... that’s–” his palm encouraged her closer, “not what it means at all.”

“Oh, good.” Liz smiled happily, taking more of him into the shallow depths of her hot, moist mouth. Red groaned bleakly, feeling a pressure already building in the recesses of his body.

So soon?! *Fuck!* This couldn’t be happening. Sure, she had surprised him by this little tour-de-force but...

His control couldn’t be that lacking...

But the evidence was clear. The longer that sweet, innocent mouth worked on his cock, the more his willpower weakened.

She spread one soapy hand upward, her fingers easing into his pubic hair, the other worked a slow, agonizing rhythm on his vulnerable shaft.

And that mouth. What that mouth was doing to him was probably illegal in most states, at least biblically.

He pumped his hips in response, pushing into the arousing grasp, his breath becoming more and more labored.

Liz hefted his testicles, having searched out the full, heavy sack. She gentle kneaded the sensitive bundle, suckling harder now, the length of her tongue rubbing along the bulging veins.

The man moaned a stifled gasp of pure pleasure.

“S-Stop now.” he warned breathlessly, hating to say the dreaded words.
“But I like doing this.” she returned to the pastime with determined flourish.

“I like touching you.” she tilted her head slightly, opening her mouth, giving him a clear view of her tongue undulating along the thick length.

“Oh, fuck...” he felt himself losing ground rapidly, his body attuned to her every whim, his damned dick having a mind of its own.

“I like how you feel.” she felt him to her hearts content. There was something incredibly arousing about having the stiff width in her mouth, the velvet softness of his skin brushing against her lips.

“I like,” she suckled him intently for a long beat, “...how you taste, you’re so clean and warm.” she flicked her tongue about his slit, drawing a bead of clear liquid from the swollen tip. She hummed, enjoying the teasing taste of what was to come.

“I’m going to come, dammit.” he snapped, slightly embarrassed for his lapse.

“I should hope so.” she seemed slightly taken aback.

“I want to do it... with you,” he growled, gently pulling at the damp strands of her wet hair, “inside you.”

She pulled at the directive, her hand refusing to stop the incessant pumping of his shaft, her mouth only attending him further... answering his every desire and need.

“And you will...”

“Elizabeth...” he used his, ‘I mean it’ tone.

“Let me do this,” she sighed blissfully, those eyes mesmerizing him, “...for you.”

“We can do it together.” he persuaded, his own voice sounded almost harsh now, raw with the emotion she stirred, “come with me, baby.”

“I will...” she seemed relatively certain of the fact before returning to her administrations.

Red watched ardently as her free hand slid between her milky thighs just as his cock disappeared over and over between her pouty lips. The pink flesh catching slightly on his bulging crown, before the hardened flesh once again vanished into the hot mouth.

God...

His senses were drawn deeper and deeper into the churning void of passion she was diligently creating for him.

Women had pleasured him before but never so efficiently as this woman... Lizzy put her whole heart and soul into the act.

Bracing his feet firmly on the stone of the shower floor, the man allowed the steamy water to wash over him all the while, the volcanic depths of Elizabeth’s succulent mouth enticed him further into a delirium he was only too glad to mire himself within.

His hand covered over the small fingers as he established the rhythm he would need to complete the erotic journey she had taken him on. Those sweet lips parted enticingly.

“Suck...” he urged roughly, “God, yes, “ he hissed, “like that, baby.”
Liz was only too happy to oblige. The man’s constant grunts of pleasure, the veiled curses of astonishment... the raspy words of encouragement guided her.

Red’s bulb throbbed worse than his head had last night, only this pain was an exquisite one.

His fingers tightened about the bunched strands of dark hair as the woman moaned melodically, the sounds vibrating along his cock.

He would pull out... at the last minute, he promised himself. He would pull out... though the luscious mouth was fucking tempting as hell.

“Tell me what to do,” she rasped around the bulbous head, before recapturing it between her luscious lips, “how do I help... you come.”

His fingers curled into the wet strands in response to the unexpected breathy plea, “You want me to come in your mouth?” he groaned harshly, demanding a reply.

She groaned deeply in response, sending another round of delicious vibrations throughout his body.

“My God... do you swallow, baby.” he growled, envisioning the intimacy. “You like to feel that hot cum in your mouth?”

The wondrous suction increased, drawing him deeper into the abyss... under her spell.

He panted sharply, lowering his eyes once more, transfixed by the vision of her hand moving in steady rhythm with her mouth.

“Do you?” he gritted.

He saw the uncertainty behind the large blue eyes looking innocently up at him.

“Fuck...” Red’s head dropped back in ecstasy.

That she was willing to let him come in her mouth was a fantasy he’d carry around with him for days.

That she had apparently never swallowed before, but was perhaps contemplating it...

“Jesus...” he breathed shakily as she suckled him with fervent determination.

“You don’t have to...” he eased her concern, giving her an out should she want one... hoping against hope she would not take it.

Cupping her small head, he got lost in the bobbing sensation as his other played with the pert nipple of her breast, losing himself in this wonderful gift.

Slowly thumbing her nipple, he drew a low moan from the woman’s throat.

His eyes were burning coals of lascivious lust. “Deeper,” he whispered the plea, “take me... deeper.”

The lights flashed a vivid kaleidoscope of cascading sensation as he slid to the back of her mouth, just touching her throat.

Red growled brokenly as the onslaught began, his body tensing, knowing what was to come.

“Son of a–” he panted harshly, a rising heat pooling in his sack.
The woman rubbed her tongue against the sensitive underside of his cock as she lifted his balls up against his body, her fingers just teasing the skin behind the handful she had and he was undone completely, giving himself over to the wild, untamed passion surrounding his mind and feverish body.

“God…” He gasped sharply as his cock head pulsed thick spurts of cum into her willing mouth.

Liz whimpered softly, wrapping her tongue about the throbbing head, tenderly suckling the hot fluid from his sensitive slit.

“Shit… I love you, baby.” he gasped, eagerly rubbing his cockhead between her pouty lips and against her agile tongue.

Some sort of sanity prevailed finally and he jerked his hips back, breaking free of the amazing suction.

Curling his fingers around hers, he tightened her hold. Their hands drew hard bursts of hot cream from his slit, coating the hollow of her throat and breasts in his orgasm.

Elizabeth watched the white arousal as it was lost in the swirling water from the pelting shower head.

“I could watch you do that all day.” she lifted a seductive stare.

Red had no witty reply, too immersed in the moment for a long beat.

She slowly stroked the last few pulses of come from his shaft, her tongue flicking out, catching a stray drop or two. He shook under the onslaught, his cock oversensitive. The intense sensation almost too overwhelming for a moment, nearly making his legs buckle

“...I could watch you do that,” he motioned to her pastime, “all damned day.”

“Flattery will get you,” she accepted his assistance to rise, “quite a lot actually.” she held her grin. “Are you feeling better?”

“Hell yes.” Red remained stationary back against the shower wall, eyes blissfully closed now, “You have no idea how much better I feel.”

“Good to hear.” she rinsed her mouth, reaching for the soap, “Want me to give you a bath?”

She held up the soap.

“I’m not man enough.” he slowly smiled, his eyes seeking out her reaction, “I couldn’t go through that roller coaster ride again so soon...”

She smiled happily, “I like a man who knows his limits.”

“Try me again in an hour.” he boasted, because he felt pretty damned fucking incredible about now.

“Oh, and,” she turned, her hands soaping her beautiful breasts, “I was going to tell you how much I love you but,” she crinkled her nose, “my mouth was full.”

He held his amusement, “Etiquette takes precedence I suppose.”

She giggled softly, tiptoeing to meet the man as he captured her mouth in a deep kiss. He grunted his pleasure, finding a slight hint of his taste in her sweet little mouth.
“You didn’t have to do that.” he murmured against her lips.

“I wanted to...” she replied softly.

“No you didn’t.” he chuckled sensually.

“No really, I like doing it with you.” she realized she did. “You didn’t make me feel...” she searched for the word, “pressured, I guess.” she smiled impishly up at him. “You pulled away,” she teased, “even though I know you didn’t really want to.”

“I would have drowned you otherwise.” he quipped.

She giggled at his honesty.

Something plagued the man, “I’d like to ask you a question,” he pushed the wet strands from her eyes, “it’s none of my damned business but...”

Liz picked up on the direction he was going, “Everyone used condoms... it was college. STD central.” she grimaced. “And with Tom... it was the same.” she confided. “I always wondered about him, but to be truthful it took the pressure off me.”

Red nodded his understanding. They used condoms because Tom didn’t want the intimacy, the responsibility of a pregnancy...

Liz smiled warmly at Red. Tom obviously hadn’t wanted those things...

Red... obviously did.

“You’re fun in the shower.” she said, breaking the mood.

“I’m fun a lot of places.” he lifted the soap from her unresisting hands, his palm sliding over the ripe melon of a mound lovingly, “We’ll have to explore.”

He pulled her back against him, amazed that his body responded to the silky warmth of her bared flesh.

“You said an hour.” she swatted him away, twisting about peevishly.

“I lied.” he reached for her.

“You don’t lie...” she arched a brow.

“All right,” he conceded, “I underestimated my masculine stamina,” he unwillingly told the truth, before his eyes lazily traveled the expanse of the woman’s flush skin, “though why I did under such circumstances is beyond me.”

“You go right now,” she pointed, “and let me finish my shower or I’ll call Mr. Kaplan and she’ll see you naked.”

“She’s seen me naked.” Red retorted.

“She has not seen... that.” Liz pointed to the man’s semi-erect penis. “And she will not see that.”

“A bit territorial are we?”

“Me being territorial over who sees your cock has nothing to do with this.” Liz lifted her chin
stubbornly, “I just don’t want to gross her out.”

Red took said cock in hand, presenting it to her, “On a scale of one to ten, how would you rate this?”

“We’re not talking about me.” Liz folded her arms under her breasts. “Mr. Kaplan would rate it a zero.”

“Says who?” Red frowned.

“Silas.” she sighed heavily, as though it should be common knowledge. “Now go...” she shooed the man forward, “I won’t be nice to you and your attractive cock in an hour if you don’t.”

She seemed pretty set in her thinking, Red had to admit.

He raked her nudity with a possessive sweep, “I’m going because I want to.”

“You just told me to go...” he countered, his eyes drifting downwards to the woman’s mound, “make up your mind woman.”

“I meant... oh, you know what I meant.” she practically stamped her foot, turning her back on the man and the subject matter.

Red held his grin, catching her reflection in the mirrors as he set the water temperature of the faucet.

He had a perfect view of that perfect little naked ass.

Liz started humming as she soaped her body with a layer of thick, fragrant lather.

She was slightly tone deaf which Red had always found charming. He would walk through the house to hear Lizzy belting out what he thought might be Adele, with the in house sound system.

Red knew enough of the artist if only due to her recent popularity but couldn’t exactly name a particular tune... though he could recite the entire musical repertoire of Billie Holiday.

But today’s choice had the man’s grin widen as he brushed his teeth, rinsing in the double vanity sink.

“But square-cut or pear-shaped, these rocks don't loose their shape,” Liz admired the ring on her finger, “diamonds are a girl's best friend!”

“Are they now?” he shifted a careful gaze.

She didn’t answer but shortly returned to her humming, and as a bonus... added a sexy little version of the song which had caught her fancy today.

Red turned about, short towel wrapped about his waist, arms folded as he leaned back against the basin to watch the show.

“I’d shower you with diamonds if you did that while sitting on my lap.” he stated quietly, attempting to keep his libido in check watching the seductive swaying of those curvaceous hips. He had caught brief glances of the plump breasts from time to time as well.

He wasn’t doing so well on that libido thing. The fabric of the towel straining taut over his rampant hard on.
“You men are all alike,” Liz rinsed thoroughly, “always think of one thing... thank the Lord.” she giggled.

“How many diamonds again?” she secured a long, luxurious towel, stepping from the shower stall tucking the end securely into the cleft of her breasts.

She towel dried her hair as she approached, trying hard not to note the man’s condition.

“How many do you want?”

“Never ask a woman that question,” she cut scolding eyes his way, “we might just answer truthfully one day."

“I meant for you to,” he intoned, “answer truthfully.” he suggested. “Diamonds, cars, money... you name it, you’ll get it.”

“Eight hundred and twenty eight dollars,” she faced him squarely, “and fifty-two cents.”

“Do you take plastic?” he was intrigued by the sum she chose.

“I’m old fashioned,” she shook her head regretfully, “cash only.”

“I’ll get my wallet.” he pushed off the counter.

She caught his arm, “Don’t you want to haggle over the price?”

“Why should I?”

“...It’s a little exorbitant, isn’t it?” now she was intrigued, “I mean... have you paid for...paid that much... in the past?”

“I don’t pay for it,” he was enjoying the conversation immensely, “as a rule.”

“You just said you would.” she was confused.

“I said... I would pay you.”

She beamed, “I’m special!”

“You certainly are.”

“You’re fun in the bathroom too.” she was delighted with the flattery.

“I could put you up on this basin and show you just how much fun I can be... if you want.” he offered politely.

“Haven’t we done that before?” she tried to be serious. “I wouldn’t want it to get stale between us so early on.” she crooked her head to one side, laying the towel aside. “Are we repeating ourselves already?”

Red liked her hair all mussed and combed only by her fingers.

“Is it all a blur?” he empathized, “I will have to try harder, won’t I.”

“I like the sound of that.” she was in total agreement. “But not until Mr. Kaplan leaves, she scares me.”
“Why hasn’t she left?” he asked peevishly.

“How ungracious.” Liz reached for her lotion. “After all she’s done for you.”

“Done to me.” Red corrected. “It’s not like her to stick around this long.”

“She and Nora have established a rapport.”

“Oh dear God.” terror struck Red’s heart but only superficially to amuse Lizzy, of course.

“I think she has finally met someone she can relate to.” Liz massaged her upper arms absently, smiling gently for his wit.

Red enjoyed the fragrant scent drifting about the bathroom helped along by the fine mist of steam floating in the air after Lizzy’s shower.

He was grateful his condition had improved. The woman clearly did not want intimacy at this time, though... perhaps in an hour...

“What’s on the agenda for today.” he inquired. Disappearing into the walk-in, he dressed for the day. Reaching for his shoes, he hesitated as the woman flounced in, giving him a look over.

“I like that shirt.” she smiled before turning about to her own clothing. “You always look so put together.” she was already wondering what might match and might not.

“I struggle with things like fashion. Guess it’s the price you pay for being raised by a man.” she grinned. “Not that Sam didn’t do his best but he thought it was fine to wear white socks with a tux.”

“First of all, you always dress beautifully...” Red corrected pointedly, “now that your past that awful olive stage.”

Liz rolled her eyes, leafing through the selection afforded her... thanks to Red.

“Your taste suits you... it’s young and fresh and you.” he discarded pair after pair of shoes as he went down the selection, “And secondly, when did Sam ever wear a tux?”

“My junior prom.” she joined the man, looking over his shoulder, “He insisted on being a chaperone so he could kill Rick Westford if he tried anything with me.”

“Good for Sam.”

Liz lay her chin on Red’s shoulder, “Would you have killed Rick too?”

“I was Rick.” he realized.

She laughed and his mood lightened. He turned his head finding her lips very close to his face.

She leaned, lovingly kissing his mouth. “You make me laugh.”

“In a good way I hope.”

“I like being with you.” she suddenly realized.

“Well, it works out just fine,” he felt her sincerity, touched by the sentiment displayed, “because I like being with you as well.”
Liz realized something else. She was happy again.

She and Silas were all right. She hadn’t felt uncomfortable or awkward with Francis this morning and...

“Don’t you ever try to leave me, Red Reddington.” she warned, hopefully keeping her tone light and airy as not to reveal the depth of emotions she was feeling. “I’ll have to do something tragically drastic if you do.”

“Slash my wrists?” he had sat on the bench seat in the center of the large closet to slip the loafers on he had chosen.

“I don’t have that much time.” she dismissed such a notion, “You have Kaplan on speed dial.... I’ll think of something.”

“Tragically drastic?” he teased, content to watch as she rifled through her lingerie draw, still as naked as when she came in. She wiggled into a pair of dark blue panties, totally unashamed of her nudity which is just how the man liked it.

“Are you making fun of me?” she put her hands on her hips.

“Can I taste those?” he motioned to her pert breasts, “the nipples are responding to me even as we speak. I get their vote.”

She covered the amazing mounds with her hands, “You do not,” she decided, “you’re being mean.”

“You are being mean... to me.” he made mention, adjusting the issue in his pants accordingly.

“A little abstinence is good for the soul.” Liz held up a blouse silently asking his opinion.

“I prefer you sans clothing.”

Liz sighed mentally, putting the blouse back on the rack, “I’ll make it up to you... tonight.”

“Then chose the red one.” he motioned to the line of blouses, “And you said an hour.” he reminded.

“Mr. Kaplan may still be here.” she jut her chin out, turning away from the man. “You’ll have to wait.”

“And if Kaplan is still here tonight?” he wanted his parameters set.

“Remember to lock the door.” she cut him a look. “She can’t pick locks can she?”

Red was not certain to be honest, “I’ll hold you to your word then.” he inclined his head minutely, “duty calls I suppose.”

Red didn’t really like the thought of returning to the other world so soon. He was beginning to prefer this one he was creating with Elizabeth more and more.

“Thank you, Lizzy.” he murmured softly.

“You’re thanking me for a blow job?” she tittered.

“No, well, yes.” he shrugged slightly. “Perhaps more for the fact that you wanted me to feel better... the affection you offered.”
“Well then,” she smiled, “you are more than welcome.” she wrapped her arms about his neckline, kissing him softly. “Feel free to call me again in your time of need, so to speak.”

Yes, he was definitely appreciating this new found world they were creating.

“Now, let’s get you fed so you feel a hundred percent.”

“You think your mouth on my cock didn’t achieve that?” Red asked seriously.

“Okay then,” she smiled softly, “a hundred and ten percent.” she grinned before sobering a little. “You should take some down time.” Liz countered on a serious matter herself, situating her blouse inside her black pants, “My God, Red... you just had a serious injury.”

The man was clearly hesitant, torn, “I feel fine.”

“You guys always feel fine.” she disdained. “You are not fine, Red. Please take at least a few days.” it was beseeched.

She massaged his shoulders, her expression a sympathetic one. She kissed his cheek, pulling back.

“What ever you decide.” she was willing to compromise but she wished he would take a breather.

“I’m going for my walk... then will have breakfast.” it was a start. “I’ll make decisions afterward. Don’t plan on an empty stomach.”


“I like the sound of that.” he grinned over at her. “Work on that delivery, or better still,” an idea occurred to him, “we’ll work on it together. Ever play the Orion Slave girl to the Romulan war lord?”

“No, but I speak Klingon, do you?” she countered artfully.

He laughed, “Francis does.”

“What a shocker.” she mused. “You know Star Trek but not Star Wars?”

“I was a child of the sixties...” he shrugged. “I’m serious about trying out a few games.” he lifted his brows. “Are you up for it?”

“Hey, I’m as kinky as the next person.” she feigned bravado for in reality, she had never once attempted such a thing. Which was a damn sad statement about her sex life. “Who gets to be the slave girl first?”

He walked past on his way out, landing a smart smack with his palm on her ass cheek.

It stung deliciously and the woman jumped visibly, stifling a squeak, her eyes widening with surprise.

“Guess.” Red leaned close, breathing softly in her ear the challenging whisper.

Those eyes watched him swagger across the area offering but one meaningful look her way.

That ‘look’ warmed her from head to toe.

Liz ruminated, standing perfectly still after his departure.
Was he serious? Did such things interest him? Did they interest her?

They had played a little before, her the student to the naughty professor... and she had enjoyed the game immensely.

Her bottom still tingled from the imprint of his palm.

It was not an unpleasant sensation to her great surprise.

Which made her very interested in what other talents he possessed.

She found herself smiling for no apparent reason.

The day was looking up.

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Red literally bounded down the two circular steps of the portico of the front entranceway.

He often enjoyed a brisk walk around the property before breakfast, and today was especially pleasant.

The sun wasn’t high enough to produce the oppressive heat as yet. There was a good Northerly wind coming off the Potomac.

The air was fragrant with the scent of a variety of blooming flowers and bushes. There was an array of colors and soft hues to catch one’s attention. The sky was an aqua blue with wisps of fluffy white clouds.

He chuckled to himself, shaking his head slightly. He was practically glowing... and he knew why. He felt like fucking Prince Charming traipsing through the woods after he found his Princess.

He had almost bought the farm yesterday... or so everyone was claiming, which made this morning rather special.

It made a guy more appreciative of the things that mattered in life.

The scents were sharper, the colors more vivid, the sunshine warmer.

The touch of a woman... more intense.

A brush with the Reaper would do that to a man. And Red intended to enjoy the sensations as long as they lasted because it was human nature to slip back rapidly into taking things for granted.

He found his favorite alcove settled back into the property was free from distraction.

Sitting on the provided bench of the little arbor, he inhaled the rich aroma of the roses climbing abundantly over the archway.

He had shared the spot early on with Lizzy, delighted by her reaction.

She had found the quaint spot, charming.

They would sit here after dark once their business issues were handled for the day and share interests.
Red had found out a lot of things about the woman he had only guessed at before.

Her political views for instance. He would have guessed Democrat because she had a soft heart, but she had surprised him... Independent all the way.

She had enquired of his affiliation. He had amused her by giving a straight faced, ‘Whig’.

Another surprise, she actually got the reference, “I would have thought you to be a member of the Know-Nothing party.” she cocked her brow smartly.

The memory brought a smile to the man’s lips.

His thoughts drifted to the events of this morning.

Lizzy had surprised him yet again, in the most pleasant of ways, granted.

As had his erection. He hadn’t been certain of his capabilities in the bedroom after his recent ordeal.

Nor had he been in the mood to jerk one off.

He could feel the crush of her soft fluff covering her mound brushing against his thigh area.

Red closed his eyes, allowing the visions free reign for once.

One of his favorite pastimes of late, was nuzzling that little neatly trimmed muff.

As a man, it was important to him to know for certain he could pleasure her when he went between those velvet thighs.

It was a priority in the male perception of his prowess, or lack thereof.

He loved how he could make her tremble with just a few flicks of his tongue on that sensitive spot.

He knew exactly how to locate it. He could feel it grow under his guidance. She would squirm about when he licked her just so. He adored the feel of her plumping lips and clit in his mouth.

Another smile graced his lips. He took out a cigar he had secured from the desk in the office, lighting it leisurely.

Yes, it was how a man proved to himself he was a man.

He had never felt more so this morning in that damned shower, when she had knelt before him.

Her hands on his body excited him.

She had been unsure of herself, of her abilities. He felt as much but she need not have concerned herself.

Red had more experienced lovers and yes, they had pleased him but there was something fucking appealing in Lizzy’s hesitant explorations.

He could sense something more, that as she went along, her confidence had grown.

That small hand stroking his hardness had felt incredible.

Having her kneel before him stirred something primitive inside. The sight of her bared breasts below, just out of his reach to fully hold them in his warm grasp, was an agony he would gladly suffer over
and over again.

For a moment, Red couldn’t decide which pleased him more? That tight pussy or the feel of Lizzy’s hot mouth suckling him hard and confidently.

In the beginning, in the early days... he had fantasized about that treasure between her legs. How would it feel to slowly inch into that steamy heat? What would it look like when she was laying beneath him, legs spread open... and vulnerable.

Did she shave completely? Well he now knew the answer to most of his fantasies.

Her responsiveness to his touch, delighted him. He could make her wet just by using a finger or two in that eager little hole.

She was so beautiful. It pleased him just to look at her. That he was privileged enough to touch that satin flesh, kiss those pouty lips... both pairs...

Red shifted absently, his hardness sliding against his thigh as it grew in length.

Damn! He wished they could have made love this morning as well.

He especially wished it now.

He longed to taste the sweetness of her nipples... he liked how the full creamy breasts filled his palm. He loved the heaviness of those luscious mounds.

Their mouths seemed designed for a perfect fit. There was nothing sweeter than the taste of her lips.

Just as she taught him the intricacies of her body. He had taught her how to use her tongue to entice, plague... tease.

She was a fast learner.

He knew knew how her hot cream felt gushing against the tip of his cock.

He had waited forever for the woman to succumb to his abilities. He wondered how he had kept it together long enough that first time? He was certain he would blow his load the minute he pushed inside her opening.

He loved watching his girth disappear into that pink crevice. It felt agonizingly good to drag his erection along the short dark hairs of her sex.

He could make her come fast and hard... or if the mood struck him, tease her core slowly... excruciatingly so.

She would quiver around him until her felt her frustration at its peak, only then, warming her with his cum. He loved coming inside her. He loved watching her come.

Her hot mouth had engulfed his shaft, a vision designed to bring him to his knees.

That slow bobbing motion that drove him up the fucking walls...

He hadn’t expected her to swallow.

He had pulled out yes, but not in time.
She had... the first few spurts...

He didn’t have the willpower to remove his cock from such an inviting home... not at first.

He tried to feel bad about his lapse but the sensation just felt too good to even pretend such an impossible feat.

This was getting him no where fast.

He glanced down to the rigid imprint of his cock pressed against his trousers.

He sighed mentally, taking in a long drag of the cigar. The heady smoke rolled about his tongue, the sweet flavor tickling his senses.

To be at the mercy of a woman’s whim was a shit-poor thing.

But found in this case... he enjoyed the prospect.

He relaxed his mind, forcing his body back from the edge of a very, very nice precipice.

Oh well... it was a subject best left for another time and certainly, another place.

The man took in his surroundings turning his thoughts to the sounds about him.

The buzzing bees, the whir of a hummingbird’s wings... the rustle of the wind in the trees.

He would discuss this moment of solitude with Lizzy tonight, he decided.

He would discuss it in vivid detail.

The man’s grin was an impish one.

Red Reddington was a detail oriented type of guy suddenly.

It would be... and intense talk.

Chapter End Notes

BlueFedora posted a few pictures back in August on Lizzington Forever as incentive to us writers.

More than a few grabbed my attention and have inspired quite a few scenes.

What apparently worked for this chapter... was a woman kneeling in front of a man in the shower.
June 1

Red had reluctantly left his musings and the pleasant atmosphere of quiet solitude his walk had afforded him.

The man was only allowed short personal intervals these days.

The business empire he headed demanded much of his time and energies.

In the past, he had liked to keep busy. But Lizzy was a large part of his life now and finding time for that relationship was rapidly becoming a priority.

Red entered the side door of the kitchen. He was pleasantly surprised to find the woman sitting on one of the stools situated around the large island in the center of the area.

Nora held up the freshly brewed pot of coffee. The new state-of-the-art brew master system he had ordered the Chef seemed to constantly be put to work on the premises these days due to the varying shifts of the residents.

Much of the kitchen had changed since they took residence. Gone were the normal sized household appliances, replaced by industrial sized equipment.

Due to the influx of people who worked and lived on the property, it had been a necessity not only for storage purposes, but for Nora’s sanity.

The woman had looked at him with profound relief when the new dishwashers, double ovens and so on were set in place.

Little did she know, this had only been a start. When they left for Mark’s, the entire kitchen was to be overhauled and outfitted with a Chef’s Kitchen that Nora deserved.

“Thank you, yes.” he smiled his ‘hello’ and gratitude, nodding that he would love some of the hearty brew she had prepared.

Nora obediently poured a steaming cup. Red had learned long ago, it truly was the simple things in life which provided true happiness.

He savored the first sip, closing his eyes to the aromatic taste, “Nora... you are a Goddess in your own right.”

“You may call me Goddess Caffeina, you sweet talker you.” Nora let him know in no uncertain
terms she had heard it all before and it now fell on deaf ears.

He grinned for the fact, turning his attention to the other occupant of the room.

Why don’t you say sweet things like that to *me*?” Liz asked, sighing lightly for her lot in life.

“You hand me an elixir which tastes like this...” Red hefted his cup, crossing to gently caress Liz’s forehead with a chaste kiss, “and I will.”

“I got your elixir...” Liz muttered under her breath.

Red’s brow arched, his eyes lowering to the woman’s lap, “I know you do, baby.” the man rumbled intimately.

He only wished he had been given the opportunity to drink down her brand of stimulant earlier.

“The way to a man’s heart,” Nora stated emphatically, “is through his stomach.”

“Or the vicinity there of.” Red retorted sotto voce for the younger woman’s ear alone.

Nora did not let on that she had heard the off-colored remark but smiled gently for Elizabeth’s slight blush.

“You guys going to take a few days off now?” Liz forced a brightness to cover the embarrassment the man’s brazen statement had caused. “Wouldn’t kill you, you know.”

“Has Francis been complaining?” Red leaned against the counter top instead of sitting and Liz instantly knew he was just passing through on his way to a more pressing engagement.

Her spirits sank, “Whining is more like it.” she mused. “But Nora is babying him. He’s milking it for all he can, of course.”

“That boy really needs a girlfriend.” was Red’s considered opinion.

“Technically, he has Lia.” Liz reminded.

“An ‘in-house’ girlfriend.” Red pushed away from the counter top sitting his coffee aside, “Where is he?”

“In the dining room.” Liz thought the answer should be obvious. “Where else?”

Liz exchanged resigned glances with Nora. They had been discussing the hope that ‘business as usual’ would be suspended for a while after all the commotion and uproar but it looked like that prospect had ‘flown out the proverbial window’.

Francis was happily downing bacon and eggs upon Red’s entrance but he put the plate aside upon recognition of the new arrival.

Francis stood, his expression a serious one, “So where do we stand?” he was not one for formalities. “With Lizzy not in the room, I mean.”

Red appreciated the candor, “While I intensely dislike how you made your point,” he shot the kid a warning glare, “I can not dispute the results.”

“What the hell was in your head?” Francis disgusted.
“I am damaged goods, Francis.” Red had long since accepted. “To say I have issues is an understatement.”

“I’ll say,” it was agreed. Francis resumed his seat, pulling his plate back.

“It isn’t easy for me to extend my trust.”

“You don’t say.” Francis appeared surprised.

Silas pushed his frame through the side door just at that moment, catching the last of the conversation, “Who don’t we trust now?”

He continued into the room, his expression a benign one as he waited patiently on both or either man to answer his inquiry.

“Is it Dembe because I know for certain,” he continued straight faced, “he was the one who took that little bottle of ‘82 Chateau Haut-Brion you so cherished.”

“You took the wine.” Red corrected, finding a seat at the head of the table.

“I didn’t take it per se.” Silas wanted the misconception cleared up. “It is under my sterling care until an auspicious occasion arises at which time, it will be brought out, in all its glory for a celebratory christening by one and all.”

“You chugged it to wash down a chili dog.” Red reminded distastefully.

Silas looked off, scanning his memory until happening upon the incident in question, “It did have a nice finish.” Silas remembered, enjoying Red’s pained grimace.

“You are the reason I hid the ‘78 Chateau Lafite Rothschild.” Red sighed his discontent. “So you will not get soused one night and drink it along with the rest of your three or four six-packs of inferior vintages.” he chided. “Have you heard from our other errant wine connoisseur?”

“I am a connoisseur. Coors is the best out there.” Silas took umbrage.

“Dembe checked in about an hour ago,” Francis answered the real enquiry between mouthfuls of succulent eggs, “everything is smooth sailing so far. He said he might take a few days downtime if he wasn’t needed here after the transactions have been completed.”

“What?” Red had noted Silas’ dark scowl.

“Oh, nothing,” the large man shrugged massive shoulders but at Red’s look, “… I was going to ask for a few days as well. But if Dembe–”

“What’s Vadik down now?” Red wanted to know.

“You should just let me cap that guy, Silas.” Francis was of the considered opinion. “Save you some grief.”

Silas was moot on the matter, “I don’t feel right going if Dembe isn’t going to be here.”

“We will manage.” Red understood about ‘obligations’. “Do you need assistance?”

“I’ll go.” Francis was eager.

Silas sighed, “And have a stray shot accidentally take Vadik out? No thanks.” the man had lifted a
stern brow. “If anyone is going to take the little asshole out, it will be me.”

“Yeah, when pigs fly.” Francis stated his belief.

Francis glanced askew at Red. He had hoped to have more time to iron out details of the situation between them.

“So... you guys were talking about Francis laying a kiss on Liz.”

Both men allowed their startlement.

“How the hell do you know anything about that?” Francis had kept mum and he was certain Red would not have said a thing.

“Did you use your tongue?” Silas was understandably interested.

Red sighed audibly, “Both you assholes know I am twice Lizzy’s age,” he snapped, “wouldn’t that conceivably give a moments doubt in either of your feeble minds if the situation was reversed?”

“I can’t imagine being that old.” Francis couldn’t.

“I can’t imagine having that much doubt ... well, about anything concerning me.” Silas was just as truthful.

Red let it go, “Suffice to say, I know if something happens to me, you will take care of Lizzy, Francis and that gives me peace of mind.”

“Are you implying I’m the inferior choice to the... boy.” Silas was affronted, sitting at an empty seat at the table.

“I’d sooner leave her to the mercies of a lion pit.” Red laughed at the absurdity.

“You’re too old.” Francis waved a dismissive hand ignoring Red’s look of incredulous disbelief for such a callous remark. “Rest assured, Red. Nothing will ever happen between me and Lizzy... until, I don’t know... you die.” he shared a wry grin with Silas.

“Unless you appreciate a challenge, don’t hold your breath waiting for that to happen.” Red dismissed the notion. “Other than that, remember, I can still haunt you in death.”

Francis’ smile slipped a tad, “Yeah but, you won’t have corporeal form and can’t hurt me.” he took hope.

Red stared at him, his eyes expressionless, “Never underestimate my reach, Francis.” he stated in a droll tone.

Francis sat straighter, running his finger along his fork, “I don’t believe in that shit.”

“Yes, you do.” Red goaded the boy.

Francis swallowed hard, given pause for thought.

“I have come bearing good tidings.” Liz brushed through the connecting doors of the kitchen, plate in one hand, coffee pot in another.

She sat the food before Francis much to Red’s chagrin, “From the love of your life, which I believe today, is Nora?” she checked.
Francis seemed stumped for an answer.

“Silas,” Liz beamed her guard a smile, filling his cup gingerly, “are you hungry?”

“What the hell?” Red spread his hand expressively.

“You are ready.” she chuckled having hoped just for that reaction.

“I should hope so.” he settled a little.

“Are you resting your poor little leg, Francis.” Liz nudged the bandaged area purposely.

“Oww!” the man raised an uproar. “You have an evil streak woman!”

Liz smiled happily at nothing in particular, enjoying Silas’ throaty chuckle for her antics.

“Nora wanted me to check on you,” Liz pulled a ‘poor thing’ face, “I checked on you.”

“Can’t you do something about her?” Francis rubbed his leg soothingly, “That was just cold, man!”

Red unfolded his newspaper, “Lizzy, please don’t be so cold to Francis.” he dutifully responded.

“Uh huh,” she replied sweetly, “Francis, do you want more tea?”

“Why, is it Red’s special blend?” the man snapped his pique.

Liz smiled prettily, “I’ll bring you a glass,” she rounded the table, leaning to kiss the older man’s mouth fleetingly, “and I will bring you breakfast,” she stared at him, “because I love you.”

Red did not miss Silas’ pointed lift of his brows at the woman’s casual proclamation just as she kissed him once again.

He felt his body stiffen, though was experienced enough to cover it artfully. He smiled back at the blissful little face, his system reeling in truth.

*What the fuck had that been?*

Silence was strained after Liz’s departure.

Having followed Lizzy’s trek, he drew his eyes back to the table and found Francis was scowling darkly at him.

Silas was sitting quietly, his eyes intent.

“What?”

“You didn’t like the kiss?” Francis was trying to decide, “or the... what she said.”

“What the hell are you blabbering about?” Red snipped, “And why is it any of your damned—”

“You flinched.” Francis accused ready to be upset for Lizzy if need be.

“What the... I most certainly did not.” Red denied vehemently.

“You did too!” Francis countered, “Maybe not flinched but... something.” he lowered his hiss so his voice wouldn’t carry to the kitchen as he leaned closer. “I think you suck!”

Red rolled his eyes, “I didn’t flinch and I love that she expresses her emotions so freely now.”
“You did!” Francis snapped his belief.

“Do you because,” Silas brought his cup to his lips in a thoughtful manner, “the idiot is right. Something went down between you guys. Are you upset she...” he trailed off, knowing Red very well understood his train of thought.

Silas knew they had not expressed that emotion... love, before. As a matter of fact, he was very aware that Red longed to hear Elizabeth express such emotions to him.

So the question was... what the hell was Reddington’s problem.

“You didn’t say it back either!” Francis hissed.

“I didn’t flinch and I’m not fucking upset.” Red pulled his coffee closer, ignoring Francis. “She inadvertently touched a... tender spot.” he lied, knowing as much but Red Reddington was an excellent liar.

He could sell it if he truly wanted. He had to ask himself, one, why he was lying in the first place and two, why he felt he had to sell it.

“I did fall on my face yesterday, you know.”

Francis narrowed his eyes at the man, before hesitantly picking up his fork unsure he believed his friend.

Silas did not believe him, but the matter was dropped for the time being, Red was grateful.

He needed time to analyze this issue himself.

“Well you just better corral your woman, is all I’m saying because,” Francis returned to his food with but one begrudging remark, “to kick a guy while he’s down is just not a cool thing to do... I have tender spots as well, ya know.”

“She didn’t kick you, she nudged you.” Silas pointed out, adding more cream to his coffee.

“Same difference.” Francis snapped. “It hurt really bad.”

“Nice grammar.” Silas mentioned in passing. “And I have the urge to kill you, so be grateful she got to it first.”

“Well, it did hurt.” the young man pouted.

Red sat his paper aside, as Lizzy brought in his breakfast. She smiled impishly at the man before heading back in to talk to Nora about the evening’s meal.

“Are you going to eat that bacon?” the kid asked politely having perused Red’s plate.

“Yes, Francis.” Red sniped. “I had planned to.”

Francis reached for the jam, “You’re an old grouch today.”

“Getting shot in the head doesn’t agree with me.”

Silas hid his grin behind his coffee cup.

Francis spread the grape jam thoughtfully on his toast, “Well, I was shot too and I’m in an excellent
mood, that’s all I’m saying.”

Red and Silas exchanged bemused glances.

“...So,” Silas moved on, “what’s on the agenda for today?”

“You tell me.” Red was curious as to the other man’s decision.

“No, I’ll stay until Dembe gets here. I’ll tell my people to handle Vadik’s situation and hope all turns out well.”

“You can leave, Silas.” Red’s tone had altered. “Anya would want you to–”

“I think I’ll take Liz’s advice,” the large man sat back, his mood a contemplative one, “maybe it will scare Vadik into another direction if nothing else.”

“Something has to change with that guy,” Francis stated gloomily, “he’s a royal pain in the ass.”

Silas shrugged, “I’ll tell him it’s a ‘no go’ this time. He doesn’t have to know that my men are there.”

Red nodded minutely, “What ever you decide but the option is always open, you know that.”

“Yeah.” Silas leaned forward, a serious expression on his face. “You gonna eat that bacon?”

And hour later found the men busy on the phones. Red had two conference calls going at once.

Liz eased into the large office, finding a seat in an out-of-the-way place.

She enjoyed observing the process.

Red’s personality changed considerably in these moments.

He was brusque, no-nonsense and clipped in his speech patterns.

She got to see another side to the man. He never sat still, his stride slow and confident as he issued orders, made hard decisions or threatened consequences were his demands questioned or hesitated over.

There was an essence of power emanating from his person that Liz found exhilarating.

Francis too, seemed entirely different. A dark scowl was often on the handsome face, the boyish grin never displayed, even his tone would alter.

Francis was light and breezy and fun.

The Francis she witnessed in the room today and oft time, in past negotiations, was none of the above.

But the second their eyes would catch, the guy would do something to let her know, Francis was still in there somewhere.

The last time, he had snapped an ultimatum to the man on the other end of the line but with Lizzy, he had crossed his eyes, stuck his tongue out to the side, imitating the gesture of someone being hanged.

Lizzy had giggled appreciatively. She smiled her happiness when Red shook his head at the byplay,
continuing with his own part of the business with a sharp tone as though nothing untoward was happening on his end of the line.

Taking possession of Cheung’s business dealings and supply system would run smoothly or it would not.

Both men understood that acquiring new acquisitions was a studied process. Problems must be handled expediently, dissension even more so.

Both men were well versed in the intricacies of the world they inhabited.

Red hung up the phone waiting patiently for Francis to finish his own conversation.

“That about does it except for–” Red glanced at Lizzy who sat wide-eyed and eager, hanging on his every word.

“The women.” Francis sat back, easing his leg into a less cramped position. He massaged the area, grimacing.

“What women?” Liz asked either man.

“Cheung dealt with human trafficking.” Liz was reminded.

Francis popped some pain pills, grabbing his water bottle from a nearby desk, “We are in the process of shutting the sites down but, there are other issues that go along with the problem.”

Liz turned to a more talkative recipient, “Like what?” she was curious, “Are you going to get the authorities involved?”

“That would be a cluster fuck.” Red knew from experience. “We tried that early on.”

“We have better programs.” Francis showed his disdain for the regular government methods.

“They will be given access to counseling.” Red had set up agencies long ago. “Money to start a new life and a chance to pursue a vocation if they so desire.”

“...You do all that for those poor women?”

“Someone should, don’t you think?” Red lifted brows, “After what they have been subjected to?”

Liz beamed her pride.

“Most of them just need down time for a while,” Francis understood the concept, “the money we offer has no strings. It’s just there for their use.”

“They’ve been told what to do for so long, that option is one they can make of their own free will.” Red finished. “But it’s not an easy road to recovery as you can imagine.”

In reality, Liz didn’t think she could imagine, truth told. How could they ever recover from such atrocities?

Red rubbed his eyes absently, an ache was building in his temples.

Speaking of recovery.

“You guys should take a break now.” she suggested. “You were shot in the head.” she narrowed
her eyes, ready for an argument, “You have new flesh wounds.” she smirked as Francis balked at the term... loudly.

“Lizzy...”

“Boys, the world can survive without you for a couple hours.”

She had seen Red cupping his forehead and Francis rubbing his leg an hour ago, now, both men looked ragged.

Francis sighed, his shoulders slumping dejectedly, “Red, I am going to bail on you... just for a little while.” the young man looked beat. “Can’t believe how wiped I feel, what the hell?” he spread his hands helplessly, “But I’m making wrong decisions, I think I was too namby-pamby on that last negotiation. Did you catch any of it?” he was concerned.

“It went well.” Red disagreed. “You go, get some rest.”

“It’s a toss up.” Francis retorted. “Which one of us is the most ashen.” he indicated Red’s own complexion.

Red chuckled, “We are fashionably Goth.”

Liz arose, sighing mentally, “Well, I don’t believe it. Two men actually acting sensibly for once.”

She had expected more fight from the two.

“Yeah, as soon as I get some nourishment inside me, I’m going down for the count.” Francis hobbled his way toward the kitchen. “For a couple hours anyway.”

“You just ate!” Liz was flabbergasted.

“Don’t judge me!” Francis called back over his shoulder.

Liz turned questioning eyes Red’s way.

“Threatening people makes him hungry.” Red smiled.

The silence came but it was a comfortable one, at least for Elizabeth.

“Are you okay?” she had noticed the man’s quietness however. “Are you thinking about those women?”

He shook his head, “Just a slight headache coming on.” he smiled absently, his real interest for what had occurred between them earlier however foremost in his mind, “Do you have a moment?”

The man was not one to procrastinate. He dreaded the upcoming confrontation but...

“Maybe we could meet in a few minutes, in the master?” he had a few things to tie up, holding his phone aloft, “This shouldn’t take much longer.”

“Red, is there something wrong?” she sensed a problem now, but he allayed her fears.

“Not wrong, no,” he was quick to reassure, “just something I want to talk over with you.”

“Oh.” that didn’t sound bad at all. Was he wanting her opinion on something? “Then I’ll see you back there in about twenty minutes?”
“Perfect.” Red was left to his own devices for a spell as he pondered the new development which had sprung up unexpectedly.

♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

Liz was ensconced in the large chair, file in hand when he entered. She had a cup of tea sitting beside her. She sat the file aside, smiling brightly for him.

“Work all done?”

He sat across from her, making himself comfortable on the long bench at the end of the bed.

“All finished for the day.” he was relieved matters had worked out in that area at least.

She scooted closer, laying her forearms on her knees, “So what do we have to discuss that has you so out-of-sorts?”

“Am I?” he asked, “Out-of-sorts?”

The woman remained serious, “Something is bother you, right?”

Red had to agree on that point. He needed to test the hypothesis he had arrived at upon, considering what had happened earlier today.

The man lifted his hand, which Elizabeth took, allowing herself to be manipulated as Red situated her by his side.

He cocked his head, smiling gently, his hand moving, thumb running down the side of her hair as he place a stray strand back into place.

Liz loved his touch, reacting to it, closing her eyes as the man made his move.

Red was experienced both as a lover and as a man. Liz got the benefit of that expertise and she was not exactly unhappy about the fact.

Her smaller hand rested on Red’s chest. She cuddled close welcoming the feel of his mouth capturing her lips.

The warm hollow of his mouth drew her senses into its inviting depths. She found herself lifting her arms automatically, wanting to be closer.

Red smelled so good, always. She especially liked his scent after a shower. He would splash aftershave but his natural smell was very evocative in itself. It screamed male... power... sensuality.

The feel of his arms around her created an aura of security and strength she cherished. But there was a more persuasive emotion invading her senses at the moment.

Unfortunately, Red broke that moment much to Liz’s dismay and shock, “W-What?”

The blue eyes stared at the man, totally upset.

Red hadn’t felt it... the odd sensation of before. Lizzy’s lips had tasted sweet and warm and intoxicating, as always.

“What was that?” the woman took exception.
Red chuckled, caressing her lips lovingly, “I’ve been thinking for the last few hours and there is something I should share with you.”

“I thought we were about to ‘share’... you know,” Liz was pretty sure the moment was going in the right direction, at least, “what’s with you pulling back on me?”

She chuckled as well after a fashion, feeling more comfortable with the man’s expression saying, ‘not a chance, baby’.

“I didn’t pull back,” he corrected, “I was experimenting.”

“I’m all for experimentation, Mr. Reddington.” she curved her body closer still, her tone suggestively seductive.

The full sensual mouth teased his with light, evasive pressure.

The now familiar jolt traversed the man’s frame and once again, he broke the contact.

Elizabeth had felt the disconnect this time however, and was up and off the support in seconds, severing all avenues of contact as quickly as possible.

“Did I do something wrong?” she gaped, stunned at the man. “Are you upset about...earlier?”

Red had the grace to be bothered, “It’s not what you think.” he lifted pacifying hands. “Let me explain–”

“Yeah well, you better explain.” she was suddenly livid. “What the hell was that, Red? What?” she felt a flush of embarrassment. Questioning her earlier actions, questioning herself suddenly...

Did he not like how she kissed? Had she come on too strong earlier? What was going on?

“You said we could discuss difficulties that arose,” he reminded hastily, “you said you were in agreement with taking that action.”

Liz tried to calm herself, “You can’t stand for me to kiss you? I think that’s a little more than–”

“It has nothing to do with... that.” he sighed heavily, “Hear me out.” he lifted scolding eyes.

Liz swallowed hard, the threat of tears on the horizon. She glanced about aimlessly, her world teetering on the verge of collapse but at length, she sat in the chair, having no recourse but to ride the turbulent storm out.

Red studied her face, his eyes softening, “Let me preface this by stating, it has nothing to do with you or anything you have done or not done.”

Liz lifted troubled eyes.

“I told Francis earlier,” the man heaved a heavy sigh, “I have... issues, baby. Deep, dark places inside me that haven’t seen the light of day in decades... longer.” which was an understatement he knew.

“You give that side of me light and truthfully,” he sought her out, “more and more of late, its like a port in the storm that keeps me afloat most days.”

Liz sat, hugging her body tightly, his words giving her hope.
“I told myself after Carla I would never allow a connection that strong to develop with a woman again.” he shook his head. “… It hurt, she hurt me, Elizabeth. I didn’t believe I could feel that lousy but… it… it was bad for a time.”

He disliked sharing that part of himself but to make this work, he had to be brutally honest with himself and this woman sitting so gravelly still before him.

“When I decided,” he hesitated. Was it too much too soon? “After you left Tom, the dynamics of our relationship for lack of a better term changed... at least, for me.” he wanted to reach out physically, but sensed this was not the time, not yet.

“Elizabeth?” he mused, taking his time, working out what and how to share his emotions.

The woman waited on pins and needles, hanging on the man’s every utterance.

“It’s been said, and I agree with the assessment, that,” he stared at the hardwood floor raptly, his hands twisting slowly together, “I can be very calculating... very single minded about something I want. I think that is a true statement.”

He lifted honest eyes, “I decided I wanted you,” he was quick to reassess, “to experience you. I held no illusions it could ever be more.” he smiled wistfully for the fact, “And I felt fucking less a man for that decision back then.”

He shifted his weight, the thought troubling him. “It didn’t stop me from pursuing you in every capacity granted me. I wanted you sexually. I had to come to terms with that weakness. But once I did,” he shrugged, “nothing else mattered.

“You–” she was so fearful of where this was going, “you consider that a weakness.”

“A very nice one for me, not so much for you.” he conceded, “I put my needs above yours but with full intention that, when the time came,” he allotted, “I would step back and allow you to leave whenever you said it was over and done.”

“What are you talking about?” she stood, too anxious to remain seated. She jerked from his attempt to capture her hand.

“I thought, once you had... shared my bed, sooner or later, the interest would fade,” he stated earnestly, “a young woman as vital and–”

“I’m so sick of this!” she snapped.

“Allow me to finish.” he arose as well, his tone altering.

Elizabeth bit her lip to keep the trembling to a minimum. The blue eyes ripped the man’s heart from his body.

“Don’t look at me like that, baby.” he closed his eyes to her anguish, “This is killing me–”

“Good!” she turned away, swiping at the tears rolling down her cheeks.

Red lifted his hands only to lower them, “I need to touch you so fucking badly.”

She moved further away.

“When you stayed, when we grew closer, I was in Seventh Heaven.” he continued. “I simply could not believe you found some kind of merit in me but over the days you convinced me of your
sincerity.” he cut to the chase, not certain how much more she would stand.

“One of those dark places lit with such luminosity, it warmed my soul, Elizabeth.” he beseeched, “For a man like me... do you have any idea what that means?”

There were a myriad of things she didn’t understand, the foremost being his statement concerning, ‘a man like him’.

“I know the depth of my own emotions, I’ve been attempting to tell you.” he emphasized, “What I don’t know for certain, is the depth of yours and I don’t think you do either. When you said you loved me—”

He was becoming frustrated with his inability to reach the woman.

Elizabeth was floundering. She thought all this had been cleared up.

“Earlier today,” he brought the topic full circle, “when you said, I love you, something dawned on me.” his brow furrowed darkly, “you said it so off-handedly, so causally... as if it didn’t really hold any true meaning for you—”

“What?” had she made him believe such a foolish thing? “No, I just... I know the guys were there. I didn’t want to embarrass you,” she tried to explain her reasoning, “but I felt so happy... so...” she struggled with the words, “everything was so good again. I wanted to share that feeling with you. The world really, I guess.”

Had she been naïve, “Was it too... aggressive. Should I have—”

“No, it occurred to me that we haven’t really said it except...” he shifted to another foot, his hands expressively ‘speaking’ along with the words, “when we are being intimate.”

“That’s not true... is it?” she searched her memory. “And so what if it is?”

Red hesitated, pondering the legitimate question. They could share their love physically. But there should be more to their relationship than that, right?

Trying to make sense of his jumbled thoughts, he shook his head, grimacing as a sharp pain tore through his skull.

Right... priorities were making themselves known.

He had receive a good blow to the head. He smirked inwardly at the unintentional pun before sobering.

He needed to focus, get his thought back on track or he risked losing Lizzy.

“Because I feel the emotions at the other times,” he motioned with his entire body, “my point being, we haven’t... explored that avenue. My question is, I guess is,” how to state it articulately, “a lot of yesterday is jumbled for me, fragmented.”

He had sought to recover bits and pieces all to no avail because it was like a large puzzle missing key pieces.

“The moment you said, I love you, is crystal clear,” his eyes held hers steadily, “but what did the words mean to you, truly. I won’t be hurt or offended if—”

with you... that I love what we have and that I want to explore the possibilities open to us.”

“Of course,” he agreed, “that’s what I though you meant.” he tried to hide his disappointment.

“What is wrong with all that?” she expounded fretfully.

“Nothing.” he soothed expertly.

“You said we would be honest with each other!” she sensed he was holding back crucial information.

“Perhaps we have had enough honesty for one day.” he mused wearily, sensing some things himself.

“I handled this badly. “ he rubbed his forehead, the ache suddenly excruciating.

“Don’t do this.” the woman grasped his forearms, plaintively beseeching the man.

“Baby, I’m not trying to hurt or upset you,” he cupped her face lovingly, “just the opposite.”

“Then talk to me!” she insisted. “I know it’s hard for you to share yourself. I know you’re a private man.”

“Not with you, never with you.” his lips brushed her forehead, his voice a husky whisper, “it’s okay, everything is....” he enfolded her in his arms, “good, we’re good.”

She shook her head unable to articulate her fears, just clinging tightly to the man for support and guidance as to what the hell was going on.

“I can wait,” he knew he could, “until it’s right for you too. Until...” he cupped her head gently, closing his eyes to the feel of her in his arms.

Until the words meant as much to her as they did to him.

“How can I make you understand?” she pulled back enough to see his features. “Red, if something happened to you... if you weren’t in my life? I don’t think....” her fingers curled about his lapels.

“I don’t think I could go on. I wouldn’t want to. That’s how much you mean to me,” she was desperate for him to comprehend what she was saying. “I felt that... when you got shot, when I thought...” she refused to say it even, “is that what you mean? Is that what you are trying to say?”

“Don’t talk like that.” he grasp her shoulders almost roughly, “of course you will go on. I’ve made provisions for that day.”

“You are so stupid sometimes!” the blue eyes filled with unshed tears, “You are not only missing the point.” she snapped her annoyance. “But you can’t make provisions for something like that. I have to be allowed to feel whatever it is I feel.”

Red wasn’t pleased at all, “Francis will be here to take care of you. This is off-topic.” he snapped his growing disillusionment.

“Off topic?” she threw up her hands, her frustration at a boiling point, “I don’t want Francis. I want you.”

Red turned aside, “I can’t promise that.” his line of work alone and too, he was so much her senior, “and you know as much... don’t do this to me.”

“Do this to you?” she was beside herself, “You are the one telling me you don’t want my love.”
He jerked his head about his mouth agape, “My, God... is that what you’ve heard?”

She spread her hands out, “It’s what you said!”

Red’s eyes closed, his head dropping back, “I never said any such thing.” he grated. “You said the words, yes... but how much emotion was behind them?” his temper flared for in his opinion she was being unreasonable.

“Those words mean everything to me... everything!” he stressed. “When you say them, I want you to feel them to the depths of your soul and right now... I don’t think you do. How can you?”

Elizabeth stood, ashen faced, totally lost.

“We’ve been together, what... almost a month?” he calmed, “How can you possibly know what you’re feeling. Everything is new and wonderful... at least on my part. I’m thinking about the long haul, are you?”

“Do you know what you are feeling?” she countered.

“I’ve lived more of life, so yes, I know Elizabeth.”

“Don’t pull that, I’m older and wiser, crap on me.” the woman flared. “I know my own mind.”

“You loved Tom.” he reminded. “I think a part of you still does or maybe... the idea of him.”

“You think wrong.” she scoffed her disgust, “The great Red Reddington can be wrong, can’t he? You’ve made a gross error in judgement.”

He quieted, trying to control his temperament.

“I know there are no fairytale endings out here in the world,” she continued, “I know any relationship takes hard work and due diligence. Why do you think I stuck it out with Tom? Did you think I was really content with him? I wasn’t.”

Red was taken aback, “...You seemed to be.”

“Contrary to popular opinion, I’m not stupid.” Liz begged to differ on the matter, “I could sense something was wrong. Warning bells were going off in the first few months.” she confided.

“I chalked it up to marital discord... the honeymoon period had ended, real life began.” she glared at the man across from her, “I didn’t turn and run when I so easily could have... I didn’t put my head in the sand.”

Red blinked, unaware of any of what Lizzy was sharing.

“I knew there were problems but what marriage doesn’t have problems?” she raged.

“You just deal with it or you bail... okay, I should have bailed but in my mind.” she stepped closer, confronting the problem and the man, “what you accuse me of not being able feel... to understand,” she sneered, “I felt and understood all too well!”

Her eyes hardened, her back straightening, “I was hanging in, trying to salvage something I had vowed to God to try and work out... for the long haul!”

Red was given food for thought, growing quiet.
“And who is to say what you felt won’t happen this time,” he questioned softly, “with me.”

“With Tom, I felt nothing but frustration and smothered,” she tightened her fists, the frustration apparent, “But with you, aside from you pissing me off, I feel optimistic, excited... I can breathe again.”

The silence stretched into minutes. Liz was angry. She refused to be the first to speak. Childish, yes. Petty? All right, but it was what it was.

“I was hoping... for more, that’s all.” the man reluctantly admitted his flaws. “I was hoping... all right, it was childish of me, petty even,” he realized, “I should be grateful for what you have given. And I am. Really.”

Liz’s head lifted, a bemused expression on her face. *He felt such things?*

“What do you mean you were hoping for more?” she was hoping he would elaborate. Keep talking. Communicating.

Red usually said just enough to pacify. That he was allowing her a glimpse into his private side was amazing even though it was a somewhat frightening journey in this instance.

She had no idea where this was heading or even why he had brought the subject up.

“We’ve come so far in such a short time.” the man reseated himself. “I honestly am not fully aware how we arrived at this point in time. I am only glad we have, Elizabeth. Please don’t think otherwise.”

She remained moot on the matter not certain what to comment on or what not.

“I remember the early times,” he did, vividly, “... you hated me.”

“Hate is a strong word.” Liz objected, embarrassed for her behavior before.

“But an apt one.” he reminded.

She could not debate the statement, but there was a flaw in his logic.

“Red, you were giving me every reason to run away from the marriage I was fighting to maintain.” she sighed. “You were giving me the perfect out. I think... I was more angry with myself for wanting to give up. Take the easy route in leaving Tom.”

Red laced his fingers, tightening them painfully. If he could have only been straight forward with her, told her what he knew of Tom. But his fears, again won out. He thought, to tell her that he had hired Tom, would have meant he would have lost her.

Had he known...

“All that has changed.” she stated the facts as she knew them. “That is the past, all that matters now is the future.” she said, uncertainty in her tone. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s my fault.” the man shouldered the burden, “The only time I’ve expressed my love is when I’m trying to get between your legs or you were between mine.”

She fought the blush and won.

“I want to make it perfectly clear,” he held her attention, “what I feel transcends the physical
intimacy we share.”

“I feel the same.” she blurted.

“It is very... difficult for me to vocalize my emotions.” he confided. “I’ve become wary of doing so, as I stated. It’s easier for me to ‘show’ you through my actions.”

She could find no fault with the statement.

“That’s the easy way, for me,” he reiterated, “as I said and that is not acceptable to me any longer.” he was angry for his lapse in showing her proper emotional attachment. “You deserve better than that.”

“You are such a complicated man.” she was only beginning to realize as much.

“A guarded one.” he concluded, “I have to mentally remind myself, it’s okay to let down my guard with you. It’s okay for the walls to drop.”

Elizabeth touched his face. He instantly grasped her hand, turning his lips into the warm, dry palm for a brief kiss.

“The years have hardened me, Elizabeth. I am not... what... who I used to be.” his brow furrowed darkly, “I am not happy with what I have become some days. I wish you could have know me... before.”

“I like you just the way you are now.”

He stared long and hard at those blue eyes. Windows to her soul...

“I wish I could be better for you.” he stated quietly. “I wish there wasn’t so much baggage.”

Elizabeth knew the man would not be so disconcerted if he cared nothing for her.

What was Red trying to convey?

It was clear Red was truly troubled, truly upset. She was no longer certain, whatever it was... pertained to her however.

He seemed even more upset that he couldn’t articulate the words to make her understand exactly what the issue was.

She took a moment to reflect on all that had been said, a thought finally coming to the fore...

“As long as you care for me,” she explained her point of view, “as long as you don’t shut me out...” the small fingers grasp his tightly, “we’ll be okay, Red.”

He nodded minutely.

“I’m glad you came to me today,” she cocked her head, regaining his attention, “something was bothering you, something wasn’t quite right, was it. And you shared that feeling with me.” she realized what had gone down finally, “it had nothing to do with my kiss, did it.”

She leaned slowly, her lips gently placed to his.

The man stood very still under her guidance, closing his eyes to the myriad of emotions cascading through his mind.
Elizabeth’s lips parted, breaking the sweet kiss. She smiled gently up at the brooding man. “You didn’t pull back.”

“I didn’t pull back before.”

“No,” she sighed happily, “no, you didn’t. It’s just that you won’t stand still for bullshit... of any sort.”

Her smile widened with understanding, “You had to get it out... set it right between us, didn’t you.”

“I wanted to make sure it was right between us.” he corrected.

Elizabeth studied the enigma before her, “I don’t think it’s ever been so right.”

He downed his head then... smiled, “You think?”

She nodded slowly.

“You stood up to me.” his eyes twinkled almost mischievously.

Liz considered the statement, “Wasn’t I supposed to?”

“You were pissed at me.”

“I certainly was.” she concurred.

“Was.” he needed confirmation.

She inclined her head, “... Was.”

His smile came again, “Will you blow me?” he tested the waters now that things seemed to be back on an even keel, “if I tell you how very much, I love you.”

She cut him a wry look, “I don’t think so.” she took his hand leading the man across the shining hardwood floor as she went. “What I will do, is lay here with you for a while.” she indicated the neatly made bed, “and let you get some rest.”

“I don’t need to rest,” his hands shook free instantly, cupping her hips as he stepped casually into the space between her legs.

He glanced down to where their bodies met. His look one of masculine approval. “Shall I tell you what I do need?”

“Oh gosh,” she bit her lip anxiously, “I might think you only loved me for what’s between my legs if you did that Mr. Reddington.”

He sighed lightly, his head falling back, “I asked for that one, didn’t I.” he realized.

She chuckled her mirth, “You sure did.” she appeared well pleased with herself. “We had a rough night and not a in a good way. I’m exhausted. I’m going to take a nap for the simple fact, I can. The question is,” she lifted perfectly arched brows, “will you be joining me or do I have to go get Francis?”

Red eyes deepened, “No one sleeps with you but me.”

“But Francis looked like he needed a nap,” she pointed out, teasing, “you state that you are all bright
eyed and bushy tailed.”

“My cock isn’t bushy,” he pushed his growing hardness forward, “but it is... other things.”

She gave him a scolding look, “Are you going to behave?”

“I doubt it.” he told the truth.

“I’ll be really, really nice to you later tonight if you do.”

“...How nice?” the tension in his shoulders was better but truthfully, his head was spiking each time he moved it too quickly. She didn’t have to know.

“Really, really.... really nice.”

“Blow job nice?”

“You liked that, huh?” she perked up. “Sure, I’m flexible, why not. I might even let you reciprocate.”

“You’ll let me.” he chuckled.

“Sure, why not.” she cut him a flirtatious up and under look. “You’re pretty good at it when you put your mind to it but right now,” she mused, “I don’t think you could put your whole heart and soul into the act, am I right?”

She touched his temple lovingly.

Red closed his eyes to her touch, the cool fingers feeling so good on his skin, “Okay, but just for an hour or so...” he sensed he had done a little too much today, “don’t think you’ll get your way each and every time you use these methods though.”

“What methods?” she asked innocently.

“Tease the cock, method.” he was only too happy to supply the answer.

Liz kicked her shoes off, sliding into the bed. Red closed the shutters, blocking the sunshine and the outside world.

He rid himself of his own shoes and belt but was suddenly too tired to care about the rest of his attire.

Liz was situating the blankets, tossing his side back for his entrance.

He cuddled close, his arms about her small frame. The quiet of the room settled about them. Elizabeth yawned, sinking down into the warmth of the covers.

The air conditioner and ceiling fan hummed quietly overhead.

The last time Red had been in bed with a woman fully clothed came to mind.

Siberia, dead of winter, freezing his ass off, hoping for a rescue from a rather dire predicament.

The occasion had not been especially pleasant.

There was nothing what-so-ever to compare this moment with the other.

It felt wonderful to simply lay here, feeling Elizabeth’s warmth... the gentle rise and fall of her body.
He closed his eyes, laying his head more securely into the pillow.

His head was hurting but he sensed the pain was only superficial. It was his own fault, jumping back into work too quickly.

The emotional confrontation had not helped either but he had to know where he stood with Elizabeth, so that, he did not regret.

He shut his mind off. It would hold another day.

He needed to rest. He could do that now. He could shut the world out. It was becoming easier and easier.

Red glanced down at the crown of Elizabeth’s shining hair, planting an absent kiss of the fragrant waves.

Yes, it was becoming easier and easier.

Red shut his eyes, breathing in a cleansing breath.

The clock clicked forward....

He tightened his hold on Elizabeth and in minutes, the drowsiness overtook him.

He slept soundly.

♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

Red opened his eyes to a silent, dusk filled room as he waited for his vision to focus.

Elizabeth lay beside him the naturally light lids closed, her breathing slow and even.

The man lay still, getting his bearings.

A lazy shaft of fading sunlight stole through the neglected slit in the picture window drapes.

He had been more tired than he thought. He checked the clock by the bed, turning his head to do so.

His headache had totally receded.

The warmth of Lizzy’s body seeped into his side. His arm was asleep.

He flexed his hand and fingers but the woman’s nape had cut off the supply of blood.

He grimaced, not wanting to awaken her by risking movement. He deliberated his options.

Luckily, Lizzy shifted a tad. He took the opportunity to withdraw his arm. She snuggled back into her pillow.

Red lay still, content to have her near. He was enjoying this moment of relative quiet.

A discrete knock alerted him to an intruder into that special world he and Lizzy created.

Red was up instantly, quickly extracting the weapon he kept under his pillow. He didn’t expect any real danger but in his world, that was the exact time danger chose to appear.

He crossed rapidly to the door, listening carefully for any tell tale signs of anything amiss.
“Red…” Francis’ whispered voice filtered through the thick portal, “are you there?”

Red opened the door instantly, his gun falling to his side.

“Didn’t want to disturb you guys but we have a problem.” Francis noted the weapon, proceeding undauntedly, “Michael is not answering his phone. He has missed two check-in calls.”

“Red?” Liz’s voice interrupted the conversation.

He glanced back holding up a couple fingers.

“Just a minute, baby, everything is fine.” he returned his attention where it needed to be. “I’ll be out in a moment, can you get Bret on the line for me?”

Francis was doddering away in the next instance.

Red closed the door crossing to flick a bedside lamp on.

Liz sat up in the bed, rubbing her eyes even though the light was not especially bright.

“Who’s Michael?” she stifled a yawn, seeking the man out.

“A colleague.” Red watched her struggle into awareness, “I like your hair like that.” he did. All mussed and unruly and lush.

“Is this colleague a good guy or a bad one?” she slid out of the bed, searching for her shoes.

“A good one.” Red smiled, heading for the bathroom. He needed to slap some water on his face, brush his teeth, take a leak, “he’s fallen off the grid which is not normal. We have to locate him.”

“Can the Bureau help?”

Red set the temperature on the tap, “We have our own network. It’s faster. We’ll locate him.”

She came up behind the man, preparing her own toothbrush, “Can I help?”

He rinsed his mouth which curved into a smile. “You already have.” he dabbed his mouth with a clean cloth, “you just gave me the best afternoon nap I’ve had in years.” he leaned kissing the back of her ear in open affection, “My headache is gone and I feel like my old self again.”

She brushed vigorously, “I knew you had a headache.”

He chuckled, “Past tense.”

He checked himself in the mirror. Pulling his wrinkled shirt off overhead, he walked into the closet, coming out moments later with a shirt and vest on, but his collar open.

“I have to commandeer the office for a while.”

She nodded, “I know.” she watched his retreat in the mirror, “I’ll bring food and coffee.”

He turned, sending her a grateful nod, “Sounds good.”

He stopped in his tracks, retreating in his steps back towards the woman. She turned a confused expression up his way.

“I love you…” he murmured.
A flush rushed her face, a smile playing about her lips, “...I love you too.”

Inclining his head, Red kissed her forehead, retreating from the bathroom, leaving a serenely smiling Elizabeth Keen in his absence.

♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

A half hour later, she was passing around trays laden with sandwiches, fruit and various desserts Nora had prepared on the spur.

She listened to Red practice his magic.

His tone was light and airy but even she sensed the calculated lightness hid a darker, more menacing undercurrent.

“You are telling me things I already know, Bret.” he was pacing slowly back and forth, wandering aimlessly about the large space of the room. He occasionally pinged a pencil on a nearby surface. “I don’t pay you the ridiculous amount I do for you to tell me things of which I am already aware.”

Francis cringed for the guy on the other end of the line.

“I think what I pay Silas is ridiculous as well.” Red replied to the unheard retort, sighing his annoyance.

She noted the older man was once again showing signs of tension. It must be terribly frustrating for a man like Red to have to delegate a problem.

He was a doer, an achiever. He got things done. He was also a bit of a control freak, she knew.

“He’s been off the grid for forty-eight hours.” Red’s clipped words marched on. His fingers kneaded his nape absently. “That’s an awful long time, Bret. Remember your little sojourn to Cartagena last year?”

Francis nodded knowingly, “We had to pulls his ass out of the fire.”

Liz got the drift.

Red cricked his neck right and left, shifting the muscles tautly, “I want Michael extracted. I don’t care what it takes.” his tone altered slightly.

He sat heavily in his office chair, the pencil between his finger beating a restless rhythm on the leather pad covering the rich mahogany wood.

“I can’t believe I was not informed of this problem two days ago.” he was getting upset, clearly, so he visibly calmed his reaction knowing anger solved no problems.

Liz came up behind the man sitting a fresh cup of coffee before him on the desk.

He smiled absently at her, “The only casualties I care about would be for our side, Bret.” the pleasant tone had returned.

Liz sighed, placing her hand on his shoulders, her fingers automatically massaging the tight bundle of muscles found there.

Red closed his eyes letting out a hasty gasp of gratitude. He dropped his head forward encouraging her touch.
He sat quietly, enjoying the exquisite moment to the fullest, “Francis will relay that information as it becomes available,” he murmured, “have your people ready and mobile when it arrives... do your damned job, Bret.” it was more aggravation than real anger now, Liz surmised.

She pushed hard on a bunched up knot of nerves she felt in his lower back.

Red arched, grunting shortly.

“Get Michael to safety... call when you have him secured.” Red snapped his phone shut. He dropped his head further, sighing, “...I know, baby.”

Liz couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped. He had pushed himself and was waiting for his scolding.

She returned her efforts to the man’s shoulders so he could lean back and relax, “I expect a handsome gratuity for my services.” she mentioned in passing.

“We’ll take it out in trade.” Red quipped.

“Too much information!” Francis grimaced accordingly, “Here I’ve sent this on.” he indicated as Red perused the readout.

“Is this that wanna-be group down in Cape Town.”

“Yeah, but this time, they chose the wrong British tourist to mess with.” Francis stated, “I can’t wait to give Michael the what-for, for allowing his guard to drop so far.”

“I’ll lay you three to one there was liquor involved.” Red philosophized.

“When will men learn?” Francis disdained. “Women, liquor, drugs and rock and roll.”

“I don’t know Francis,” Red shifted a sagely wise glance, “when will you?”

“Me?” the guy was taken aback, innocence in itself.

“Istanbul, last summer,” Red ticked off his fingers, “Paris, last year, Morocco, the year before that.”

“Oh, now you’re keeping track?” the kid was annoyed, “How typical.”

Red moved Liz’s hands to the opposite side of his neck, “Just there, baby...” he crooked his head accordingly, “damn, that feels good.”

“You get a massage,” Francis whined, “what about me? I was hurt just as much as you were.”

Elizabeth tsked sympathetically, “Poor baby.”

“You don’t really mean that.” Francis wasn’t fooled, going back to his sulking.

“No, I don’t.” Liz confirmed, “Does that feel okay, darling,” she soothed Red’s temples gently.

“Does that feel okay, darling.” Francis mimicked sarcastically. “Nora is the only one that gives a crap about me...” the young man arose moodily, “I’m hungry. I need nourishment.”

“Wait a minute,” Red grumbled for his respite having been interrupted, “What’s the prognosis on Michael. Can we extract him without too much danger to his well being?”

“The assholes who took him are disorganized, undisciplined, you know that.” Francis grumbled right
back. “They will probably leave him tied up somewhere while they go out on the town just because they’re bored.”

“Let’s hope they follow that scenario.” Red approved, “Which begs the question, how did Michael allow himself to get taken by such an inept group.”

Francis settled a tad, “We’ll ask him when we see him.” he took the time to really examine his friend, “You look wiped, Red.”

“I’m okay,” Red replied automatically. No one liked a complainer after all, especially in the crowd he hung out with, “I wish these interruptions would stop for a while though, how about you?”

“That’s why we get the big bucks.” Francis said.

Elizabeth marveled at these guys. The acted as if they didn’t have a care in the world. As if one of their own wasn’t in dire straights, wasn’t being extracted from some God-forsaken spot across the continent... or maybe two of three continents, for all she knew.

Both men had arisen, stacking papers, dropping pens, appearing for all the world like typical business men taking a break from a meeting.

“Thanks, baby,” Red touched her face gently, “I needed that.”

“Yeah well, I needed it too but I didn’t get it?” Francis’ irritation had returned.

Red grinned at the woman as they followed the pissed off man to the kitchen. Fresh coffee and a break sounded great along about now.

An hour later Red’s ashen grey complexion had returned to a healthier pink.

Elizabeth had entertained the men with harrowing tales of her time as a teenager growing up with a ridiculously over-protective father.

“I hadn’t known all the colorful details, “Red chuckled appreciatively at the amusing tale, “I’ll bet Sam was furious.”

“He grounded me for a month but he forgave me in time for the Junior prom.” Liz remembered fondly, “Three days short of my projected release date.”

“Come on, Nora, “Francis had moved on apparently, “you have to take chances in life. I’ll show you the time of your life.”

“You’ve already done that.” the older woman chuckled her mirth, “Sweetheart, you’ve made my year just by being here. But no,” she was adamant, “I will not go out on a date with you... not ever.” she held up a staying hand, “Not because I don’t adore you, I do.”

Francis was up at headed for the woman in seconds, beaming.

“Down boy,” Nora’s tone squelched his enthusiasm, “I’m going to say this once and then the words will never pass my lips again.” she held up a warning finger.

“I love your lips my precious.” Francis chimed in, “I would kill to taste them.”

“Takes on a whole new meaning when he says that, doesn’t it.” Red quipped sotto voce.

“What do you mean?” Liz was curious.
Red waved the inquiry aside, chuckling lowly.

“Well don’t hold your breath, Junior.” Nora cocked a brow, “I’m too old for such shenanigans, I’m too old for you.”

Francis gasped, “That’s blasphemy woman!”

“You get on the phone and connect with that cute little saucy wench you picked up out in Vegas.” Nora put more food on Francis’ plate. Stacks off pulled pork with barbeque sauce on the side, “Tell her you will be on the next plane out. I will even come visit to cook for you but other than that…”

“You’re breaking my heart.” Francis grasped his chest dramatically, “I can’t survive without you. I need you in my life. Come live with me. Let me take you away from all this drudgery.”

“Thanks.” Red scowled disapprovingly, “Stop trying to steal my people out from under me.”

“Nora, you better not leave me.” Liz was appalled. “Especially for that little two timing dog.” she turned stricken eyes Red’s way, “Offer her more money... a 401K!”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Nora stated firmly, “but that 401K sounds good.” she winked at Red, “Francis stop sulking and cut your food.”

“I have no appetite now.” his mood dropped drastically.

Nora started to remove the dish. He grasped the rim of the place hastily, his look incredulous.

She stepped back, folding her arms chastely, “Pie for dessert. I’ve made your favorite.”

Red drank his coffee, hiding his amusement.

“Cherry?” Francis lifted hopeful eyes.

“With homemade whip cream.”

Francis felt a little better, “I’m crushed. I can’t go on.” he seemed positive, “Can you make me one to take home?”

“You’re actually leaving?” Red put his cup down with a sharp thud.

“I can’t stay here knowing this woman jilted me and to my face.” he wailed.

“Do you want some dinner rolls to take home as well, honey?”

“Oh, could you my beloved?” Francis turned on the charm, “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble for you, sweetheart.”

“Are you two sure you’ve come to a parting of ways?” Red was confused.

“I’ll add some of those chops,” Nora decided, “and some potato salad,” she mused.

“And maybe that green bean casserole?” Francis lifted puppy dog eyes.

“Of course…” Nora nodded.

“I love you my precious cupcake!” Francis felt better, “speaking of cupcakes—”
“Stop!” Liz arose from her seat by the large island, “You just better stop right there you little shit!” she confronted Francis head on. “Stop taking advantage of my friend and hire your own assistant!”

“I got a promotion.” Nora beamed, pouring Red more coffee, settling a slice of cherry beside the steaming cup.

“Well deserved, I’m sure.” he bit into the slice, savoring the taste.

“You take your pie, chops and casserole—” Liz was on a roll.

“And potato salad!” Francis was gathering his goodies even as Liz was hastening him from the kitchen, motioning Nora to load him down with promised goodies.

“You can’t carry all that,” Nora tsks, “let me help you out to your car.”

“Nora!” Liz wailed her dismay.

“He can’t drive with that leg,” the older woman noted Francis’ exaggerated hobbling.

“He drove to the donut shop today.” Red pointed out.

“That’s because I made pancakes this morning,” Nora explained, “bad call on my part there.” she conceded.

Liz looked a bit sheepish, it wasn’t Nora’s fault she had never told her pancakes were not a favorite.

“You did make a fuss about it then.” Francis pointed an accusing finger at Liz.

“Get out!” Liz yelled at the man as he took his foiled plate happily, “Go!”

“What are you so bent out of shape about?” Francis was stumped. “Can I have some extra sauce, sugar drawers?” he craned his head around Liz to inquire of a fretful Nora.

“I’ll sugar drawers you!” Liz threw a wooden spoon at the man, one she had seen on a nearby crockery bowl.

“Ow!” Francis rubbed his chest absently. “What is your problem? Red can’t you do something here?”

Red finished his pie, pushing the plate aside for his coffee, “No, sugar drawers, it’s out of my hands. Nora?” it was his time to turn on the charm, he lifted his empty plate, “I know I shouldn’t...”

Nora beamed him a smile, forgetting all about the little ruckus taking place steps away.

She hurried to refill the plate, “You seldom indulge that sweet tooth. I feel honored.”

“It is I, rather...” Red objected gallantly, “who is the privileged one.”

“Well, let me just puke.” Francis knew a ‘take-over’ when he saw one, stopping in his tracks which gave Lizzy a chance to hit him again with her spoon.

“Owww!”

Lizzy drew back again, “You little thief!”

“I offered to pay her!”
Liz hit him again.

Red winced for the guy then pulled his pie closer, a serene smile touching his lips, “Life is good.”

Nora was pleased with the proclamation clearly, “I’ll get you some more whipped cream.”

“How about you?” Francis put a chair between himself and his adversary, “I’m not hearing this. Say it ain’t so!”

Liz leaned swatting his bandaged arm a good smack.

“Okay! That hurt!” he instantly cradled the wound.

Liz swiped at him yet again but he stumbled out the French doors onto the paved lanai.

Liz locked the door, sticking her tongue out, her face planted to the window pane of the door.

Red leaned, pulling his ringing phone from his pocket, answering it. Covering his ear, blocking out the two bitching across the way, he listened to the other end, nodding.

“Lizzy...” he rumbled over the din, halting the tirades. Waving his fingers, signaling that he needed a moment with Francis, Red held his amusement.

Liz sighed dramatically, cracking the door slightly ajar, allowing Francis to hear whatever needed to be said.

“They got him.” Red gave a thumbs up before returning his attention to the phone, “Michael, what have you gotten yourself into now?”

Liz looked at Francis, shrugging, then shut the door forcefully, locking it again with flourish.

“You gave me a key.” Francis rolled his eyes.

“You better not use it.” Liz screamed to be heard. “I’ll tell Silas to shoot you on sight.”

“Knowing him, he probably would too.”

“Go home.”

“I can take a hint.” he bellowed, “You don’t have to hit me over the head with a mallet you know.”

“I wish I had thought of a mallet!” Liz shut the wood blinds with a finality.

“It’s nothing, Michael,” Red sighed, “it’s just Francis.” he explained, “Get some rest and we’ll discuss this in the morning.” he said, ending the call.

“Nora,” she rushed over to the woman, “you can’t go with Francis! We’ll give you—”

The woman chuckled. “I like it here. Feels like home.” she proclaimed. “Speaking of which, when I get this mess cleaned up, I’m outta here. Okay, Captain.”

Red sat back patting his stomach, “Nora, you have to stop having out with the guards.”

“They,” she proclaimed, “hang out with me.”

“I stand corrected.” Red stated.

“But you’re staying, right Nora?”
“Oh, honey,” the woman soothed Liz’s frayed nerves with a hug, “wild horses...” she offered a sedate look that said it all.

“I’ll get this, you go home and rest.” Liz hurriedly scraped nearby dishes.

“You most certainly will not.” Nora took the matter into her own hands with a stern reprimand, “Captain?”

Red obediently arose, taking Liz in hand, “Come along.”

“I can help.” Liz managed around Red’s broad shoulders as he gently but firmly guided her from the kitchen.

“She doesn’t need your help.” Red knew the woman’s capabilities, “That’s why she’s in charge. She’s self-sufficient.”

Nora waved cheerfully to a disgruntled Elizabeth.

Liz marched down the corridor, her spirits still high, “Do you believe that little twirp?”

“That pie was delicious,” Red said, “I can understand Francis’ view point.”

“Well, I can’t!” Liz turned on the man. “I’m going to push him in the pool the next time I see him... the deep end!”

“Watch your step, baby.” Red caught her in time to prevent a run-in with the door facing to their bedroom.

She had been walking backward, too pissed not to unburden herself on a convenient sounding board.

“You just better take him to task tomorrow, do you hear me?” she pointed an accusing finger.

“Which means, shoot him in the other leg or bury him with the fishes.” Red surmised, rolling his aching neck, producing a resounding crack in the open room.

She pulled a face, “Very funny.” then, a sudden thought occurred.

Liz caught Red’s vest in her hands, pulling the man close.

“Go to your office.” she stated, her voice firm.

Red’s mouth twitched, nodding slowly at the declaration. “Why would I go there when everything I want is here.”

“Because I say.” she reiterated.

“Don’t I have a say in this?” he teased, wondering where this conversation was leading.

“...No.” she decided.

“But I have a twenty-five year old bottle of Glenfarclas in the closet over there calling my name.” his eyes sparkled with merriment.

“You’ll just have to make due with what you have in the bar...” she replied in a no-nonsense tone, “besides you have a thirty year old woman here that’s obviously better vintage.”
“Well, when you put it that way,” he grinned, “I suppose I can make due with that...” he shrugged lightly, “and the forty year old bottle of Glenlivet I have stocked... in your bar.”

“I’m so glad you saw reason.” the blue eyes narrowed, hiding the amusement contained within. “Now go, you can’t be here.”

Red glanced around the room absently attempting to ascertain her ploy.

“You go to your office.” she pointed to the unseen room, “you always go to your office before you come to bed... you always do that.”

Red’s tongue traced the outline of his lips, “You want me out of the way for a while.” he got the drift.

“Well... yes.” she managed to look contrite. “I said I would be really nice to you tonight. I promised.”

He slipped his hands about her hips, “You said... really, really, really nice.”

“Yes, so...” she shoved him away, “go to your office for a little while.”

Red sighed mentally, “How little a while?” his appetite was already whetted, truth told.

“Twenty minutes, tops.” Liz was certain she could prepare everything in that time. She would have already slipped away to do it but for that shit head, Francis.

“You’re awfully bossy tonight,” he said, the hint of affection more than clear in his voice, “again, don’t I have a say in this?” he asked.

“I said no.” she replied succinctly.

“Then who am I to argue?” Red cast a doubtful glance, “Twenty minutes.” he consulted his watch, “Not one second more.”

She smiled brightly for him, “Go, get out.”

“I know how Francis felt.” the man went begrudgingly.

Red and his bottle of forty year old Glenlivet made their way to his version of a man-cave.

He sat, relaxing in his comfortable chair. He lit up a cigar, determined to make the wait a bearable one.

He sipped the warm beverage absently. Frankly, he would rather have the thirty year old woman who waited in the back room than the vintage he sampled.

Or perhaps share with her the wonderful vintage after she revealed whatever surprise she was preparing for him.

The thought made him smile. He blew the grey mist of smoke into the air watching the swirling rivulets dance about.

He should be making calls, shipping manifests. He sorely missed Dembe’s presence.
He did make a call to check on the man. Dembe was ‘occupied’ so the call was a short one. Red could hear the throaty chuckle of a female in the background.

Red’s smile returned. He was pleased his friend was truly taking some down time.

Good for Dembe!

He checked his watch, finished his drink, reluctantly rolled the cherry off his cigar before heading back to the master bedroom.

His curiosity was definitely piqued, he had to admit.

Closing the door behind him, he was immediately struck by the change in atmosphere.

Lights were dimmed, strategic candles scented the air and set a wondrous mood.

A large fluffy stack of towels sat on the end of the bed.

Soft music played in the background.

Red kicked off his shoes just as Elizabeth appeared, framed in the ambient light emanating behind her.

He took in the long satin gown with its high slits on the side which revealed a hint of lovely thigh as she moved. The very, very low cut lace bodice which only just covered the luscious mounds.

The lace was so thin and delicate he could clearly see the imprint of tiny nubs of nipples straining against the fabric.

The woman smiled pleasantly at him as she passed, arms laden with bottles of every shape and size. She neatly lined her products on the bedside table.

Red took a moment to run the length of her amazing figure.

He loved the rounded smoothness of the satin as it caressed her buttocks. The inviting swell of her pert breasts captivated him.

The lace was cut to reveal most of the delicious mounds with only the barest of sheath over the center to hide the necessities.

The lace made his hands wish to uncover the hidden treasure beneath.

“You need to take off your clothes.” the blue eyes shifted to his, the depths alluring, the soft voice affecting his nervous system.

“You first.” his eyes deepened as his imagination took over, once again raking her body.

“You booked the appointment, Sir.” Liz feigned professionalism. “We assume you wish to make use of our... amenities?” she motioned gracefully with her hand to the bottles on the table. “We were given to understand... you’ve had a very stressful few days.”

“We?” he gave the area a compulsory glance, “Will more be joining us?”

“Do you require... more?” she tested the waters with a lifted brow.
Red wisely backed down, “You will suffice.”

Again, his look told her just how much this belief was instilled in him.

She smiled gently, “If you are certain then... perhaps we should begin.” the smile remained transfixed. “Would you like assistance with your clothing?”

He considered the request, “...Oh, hell yeah.”

Elizabeth stepped, deftly divesting him of his vest, she hung the light weight over the Valet stand.

Stepping about the man, her fingers slowly, unhurriedly unbuttoned the front of his shirt. The blue eyes lifted to meet his stare.

“Are you here for a long stay?” she made polite conversation.

Red played along, “A few days... a few nights.”

“Business trips can be so stressful.” she eased the shirt from his shoulders.

“They certainly can,” he watched the shirt meet the same fate as his vest. “I’m ever so glad to have found your... agency. You can imagine my delight after hours upon hours sequestered away in a dull, boring, boardroom.”

His eyes enjoyed the slight bounce of her breasts as she lowered herself before him. The young inviting cleft beckoned his interest.

She unbuckled his belt, easing the zipper of his slacks down over the beginning bulge of his rapidly growing erection.

“I can only imagine.” she sympathized, leaning to nuzzle the hardness with her nose, “You can forget about all that for a time,” she sought him out, “it’s my job to ensure you do.”

She tugged his slacks down. Red stepped out of the legs handing them over to capable hands.

She smiled that smile, her fingers tenderly easing inside the waistband of his boxers. In seconds, they had followed the same path of his slacks but instead of being laid neatly over a perch... she had tossed them aside carelessly.

They landed on the floor somewhere, he didn’t take time to note for she had curved sensually to him, the small hands engulfing his stiffness protectively.

“You are stressed, Sir. Please,” she tugged ever so gently on his captured shaft, “come lie down. Let me see what I can do to alleviate that.”

“I am not one to argue.” he more than willingly followed her lead.

She released his cock and he felt cold.

Liz situated the towels, “If you will lay here?” her hand swept the area, “We will begin.”

He wasted no time in obeying those orders. His muscles slumped into the comfortable bedding even though the other parts of him were considerably more tense.

He felt warm oil drip to his back for she had indicated he should lie on his stomach.
Several seconds of slow, agonizing massage eased the tension in his body considerably.

“This is,” he breathed out a low moan of delight,” ...amazing.”

It had been forever that he had a massage let alone the sensual back rub the woman was supplying.

His skin erupted in gooseflesh, anticipating the treat.

The excruciating torture continued. Red could not prevent long, drawn out groans of appreciation.

It didn’t get any better than this.

Sighing, the man relaxed further into the support of the bed as gentle fingers stroked his back, sides, adding more pressure as Elizabeth mapped out the line of his body.

Legs, ankles, thighs even the soles of his feet were given much needed attention.

Slim fingers kneaded the smooth tautness of his backside.

The warm oil drizzled evocatively between the crack of his ass. He was loathe to prevent a guttural sound of arousal in his throat.

A teasing tip of a manicured finger ran the length of the cleft for a gentle but insistent palm had pushed on the inside of his thigh asking for entrance.

He eagerly granted the invasion which ended in a loving cup and illusive graze of his testicle sack.

“How does this feel good?” she continued the exquisite pastime, watching her activities thoughtfully.

“How? he could barely articulate, “I don’t think that adjective quite covers it...” he swallowed a tightness in his throat. “Amazing, incredible.... fucking fantastic...” he couldn’t find enough words to express what it felt like.

No, it definitely did not get better than–

He felt the bed move with the indentation of her weight.

She straddled him lazily, her thighs rubbing along the outside of his.

He knew she was sans panties. He could feel the heat of her mound on his buttocks.

She leaned her weight into the massage of his neck and shoulders. “You are tight...”

She frowned over the tautness of his muscles even after all the work she had put into relaxing them.

“I will wager...” he lifted his head slightly, “you are as well.”

Her hands stopped for a beat and he worried he had moved too fast, spoiled the game for her.

His mind raced to solve his gaffe.

She settled that naked ass over his welcoming buttocks, laying her body to his.

“There is only one way to ascertain the answer to that inquiry,” her voice whispered in his ear, sending shivers down his arms, “it will cost you extra.”

“I’m so fucking hard it feels like, if I move,” he rasped huskily, “it will snap off from its base.”
“That would be terrible,” she slipped her hand beneath his body, grasping his hardness, “I have need of it.”

Red rolled quickly, allowing her more freedom of touch. He groaned loudly as she shifted taking the heated flesh into her mouth.

The stiff erection of his penis jutted straight out, having bounced heavily with the movement of his turn.

The hot hollow of her mouth engulfed him, that amazing little tongue swirling about the rounded tip lovingly.

Another gasp escaped the man.

His hands gripped the bed covers for support as she continued to work her magic on his straining flesh.

Straddling his waist, Liz felt the hard shaft tap against her backside, a pool of heat instantly settling in her core.

Rubbing the warmed oil into her hands, she kneaded the tightness from his arms and chest, occasionally flicking her thumbs teasingly across his nipples. She smiled gently as the peaks tightened, and the man beneath her moaned brokenly.

“You don’t have to do this.” he practically pleaded his case.

Scooting back a hair, Red’s erection slid along the crease of the woman’s ass, drawing a sharp gasp from them both.

Dropping his hands to her thighs, Red curled his fingers into the white flesh. Elizabeth rubbed her fingers gently over his stomach, sliding back purposely.

His erection bent with her movement, her slit easing wetly along the hardened shaft.

Inhaling shakily, Red held his urge to impale her on his cock. Her fingers bypassed his groin all together, instead heading for his legs and feet.

“You! fuck me!”

“I like a man who knows his own limitations.” she ignored the tense request however, instead for countless minutes, she massaged his tension away. So lost in the sensation of the tightness bleeding away from his limbs.

Red lost track of time until Liz’s slim fingers combed through the short hair on his groin.

His cock jerked with the touch, the slit of his crown beading with wetness.

Slowly stroking his hardness, she massaged his sack, gently tugging them as her hand encircled his head.

“Listen to me!” Red hissed, his body needing a release.

Liz hesitated, having wanted to take him into her mouth once more.

His rough, unsteady voice thrilled her. The sight of his cock, so hard for her, changed her mind.
She reluctantly gave the power over, laying face down into the pillow.

Red nudged her and she lifted as indicated. He placed a pillow beneath her stomach raising her ass into the air.

He nudged her again, sliding his thighs between hers as she parted her legs wider.

He could almost taste that sweet little pussy. He stared at the soft pink and darker outer layer of her lips.

“You are fucking beautiful...” he stated shakily, his hands encompassing her back.

Red watched the small frame disappear repeatedly under the width of his hands. There was something incredibly erotic about the sight.

A drop oozed freely from the sensitive slit as his shaft brushed against her cheeks. He smiled when the woman lifted into the sensation, which shoved his head between the soft swell of her bottom.

Red’s face was suddenly grim. He was hurting so deliciously. He allowed the woman to rock herself against his erection, his cock head catching on the puckered hole of her ass.

Liz inhaled sharply, backing against his fat crown. Red’s head fell back, his eyes closing with pure elation, euphoria overtaking his mind.

“I’m dying here...” he murmured roughly, “and I don’t give a fuck.”

“...Yes.” she sighed, understanding completely. She lifted her bottom enticing him further into the abyss.

Leaning forward, Red added slight pressure to her backside as his hands skirted the plumpness of her breasts.

God...

“Now this...” he breathed heavily, his eyes blazing his ever growing desire, “is heaven.”

“You like it?” she questioned quietly.

“Hell yes, I like it.” he sighed breathlessly.

He pushed against her pleasure, wetting the tightness with his pre-cum before inching downward, enjoying her mewl of disappointment.

“I’m going to make you climb the fucking walls, baby...” he breathed, anticipating the outcome of his declaration. He gently turned her to face him.

His eyes focused on her pink nipples, which grew into tiny pebbles, hard under his stare. He touched her rib cage, arms, shoulders... everywhere but those tiny peaks.

Teasing her relentlessly, as she had done to him. He centered his attention on the canvas of her beautiful body, deliberately replacing one sort of tension with another... finding new erogenous zones along the way.

Leaning into his arm, he finally took the rosy nipple into his mouth, his tongue massaging the tight bud in an entirely different manner. She squirmed under the technique.
She scratched her fingertips into his scalp, drawing a low content groan from his occupied mouth.

Liz whimpered when the man pulled away, only to writhe with anticipation seconds later as he slithered downward.

“No!” she reached for him as he moved down the bed, determined he should end the agony... the ecstasy he was causing.

“Spread your legs for me.” the man demanded, ignoring her completely.

The tenor of his voice excited her deep inside. Her already hardened nipples tingled with sensation and her heavy sex, throbbed deliciously.

“I’ve been wanting this all damn day.” he murmured roughly, lowering his face between her damp thighs.

Red groaned his appreciation, finding the small lips sensitive. Nuzzling against her, he drowned himself in the natural scent of her arousal.

“So wet for me...” he moaned, sucking the peak of her sex. “So succulent...” Grasping her hips, he expertly built the tension layer by layer.

Liz’s breath came in heated rasps. Red licked her in long sinuous strokes before capturing her clit. The gentle tug of his mouth, pleasured her beyond measure.

She shivered, finding the man’s darkened eyes staring intently up at her, “You have to stop this...” she whispered breathlessly.

Rubbing his nose into the fragrant mound, Red focused on the matter at hand, his tongue rubbing along her clit greedily, devouring the treat hungrily. Sliding his thumbs between her plump cheeks, he rubbed her in rhythm with his relentless strokes.

“R-Red...” the woman stuttered incoherently. His large thumb rubbed against her ass, his pre-cum leaving her slick and sensitive to his touch. It felt so good... so amazing.

Red grunted his pleasure. This is where he wanted to be. Nudging her gently, he sought out her reaction. She stared hazily down at him, her mouth parting as soft, sharp moans passed the parted lips.

“More...” she begged breathlessly, rolling her hips, pushing against his mouth. Grasping her breast, she pulled restlessly at her nipple as she cradled his head, pulling him even closer.

Red reached around, palming her breast, gently kneading the heavy mound. Turning his hand, he pushed his fingers against her ass, rubbing the touch-heightened flesh and felt the woman’s body tense.

Lovingly suckling her clit into his mouth, he rubbed his tongue incessantly against the swollen tissue. Finally giving way to the emotional onslaught, the woman shook violently, clasping his head with her creamy thighs. His mouth filled with warmth as she bucked sharply against the intense sensation, coming hard under his tutelage.

She dropped to the bed, gasping and shaking with the intense orgasm. Seconds later she felt Red’s large hands push at her trembling legs, shoving them wide as he knelt between the curvy alcove presented.
“You didn’t set a price...” his voice was husky, his fat crown pushed at her opening. The man was thoroughly aroused. “So I’ll extract what I need, we’ll discuss terms later on...”

“My supervisor will not be pleased.” Liz murmured as he adjusted himself at her fluttering opening.

“You worry about pleasing me.” he murmured. He groaned brokenly as he slid into the steamy depths of her cavern.

Liz loved the thick spread she felt when Red pushed into her body.

Cupping her ass, he lifted her slightly, thrusting against her pliable flesh. Their heightened breath mingled, mouth catching mouth, kisses long, lingering and passionate with the heat of the moment.

Red situated her leg over his shoulder, needing to be deeper inside the quivering hole.

He raised her higher, jabbing his hardness inside her faster and faster, the tempo meeting the coiled tension in his body.

“...Yes,” he hissed, the woman’s shaky cries of ecstasy becoming louder and more breathless, “fuck!”

Curling his fingers inward around her bottom, he gently petted the tight hole of her ass as he pummeled the other with his shaft.

“Shit...” he panted harshly, squeezing the cheeks in his palms, increasing the tightness of her body. “God yes, squeeze my cock hard, baby... just like that.” he approved, losing himself in her body.

He pushed against her ass as incentive, producing the desired results. “Jesus... you are such a good little girl for me.”

Squeezing him tight in her core, she felt the first wave of her orgasm settle in her abdomen, a heat spreading through her limbs at breakneck speed.

Red lowered his eyes, hypnotized by the sight of his hard flesh plunging into her drenched depths. His long, fat erection, spreading her open easily with each stab he offered, before disappearing from sight into the volcanic heat of her pussy, “I need to fuck you...” he breathed shallowly, “I need...”

“Harder.” she pleaded, hooking her heels on his shoulders, lifting her own pelvis expertly to allow him better access.

“Fuck...” he palmed the tiny ass, roughly yanking her against him.

Fixating on her face which twisted into a state of bliss, he thrust into her in rapid succession, pushing sounds from her throat in sharp bursts of undeniable lust.

Her soft breasts bounced erotically as she gripped the headboard, her fingers tightening, bleeding them of color. Her legs fell to the side, her back lifting off the bed as she tensed. The sweet melodious mewl of her release filling his ears.

His thighs and sack were soaked with her arousal, “Look how wet you are...” he hissed his delight, “do you like being fucked hard.”

“...Yes... yes...” she whispered seductively, thrusting against him, driving him inside her body. “I love it so much.”

Bracing himself on his arms, fucking her hard and deep, Red lost himself in her body.
“Do you like... to fuck me?” she urged him on, drawing his balls tight against his body.

The soft moans of her encouraging taunt and the wet sound of his cock fucking her body was his undoing.

“...Oh, fuck,” he panted shakily, “gonna come so hard, honey.”

“I want it.” she whispered. “It feels so good...”

“You want me to give it to you?” he needed to hear it.

“Please...” she panted breathlessly, “...please!”

Capturing the woman’s reddened lips, Red tongued the pouty mouth open. His slit pulsed hard with his first release. The hot rush of cum exploded from the tip, leaving the man shaking in it’s aftermath.

“...Yes.” she moaned sharply against his mouth, her body quivering around his in response.

“Take it...” he gasped hard, jerking his hips, pushing his thrumming erection deep, filling her with his viscous climax.

She whimpered, lifting her pelvis to his obediently.

They lay afterwards, bodies bathed in the sweaty sheen of their activities. Slick, damp curls of their sex shimmering with each others arousal as they came together in the low light of the room. A feeling a contentment permeated Red’s mind like he had never felt before.

The sense of peace he had been searching for settled over him. The soft scent of their union filled his senses, leaving him satisfied beyond measure.

She hugged herself to his body, nuzzling her nose into his neckline. She sighed when he returned the favor, laying his warm mouth against her damp, beard burned flesh.

The woman stirred finally from the embrace of his body, the strength of his arms.

Red grumbled for the disturbance, “It’s not over until I say it’s over.” he reminded.

He smiled softly as the realization hit him.

He had just made love to the woman he was meant to share his life with.

The woman he had searched for, was right here... basking in the aftermath of the love they shared. Both physically and emotionally.

A rush of tingling currents ran the length of his spine as they both trembled with aftershocks of their extreme high.

They really should have made love, considering their shared confessions. But in their own unique fashion he had come to adore... they had fucked the system as it were, once again doing things their own way.

Perhaps he should have delivered a more romantic interlude, because Lizzy deserved that. He understood now however, that the passion had been so heightened between them, the only release of those frenzied and unrestrained emotions... had been delegated to the extreme.

Liz reached out, laying her palm against his torso. Sliding her fingers upwards, her palm settled over
the man’s heart, the erratic beat, easing gradually under her touch.

“...I’m happy.” she whispered, lifting her eyes to meet his.

“You are, huh?” his mouth tilted lazily at the corner, his fingertip tracing the curve of her cheek.

Nodding slowly, she lifted her hand, touching his mouth, “I am so happy that I took a chance,” her eyes shining brightly with unconcealed adoration, “...that I trusted my heart.”

He cleared his throat, drawing in a deep breath, barely controlling the wash of emotions filling his heart.

He was affected by her words, no matter how simplistic they were. Perhaps because they were delivered with the overwhelming fulfillment and tranquility she felt when with Red.

“...So am I.” he openly confessed. “I’m damn glad you took that chance.”

He smiled warmly as the woman snuggled closer to him, seeking his warmth. He chuckled adoringly sliding free, which cause a small pout to appear on her kiss swollen lips.

He peppered the luscious mouth in soft kisses until she was once again... happy.

“I love you, Lizzy...” he murmured lowly, wrapping the woman in his tight embrace.

“How did you know my name?”

He grinned down at her, “Games are over for tonight.” he advised. “There’s only one woman I want in my bed and I have finally found her.”

Chapter End Notes

Any mistakes are mine. These two literally drove me out of my mind.
Monday, June 2nd

Red was a light sleeper. His chosen profession had taught him to be constantly on guard.

He had felt the movement beside him, but thought it more advantageous to pretend as if he had not, in this particular instance.

The sensual sensation of full lips and an agile tongue traveled the stubbled flesh of his jawline, moving gently down to his neck roused the man fully from a most pleasant dream like state.

To a reality even more pleasant.

He lay very still enjoying Liz’s newfound assertiveness.

He inhaled the last traces of her baby lotion and the alluring salty aroma of aroused female.

“Hey lady...” his sleep roughed voice tickled her nape for she had straddled his body strategically, “I’m sorry,” he feigned mild consternation, “did you need something?”

Liz curved her thighs into his hips, the long silky legs intertwining with his dormant ones.

It was the only thing dormant about the man at this moment in time.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you,” the seductively innocent tone hardened the man’s cock all the more, “I have a little problem here, you see.”

She slid along the length of his shaft slowly, the hot wet muff heightening his senses.

Liz moaned softly, squirming about the surface anxiously.

“Uh huh.” he managed throatily, his mouth suckling her neckline hungrily, “I can see that... go on.” he encouraged, his lips peppering the fragrant skin with light, nipping kisses.

His rough palm cupped the plump ass cheeks, rubbing the woman up and down his cock in slow, calculated thrusts.

“I was...” her breath was shallow, “having the most amazing dream.”

Liz pressed into the excruciating sensation as the man’s shaft thumped against her slit, the wide head of his crown sliding against the curve of her sex to her plump cheeks.

“Dreams can be so realistic at times.” he knew first hand.

“And so frustrating.” she pouted prettily for him, “I woke up just when it was getting... good.”

“Oh no,” he commiserated, his fingers kneaded her bottom purposely, widening the gap between her legs with expert tension, “I am so sorry to hear that,” he managed sincerity, “what can I do to help?”

Elizabeth’s stomach pitched erotically when the man’s stiff flesh connected soundly with her clit.

“Oh my,” he tsked, having felt what he needed to feel, “you are all swollen,” he frowned his
sympathy, “that must be painful,” his tone had dropped into a lascivious caress, “... show me.”

Liz lifted large blue eyes as she allowed the man to shift, taking her with him as he went.

He rolled her unto her back, his palm parting her legs.

Red’s eyes traveled the smoothness of her flesh, over the alluring mounds of her bare breasts, past the small, flat abdomen and beyond.

His eyes flamed as her fingers spread the silken hair covering the tumescent lips of her labia and vulva.

His cock pulsed greedily at the sight of her mons glistening in the early morning sun. His gaze heated further when the woman’s thighs, sparkling with moisture, came into view.

“You see.” Liz played her part to the hilt, her voice melancholy, a little miffed.

The shimmering mound of her sex, reddened and exposed to him, allowed him a glance of her engorged clit. The sight of the woman’s puffy slit overwhelmed him with alluring images.

Fantasies of pounding into her mercilessly one moment were replaced by visions of him taking her clit in his mouth in the next.

He controlled them.

“My poor baby,” he sighed heavily, “it just makes me want to tongue that steamy little alcove and suckle your delicate flesh...” he whispered, “give my hot, precious pussy the attention it so clearly needs.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes, mewling desperately, “Y-Yes,” her thighs trembling visibly, “do that.”

“Yes, I could do that,” he certainly was not adverse, “but if I did, you might come entirely too quickly for my liking.”

“No, no I wouldn’t,” she breathed the lie breathlessly, “I really wouldn’t.”

“No?” he lifted a scolding brow, “then prove it,” he insisted, “touch yourself.”

Elizabeth hesitated, feeling as he made her feel, she wasn’t certain she wouldn’t come at this stage with the least amount of stimulation.

Red was beginning to love these morning sessions. Elizabeth was becoming more passionate, showing her emotions uninhibitedly.

She was expressing desire, trust was growing between them. He had worked meticulously hard to gain that trust.

His hand rested on her thigh, a studied scowl on his handsome face.

The slender fingers danced idly over her warm flesh, squeezing the delicious pain of sexual awakening from her mounds before moving lower through the dark, damp wispy hair on her mons.

Red lay his palm flat on her stomach, holding the woman in place.

He lay stretched out beside her, his thigh holding her legs spread open for his pleasure.
She was entirely exposed to his gaze, naked and vulnerable.

“You can do better than that.” he approved of the tiny nubs of the pert breasts rising stiffly at his continued stare.

Elizabeth reached, her fingers spreading the lips of her labia open, boldly sharing herself with her lover.

Red eyes deepened, “That little opening is already welling with cream.”

Liz’s body reacted to the lust-laden tone.

“You are so wet for me.” he watched the slick nectar ease from her opening, disappearing between her rounded cheeks.

Gooseflesh spotted her skin at the sexy proclamation.

The woman’s heady aroma filled his senses leaving his mouth watering and warm liquid trickling from his cock.

Her fingers pushed in against her tingling sex attempting to alleviate the incessant throb deep inside.

“This is all for me, correct.” he pushed his index finger into her body, extracting the slick appendage. He massaged her clit with the product tenderly.

Liz tried to clamp her thighs shut, but he refused to allow her the luxury.

“I will take the ache away, baby.” he soothed, pushing her own fingers aside as they tried to complete the act on their own, “Just tell me what it is you want.”

“...You,” she breathed shakily, “I want... you.”

“You want my cock,” he corrected silkily, “which I will gladly give but I need to hear those sweet words from that beautiful mouth.”

She opened her legs wider in open invitation, her eyes fixated on his face, “Are you going to make love to me?”

“I can do that,” he nodded minutely, “you know I’ll give you anything you want.”

Elizabeth trembled at the man’s confident delivery of the sultry words.

“I’ll make you feel all better,” he crooned lovingly, “Open your legs for me, baby. Let me in.”

Opening her legs wider to accommodate his bulk, Red rolled into the curvy alcove, settling his weight on the slender body beneath his.

Red smiled warmly at the woman’s sullen features, before lifting and bracing himself on his hand.

Taking his cock in hand, he brushed his weeping slit against her clitoris, producing a fresh warm gush of milky white fluid trickling from her center.

Liz moaned brokenly, wiggling closer to the bulbous head teasing her. She squirmed in earnest, whimpering despondently.

“Be patient, baby...” he murmured, intent on his task.
The woman’s brow furrowed as he lifted his cock away from her. She opened her mouth in protest but still at the sight of his head, thick and full for her.

His own slit was parted with arousal. A translucent bead of moisture oozed from the tip, holding her rapt attention.

Stroking the bulging shaft once, Red watched the bead travel the rounded tip of his erection. The clear liquid dripped into the pink hole, drawing a soft gasp of his growing arousal.

“Only you make me this hard.” the man whispered urgently, “so quickly.”

He cursed his lack of control but marveled at his advanced state of ardor.

“Then do something about it.” she breathed a shaky sigh, her bottom lifting in total supplication.

She felt the growing wet spot beneath her on the sheets.

“That must have been a hell of a dream.” he stated his belief, aligning his cock head between the ripe flesh awaiting him.

Leaning determinedly, the man gently shoved past the tight resistance of her labia, demanding entrance into the wet depths awaiting his exploration.

Elizabeth groaned, gratefully welcoming the invasion, “...The reality is better.”

“God,” Red moans joined hers, as the intense pleasure of the steaming cavern spread for him, only to close back around his hard flesh as he pushed further into the tight sheath, “I fucking concur...”

A shaky gasp of relief escaped Liz’s parted mouth as the girth opened her wide. The man’s foreskin massaged her cushioned depths, increasing the ache in her core in the most delectable, torturous way.

“So... so much better.” she whimpered her delight as Red rocked his hips, opening her to his intrusion, inch by agonizing inch.

“There now,” he whispered faintly, “is this helping ease that ache?” he enquired, his tone raspy with growing passion.

“Yes.” she pleaded, lifting her hips to greet his shallow thrust. “Don’t stop, please...”

He should have done this last night... made love to her.

His undisguised and shameless lust for the woman won out.

Not that either had complained.

But this... this was breathtaking.

“I love you.” he whispered, settling his entire length into her body. He breathed a deep sigh of contentment as her soft down meshed with his own, the connection complete.

Liz nuzzled into the shadowing on his face, a sense of tranquility calming her heart.

The coarse hair of morning beard scraping her delicate skin and the man’s husky voice whispering words of love in her ear, sent tingles along her spine to the sensitive area between her legs.
They had been making love for weeks now and it was phenomenal. She felt cherished beyond scope.

This morning... what they shared was stunning in its intensity. They were united not just in the physical sense, but emotionally. It was as if they were one entity. Souls bound together.

Liz’s cheeks flushed, a swell of emotion flooding her psyche. Her tummy flipped, her heart fluttered, her breath quickened with passion, she felt absolutely... exhilarated.

She recalled a moment in her teen years when she experienced a similar occurrence while reading her first romance novels.

The worlds created in her imagination had been an enchanting one.

She had become conscious of her sexual desires... an awakening.

The lust between the characters was potent. The build up in tension, captivating. Until the point they gave into their yearning and consummated their carnal desires.

She masturbated many times to the erotic pictures painted.

But above all else, to the fantasies of... him.

The hero. The knight in shining armor that came in on horseback, wooing the damsel in distress. Or the swarthy and ruthless Viscount romancing the beautiful, yet, untrusting Governess.

Each protective, faithful, infatuated and passionate about their lady loves.

She dreamed of having a man such as that one day.

And now, here she was... living the dream.

The good-hearted Criminal loving his supposed sworn adversary, a Federal Agent.

And he was doing it so well... so very, very well.

Red was living up to expectations he wasn’t even aware she possessed, being what she needed in every respect.

She had his protection. His commitment. His respect and admiration. But above all else, she trusted him implicitly.

They had love.

They had this... the carnal connection the likes of which she never experienced.

She never had a wish come true but as Liz felt the gentle tug of Red’s warm mouth on her captured nipple, the wet slide of his heavy erection... it was as close as she would get to perfection.

She knew without a doubt that wishes did in fact, come true.

Pushing the pale flesh of her breast closer, Liz whimpered, eager for more of his brand of attention.

Flickering the rosy tip, Red wondered what thoughts captivated her moments ago.

Although fully involved in the physical sense, lifting into his slow rhythmic thrusts, he sensed her
mind was momentarily elsewhere. Her eyes held an unfocused, dreamy look in the blue depths.

Whatever it had been, left the woman blissfully tranquil and eagerly receptive to his unrequited passion.

Perhaps she had been recalling her earlier dream...

“God,” he exhaled pent up emotion, a little pensive himself suddenly, “you have no idea how much I need this with you.”

Wrapping his tongue around the puckered flesh of her pert nipple, Red groaned about the little nub, observing her reaction to his efforts.

Ragged breaths escaped Lizzy’s parted mouth as Red leisurely nipped a stiff peak, leaving a sweet, torturous pang between her legs.

“You need me...” she whispered in a rush, clasping his head to her breast with shaky fingers.

Entranced by the rhythmic motion their bodies performed, both enjoyed and lost themselves in the unfettered moans and gasps their lovers released.

“I’ve waited such a long time for you, Lizzy...” he openly admitted. “Did you think a month ago, I’d be here... making love to you?” The fact still enthralled the man.

She had to admit, there was a part of her that had been intrigued by the idea. But she never imagined it actually happening.

“No,” she confessed, “but I am so damn glad you are.” she gasped as he slid in deep, rubbing against her throbbing clit.

“I want this,” she breathed, grasping the man’s forearms tight in a desperate hold, “...every morning.”

Red dropped his chin, watching his girth disappear inside Lizzy’s tiny hole, “I’ll put it on top of my ‘to-do list. Trust me...” he grit, pushing into the wet depths he adored.

“I want to start each day...” she rasped, raising her hips into his downward thrust, “just like this.”

“We need a compromise,” his lips curved playfully, “because I want you every night.” he counter negotiated, captivated by the slim hips meeting his wantonly.

The woman’s thighs shook with the intensity of the man’s concentrated movements and attention to their activity.

“Jesus...” she sucked in sharply, “right there.”

Undulating his hips, he directed his shaft where she needed, his breath shallow and uneven.

“...I stated my requirements.” he reminded her of the negotiations taking place.

“Yes,” Liz arched into the deep thrust of his heavy shaft, “morning... night.” she babbled incoherently. “Any time,” she was flexible, “God, Red..”

Liz’s arousal heightened as she read the excruciating torture on the man’s face.

Red’s head fell back, his face showing his state of ecstasy. A rumbling growl tore from deep within his stocky, hair covered chest on the long downward stroke of his beautiful cock.
The velvet soft thickness, framed by curly honey blond hair, came into view. The thick bulging veins in his cock caressed her touch-heightened flesh, drawing her closer to the precipice of climax.

He was so handsome, sexy... so masculine.

“It feels good...” she whispered, “doesn’t it.”

“You have no idea how exquisite you are...” Red moaned brokenly, grasping the pillow in the strong hold of his clenched fingers, “I dreamed of this...” he tightened his arms at her side, cupping her little face in his calloused palms.

Liz kissed the man’s full mouth, panting against the damp flesh.

“So many times, I wanted to be with you, just like this,” he allowed more of his weight to settle on her, “surround you with my warmth,” he murmured, “and part your lips with my cock, slide into this sweet, amazing body.”

His eyes slipped closed, reveling in the euphoria of doing just that, “My cock ached to experience your body giving into my intrusion,” he growled shakily, “to savor the sensation of your hot, snug pussy cradling my cock.”

Liz flicked her tongue sensually against his, picturing the images he painted for her,

“Nothing could prepare me for how wonderful you truly feel,” he murmured, “that I would get to experience you... like this,” he stared down at his bare cock shining with Elizabeth’s arousal, “is something out of my most primitive imaginings.”

Catching her lip with her teeth, she bit into the tender flesh just as captivated by the sight.

“Knowing I’m the only one afforded this gift,” he nuzzled her dampened neckline, drawing in her sweet scent, “that I am the only one who ever will warm you...”

The man’s eye darkened, amplifying the rolling pitch in Elizabeth’s abdomen.

“Feeling you come around me...” the husky voice lowered intimately, “is excruciatingly pleasurable.”

Liz’s clit jolted with sharp piercing waves of desire. The delectable, thrumming heaviness between her legs cried out for release. A warm rush of fluid poured from her quivering heat, drawing a rumbling moan from her lover.

“...Yes,” he encouraged breathlessly, “baby, I need you to come.”

Red’s breath hitched as the woman’s face lit with an inner glow of ecstasy. Her tiny feet curved into his thigh, her fingers grasping his ass in a tight grip, pulling him roughly against her center.

Shortening his strokes to an almost manic pace, Red nudged Lizzy’s engorged clit encouragingly. A whispered rush of amazement escaped the woman.

The man’s body reacted, his testicles tightening in anticipation of his release.

“Don’t hold back...” he rasped, “those sounds are torturing me in the most delightful way.”

The woman’s breathy sighs and moans against his sensitive flesh, heightened his senses to a feverish pitch.
Red blatantly watched the show unfolding before his eyes. The woman’s knees tightened against his hips, her thighs shaking uncontrollably. Her back lifted from the bedding, presenting her breasts for his warm mouth’s caress.

Rubbing the tiny peaks with his tongue produced incredible results. A vicious snarl of compliance pushed from his throat as her core clamped his pumping shaft tightly.

“**God,** that’s it...” he growled his approval as Lizzy’s heels dug into his thighs.

Her slim fingers curled into his low back as she cried out, her body coiling tight.

“Please...” she whimpered, working too hard, wanting the release too much to control or synchronize her body’s need, “**Red...**” the unasked request touch the man’s heart.

Wrapping an arm about her waist, he tilted her pelvis, dragging his bulging shaft roughly against her over sensitized clit. He knew what to do... how to help.

“**Come,**” he demanded, his tone heated, “**come for me, baby.**”

“**Oh...o-oh... God!**” her voice quivered as the man nuzzled into her neckline, nipping the damp flesh.

Pushing against the fluttering tunnel, Red felt his control slipping as the little hole rushed with wet heat, soaking his groin in the milky fluid. His sack brushed against her ass cheeks, sending a staggering jolt up his spine.

The images it conjured... the sounds she was making... the unrelenting pull of her pussy...

It all drove him out of his fucking mind.

“...**Jesus Christ,**” he husked, “...**yes.**”

Hugging herself to the man, she surrendered herself to the moment.

She loved the sounds Red made when he loved her. The low grunts, growls, breathless snarls... the lustful moans as he took her deep. The long slide of his cock pushed at her tight walls, spreading them relentlessly.

Cupping his face in her hands, she captured his mouth in a fiercely passionate kiss. Their lips and tongues imitating the movement of their bodies below. The unrestrained need in that kiss made her core quiver and tug at the fat cock fucking her, drawing another pleasurable moan from the man’s throat.

“**Let me feel you...**” she whispered, kissing his jawline, “**love me...**”

“I do love you...” he whispered in a rush, “**so very much.**”

Opening his eyes, he connected with the deep azure blue staring back up at him. A slow smile spreading those incredibly sensual lips.

Capturing her mouth once more, he broke the passionate embrace.

“**Oh, God, I’m gonna come...**” she panted, the peak of her euphoria reaching a fevered pitch.

“**Lizzy...**” he implored she follow her body’s dictates, “**please don’t stop...**” his breath quickened, “**God, please.**”
Her mouth gaped, an abrupt erotic cry breaking free as she felt his crown expand, the shaft throbbing explosively.

Thrusting against her opening, Red pushed deeply into the oozing slit, forced to still his movements. Lizzy’s body responded accordingly, assisting in the incredible journey he was about to undertake. Hissing through clenched teeth, the creamy heat of his cum washed over his cock head as he gave himself over to the rapturous thrill.

A rush of endorphins blinded their senses. Hearts pounded rapidly as sounds faded into background, only to amplify in their own heads.

“There baby...” Red’s tone was pure indulgence as he basked in the afterglow of a job well done, “...there.” he whispered luxuriously.

Shaking with the intensity of the hot rush of his cum against her cervix, Liz tilted her hips, taking him further into her body, her pussy quivering about his straining organ.

“Did that help?” easing his cock back into the warm cushion, he gasped his awe, catching her panting lips hungrily in a kiss so intensely sensual, its completion left the woman breathlessly limp.

Liz closed her eyes, riding the wondrous wave crashing over her. Her calves tightened about his thighs, holding him deeply encased within her body.

“...Yes,” he whispered soothingly, “that’s what my baby needed.” he knew she was at the apex. He intended to enjoy each second afforded him.

Liz’s heart pounded loud in her ears, fire erupting in her veins. She was on a crest and the feelings were breathtakingly stunning.

Red’s large palm cupped her bottom, lifting her into his offering.

“That’s my good girl...” he encouraged silkily, nudging her sex, gently rutting her deeper, “take it all, baby.”

Liz pushed into his offering eagerly, her clit convulsing with the last surge of her climax. She slumped back into the soft bedding, panting with the exertion her body had expended.

Red moaned a breathy release, relaxing gradually.

The pleasant throb of completion radiated throughout his groin and thighs before traveling in a pulsing wave throughout his body.

Trembling with the aftershocks of their lovemaking, Red lay into her, smiling warmly when she lovingly wrapped herself about his bulky frame.

Trailing gentle kisses over her forehead, his eyes lit with adoration for the woman who had given him so much contentment. Wild, untamed locks of silky hair twisted about his fingers as if they too, wished him closer.

He nuzzled her nose affectionately, lavishing languid kisses on the receptive, full lips.

“I love you.” she murmured lazily, drifting in a state of total bliss.

His eyes flit over her face, a gentle smile reaching his mouth, “I love you.” he repeated the emotions
back, feeling the depth of their meaning.

His flaccid cock slid free, drawing a soft disgruntled sound from both. Red chuckled lowly for the action signaled the ‘moment’ ended. It had been a very nice moment indeed.

Liz shifted begrudgingly, loathe to end the moment as well.

Smiling her contentment, Liz stretched languorously before allowing the man to gather her in his arms once again.

Relaxing in his hold, she absently traced the freckles on his shoulder.

Rubbing his hand along the slope of her spine, Red smiled as Lizzy cuddled closer into his frame. Her fingers idly played with the hair covering his torso.

“Do you think…” Red began before hesitating long enough Liz’s fingers stilled in their pastime. His mind wandered to the most oblique subject. Why, he had no clue.

“Think what?” she questioned, shifting her head to look up at the man.

“I suppose it’s naïve to assume I’m not,” he sighed, his brow knitting, “she’s a mature woman after all.”

“Red what are you rambling on about?” Liz huffed.

“… A grandfather?” he muttered. The notion at once exciting, yet vexing on the other hand. Was that a vain outlook? Of course it was.

“What?” she scowled.

“Do you think I could be?” was the question of the day. He shifted to read her expression.

Liz frowned a moment before it registered. “Are you talking about the other morning with Nora?” she questioned, “…Oh, Red we were just teasing you.” Liz soothed.

She hadn’t thought at the time... she should have, of course. Considering the man had no idea where Jennifer was... it had been a cruel joke.

“I know, I know that.” Red soothed her immediately, kissing her temple to ease the growing strain she was experiencing.

He knew it had just been a joke and had reacted in kind. But the subject nagged at him, leading him to speculate about the possibility, he could very well have a grandchild out there somewhere in the world.

“It just... it made me wonder if—”

“Red, I’m so sorry.” Liz lifted to her elbow, cupping his cheek in her palm. “I didn’t take into consideration that—”

“It’s all right, sweetheart.” he stressed, kissing the sadness from her lips. “I know you didn’t mean to hurt me. And you didn’t. I just... I’ve missed so much.” he had been made to realize.

Liz moved closer into his embrace, her eyes gentle. “We will find her, Red.” she promised.

Red nodded absently once again becoming lost in his thoughts. He looked at her after a beat of
silence, needing her point of view on the matter, “But... I could be, right?”

“I suppose you could be, yes.” she murmured softly. “Jennifer and I are around the same age,” she shrugged, “and you know our own predicament.”

Red’s eyes softened, snuggling the woman closer. They were awaiting news of the baby kind, themselves.

Red sighed as his next thought materialized, “Does it bother you?”

“No.” she replied without hesitation.

“I’m old, Lizzy.”

“For an old guy, you have amazing stamina.” she giggled at the absurdity of his statement.

“Reality sucks.” he grumbled despondently.

“Your advanced age,” Liz teased, “didn’t stop you from just knocking my socks off.”

“You weren’t wearing socks,” he muttered, playfully nipping her shoulder, “or much of anything else. Thank the Lord.”

She continued on, ignoring his diversion tactic, “Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart, Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta Jones, Celine Dion and that French guy–”

“I get your point.” Red conceded. He had to admit if only to himself that he knew of a dozen couples he personally associated with that had a significant gap in their age brackets.

And they were happy. Or surface appearances would have it, at least.

“I love you,” she kissed his chin, “no matter how decrepit and aged you are.” she trailed off, hiding her mischief filled eyes.

Red tweaked her side in response, eliciting a sharp yelp from her.

Playfully wrestling with his little troublemaker, he chuckled as the woman valiantly tried to escape his reach but was too waylaid by her own laughter to make much headway.

“I suppose I should thank you for praising my talents.” he got the giggling woman under his control, kissing her smiling lips.

Her eyes softened as the man rolled to his back, taking her along with him as he went.

Laying in the quiet, Liz drew shapeless patterns across his chest, waiting patiently.

She finally understood what Red meant when he said he could almost hear her thinking.

He was practically screaming he had something on his mind... something was bothering him, though he had not said a word. Would he share freely this time or...

“How can I ever make up for everything I missed?” he confided solemnly, finally breaking the silence. “Would she even care if I tried?” he didn’t see how it could matter now, after so long a time.

“If it tells you anything,” Liz began, “I know my parents were rotten to the core but if they came back, genuinely wishing to make amends for...” she trailed off, sighing, “I honestly think Jennifer
would open herself to at least trying, Ray.”

She held his eyes for a long moment until the man grudgingly nodded, accepting her outlook on the situation.

“She couldn’t help but love you, Red.” she added, before laying her head back down, cuddling the man.

Tucking his cheek against her soft hair, he remained silent, letting the words settle.

He hugged the woman closer, needing the warmth she exuded both emotionally and physically.

He hoped beyond hope she was correct in her assumptions where his daughter was concerned.

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Red and Liz lay ensconced in the quiet seclusion of their bed until Lizzy’s stomach rumbled hungrily.

He smiled his affectionate as she tried to hide the fact obviously not ready to leave the warmth of the bed or their private time.

While Red had to agree, he wasn’t ready to leave the confines of their room and deal with the world outside either. This particular morning, unlike previous ones, started on a high note.

Both were well rested and thoroughly sated.

He sincerely hoped to do as Lizzy wished and begin each day in the same manner although he knew life rarely allowed for such luxuries.

While it went without saying he adored the physical intimacy they shared, it wasn’t just making love he enjoyed.

He totally appreciated the uninterrupted time and conversations they shared.

They often spoke on an eclectic series of subjects ranging from dream vacations to favorite subjects they studied in school.

And now, Jennifer had been addressed and how he missed so much in his daughter’s life.

They spent many such mornings, wrapped in the sheet and little else... baring themselves to one another on the most intimate level imaginable. It went beyond the physical.

Is that part of why they were so open with one another in these moments? They couldn’t hide their faults or imperfections physically... so why not go ahead and share confidences which bared their souls as well?

These unhurried early mornings together were a favorite part of his day and he knew they meant a great deal to Lizzy as well.

Having experienced rushed mornings where there was barely time to savor a cup of coffee, let alone greet their other half was a small blessing many couples took for granted.

He recalled many times arriving on base, realizing that Carla had not returned his wish for a good day or said ‘I love you’ as he closed the door behind him.
Lizzy had experienced much of the same, within the confines of her marriage.

Stolen moments where a couple were alone, together, were not only cherished but beneficial to any relationship.

If they should make love in the midst of that perfect morning and share stolen kisses as they dressed... it made their day that much better. Or at least, it did Red’s.

And truth told, he secretly thought, should something happen to him he would know he left Lizzy with a pleasant memory of intimate private time... and now the words, ‘I love you’.

As much as they would love to continue on with the lackadaisical way the day started off... duty called.

After enjoying an extended breakfast with Lizzy, they both more than reluctantly readied themselves for work.

Liz settled into her routine, opening her email. She smiled when she was greeted with the new office gossip which Aram supplied on a regular basis. Along with the good stuff, a mountain of new files for her to profile also filled her inbox.

Red seemed to be engrossed in a lengthy conference with Michael Fairfax involving the little incident in Cartagena.

While she was not privy to all the details of what exactly transpired, or the ‘why of it all’... she did know Red informed her he had to leave for a brief trip to New York on Michael’s behalf.

Much to her vexation.

The man had just been shot in the head, for heaven’s sake, which she pointed out in no uncertain terms. Her words fell on deaf ears.

Red had wrapped his arms about her waist, drawing the pouting woman against him.

“I'll be taking Francis with me.” he soothed her fretful brow, “How much trouble can we get into?” he teased.

“God only knows.” it was vowed. She lifted blue eyes at that, taking solace that her friend would be there to pick up the slack if need be.

“You’ll call...” she lowered her eyes, fingering his lapel and tie, “when you land?”

“I'll call every chance I get.” he assured. “I promise, this won’t take too long.”

“It better not.” she frowned, stroking a gentle finger over the scab on his head.

“Trust me, Lizzy,” he rumbled deeply, “I’ll do everything I can to be here in time to enjoy another wake up call with you.”

Red held his smile admirably, until the woman flushed faintly, rolling her eyes to cover the moment.

“I love you.” Red murmured, a peace settling in his chest to be able to say the words so freely.

Liz relaxed in his embrace, her eyes clearing. She ‘loved’ hearing the phrase, “I love you too.”

Reluctantly kissing Red goodbye. She wistfully waved her farewells until he pulled from the drive,
no longer in sight.

She closed the door behind her, leaning into the solid wood, listening to the stillness of the house.

She never realized how much the men’s presence permeated the space until now. It was as if they had taken the energy, the soul of the space... the essence, along with their departure.

She couldn’t be sure if the quiet was a good or bad thing at present.

Usually, Francis would already be here providing distraction with his charismatic charm and good-natured laughter, but since he was accompanying Red on this outing, it left Liz a bit out-of-sorts.

She pushed off the door facing, resolved to getting on with the day at hand. Looking off down the hall, she smiled at the sight of the budding blooms and lush lawn through the French doors...

What a lovely sight. It cheered her heart. She pulled up slowly, her steps halting as a thought occurred.

The normal wired restlessness she experienced when Red left... was subdued. She felt at ease somehow, even without Francis here to fill the void.

There was a different vibe suddenly. This wasn’t so bad after all. She continued on absently, her destination predetermined.

A small smile curved her lips as she remembered the activities of this morning. She was incredibly pleased Red had been so receptive to her early morning demands.

But then, he had been since the first time she made sexual advances towards him.

She had been so nervous that first time, but the ache between her legs demanded she comply to her body’s dictates.

Tom had always been slow on the uptake. He would blink bleary eyes, go to the bathroom, let the dog out... leaving her in bed writhing anxiously.

Tom left her feeling guilty for having awakened him and frustrated sexually because usually, he would get off and leave her in the lurch. Fucker that he was...

Red, on the other hand, never hesitated to deliver.

She dearly loved the man’s ability to conform to any situation.

He was awake and ready to perform within the blink of an eye. And perform he did. Red made her feel sexy, sensual and loved. She never felt neglected with him.

She really appreciated that Red didn’t fuck and run.

She really loved when they got to spend quality time together. It was an amazing feeling knowing Red wanted to be with her even after the fact.

But today, it felt different.

To anyone else, it may seem like no big deal.

That he shared self-doubt... trusted her enough to confide an incredibly personal detail about himself. He expressed his love for her in ways she never imagined a man could... or would bother.
She felt an inner peace she never experienced before.

So many little things were coming together so seamlessly.

His need to be certain she was in this for the long haul. Her need to know she was his confidant. So many pressing questions were being answered.

Pulling her phone free, she impulsively shot off a quick text, telling Red how much she loved him. She grinned a moment later when Red, who hated to text, replied in kind... he said it so much better than she ever could have, of course.

Yes, it was the little things that meant so much... just as Red always said.

June 3

As promised, Red called the moment they landed in New York. He promised another call back shortly with a progress report on the issue at hand because, “I know how you like to gossip and carry on about things that are really none of your concern.”

She laughed, sticking out her tongue.

“There are better things to do with that tongue little girl.”

Liz had blinked her surprise to know the man could sense her reaction even over the phone.

Four hours later, she was becoming angsty, admittedly when Red’s expected call did not materialize. But finally he chimed in again just when she was about to make contact herself.

An unexpected encounter with a Blacklister had thrown a wrench into the works.

Red was juggling priorities.

He was keeping tabs on the guy but he needed assistance from the team as manpower was in short supply this day.

Liz jotted down the pertinent information to relay.

“It will take time to get there, Red. They don’t have your resources.” she realized.

“Tell them to pack an overnight bag.”

“No...” she moaned, “I was hoping you could come back this evening.”

“From your sweet lips to God’s ear,” he sighed, “but no, baby. This will take some doing but if they move their asses we can contain this bastard in no time, considering.”

She had nodded her understanding.

“This fucker deals with chemical warfare,” the man continued, “I want him gone, out of the picture before I return home.”
“Of course,” she commented, “I just miss your cock.”

“You have all those little toys in the bedside table.”

She wrinkled her nose, “Not the same.”

“Not even the purple one?” he teased.

“Is this going to be one of ‘those’ calls?” she settled down to enjoy the ride if so.

Red checked his watch, “Give me a rain check. I want to Google the subject... get it right before I attempt an assault on your sensitivities.”

“You’ve never had phone sex before?” she perked up totally interested in his reply.

“You’ll never believe this story,” Red settled back to relate the tale, “I was in Baltimore in March of ’84, cost me nearly $4,000 to buy this thing...” he winced with the memory, “was talking on the Motorola DynaTAC 8000X, one of the first handheld cellphones...”

Liz held her amusement. She always enjoyed these insightful history lessons.

“I was talking with Petty Officer Virginia Sherman one quiet spring night while on night patrol on base...”

“You were talking on a cell phone while on patrol?”

“And one thing led to another, as things invariably will...” he cocked his head smiling at the reminiscence.

“Bet you looked great in your uniform.” she had often imagined the image.

“And we were just about to reach the pinnacle of all that smoldering pent-up desire...” the man steadfastly ignored the interruptions.

“This is turning me on actually.” Liz quipped.

“When I dropped the damn phone into my lap...” he grimaced accordingly, “needless to say spoiling an otherwise perfect moment.”

Liz tried to stifle her chuckle.

“My God, do you remember how large those phones were?” he shook his head regretfully, “it was like dropping a brick on my who-who.”

She spit out an infectious bout of laughter, “Your who-who?”

“It’s a wonder I can perform at all, considering.” he enjoyed her laughter so very much, even if it was at his own expense.

“I’m thinking about touching my own who-who after such a titillating tale.” she confided.

His throaty chuckle alleviated her doldrums, “You behave,” he instructed, “I’ll make it up to you and your who-who when I get there.”

It was safe to say, Liz was more than ready for the man’s return.
Red called early the next morning, informing her the team nabbed their man. He sounded tired but upbeat.

While they had been gone, Liz had taken the opportunity to dive into work. Aside from meals Silas demanded she eat in the dining room to give herself a break, she stayed ensconced in her room. Pumping out profile after profile.

...Until now. A snag had put an abrupt halt to her flow.

“Stupid thing!” Liz groused, punching the keys on her laptop excessively hard. After hours of research and two restarts to her computer, she barely had a paragraph written. All because this stupid computer wasn’t cooperating with her.

This criminal appeared to possess no past or present except one sheet of a general report on his recent arrest. The net could produce nothing else what-so-ever.

No digital footprint.

Was Google purposely screwing with her?

She checked possible issues with her search engines using her own name. Not much information out there, but enough to know she existed. She didn’t have social media accounts but an old article appeared in her hometown newspaper which amused her.

There was the engagement announcement and wedding photos dutifully displayed. *My God, was that the hairstyle she had chosen?*

She appeared on the census report under Sam’s name.

She had even been registered with Classmates. Elizabeth Keen did indeed exist in the world, somehow.

But... not this bastard.

She threw up her hands, considering stopping for the day but an idea struck her. She wasn’t a quitter, after all.

She mischievously typed in Red’s name. He had his own Wikipedia page. *Color her impressed.* She shook her head, reading it if only out of morbid curiosity.

She read studiously, a fixed scowl on her face. “Well, that’s just a lie.” she disagreed vehemently with several ‘facts’ listed.

How the hell did someone issue a correction on this erroneous information? She was incensed for Red but she knew it didn’t really matter to the man what people thought or said.

She wished she could develop that thick skin. She wasn’t at the point just yet.
Scrolling, she crept up on his personal information, only mildly disappointed that she was not listed as someone of import. His first wife was afforded four entire paragraphs.

It was a silly thought of course, but there was a part of her that wished she was listed as someone significant to Red. Humans were so petty.

Smiling to herself, she cleared the page. She was absolutely sure now that her equipment was working properly.

Reentering her search parameters of the man she was profiling, she once again hit a dead end.

Typing in another name, her fingers hesitated over the keyboard. She suddenly realized... she didn’t know Silas’ last name.

She never asked, and it had never been supplied. Though, she was positive if she were to ask, Silas would say he didn’t need one, as he was just that special.

He would be among the ranks of the other one name wonders such as Socrates, Pythagoras, Cher, Bono, Prince... or The Artist Formally Known As...

Liz chuckled at her thoughts, sipping her coffee absently.

She sat the cup aside, a brilliant thought striking her.

The woman rapidly typed in Francis Holbrook’s name.

She waited patiently, chomping into one of Nora’s still warm chocolate chip cookies. She had settled more comfortably in her seat. The screen lit up with paragraph after paragraph of neat print.

She coughed painfully as she unintentionally swallowed the steaming liquid. Liz’s mouth fell agape as she scanned the list.

Scrolling the numerous pages, she attempted to comprehend sentences she saw.

Keywords popped out at her, one after another.

*Tax evasion, racketeering, extortion, conspiracy, weapons trafficking, money laundering... conspiracy to commit murder...*

*Murder??*

Her heart pounded loudly in her ears.

Criminal charge after criminal charge splayed out before her very eyes.

Sure, she had surmised the guy was *some* sort of criminal...

She hastily ran to the top of the page once more, grasping at straws. She had surely typed in the wrong name.

*Oh my God...*

Liz sat back, stunned... confused... she didn’t know what to think... to do... to feel.

*Fantastic profiling skills you have there, Lizzy.*
She felt like a fool.

Snippets of past conversations flashed through her mind, past actions, scenarios....

Francis vouching for Red Reddington with Antonio Crocetti’s brother. Red’s total belief in Francis’ abilities to handle a ‘war’ as it were after Carver approached her in Las Vegas.

Francis’ total lack of concern or fear when he and Red had gone up against Tom or Cheung....

Her nerves were shot, her hands shook as she sat her cup down, the porcelain vibrating against the wood. Setting one hand over the other, she placed it solidly on the desk.

She stared at the object morosely, clenching her hands tightly together.

She instinctively reached for the phone, retracting her hand as if the device were red hot.

What would she say? How could she possibly get any coherent thoughts out?

Her eyes flitted to the walkie-talkie constantly by her side.

Did Silas even know?

Of course Silas knew.

She clasp her hand to her mouth.

She was an FBI agent for God’s sake. She should not be associating....

What an absurd thing to say! She already was associating with a known criminal. A very well known one!

She was in love with the guy!

She was going to kill the guy when she saw him for keeping her in the dark like...

“My darling little sugar baby,” the guy’s warm, earthy voice filled the space around her, “you home?”

Liz released the breath she had unconsciously been holding, relief washing over her.

She had not heard the front door open, so engrossed in the horrible discovery she had blundered into.

She raised from the chair hastily, scrambling forward to the opened door of her bedroom only to pull up short at another recognized intruder joining in on the conversation.

“Afraid she’s off dwindling down your fortune?”

Liz panicked, clear and simple, rushing back to the laptop, minimizing the tabs with lightening speed.

“Woman of the house...” Red was in high spirits, using his Irish accent freely.

She could hear footsteps nearing, her eyes darting to the screen.

“Where’s me tea?” the lilting voice enquired.

“Oh shit.” she breathed out, turning about just as her desktop image appeared. She plastered a smile on her face.
“Irish, eh?” Francis was nodding his approval as they entered the room, his attention on his companion so Liz had an opportunity to settle a bit before the inevitable face to face confrontation.

“I can do French really well.” Francis smirked. “Or so says my dates.” the man preened. “Though, my ‘Italian’ is perfection.” he boasted. “Want to hear it?”

“I prefer your Klingon.” Red tossed his fedora on the bed spread, leaning to kiss Liz’s mouth gently. “Hello, baby.”

“That new system already has some bugs.” Francis was checking his messages, his face askew.

“We expected that.” Red’s attention was elsewhere.

Liz kept a bright smile going, her system reeling in the younger man’s presence, in truth.

“Everyone needs to be patient and let things evolve.” Red’s scowl had deepened. He pulled Lizzy closer.

“Therein lies the problem, doesn’t it?” Francis rolled his eyes. “I’m all for it, but the old bastards....” he groused, “that remains to be seen.”

“You know, they think the same about you young hooligans.” Red cocked a brow.

“Thanks... at least I’ve been upgraded from street rat to a hooligan. Guess that means I’m getting somewhere” Francis smiled cheekily. “As for the ‘old ways’,” he air quoted, “sure, some methods may work still,” he granted, “but the updated methods aren’t all that bad either.”

“I don’t always agree with them either, Francis.” Red conceded. “But you can learn a lot from their side as well.”

“Antonio, I don’t mind.” Francis admitted. “He’s moved with the times. But the others...” he groaned. “Now I know how people felt going up against the Luddites.” he sighed.

Red pulled up short, looking at the boy queerly.

“What?” Francis frowned. “It may not be the Industrial Revolution they’re against, but it’s the same difference, for the most part.”

“No,” Red waved the issue off, “I was just surprised you knew what a Luddite was.”

“I do read you know.” Francis screwed up his face, slightly annoyed.

“I assumed you did...” Red nodded, “I didn’t think you had graduated past Mad magazine.”

“They did an issue on the subject.” Francis chuckled, defending his choice of reading material. “But no, my source was from Uncle John’s Bathroom Reader.”

“Of course.” Red shook his head woefully.

“If you didn’t want me to read them, you shouldn’t have turned me on to them.” Francis shrugged the conversation aside.

“What are you two talking about?” Liz asked politely, sensing Red’s overt interest.

Red cocked his head to one side, “All right, what’s going on?”
Liz did not lose her carefully controlled façade, “What do you mean?”

“You just got home,” Francis muttered, “and you’re already in trouble. How the hell did you manage that?”

Red shrugged, just as baffled as Francis. But had to concur, there seemed to be a shift in the Cosmo’s since he was last here, though he wasn’t sure why.

“Well, this should prove interesting.” he too wondered at the woman’s mood, shifting his weight to the other foot, “What have I done now?”

Sighing heavily, Liz shook her head for the lack of decorum. Sometimes Red could be so perfect. And then so perfectly male in his denseness.

“What have I done now?” she pinched her lips sternly.

Red sensed his faux pas but didn’t really get the problem.

His eyes widened slightly, a thought occurring to him. Perhaps in his absence, Lizzy had learned news about their little predicament?

Francis laughed quietly, shaking his own head with open sympathy. “You’re digging a grave man!” he warned. “Stop while you’re ahead.”

Red smiled, “Pass me the shovel.” he quipped, “It’s just, Francis.” he hooked his thumb to the guy.

“Still, a little propriety wouldn’t kill you sometimes.” Liz muttered. “It could be a very private matter.” she narrowed the pretty eyes once more.

“Drop an anvil next time... it’s more subtle.” Francis smiled at the woman’s vexation, taking the folder Red handed him. “I’ll check to see how things are moving along.” he said, waving the folder about. “When you’re done getting your ass reamed... call.”

Liz sat at her desk, her legs giving way.

Red listened as the man’s footsteps cleared the hallway before pulling a chair up in front of her.

“Now, you want to tell me what’s wrong?” Red gave her every bit of his attention.

“Do you know who Francis is!” she hissed quietly, reopening the page she had previously viewed.

Red scowled slightly unprepared for the turn in conversation. He had thought...

“Of course you know!” the woman rolled her eyes expressively, jabbing the screen.

Red leaned forward, his expressionless eyes scanning the page. He scrolled the page a little, sitting back in his seat... chuckling.

Liz’s mouth gaped, then closed, only to gape open once more.

“Francis is not an Associate of the Mafia.” Red shook his head at the absurdity.

Liz pointed at the screen again offering proof, “Google doesn’t lie!”

“In this case, and the case of Silas’ mystery mole... it does.” he sighed, getting comfortable in his

“What the hell are you saying!” she bitched.

“When I happened upon Francis again, he was a street rat.” Red smiled, remembering back all those years. “I suppose he felt he fit the surroundings.” his eyes softened, as had his voice.

“Street rat?” Liz searched her memory for the meaning of the slang expression.

“The ears on the street for a mobster I had dealings with.” he sat back, crossing his ankles. He was getting comfortable for story time, she sensed as much.

“No one noticed him hanging around because he was young, looked appropriately grungy. They thought he was just some homeless kid.”

“How did he get from street rat to... to... whatever he is today?” she gestured wildly to the computer screen.

“His present position, you mean?” Red enquired.

She hesitated, “Yes... yes, I mean that!”

“Me.” Red lifted gray eyes, holding her blue ones easily.

“I despised the bastard he was running for, thought he treated his men like shit, especially the incredibly loyal ones, like Francis.” Red recalled the beginning with a certain fondness.

“Go on!” she prompted urgently, her nerves strung tightly.

“I gave Francis information about some product that would rake in lots of cash,” Red shrugged, “and instead of taking it to the Boss, as was protocol,” he grinned mischievously, “Francis took it to the bank, like I hoped he would.” he stated proudly. “Made a name for himself overnight.”

“But... the guy, this mobster guy, he didn’t kill Francis for... for what he did?”

“He tried, but we were there.” Red shrugged. “It was messy, it was violent, but Francis and my team won out in the end.”

“So, then what happened.” she was on tenterhooks.

“Francis took his place.” he spread his hands accordingly.

It seemed an obvious progression to Red.

Liz’s eyes widened at the implication. “Are you saying that Francis is a... a... mob boss?”

“That is exactly what I’m saying.” he nodded. “Well, to be more precise, Francis is considered the Godfather of the Mafia.”

“No...” she faltered, “that... can’t be,” she was totally confused, “...Antonio.”

“Despite his age, Antonio stepped aside.” Red explained, “Antonio is lower in the ranks than Francis.”

Liz sat back, drained. She took a moment to digest all that had been said. “Francis treats him—”
“With the respect the man has earned.” Red replied. “Besides, Antonio paved the way for Francis.”

Liz’s scowl increased a little, “Why would he do that? I thought once they had the power...”

“Antonio is smarter than that besides,” Red stated, “it was time to step down.”

Liz seemed deflated, “It’s not like in the movies...”

“Despite his age at the time, Antonio demanded the men give Francis the respect of his rank.” Red clarified, chuckling for her outlook, “He had fought for it and won, after all.”

“So he’s...” Liz’s finger shook as she pointed to all the charges listed.

“Well, he’s no Gambino or Luciano, if that’s what you’re asking, not yet anyway.” Red shrugged. “But essentially, yes. Or to an extent.”

Liz’s face paled considerably at the thought Francis could... no, that didn't even make sense.

"I don't understand..." she confessed, "Francis is so... so..."

"Stupid?" he chuckled, "I assure you Lizzy, that is just a façade he projects. He is far from... stupid."

She looked at him doubtfully.

“In his defense though, most of those charges and some others not listed, pertain to me as well.” Red motioned, “Have you read my page?”

She looked guiltily aside.

“For instance, mine states I’m in the prostitution business.” he explained. “And you know I would never involve myself in that.”

“But m-murder?” her eyes fell sadly, as did her hopes.

“Don’t worry, Lizzy. Francis doesn’t go around putting people in cement over shoes.” Red chided. “He’s actually cleaned up a lot of what the bastard before him did.” he tried to sound impartial. “Let’s just say the neighborhoods that used to be terrified of seeing these guys coming, now instead, feel relief.”

Liz felt torn. Before, Francis had just been a funny guy she enjoyed spending time with, even knowing he did some off the book business.

He made her laugh. She had fun with him and was so fond of him, it hurt to think...

She really liked Francis, a lot.

No, she loved Francis. He was her best-friend. Her only true friend.

Now, she discovered he’s like Tony Soprano.

You can sure pick them, Lizzy.

Red watched the woman growing paler by the second and knew for a fact what she was thinking.

“Lizzy, look at me.” he dipped his head, finding the woman’s troubled eyes. “Your instincts tell you, that you like Francis, it’s all right.” he assured.
“Why didn’t you tell me.” she wailed.

“Because you love him.” Red clasped her hand, gentling her fingers.

“I saw how close you were getting and knew that given time, what he is wouldn’t matter to you.” Red told the truth. “He’s a good man.” he squeezed her slim fingers comfortably, understanding her state. “I would tell you otherwise, trust me.”

Hope filled her eyes. She wanted so desperately to believe him.

Red slid forward, his legs bracketing hers. “You remember when I warned you about Edward?” he said quietly. “That I said he was no good, and I was right?”

“Yes.”

“I’m telling you,” he rubbed her knee soothingly, “Francis is good people.”

Liz read his features for a moment, finding the absolute truth staring her back in the face.

“Okay.” She breathed her relief.

She liked Francis so much, she would have been heartbroken to find out he was ‘that’ type of person later on.

“And Mark, Ben?” she questioned, suddenly apprehensive.

“I wouldn’t have let you get close to them if I thought they were totally corrupt.” he teased, “I would have told you to keep your distance.”

“All right.” She didn’t have many friends, and obviously wasn’t a great judge of character. She had grown close to the men. She felt better that Red vouched for the guys.

“Granted, anyone can turn disloyal in the blink of an eye,” he reminded her to be on alert, “but Francis... he will never turn against me.” he stressed. “Ever.”

“Because of your history?” she questioned.

Red’s mouth pulled into a smile, as he chuckled quietly. “...Yes... partly.”

Liz’s brow furrowed at the small smile on the man’s face. “What?”

A soft knock on the door interrupted the session. Red pushed out of the chair to respond, leaving Liz with more questions than answers.

But on the bright side she had received more answers than she ever imagined or usually received in one setting with Red Reddington.

A few moments later Red was back at her side, reseated and patiently waiting.

“What are you doing here?” Red tapped the papers beside her, breaking her reverie.

“Oh, this guy got me started on this journey.” she sighed, flicking the papers in disgust. “I kept searching for anything on him but came up empty each time.” she sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. “There is absolutely no footprint at all.”

She slid the papers over to the man beside her, her frustration resurfacing. Red looked them over
carefully, taking his time.

“No birth certificate, census record, not even a parking ticket!” Liz sighed heavily.

“Well, maybe if you looked under his real name.” Red drawled, having sensed the woman’s aggravation.

“Are you telling me I’ve been sitting here for I don’t know how many freaking hours looking for someone who—” she snapped.

“His name is not Timothy Phillips.” he shrugged, gingerly sliding the folder back her way. “It’s Mario Rosselli.”

“I can’t freaking believe...” she gritted through her teeth. Liz dropped her head back against the chair, whining her despair.

Red stood up, looking down at the scrunched face. “Baby, do yourself a favor and start shooting me a picture of them or the preliminary paperwork you have,” he chuckled, dropping a small kiss to her forehead, “just on the off chance I might know them.

Raising to his full height, he carded his fingers through her long hair, easing the tension in increments until she sighed and relaxed.

Flipping her page over, she sat up straight, putting pen to paper, ready to begin her renewed search, “Hope spring eternal.” she mused, “If you have the right freaking name.” she reached for the keyboard, drawing up short.

“Red?” she looked up at the man, a nagging issue plaguing her, “What’s Silas’ last name? Better yet, is Silas, Silas’ name?”

The man snickered under his breath, shaking his head in open amusement. He opened his mouth to issue a reply, only to have the sound of a ring tone interrupt.

Growling under her breath, “I don’t believe this!” Liz staunchly returned to her keyboard... ignoring Red’s throaty chuckle of amusement as he answered the call.

“Told you, you were a gossip.” he quipped lightly.

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After lunch, Liz lost Red to the Universe once again. But now that she had Mario Rosselli’s real name, the profile came together quickly. She signed off on it after about an hour.

She looked at the large stack of manila folders requiring her attention with a menacing glare.

She used the excuse that it was prudent to wait for Red’s input before continuing, which also lessened the guilt about–

“What’d you do?” Silas breezed his way in, holding a large vase of flowers, “blow Red during lunch?” he held the bouquet aloft.

Liz sighed, pushing up out of her chair, meeting the man halfway, directing he sit them on the dresser.

“If I had done that, I would’ve got chocolates too.” she scanned the large arrangement absently.
“What?” Silas had sensed something amiss from her reaction but was waylaid when Joe entered, holding a box in capable hands.

Silas grasped the flowers hastily, shoving them at the unsuspecting guard, “Get them out of here.”

Joe rushed from the room, vanishing from sight as quickly as he had arrived.

“You didn’t deliver flowers and chocolates to me, did you?” Liz had followed her own instincts, having dialed Red hastily, “...I didn’t think so.”

Silas pulled the radio from his hip, depressing the button. “Put the package in the box.” the man ordered. “I’ll handle it shortly.”

“No, we both thought they were from you at first,” she explained, “then I really looked at the bouquet and it just wasn’t your style.” she confessed her misgivings.

She looked at her guard, finding the man scowling as he talked quietly into his radio.

“Silas made Joe get rid of them...” she further added. “Easy come, easy go, I guess.” she listened attentively, then handed the phone out for her guard.

“The package is secure.” Silas confirmed for Red. “I will address it when you arrive back.”

Shutting down the phone, he handed it over, shaking his head. “We’re going to have to take extra precautions.”

“We couldn’t have known.” she soothed the man.

She knew he was worried about his oversight. If it had been anyone else, it wouldn’t have been odd to receive flowers from a man, especially one as thoughtful as Red Reddington.

But then, they weren’t just anyone else. And Red, being the type of man he was... would deliver his gifts personally.

They were all treading into new territory here and it seemed, everyone would have to be on their guard.

She knew it was going to eat at Silas all day, or until Red told him to let it go... but it didn’t occur to her either that something was wrong until she really looked the bouquet over.

They were beautiful flowers but... they were all white.

Red would have gone out of his way to infuse color into the arrangement. To have meaning behind any gift he sent.

The flowers he had given her the night of Francis’ party, were vivid and fragrant. In hindsight, they were a perfect mixture of friendship and admiration.

The flowers he gave her on their first date had been just as startling, but one solid color. On her return home from New York, she had been curious why he picked orange roses, and had been pleasantly surprised to find they signified a new journey, but also the growing desire and passion Red felt for her.

“Silas, it’s all right.” she frowned at her guard who stood brooding by the doorway. “Red is thoughtful. It’s not an impossibility he would send me flowers.”
“No.” Silas grated his rising anger for his lapse. “Red would have called to alert me of their arrival.”

“All right...” she granted, “but let me ask you this,” she looked up at the man, “have you ever been put in this position before? Of taking a delivery of flowers for a woman Red is dating?”

“That’s not his style.” Silas replied.

“Well, that surprises me, as well.” she confided, a little embarrassed truth told. “So... we’re all new at this. Aren’t we?”

Silas grudgingly nodded his understanding.

“It’s settled then, we’ll just have Red inform you of any incoming deliveries, so you know they’re safe.” she found the simple solution. “But don’t you dare tell me anything is coming!” she warned playfully. “I want to be surprised.”

“I just don’t want you getting killed.” Silas sighed impatiently. “He’ll be in a horrendous mood if that happens.”

Liz’s shoulders slumped at the easy way the thought rolled off the man’s tongue. He didn’t seem all that upset at the thought of her demise.

“I will go out of my way to prevent that from happening.” she stated sarcastically.

“You get a paper cut and Red gripes about it all week.” he bitched, continuing his tirade. “Can you imagine the alternative?”

“I’d rather not, you morbid bastard.” she told the truth.

Red came sweeping into the room, making a beeline for the woman. He drew her into a crushing embrace, burying his face in the lush fragrance of her hair.

“I may never buy you flowers again.” the man murmured into her neckline, so very glad to feel her safe and unharmed.

“You better buy me flowers again.” the woman chuckled into his shoulder.

“Where are they?” Red turned his attention to the guard, his entire manner businesslike.

“Joe put everything in the box.”

“What the hell is this box you keep talking about?” Liz demanded.

“Any suspicious packages are put in the box in case they explode.” Silas replied evenly.

“You put the flowers...” she screwed up her face, “in a blast resistant box?”

“The liquid they are contained in could be explosive, for all we know.” Silas stated off-handedly.

“Is he always so paranoid?” Liz questioned, half teasing, half... not.


“Are you kidding?” she scoffed, “You expect me to work? I’ve worked all morning without a break.”
“You had lunch.” Silas retorted.

Liz gave him a ‘shut-up’ look.

“Read a book.” Red suggested. “Just don’t come out of this room. Silas needs to concentrate and he can’t do that if he’s bickering with you.”

She sat at the end of the bed, grudgingly. Already waiting.

“When we’re done, I’ll let you know.”

“When we’re done,” she mimicked, “we’ll let you know.”

Red gave her a look that spoke volumes.

The minutes passed at a snails pace. Red came back sticking his head in the door waving for her to follow twenty long minutes later.

Bolting from the edge of her seat, Liz trailed after the man as they made their way to the guest house garage, of all places.

“I’m sure you’ve made the connection that the flowers all signified purity, innocence...” Red related what he had learned himself, informing the woman of the progress so far.

“And the package?” she questioned Silas and a carefully looked over box.

Silas waited by the object in question, his look one of sheer boredom.

Liz glanced over the articles on display.

“A purity ring and other paraphernalia.” Red sighed, waving over the host of gifts the package had enclosed.

“Okay...” she drawled, “he knows I haven’t been a virgin in a while.” she lifted a pensive stare.

“Apparently, you are to wear these,” Red smiled, “to ward off my evil spirit,” he explained, presenting a letter that had arrived with the package, “and I’m sure to curb my sexual advances.” the man’s brow crooked oddly.

“That ship has sailed.” Dembe prophesied sagely.

“Yeah, he’s a little late to the party, isn’t he?” she grinned. “Besides, to my way of thinking, he really should have sent them to you.” she batted her eyes coquettishly at Red.

“Why, because you are evil or just a hussy.” Silas muttered.

“Well, I’m not evil.” the woman smirked a reply.

“Says you...” Silas grumbled, fingerling the exposed parts of the box absently. “It’s totally clean.” he shrugged any concern aside.

“From now on, all packages are to be screened.” Red directed. “All deliveries—”

“Confirmed before passing the gate.” Silas finished the thought verbatim.

“What are we gonna do with that.” she gestured to the gifts.
“They’re going in an off site safe.” Red handed them over to Joe, who in turn handed them to David who looked around for someone to hand off to, coming up empty.

“Why,” Liz asked cheekily, “do you think they’ll explode?”

“No,” Silas replied sourly, “but they may be bugged, twirp.”

“Seriously... are you always this paranoid?” she questioned once more.

“Since you’ve become so popular with the psycho crowd?” the man answered sweetly. “...Yes.”

“I don’t recall Jared advertising the ‘Wiretap Your Obsession’ jewelry collection?”

“It’s their new Fall line,” Silas narrowed his eyes, “on the shelves for the Christmas shopping season.”

Red tried to concentrate on the newly arrived communication.

“Lizzy?” he got the woman’s attention away from her guard. “Before we went to Vegas and just again recently, this jackass said to meet him in your special place and that you would know how to contact him,” he recalled. “Do you know what he’s talking about?”

“Why don’t I just go ask him?” Silas offered politely. Dembe stood as well by his friend, ready to go confront Tom on a level he personally had wished to do, for some time now.

Red pointedly ignored the men.

Liz thought of places Tom would consider special to them, but couldn’t pinpoint a single one. None of their old haunts held any special meaning to her now.

“Nothing is really coming to mind,” she shrugged, “the park near campus where we first met, the theater where we had our first kiss...” she named off a couple, ‘gagging’ slightly on the latter.

She fell silent having enjoyed Silas’ chuckle for her antics. Liz dug deep into her mind, trying for anything that might be of use.

“You know...” she began, “when I was dating Nik, I started seeing Tom on the side a little.”

“Like I said,” Silas muttered quietly, “...hussy.”

Liz’s lips quivered with amusement, but she forged on. “I would call this restaurant to make plans with him.” she scrunched her nose, a little put off by her behavior then as well. “I don’t recall the name or number, really. I’ll have to think about it or,” she perked up, “maybe I can drive there.”

Red nodded slowly, getting lost in his own thoughts. “We’ll take a drive,” he decided. “Did you have a specific time you would call?”

“I think it was about seven.” she remembered back.

“Silas, has Tom left at any specific times?” Red questioned the guard.

“He comes, he goes” the man replied.

“Not much has changed, I see.” Liz muttered aside.

Silas chortled quietly, before returning his attention to Red, “About three times a day. No specific
times.”

“\text{I want you to make note of the times he—}” Red was handed a small book. He started to peruse the listings inside.

“And if he does leave at seven?” she craned her neck to see what Silas had written down.

“Maybe we can trap the bastard.” Red said.

Liz glanced at the clock, grimacing. “Oh shit, I’m gonna be late.”

“Late?” Red frowned.

“For physical therapy.” Liz reminded. “Silas?” she looked at her guard, “I can be ready in five.”

“When I see it, I’ll believe it.” the man inclined his head, “We’ll make it. I’ll get the car.”

“Thank you.” she smiled as the man retreated from the room.

Red shook his head, “Baby, I don’t think—”

“Red, I have to go.” Liz reminded. “Plus, I’m not going to let some psycho control my movements.”

The man hung his head, nodding, “You’re right.” he apologized with his tone. “I just–”

“Worry...” Liz smiled. It was nice to know he truly cared.

“...Yes.” Red sighed.

“It’s a couple miles away.” she cooed. She snuggled up to the man, peppering his chin with kisses, “And I’ll only be there for an hour.”

“Are you managing me again?” Red looked down at the upturned face, holding his smile.

“I don’t know...” she winced adorably, her eyes sparkling with humor. “Is it working?”

Red lowered his mouth to hers, gently flicking his tongue against her full mouth, “...Yes.”

Liz batted her long lashes, drawing a chuckle from the man. “Go on,” he pat her bottom, “before I manage you.”

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“They’re fucking useless!” Silas spat as he opened Liz’s door, giving her a hand into the back seat. “I should have taken the bastard down right there and then... show him how it felt!”

“It was an accident, Silas.” Liz cradled her wrist, situating herself in the seat. “I’m fine, I promise.”

“No... you’re not.” Silas closed the back door, yanking the driver door open, “What kind of idiot trainer doesn’t spot his client?”

Liz smiled as the man continued to grumble his discontent, pulling the car out into the thoroughfare. It really had been an accident. Liz had felt her wrist going weak, tried to compensate for it... and lost her grip.

She thought the exercise too strenuous so early on, but she could have spoken up. The action had yanked the wrist painfully, leaving it bruising and swelling.
“I’ll just put some ice on it,” she inserted her two cents, “it’ll be fine in the morning.”

“Stupid mother fuc...” Silas muttered, executing a right turn onto a less traveled road, “Are you hungry?”

Liz guffawed before she could catch it, “You really do hang out with Red too much.” she patted the man’s shoulder, referring to his sudden change of topics , “And no, I’m fine.”

The man continued to rant as drove, his eyes constantly checking the back-up crew in the inconspicuous SUV tailing them.

“I don’t know why you don’t just tell them to fuck off,” the man snapped, “tell them I’m training you.”

“I did tell them.” she smiled sweetly.

“So why the hell are we still going?” the man gritted his teeth.

“They said you weren’t sanctioned by the FBI.”

“Thank God for small favors!” Silas continued on his tirade. “It’d be an embarrassment to be associated with such morons!”

Liz covered her mouth, hiding her smile and holding her laughter. The low ringing of her phone drew the woman’s attention from the perturbed guard to her bag.

Rifling through the dark contents, she pulled the lit phone free.

“Hello?” she sighed, shaking her head as Silas hit the steering wheel once again, his anger still high.

“Hello, my little escapee.” the velvet menace washed over her like a smothering fog.

The voice instantly sent shivers up Liz’s spine. The urge to vomit surged with the dark distressing chuckle it delivered.

“Who is this...” Liz questioned shakily, though in her gut... she all ready knew.

“Oh...” the man tsked sorrowfully, “have we forgotten me so soon.”

Silas turned his head, his jaw pulsing. He had heard the tremor in the woman’s voice loud and clear, alerting him to a problem. His eyes met her frantically searching ones in the rearview mirror.

Liz stared at the phone helplessly, before blinking away her inaction, putting it on speaker for Silas to hear.

“I haven’t forgotten you.” the man continued on, intoning pleasantly, “As a matter of fact, I lovingly recall the sensation of your small bones breaking in my hands just like it was yesterday.”

Liz wrapped her hand tightly around her throbbing wrist, squeezing the flesh until her fingers tingled from the loss of blood supply.

“I saw you...” it continued, his voice making her stomach pitch sickeningly, “with the older woman...”

Liz lifted startled eyes, meeting Silas’ dark grey ones in the mirror. The guards presence gave her a sense of security.
His eyes were clear, steady... only leaving hers to get his bearings while he drove. He searched for a spot to pull over.

“What was her name again...” the man teased lovingly, “Oh, yes. Nora, right? A lovely name. A lovely woman.”

Silas calmly held Liz’s panicked gaze as he pulled his phone free, dialing the house.

The guard half listened to the man on the end of the line, before murmuring quietly into his own phone, checking on Nora’s safety.

“Is it a special occasion for dinner tonight?” Carver questioned lightly as if carrying on a normal conversation, “You two poured over the grocery selections for a goodly while, didn’t you.”

Liz curled her arm about herself, drawing a measure of comfort from the action. She sighed her relief when Silas slid his phone in his shirt pocket.

Nora was safely at home.

“Long enough that I mapped out your little body to my hearts content.” he laughed shortly, “We’re going to have such a splendid time on our next meeting.” he breathed into the phone.

The woman’s eyes closed, only to snap open when she was inundated by visions of what the man may have pictured in his warped, sick mind.

“I admit, I usually get my thrills feeling my blade tearing through flesh,” the smile in his voice was repulsive, “but then, there is a certain thrill wondering what it is exactly that Reddington likes about having those long legs wrapped about him.”

Reaching out, she grabbed Silas’ shoulder. Curling her fingers into the warm fabric of his shirt. She felt the steadiness of a trusted person. Silas reached up, curling his fingers around hers in added comfort.

“Hang up the fucking phone.” Silas directed curtly. He rolled down the window, jerkily waving, ordering the back up guards closer. The black SUV surged forward, staying less than a car length away.

“That’s a fetching outfit you have on now,” Carver baited, “I bet Reddington is going to strip those little black shorts off your tiny ass the minute you walk in the door.” the man’s voice lowered, “If you arrive home safely, that is.”

Liz glanced down quickly, finding her tight black shorts snuggly in place. The fact somehow calmed her.

“Liz, dammit,” Silas snapped, “hang up!”

“I’d personally just cut through that tight blue top you have on there.” Carver continued undaunted.

“What do you want.” Liz damned the tremble she heard in her own voice. “Why are you doing this?” she bit at the soft flesh of her mouth nervously.

“Why, my little angel...” the man purred, “don’t you know? Haven’t you guessed?” he chuckled sensually, “I want you,” the throaty exclamation was repulsive in nature, “all for myself.”

Pushing his foot hard on the gas, Silas and the crew behind him cut through traffic like it wasn’t
there. The man looked in his mirrors checking for a tail... but didn’t see a damn thing.

So either Carver could still see them... or the fucker knew exactly where they were heading.

“We have some unfinished business, wouldn’t you say?” Carver questioned lightly.

“Don’t let the sick fuck get to you.” Silas urged. “Because he never will.” the man encouraged.

Liz looked up at the guard anxiously before reluctantly nodding. Even if Carver was following her... he hadn’t approached.

“I’m going to make you bleed...” the man promised in a harsh whisper, angered by Silas’ warning.

Liz startled, gasping loudly.

A dark blur of a car came into her peripheral vision, approaching at a breakneck speed “Silas!”

“Fuck!” the guard snapped viciously, swerving hard to miss the approaching vehicle.

The grotesque sound of glass shattering and metal twisting deafened the occupants of the car.

Liz grasped for the side handle, the phone flying from her hand as the car spun out of control.

Silas yanked the steering wheel to no avail. The shrieking peal of the tires skidding across the asphalt and the taste of burnt rubber filled the windowless car.

Instinctively raising her arms, Liz curled inward as the car continued its dizzying and disorienting spin.

It rammed to a jarring stop, blanketing Liz and Silas in what was left of the glass. A sharp crack and deep grunt from the front seat terrorized Liz. Seconds later, she had her own demons with which to contend, a sharp agonizing cry escaping her lips.

The sudden quiet was deafening. It lasted only seconds.

Liz wearily shook her head, trying to focus. She heard the metal slide of Silas pull his weapon, then silence.

“Honey...” Silas panted, obviously in pain “can you get down?”

Liz pulled weakly at her seat belt, coughing fitfully, her ribs felt like they were crushing her. An overpowering smell of gasoline filled the car.

“No...” she pulled frantically at the buckle to no avail, “the latch...”

“Calm down,” Silas turned his head slightly, catching the frantic woman’s eyes, “it’s all right...” his steady gaze helped her focus. Blood dripped down his arms and forehead.

“Don’t move.” the man slurred his demand. It took forever to extract his phone from his pocket.

Liz drew in a staggering breath, maneuvering as much as the locked seatbelt would allow. The sound of shattering glass and barked demands sounded far in the distance.

The back up team!

Liz turned her head, seeking the shattered window. The other guards stumbled from the SUV,
limping quickly toward their car, weapons drawn.

“Fucking phone.” Silas cursed fluently, “I dropped it, do you fucking believe...” he felt the areas beside him gritting his teeth with the pain movement caused.

“I have mine.”

Blinking past the haze, she found her phone on the side floorboard.

Reaching for it, she hesitated in her movements, finding her fingers dotted in blood.

She gasped, reaching for her face.

“You’re fine...” Silas assured seeing the fear return in the blue depths, “just small cuts...” the man grimaced, bad choice of words there... seeing as how she had just been talking to that fucker Carver, “…from glass.” he clarified hastily.

Liz nodded, taking a deep controlled breath, settling her nerves before reaching for the phone.

She stopped short when a searing pain shot up her leg.

“What?!” her guard was getting angsty but for the moment, all she could manage was to sit very still so the agonizing pain did not return.

She lay her head back slowly, closing her eyes for a brief second. Outside people were moving. People were shouting.

What the hell had happened?

An accident.

Was it Carver? Her blood ran cold, her eyes flying open.

The airbags had been deployed. There was glass everywhere. The smell...

She could see the back of Silas’s head. Her guard was abnormally quiet and still.

She jerked on the locked seatbelt. She had to get to him. But the sudden pain was so overpowering she almost lost consciousness.

Why didn’t they come? Where were all the people she heard? She could still hear them but they were far off in the distance.

She wanted Red...

She needed Red...

Where the hell was Red...
Red had a lot of irons in the fire this morning. The schedule was ultra-hectic, but he seemed to thrive in such an atmosphere.

Michael Fairfax was safely back in Italy, at his post, operating at full capacity after the harrowing incident in Cartagena.

Red valued the man’s abilities, pleased the outcome had been favorable for all concerned.

One thing checked off the ever growing list of things which must be addressed.

Aside from his business dealings with Francis, he promised his little Profiler he would scan a few files to see if he could offer any information on the mysteries Lizzy was attempting to solve.

An unexpected obstacle cropped up this morning, however.

“Well...” Red tossed the file he had been perusing to the desktop, “Federal agent Donald Ressler, to what do I owe this unexpected... pleasure.”

Pleasure? Was that the word he searched for? Red didn’t think so.

There was a noticeable moment of hesitation that Red did not miss.

“I know that you specifically signed on to provide us the Blacklist,” Ressler cleared his throat, “and it’s not in your forte to stray from your–”

Red waited impatiently for the agent to get to the point, “I have a life, Donald.”

“Such as it is.”

“Pot calling the kettle black.” Red retaliated effortlessly, “When’s the last time you got laid?” he baited the young man. “Because I had a lovely morning with–”

“Anyway,” Ressler forged ahead, ignoring Red’s quiet chortling in his ear, “I’ve got this guy...” the man trailed off, obviously irritated.

Red grinned as Ressler hesitated, knowing full well the man regretted his choice of wording after Red’s prior comment.

“I mean, there’s this guy I need help finding–”

Red frowned his confusion, “I haven’t sent you a new–”
“No, he’s not one of the Blacklisters,” Ressler corrected, “I thought, if you could...” the red head pushed his seat back, sitting upright in the hard leather, “I owe this to someone I worked with that is out for information on... the guy we’re discussing.”

“Does this guy have a name?”

“Samuel Lawford.”

“Run of the mill mobster...” Red knew the guy in this instance.

“So you know him?” Ressler perked up.

“He’s connected sparsely to the organization.” Red admitted, though he was sure he’d regret getting involved, “He’s more a liability than an asset if you ask me. How is he on your radar?”

“We believe he operates out of Chicago, right?” Ressler reluctantly trusted Reddington’s Intel over even the Bureau’s data.

“Yes, Chicago... that toddling town.”

“Lot of charges, none have stuck.” Ressler finished all he knew.

“I must be getting soft.” Red realized he had mentally already agreed to help the agent, if only in his mind.

“What?” Ressler inquired quickly.

On one hand, regardless of his promise to Lizzy to play nice in the sandbox, he wondered why he should involve himself.

On the other hand, Red was still in a spectacular mood after Lizzy had initiated their early morning playtime the other day... so he preferred to think that was his reason for capitulation.

“I’ll send you what I know,” Red conceded, “work habits, associates, known hangouts...” the man sing-songed his head, sliding closer to the desk he occupied, “his mother’s maiden name, passwords to his Facebook account, yada, yada, yada.”

Ressler half expected to receive the latter, “Thanks, Reddington. I owe you one.”

“Yes Donald, you do.” was the rather sinister reply before Red gently rang off.

After sending a break down on Lawford’s dealings to Ressler, Red wanted to get back to tracing the packages sent this day, but as soon as he reached for his phone, it rang again.

Seemed he spent half his time on the damned thing.

Maybe that new system he and Francis were working on, connecting the business network through his tech team’s efforts on the Dark Web might free up some of his time.

“What do you want from me, Ressler.” Red had listened patiently, again, to the guys new problem.

“Do you have anymore data? Anything else that may lead us to Lawford.” Ressler asked, the discomfort in his tone plain.

“What else could I possibly give you? You want me to size up his ball sack?” Red snipped. “What do I have to do for the FBI so they can get off their collective asses and actually do a job themselves
for a change?” he was stupefied.

“No wonder Lizzy is so much in demand, mindless of your claims Profiling is a useless art form.”

“Where is Keen?” Ressler demanded, venting his frustration.

“She is attending one of your mandatory, not to mention totally useless, physical training sessions.”

“I hate those things.” Ressler shuddered, “She can slip them cash on the side and get out of it.”

“I believe Elizabeth would prefer to handle matters on the up and up.” Red didn’t get it either.

“Whatever.” Ressler shrugged.

Red threw his pen aside, shoving his pad away, “I’ll draw you a map with ‘X’ marks the spot, Donald.” he stated, “Can you manage to set aside a time to pick the guy up or should I book an Uber.”

“Very amusing, Reddington,” Ressler had the grace to feel the burn, “I’m handling this alone, I would appreciate a little back-up here.”

Red crooked a brow, “You must owe your friend big-time.”

“Like you said,” Ressler smirked, “a debt should be repaid.”

“All right, I’ll do what I can.” he promised, “Stay by your phone.”

Red hung up once more.

When did Ressler not have that fucking phone glued to his side? It was more important than the guy’s weapon.

If only to keep tabs on the multitude of ‘girl-friends’ the agent shifted through on a weekly basis.

The thought brought a grin to Red’s face.

He absently jotted a reminder to himself concerning Ressler’s request.

Red’s thoughts turned elsewhere.

Lizzy was contemplating the options available to her regarding work.

She missed the team, Red was aware, but she was also proud of the volume of cases at the BAU she helped close.

The mental challenge was stimulating as well.

Instead of the usual censure she received from her associates regarding her association with him, Lizzy was finally getting the accolade she so richly deserved for her intelligence and work ethics.

Which is why he kept his personal feelings on the matter quiet and his mouth shut, offering support when a discussion arose about what position was better suited for the woman.

Each job held finer points to offer.

Though, if a baby was in the making...
Well, time for that discussion could be made down the line.

In the meantime, the promise he made Lizzy about working with her team during her absence was one he was slowly beginning to dislike.

While Samar and Aram were willing to listen and learn, the other three males were proving a royal pain in the ass.

He had written four profiles for the FBI. Why, he could not fathom.

At first, he thought someone had been yanking his chain because Red was accustomed to leaving Lizzy the most simple clues which she could pick up on.

Maybe being with him, some things had rubbed off, who knew?

Maybe she was starting to think outside the rigidity of the proverbial box an organization like a government agency insisted everyone follow.

Ressler oft times surprised Red with his insight but with Liz’s absence, the agent seemed to be resorting to his old tactics.

Or maybe hanging out with Moore and Wilson was affecting his perspective. Shades of Ressler’s superior attitude were resurfacing more often than not.

Red had no issue what-so-ever with taking the boy down a notch or two when Ressler’s Napoleon complex reared its ugly head.

It was only after the ‘Old Boys Club’ mentality was pointed in Samar’s direction, did Red take issue with Ressler... but only in private.

Though no voices had been raised, everyone was well aware of the dressing down Red had given Ressler in that window encased room that day.

Red had been fully aware that Samar did not need his assistance and could well take care of herself in handling the men on her team.

He could not in good conscience, allow such treatment from a team leader, just because one of his ‘men’ happened to be a female.

It was a dangerous situation when a fellow team mate could not be relied upon in or out of the field.

Especially since Samar’s theory had been proven one hundred percent correct.

Now, the question of the day was, why Red sitting here grinding out yet another full-blown profile when the information he formally supplied should have sufficed.

There was an upside to this in-depth delving into a person’s life, however. Red was becoming more aware of the people he worked with on a regular basis.

If any one of them should turn to the dark side, Red knew for a fact, it would be much easier to locate the bastards.

For instance, take Bob Delany. His go-to man for reliable transportation overseas. Bob had a penchant for the horse track and Cajun cuisine.

Frank Martin, a local vendor Red used more and more frequently for various sundry... Frank was
obsessed with antiques and a cute little blonde waitress who worked the night shift at Guido’s.

Little things made the world go round.

They even nabbed a Blacklister in Jersey because the guy had an addiction to Bingo parlors.

All information was useful, no matter how trivial.

Red wondered if it would prove his own downfall? Some simple little habit he wasn’t even aware he possessed.

Dembe would never allow such an error.

Red smiled.

He absently checked his watch.

Lizzy’s session was ending. She would be home soon.

Red sighed heavily, trying to concentrate.

This mobster guy, Sam Lawford... there was a certain amount of hostility between Lawford and Francis Holbrook.

That feud had been festering for a while. Wreaking havoc on Lawford’s end of the game, set well with Red.

Francis was a big boy and normally, Red wouldn’t interfere.

Red disliked Lawford from the get-go, however, due to the fact Lawford had purchased a three thousand square foot cabin in Montana in order to hide his mistress from his wife.

Lawford was fucking around on his woman and it pissed Red off. He liked the woman. Lawford had kids with the woman.

Maybe the fact Red would give anything to be in the same boat with Elizabeth, to have that level of commitment in his life... made what Lawford was doing so distasteful.

Divorce, or better still, trying to fix the problems in a marriage... that was the way to go.

Surely, that had to be the only option for a real man. Red didn’t like to judge, but he knew firsthand, on this one.

To get the bitter taste out of his mouth, Red hoped for a quiet evening at home with his woman. It seemed Elizabeth could change his mood just by a smile or the sound of that contagious laugh of hers.

He glanced at his watch again.

Thoughts of seeing her face urged him to finish up the profile he was sending to Ressler.

Red pushed from the desk, rising, wandering aimlessly to the front of the house.

The man peered out the arched windows.

These sessions were good for Elizabeth. Red knew Silas thought the techniques and methods taught
were useless and ineffective.

In reality, while Red believed the same, it was good for Lizzy to get away from the BAU work for a while, plus the exercise worked off stress and restlessness.

Restlessness which had grown exponentially since the time for the sessions to end approached. Two more to go, along with her psych evaluations.

Lizzy would be reinstated soon... perhaps too soon for her liking. Red couldn’t read her state-of-mind as yet.

His phone rang.

Red rolled his eyes, instinctively lifting the object to his ear.

Sounds invaded his senses. Loud, unnatural sounds... chaotic, sharp, heart stopping sounds.

“Elizab–”

“Red...” the harsh, raspy voice caught Red’s attention, causing his heart to halt for a long beat.

“Silas?” the other man sounded so unlike himself, Red wasn’t certain it was actually his head guard on the other end of the line.

The guard tried to steady his breathing, knowing it was too shallow. He squinted through blood soaked lashes, focusing his vision. Silas cradled his arm protectively, pushing the pain of broken ribs aside.

Red strained to hear the man’s labored voice strain out an intersection near the house. He rapidly made a mental note of the coordinates.

“Silas, what happened? Is Lizzy all right?” the man could not keep the fear from his voice, “Are you? What’s your situation?”

The silence was terrifying.

“Silas!” Red barked but already was on the move, covering the space to the front foyer in record time.

Dembe had heard the commotion emerging from the library, his features set quizzically.

Red motioned curtly, “Something’s wrong.”

Dembe fell into rapid step beside his friend, covering the distance to the car quickly.

Red repeated the street address, sliding into the front passenger seat.

Dembe fired the powerful engine to life, pulling the large SUV out of the security gate in record time.

“It is not far, Raymond.” Dembe offered a quick glance at his overwrought companion.

Red noted Tom Keen was not at his usual place outside the home.

“Stalker boy isn’t here.” he stated grimly, his first thought... Tom Keen was very likely the cause or reason for Elizabeth’s situation whatever it could be... or Silas’s uncharacteristic lapse.
The tension in the car was palpable. The drive, though short, seemed to take eons to Red’s way of thinking.

Dembe tried to picture the area to which Silas directed they go.

A Catholic church sat on the Northeast corner. It was an affluent residential area with one of the better high-schools just blocks to the South.

Raymond had chosen well when it came to the community in which Elizabeth could recover and now call... home.

They took the corner on two wheels, rounding about a shaded and tree-lined street.

Dembe screeched to a halt behind a green Honda sedan.

Red surveyed the area with frantic eyes. He sucked in a sharp breath at the scene laid out before them.

Flashing lights, traffic backed up. They were at least a block from all the real commotion due to a large fire truck blocking both lanes of traffic.

An ambulance was rolling slowly forward weaving through a scene of pure carnage as it went.

Red’s mind could not take in the full scope of all the disorder going on around him but he exited the car before Dembe could pull it to a full stop.

His eyes swept the scene, his heart beating frantically in his chest.

The smell of gas, broken glass, burnt rubber and blood filled his nostrils.

A car of an undistinguishable model, right in front of him, was mangled to pieces. The front end, bent upwards at an unnatural angle. The impact it had sustained curved the thick metal in the middle, leaving the car bowed... all doors off set from their rightful place, the glass, shattered from its frames.

Darting his eyes to his left, another vehicle, this one a larger SUV model, sat in the middle of the intersection, flipped to its side. Moving closer towards it, the panic he felt surged when he recognized it as one of his fleet.

Following the line of carnage, Red found Dembe nearing the same area, his large frame darting through the emergency workers. Rushing after the man, he came around the front of the SUV, stopping dead in his tracks.

Another black car was severely demolished. The driver’s side was caved in, apparently t-boned. The passenger side, curved inward, rested against a light pole.

It sat meters away, at the far side of the intersection, resting ominously. It was turned completely around facing the opposite direction, on the wrong side of the street.

Two of Silas’ people stood guard about the vehicle, faces stoically composed, obviously men accustomed to handling unnatural circumstances.

No weapons were drawn which somewhat reassured Reddington until he realized, there was only two of his employees present.

Dembe was leaning into the crushed drivers side, his actions indistinguishable from this distance.
Red quickened his steps, “Elizabeth...” he whispered sacredly, rushing forward.

“Hey,” a guy in a yellow vest caught at Red’s arm but he shoved roughly away, continuing on, “you have to stay back!”

The demand fell on deaf ears.

“Hey!” the man’s urgent words faded into oblivion.

Red cursed fluently, coming to an obstacle he could not shove aside... the light post held the car door wedged tightly.

She was inside, half-sitting, held by the seat belt, half hunched over, her hair obscuring her face but he knew...

“Baby...” an anguished gasp escaped his suddenly parched lips. His brain kicked in even when his senses couldn’t.

He yanked frantically on the mangled door, the sound of twisted metal creaking and groaning against itself at the power he exuded in his effort.

“Lizzy!” he snapped anxiously, frustrated beyond endurance as the door resisted all attempts he offered.

The woman stirred, her head turning slowly. Blue eyes locked with light grey.

“Elizabeth!” he expelled relief and a prayer to a benevolent God for the awareness looking back at him.

“Oh, Red...” she closed her eyes, blinking back tears. She had needed him to be here and now... he was. Or... was she hallucinating?

“I’m here, baby...” the shaky statement answered her own prayers, “I’m here.” he reached into the shattered window mindless of the sharp shards still edging the frame.

His fingers touched her face, easing the dark hair behind a convenient ear, “I’m right here. Don’t try to move... please.”

He surveyed the scene rapidly. Dembe’s eyes reassured from over the top of the front seat headrest.

“He is injured...” the calming tone helped Red focus... commit, “how badly, I do not know.” he was carefully supporting Silas’ slumping bulk as best he could.

“I’m,” Silas’ voice lacked its normal vitality, “...fine.”

Elizabeth laughed shortly, tears allowed, “He’s fine.”

She shook her head, grimacing at the pain the movement caused.

“Keep your head still, baby,” Red snapped fearfully, “try not to move, okay?”

She swallowed, remaining still.

“Is she...all right?” Silas was trying to sit up, to turn about.

“Be very still, my friend.” Dembe prevented the unwise action.
Silas had gasped at the pain, a coughing spasm following the stilted movement.

Red winced, seeing blood splatter on Dembe’s crisp white shirt. “She’s good, Silas, stay the hell still!” he barked, afraid for his friend now as well, his mind began to function properly, finally.

“The others?” Elizabeth’s thoughts had long since focused, “the other... guards.”

Red sensed Silas’ interest as well for the man’s broad shoulders had stiffened noticeably.

Dembe glanced about with the eyes of a trained observer. “They are being extracted from the SUV... they appear functional. At least from this distance.” he scowled. “Amir and Justin are here,” he nodded to the Frenchman who stood just outside the vehicle, “on duty.”

“Thank God.” Elizabeth murmured serenely, “…Red, you won’t... go will you.” she tried to keep the tears from her voice.

“Fucking wild horses, baby.” he returned tightly, “Where do you hurt?”

Silas barked a curse as the steering wheel turned sharply. Rescue workers were now working on the front of the car.

“Fuckers!” Silas grated angrily.

“They are attempting to extract you.” Dembe could see the efforts whereas the others could not. “The front end is twisted. You are trapped until they...” he trailed away, “what do you need?”

“A shot of whiskey.” Silas grinned almost impishly but his face instantly contorted into a fixed grimace of pain.

Dembe produced a flask, holding it for his friend to partake.

“Red!” Elizabeth was dismayed, “Don’t let him do that!”

Red remained silent on the matter, “Where do you hurt?” he repeated sharply.

The woman closed her eyes wearily, “...Everywhere,” she smiled bravely then sobered, “…my leg,” her brow furrowed, “my leg really...hurts.” she realized, “Oh man!” her breath expelled in a whoosh, “What the hell happened?”

Red’s eyes darted to the wrecked automobiles absently, returning his interest to more pressing matters.

The front seat pushed down painfully on Lizzy’s shin, her foot was jammed up underneath the edge.

“My head is killing me.” she made mention, “Dembe... hand me that flask.” she quipped.

“Where the hell are the firemen?” Red snapped, “Why isn’t someone–”

“They must alleviate the weight of the seat.” Dembe motioned to a now collapsed, very silent head guard, “Silas must be extracted first.”

“How long?” Red gritted, his fingers tightening on Elizabeth’s.

“Red, that hurts,” she wiggled her hand to signify.

He loosened his grip instantly, “Sorry, baby.” he was contrite. The fear he felt powered through him.
“A few minutes only.” Dembe assured, or placated, Red wasn’t certain at this point.

The silence came in the car but around them, sounds exploded.

Red shut it all out concentrating on just one thing. He smiled gently at Lizzy, “I leave you alone for one minute and look at the mess you get yourself into.”

“Why is Silas so quiet?” Liz was more than apprehensive, struggling to see her guard, to check on his condition.

“He thankfully...” Dembe hastily replied seeing Red’s reaction to her movements which brought severe repercussions. She had cried out with the sharpness of pain, “has passed out. It is a good thing, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth’s face registered distress and fear.

“Calm yourself, please.” Dembe was reaching the woman where Red could not. “Silas is strong. He will come through this.” he soothed. “He is just resting now that we are here.”

She visibly tried to obey.

“Mr. Kaplan is on her way.” Dembe further put her mind to rest.

“Did she give an ETA?” Red jerked his head to the man’s dark gaze, his own apprehensive to say the least.

A fireman stepped in beside Dembe, alerting him to the situation. The man nodded, taking the item handed him.

“Ten minutes, Raymond.” Dembe replayed the information, securing a thick chain around the steering wheel before feeding it through the open windshield to the waiting rescue workers.

“We... we can do ten minutes, right?” Elizabeth was asking more for Silas it was understood by all, “I m-mean, Silas can do ten minutes in his sleep.”

“He once went two days in the Sudan with his arm hanging out of its socket after an IED device took out our vehicle,” Dembe recalled, “cursing like a sailor the entire time but...”

Elizabeth smiled. She knew that had been the least of Silas’ injuries at that time. The guards had shared the gruesome tale.

“Yeah... he can do ten minutes.” she felt infinitely better, and then... she didn’t. Nausea reared its ugly head. “You better not get too close,” she grimaced adorably, “I might puke.”

Red surveyed the vehicle, “Hold on, sweetheart.”

“Don’t go!” she panicked, feeling his warm fingers release.

“No...” he hastily reassured, “I think I can get in the other side.” he wasn’t sure and it took a Herculean effort from both he and Dembe but then he was sliding across the glass strewn seat, easing ever so gently to her side.

She lay her head on his shoulder, seeking his warmth. “I’m cold.” she shivered involuntarily.

Dembe reached past his unconscious friend heaving a jacket to the back seat.
Red carefully draped the dark fabric over her arms and chest. “You just stay very still. Kate will make it all better,” he crooked his head to see her face, “you believe that, right.”

“I know.” she drifted in a very nice place. The pain was receding.

"You're going to be okay." Red soothed, gently kissing her forehead. "I promise."

Minutes passed.

Red began to sweat.

His guard’s body was covered in blood. Silas’ light blue shirt, streaked with blots and oozing wounds.

The man’s breathing was ragged, a gargling sound deep in his chest.

Blood was filling his lungs, Red realized from previous experiences along similar lines.

Lizzy was probably going into shock. Silas already was...

“Did they get him?”

Red practically started at the woman’s voice.

A church bell chimed several times in the far distance over the uproar of activities taking place inside their very small world.

“What?” he questioned, pulling her closer.

“...Carver.” the woman answered quietly.

“...Carver.” the woman answered quietly.

Red’s heart stopped completely then sped ahead frantically, “...What!” Was she getting delusional?

“He was on the phone with us,” Elizabeth couldn’t really see any urgency now. The damage had been done, after all, “...just before...” she scowled.

Before what?

Oh yes, the blur... the dark blur.

Reddington was reeling. Carver? No, it was Tom... wasn’t it? It had to be... Tom.

Carver knew Lizzy’s number?!? How the fuck did–

“Awww, shit.” Silas had come to, groaning weakly, “fuck...”

Dembe exchanged subdued looks with a wildly speculating Red Reddington.

The loud grating sound of the hood collapsing into itself halted all coherent thought for a beat.

The chain Dembe had secured about the steering wheel had done its job.

Silas cursed fluently as the heavy object veered slowly away from his body.

Blood rushed rapidly from the man’s mouth.

Thankfully darkness descended.
Dembe moved aside to allow the extraction.

Elizabeth watched, breathing a sigh of relief, “Ten minutes is a really long time.” she concluded.

She yelped like a little hurt puppy as Silas’ weight left the seat, a searing pain ripping through her leg.

Red closed his eyes. She was hurting and there was not one fucking thing he could do to help.

“I’m here.” he murmured the useless words, “...I’m here.”

Ages passed... eons passed but finally.... finally, Elizabeth was freed, placed on a stretcher.

Dembe got Red’s attention.

Their own ‘ambulances’ had arrived.

Red held tight to Liz’s hand, “Where’s Kaplan? He pressed for information not having seen the woman in all the chaos surrounding them as yet.

“She is waiting at Dr. Bryan’s,” the answer seemed apparent to the attendant, “in case we needed the space in the ambulance.”

Red wasn’t happy for the woman’s presence always calmed him but he understood the reasoning.

Silas’ ambulance pulled away, sirens blaring.

Red watched it weave rapidly through the maze of carnage and the enormous crowd which had developed.

“Sir..”

Red turned having stepped aside to allow Lizzy to be lifted into the back of the second ambulance.

A uniformed officer approached, his smile a gentle one, “Everything will be fine... they will have your wife at the hospital in no time.”

Red glanced at the woman. Kaplan’s people were efficiently calming and reassuring Elizabeth as they hooked her to bags and leads.

He calmed at the words, your wife.

He took a steadying breath, letting it out slowly.

His anger... his fear would be a distraction.

“I’m Officer Andrews.” Red was handed a card.

He stared at it, not seeing the print.

“Look, I know you don’t want to deal with this right now.” he held out a sheet of paper.

Red took if for he sensed he should

“I want to give this to you for later.” the cop was continuing. He gestured to a totally mangled maroon late model sedan, “it’s the other drivers information.”
Red must have seemed lost.

*Had they caught Carver? Was the bastard in that fucking car? Had he been extracted first? Had they taken him away?*

The officers eyes softened, “I get it. If that were my wife trapped in that...” he pulled a face, seeing the damage done to the sturdy Mercedes, “I just thought you would want his insurance information.”

“Who?” Red demanded.

“... The other driver.” the cop thumbed back again to the maroon car. “Damned teenagers,” he shook his head woefully, “blew through the light while texting. The front seat passenger... kid about seventeen...” he looked sad, “went through the windshield,” he lifted grave eyes, “no seat belt. Probably won’t make it, but ya never know, ya know.”

Red nodded absently, his own face grim.

“The two in the back seat aren’t fairing much better. At least they were wearing seat belts.”

Red rubbed his temples.

“Are you saying...” he tried to comprehend it all. No words would form.

*An idiot kid caused all this mayhem?*

“They took him first,” the cop nodded, “he’s already in surgery. I think he was also high... drunk?”

Realizing he had said too much, the guy backed off, “We will have more information as the day wears on. Call that number in an hour or so,” he motioned, “I see they are ready to transport. I will be at the hospital. We can speak further there.”

Red watched the guy walk away.

He knew he wouldn’t be at their hospital.

The cop stuck his head in the ambulance, “They taking good care of you, Ma’am?” he smiled cordially, “Everything is going to be fine.”

Liz tried a smile. She didn’t think it took. Was that the standard ‘go to’ line for all males?

*Everything is going to be fine.*

Silas had been ‘fine’.

“My name is Ethan. I’m here to see you are okay... but you look like a strong type of gal.” he grinned, “I’ll put my money on you to recover one hundred percent. You have to...” he continued, glancing back at Red, “your husband is about to shit kittens out here worrying about you. You gotta let him know everything will be–”

“...Fine.” Elizabeth smiled genuinely, “I will Offi–” she hesitated, “Ethan, thank you for being so solicitous and kind. It is very appreciated.”

The man nodded, stepping aside as Red came forward to grip Elizabeth’s small fingers in his.

Red leaned, kissing the woman’s forehead.
“Are you shitting kittens?” she teased lovingly.

“I don’t shit kittens.” he murmured, “although, if you do this to me again... I might cut my own fucking wrists.”

“What a waste of a perfectly adequate penis.”

“Adequate?” he lifted his brows ever so happy to be beside her, trading quips again, “Seriously, woman,” his voice dropped an octave, “you put me through hell these past few minutes. Don’t you ever do that to me again... promise.”

She brought his hand to her lips, lingering a soft kiss on his fingers, “I promise.”

“I’m going to let them take you now.” he was suddenly all business, “Dembe and I will follow in the car because,” he soothed any objections or demands, “they can get you to Kaplan quicker. And the cop is going to want your information and if... when we don’t show up at the hospital...”

She nodded, “I understand but hurry... please.”

“You got that right,” he hated not going with her but he wanted the world he created for her to stay intact if at all possible.

Running from the police would not ensure that eventuality.

He had no idea how far Carver had integrated himself into the situation but Lizzy was safe and secure at the house.

He hoped nothing had changed.

Besides bringing the fucker to a place of Red’s choosing was far preferable to meeting Caver on another, unfamiliar turf.

He glanced out the open doors, watching another SUV meander a path towards them. Lizzy’s other guard, David, hopped out... heading their way.

Liz caught Red’s hand, directing his attention her way, "I love you."

"I love you." Red kissed Lizzy briefly, “Do as Kate tells you.”

“I’m afraid not to.” Liz told the truth, “She’ll see to Silas first, right?”

Red stepped down out of the large ambulance, waving Lizzy’s guard, David, to take his place.

He pointed a finger, stepping out of the way of the closing ambulance doors, “Do as Kate tells you!”

Red crossed rapidly, extracting his fake ID. He gave the needed particulars to Officer Andrews.

“This could have waited, really.” the guy was being cool.

“I want her to rest once everything calms down.” Red smiled tightly, finishing up the task with a brisk, “I’ll come to the station and retrieve all those cards, Officer. I really just want to be with my wife, if I could.”

“I’ll leave them at the front desk. You know where the station is located?”

Red knew where most police stations were located, in truth, “I’ll find it and thank you again for your
understanding."

The cop turned aside.

Red searched the crowd for Dembe.

His eyes scanned slowly, carefully...

He was a little miffed, startled... to see one of Silas’ guards withdraw his weapon, assuming a crouched position to steady his aim.

Red was torn between lashing out a reprimand... he had just soothed matters over with the police, after all.

Or again... wondering at the cause behind the man’s actions.

The answers came in rapid succession.

Having followed the guard’s line of sight and now ignoring all the startled yelps, outcries and panic a visible weapon can cause....

Red locked gazes with a serenely smiling.... ominous nemesis.

Carver stared back at him, out of a crowd of rapidly dissipating members.

Officer Andrews reacted as his years on the force would demand and in a most timely and efficient manner, Red had to acknowledge.

Dembe artfully disarmed, not to mention, completely disabled the now downed cop.

Officer Andrews lay peacefully on the pavement, his bulky body outstretched like a toddler taking a much-needed nap.

Dembe was fluidity in motion, his own weapon raised, aimed...

Carver pulled a female in a bright pair of leggings and a yellow stretch top in front of his body, a wicked grin on the totally malicious face.

Amir approached carefully, but he did not have a clear shot as yet, Red sensed.

Red stood, glued to the spot, trusting his men to do their job.

“If looks could kill, hey old friend.” Carver gleefully taunted, all the while shielding himself behind a terrified, screaming human shield.

He whispered something to the captive woman who fell instantly silent, her eyes showing the sheer terror she was experiencing.

The guard on the left, Justin, was working his way into a more favorable position.

Carver, sensing as much, ended the stale-mate by hastily slicing a blade across the woman’s throat before disappearing into a row of well-trimmed bushes which lined the church property that boarded the block.

The guards gave chase.
Dembe had even managed a couple of well-placed shots into the vicinity of the bushes.

All hell had broken loose.

The crowd panicked. Cars were backing up, revving engines, honking feverishly at those blocking their avenue of escape even though escape was impossible.

Firemen had inundated the fallen police officer but now everyone was diving for cover, except a few individuals who still worked tirelessly over the man who was slowly reviving.

Red headed for the downed woman, waiting patiently for the teams to inform him of their progress.

His guards reemerged making a bee-line for their employer.

Dembe was diplomatically calming individuals as he strolled back.

Most shied away from the guy because he forgot to dispel the dark scowl on his face.

“He had a car waiting, Captain.” Justin arrived first. The guy wasn’t even breathing hard. “We couldn’t pursue.”

The guard lifted helpless brows motioning to the wrecked SUV over in the intersection.

“We could turn the car upright.” Amir offered magnanimously.

Red scowled at the guy.

“It’s a good car. Probably still runs.” Justin shrugged.

“Leave it.” Red waved off the two younger men, keeping his hold on the woman’s neck. “Go with the back-up team.” he jerked his head to the waiting SUV.

“The other teams might get him, Captain. We radioed,” the guy continued, “they were well in route.”

Red glanced about. People were beginning to stare, getting a little more brave.

“Make yourself scarce.” Red replied tightly, “You know the routine. Thanks for the attempt.”

“We’ll get the son-of-a-bitch.” Justin was unfazed by the events of the day.

The black SUV rolled up beside them, blocking sight of the surrounding people.

“The woman?” Justin asked grimly watching the firemen doing their thing with the still offset police officer.

“Take her.” Red directed of the woman.

“But,” Justin hesitated only enough to ascertain if the situation could be helped, “the guy is good at what he does.”

Red felt his blood pressure spike, “Elizabeth would want us to try...” he snapped.

Justin crouched, taking Red’s place, keeping pressure on the wound. Amir came about to assist the man into the back of the transport.

“We must go Raymond.” Dembe’s hand guided the man from the turmoil in more ways than one.
The guards discretely dispersed leaving the wreckage of the day in their wake.

♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

A half hour later, Red sat in the quiet of a rather cheerful room, considering.

He took in the plain blue paint of the walls. A nice enough color. He hated the depressing grey of a hospital room.

It was supposed to be white; he was certain, but it always appeared a dingy off-grey.

Maybe it was just the depressing circumstances in which one invariably found themselves if a hospital was needed.

He always thought of himself as a ‘glass half full’ type of guy.

Maybe not...

Lizzy’s fingers pressed to his.

He smiled, seeking her out, “Look at you.” he was content to do so.

“Yeah,” she lay very still, immobile due to a neck brace and stiff, uncomfortable backboard, “look at me.”

His smile widened, and he shifted closer to the side of the bed.

“You look like a million bucks to me.” he confided.

“Have you ever actually seen a million bucks?”

“Who hasn’t?” he seemed stumped, “Your curiosity returns... a good sign.”

“Have they said... about Silas?”

“Would you be this worried about me?”

“Red...” she was bothered by the taunt.

He waved the matter aside, “Kaplan is working her magic. He was awake and bitching when I came through.” he motioned, “Another good sign. Have you ever witnessed those two when they are at odds? We should sell tickets.”

She chuckled then, grimaced, “Don’t make me laugh.”

The silence came. Red lifted her hand, his lips gently caressing her skin.

“You were kinda hot out there today.” she mentioned in passing.

“Well, it is springtime in Washington D.C.”

“I meant,” she let him know by her ‘look’, “hot as in... knight in shining armor arriving on horseback to rescue his damsel in distress hot.”

It was his turn to chuckle.

“Or at least,” her voice softened, “that’s what it felt like to me.”
His laughter died away, his eyes hold hers willfully.

“I so needed to you be there and then... you were.”

He leaned kissing her mouth gently, “Let’s keep it that way... always,” he nudged his head slightly, “okay?”

She nodded minutely, “What would I do without you?”

“We’re not going there.” he sat back, subject closed, “So tell me, what were the events which led up to this rather... cryptic days events?”

She told him to the best of her abilities, “I thought it was Carver... ramming our car.”

He kept mum on the ‘Carver’ sighting afterwards. She had enough guilt on her plate at present.

“I saw your ankle, before they wrapped it.” he motioned, “Looks broke. The skin was purple and swollen.” he artfully changed the subject.

“I still have some movement,” she disagreed, “a couple days and I’ll be... fine.”

He shifted her a sardonic look.

“Well, I will.” she was determined. “I’m more worried about Silas.”

“Good to hear someone is.”

Elizabeth gasped at the sight of the mammoth guard lumbering into view.

“Silas!” she practically squealed her delight but Red was seeing past the bravado the other man exuded.

“What the hell are you doing out of bed?” he could only guess at the guard’s true condition.

Dembe stayed close.

Red surmised it was to catch Silas when he collapsed, from the look of him.

“That damned woman is a masochist!” Silas jerked his head meaningfully, “She drained my fucking lungs. I think she drank the blood... didn’t bother with a pump.”

Dembe sighed lightly, “You should not be up. She will not be pleased.”

“Oh well, let’s not ruffle her feathers.” Silas held up an adamant hand, “God knows what she’ll drain next.”

“You wish,” Kaplan pushed past the burly individual coming around the opposite side of Liz’s bed, “don’t hold your breath there... not that you could right now.” she smiled rather unpleasantly, noting the tightly wound bandage around Silas’ chest area.

“You like tight things?” Silas was feeling particularly foul at the moment, “I do too.” his stare dropped, holding firm at the apex of Kate Kaplan’s legs.

“Something you will never know for certain,” Kaplan lifted Liz’s wrist in a most professional manner, “which is killing you by degrees,” the dark void eyes shifted to the guard, “isn’t it. A woman you can’t manipulate.”
“I don’t give up so easily,” Silas retorted, “I have so much,” he hooked his fingers in his belt, drumming his thick fingers over the bulge in his pants, “…to offer.”

“I prefer my partners with a bit more…” Kate held her tone, ‘bounce in their step.’

Silas dropped his eyes to the woman’s breasts, more than catching her meaning.

“You and me both, honey.” he agreed. “You got small tits… but a guy only needs a mouthful.”

Liz felt the woman’s fingers tighten on her wrist.

Silas was affecting Mr. Kaplan in spite of her resolve.

Red was honestly unsure who would come out as top dog in this little tête-à-tête, but he was more that interested to find out.

“Oh, he’s so full of it Mr. Kaplan,” Liz hastily intervened, “Stop pouting, Silas.” she turned on someone she felt more comfortable with. “You big wussy.”

“I don’t pout,” she was summarily informed, “I brood…..” his eyes challenged Kaplan, “women blow me when I do.”

Red hid his smile tactfully.

Dembe sighed again, this time more heavily.

Kaplan held the moment admirably.

“Well, it’s all for naught,” Liz stated airily, “there are no women present who are falling for any of this crap.”

“I am feeling a little turned on.” Red admitted freely for Lizzy’s ears only.

“No?” Silas wasn’t so easily deterred even in his present condition. He shifted to the other foot, his arm favoring his left side. He stared unrelentingly at Kaplan who stared right back. “I think it’s actually working a little bit.”

“Operative word,” Kaplan sought out the guys crotch, “…little.”

“Ouch.” Red winced, shifting in his seat in open sympathy.

Silas only smiled, “You couldn’t handle what I’ve got… never had to before, have you.”

“By choice,” Kaplan crooned gently, “would you be interested in the reason behind my decision?”

Silas straightened slightly, grimacing, his body straining from the effort asked of it this day.

“Yeah, yeah, men don’t know how to use the equipment God gave them.” he heard it all before. “Why don’t you try a real man for a change.”

“Yeah and why don’t you try a real woman,” Liz felt bad for Mr. Kaplan but she wasn’t sure why, as the woman herself seemed perfectly at ease, “instead of the little blonde bimbo at the grocery store who helps you decide on which type of cooking oil you should use on fried Tilapia as if you have ever fried Tilapia in your entire existence.”

“That’s women’s work…” the man pushed deliberately.
Dembe stepped murmuring to Silas, “You said your mother would smack you if she ever heard that phrase coming from your mo–”

Silas scowled at the man, waving him off lest Dembe ruin his pestering of Mr. Kaplan.

Kaplan didn’t fall for the bait.

“Or the brunette at the gas station who gave you directions to our neighborhood.” Liz rolled her eyes.

Neither Silas nor Kaplan seemed to be paying her any mind, a battle of wills ensuing. Liz felt the crackle of tension in the room.

Red appeared totally unfazed by the fact.

“Or the red head–”

“Oh, yes...” Silas’ attention was caught, “I remember that one. Thank God I still have her number.” he smiled all too sweetly at Kate Kaplan, “I have to reconnect with that amazing little fire snatch again... soon.”

“She would kill you in your present state.” Kaplan philosophized. “Good riddance, I say.”

“You hurt my feeling.” Silas pouted, the grey eyes saying so much more than his words.

“He only has the one.” Dembe explained the lapse.

“What the hell goes on when you two are driving around all day?” Red was curious. “Such open camaraderie.”

He had decided to help Lizzy out of the predicament Silas had manifested even though, he personally was enjoying the hell out of the exchange between Kate and his head guard.

“Could you enlighten us further, Lizzy,” he encouraged, “concerning Silas’ many failings.”

“Oh... you should see the master at work,” Liz rolled her eyes, “he stands there acting all indecisive, like the proverbial ‘lost man’.”

Silas grinned, proud of his methods, obviously.

“And then, here they come... out of the woodwork.” Liz had seen it countless times, “All offering him much needed assistance.”

“Truly?” Dembe’s tone was curious itself as was his look.

Kaplan placed a pressure cuff on Liz’s arm.

“Tell the truth...” Silas pushed the envelop for he was in a particularly grumpy mood today and he felt like shit, truth told.

He was taking it out on the world in general.

His grey-blue eyes fell on an unsuspecting Elizabeth Keen, “Didn’t you ever fall for it as well?”

She sputtered, embarrassed that Silas would ask such a thing in front of... the blue eyes darted to a mellow Red Reddington who seemed to be waiting for a reply as well.
Damn him!

“You secretly never wanted to blow me?” Silas asked innocently.

“Blow yourself, you big lout!” she gasped indignantly.

“That wasn’t a no...” the guard pushed.

“I want to blow a hole through you!” Liz hissed, “he’s the only one who will ever...” she motioned to Red as best she could then stopped mid-motion, her cheeks flushing heatedly.

“Doesn’t seem fair,” Silas let her off the hook, “I did all the work but he gets the benefits.”

Red reached out, laying his hand against Liz’s chest, keeping her from raising from her position.

Keeping his head down, Red fought for control of his mirth, actually appreciating how quickly the grizzly man could rile Lizzy up, before craning his head towards the head guard.

“Looks like you’ll have to find your ‘head’ elsewhere.” Red lifted a confident stare.

Silas smirked before wincing visibly.

“Strike one...” Red was proud of his woman. He glanced at Kaplan, a challenge issued, clear and simple. “You’re still up at bat.”

“You’re off the clock and obviously in better condition that I thought,” Liz fumed still smarting from her guard’s innuendo, “Daylight is burning... and so is your wick, at both ends! Obviously!”

“What is it with everyone thinking I’ll need more than a couple hours to find someone who will,” the man moved carefully across the room finally coming very close to.... Kate Kaplan, “suck me off.”

“Stop talking.” Liz advised hurriedly, “You are so much cuter if you keep your mouth shut.”

“She thinks I’m cute.” he leaned conspiratorially, whispering in Kate’s ear.

“I think Tarsier’s are cute too,” Liz countered, “don’t take it to be a grand compliment.”

“They both do have startling eyes.” Mr. Kaplan lifted a subdued stare, “and about the same mentality I should imagine.”

“Do not insult Tarsier’s.” Dembe asked respectfully.

Silas smiled at both antagonists, “I bet you’re great in the sack.” he zeroed in on one.

“Yes, I am rather great.” Kaplan sat her bag aside, her voice dripping with sarcasm, “For instance, I’m certain were it a choice between you or I... your fiery little redhead would always prefer my skills over yours... each and every time.”

Red scratched the back of his head absently, his grin a contagious one.

“Damn, baby...” Silas’ tone had dropped considerably, “God, you just made me so hot.”

“I know.” Kaplan soothed, glancing down at the straining bulge growing in the man’s jeans. “Isn’t it sad, how easy you are when it comes right down to it?”

“How about it?” Silas wasn’t above begging, obviously, “You... me...? We could make some tiny
“Can’t you make her... quiver, by yourself?” Kaplan seemed stern. “Not afraid of being upstaged?”

“I sure as hell wouldn’t mind finding out who bests who.” Silas replied seriously. “Damn, I’m begging you here, woman.” he was at his wits end, “I don’t beg.”

“Obviously, you do,” Kaplan disagreed, “and I secretly think... you like it.”

Silas swallowed... hard, “Look, just think about it. Get back to me.” he spread his hands, quickly going back to his cracked rib cage to support and cradle, “No rush... no pressure. I’m flexible.”

“Not as much as I.” Kaplan assured so sweetly.

“Oh, fuck...” Silas closed his eyes, “...I have to go lay down for a while.” he turned, half in half out the door, lifting his good hand to his ear and mouth to signify ‘call me’ to a whimsical Kate Kaplan.

It was hard going for the man... in more ways than one, Red imagined.

Red breathed out slowly, expelling pent-up emotions.

“Damn...” Elizabeth grated beneath her breath, “it was just getting good.” she watched her guard hobble out the door.

Red shared the moment with a discrete lift of his brows, acknowledging her assessment.

Kaplan pretended she didn’t hear and was back to her old businesslike self.

“I will assist him.” Dembe shook his head disapprovingly at the older woman. “I expected better, Kate.”

“I gave as good as I could.” she blinked innocently.

Dembe was not amused, “He is gravely injured.”

“I told him he shouldn’t be... up.”

“Well, he is now.” Red had seen the evidence.

Dembe scowled, taking his leave.

Outside the door, the man pulled up short.

Silas was leaning heavily on the wall for support. His teeth gritted against the pain. Dembe motioned and instantly an orderly pushed a wheelchair over to their position.

“I’m not even going to argue on this one.” the guard eased carefully into the seat. He checked with Dembe. “Do you think she fell for it?”

Dembe shook his head. “You did not have to go to such lengths.”

“You don’t know the depth of that little twerp's insecurities.” Silas debated. “She had to believe that I was fine or the guilt would have eaten her alive.”

“Let us hope you survive your noble attempt.” Dembe stated stoically pushing the man down the long corridor.
“No sign of that fucker Carver I suppose.” it was weighing on Silas’ mind since his team had brought him up to speed.

“You concentrate on recovering so that when we do locate him,” Dembe suggested, “we will have you operating at peak efficiency.”

“Am I getting old?”

Did Silas need reassurance?

“Yes.” Dembe replied succinctly.

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“Why do I feel reprimanded?” Liz wanted someone to explain the sensation, “I didn’t do anything.”

“I will give you something to help you sleep.”

“No!” Red arose quickly, “No drugs, Kate.”

The woman quirked a brow, glancing at Elizabeth who flushed again but Liz didn’t know why.

That ‘reprimand’ feeling was back.

“I wouldn’t give her anything that would harm–”

“No... I know that, it’s just that...” Red had wanted to tell the woman in a different setting... a different manner, “she might be... pregnant.”

Liz kept quiet, feeling the tension emanating from the man beside her.

“I see...” Kate slapped the needle down into the sheet beside Liz’s thigh, her look a thunderously disapproving one, “I must check on something.”

Red kept his cool, remaining silent as well. He compressed his lips tightly waiting for the tempest to hit full force.

Kaplan stuffed the needle into its case, her manner livid, “...Never think of the consequences.” she muttered under her breath.

“Kate...” the man warned with his tone.

She stormed out with but one lethal glare at Red Reddington.

He drew in a calming breath, exhaling slowly, “...Well, on the whole,” he mused thoughtfully, “I think that went very well... considering.”

“Considering what?” Liz hadn’t thought it went well at all.

“Considering she could have easily severed my jugular with that look alone.”

“Why is she so upset...” Liz bit her lip anxiously, “what did I...”

“It’s me, honey.” Red soothed quickly, “She’s upset with me. Or perhaps my lack of... control.”

“You’re upset with her.” Liz realized, beginning to read his moods.
“I don’t like people judging me unduly.” he stated succinctly, “Even when I deserve the censure. Not even Kate, who has every right to make such a judgement call.”

It was a difficult admission for the man.

“I... don’t understand.” Liz was upset as well now.

“Really!” Francis Holbrook breezed into the room animated, flustered and clearly upset. “...Really?”

He spread his expressive hands wide, his face incredulous, “Oh my God!”

He stopped dead in his tracks, “Look at you!” he gestured wildly, “Silas is on his deathbed! The man’s obviously delusional spouting off something about ‘red snatches’ and what the hell is wrong with Mr. Kaplan?”

Red sat back, straightening the bottom of his vest absently, “And hello to you too, Francis.”

“Something like this happens,” the young man’s gestures were becoming more adrenalized, “and you don’t even bother to call me?”

“Oh, I’m fine, Francis.” Liz wasn’t certain yet exactly how to act with the man.

“Fine!” he gestured wildly back and forth taking in her condition, “Fine??” he looked at Red accusingly.

“It was a horrible accident.” Liz stated her belief.

“Do you think?” Francis was beside himself, “My God, look at you!”

“Mr. Kaplan is erring on the side of caution.” Red looked at Lizzy. The woman could hardly move, strapped up like a calf at a rodeo, that damned neck brace considerably limiting her movement. The backboard a necessity he disliked intensely.

“I don’t believe someone didn’t even bother to call me!” Francis was on a roll. “I had to get my information secondhand. Thank God, Joe gives my feelings a modicum of credence at least.”

“I was going to call in a minute.” Red soothed, “It’s been a little hectic around here.”

Francis... settled, “Yeah well...” he still was a little miffed but pulled up a chair, sitting. His shrewd eyes examined the woman critically, “Kaplan give you the okay?” he needed reassurance. “Are you all right?”

Liz smiled warmly, “I got the best of the deal from what I hear.”

Red had not told her about the teenagers but one of Kaplan’s people had let it slip on the way over in the ambulance.

Red was going to take care of the guy but Kaplan had beat him to it. No one who worked under either, ever revealed any more information than was absolutely necessary at any given time.

Liz had asked if anyone was aware of the particulars regarding the accident and the guy didn’t have the brains to even pretend to lie.

Such people had no place in Red’s organization.

Of course, Red would have simply fired the man. He wasn’t quite certain how Kaplan herself had
handled the situation.

One just never knew with the woman.

“You look like hell warmed over.” Francis decided, his eyes critical on Elizabeth’s battered face.

“...Yeah, well,” she tried to shrug, but it hurt too much, “you know.”

“Did you sustain a head wound?” Francis turned to Red for a coherent explanation. “What did that even mean?”

“She’s attempting to be stoic.”

“No...” Liz objected, “it’s just that, I feel so bad about those kids... their families.” she told the truth, “It seems wrong to lay here and feel sorry for myself.”

“What kids?” Francis sat up.

Red relayed the story.

Francis sat back, “Well, if the little bastard pulls through, it’ll be a waste... cause I’m gonna go ice the fucking so and so.”

The silence in the room was oppressive.

Liz looked like a deer in headlights, a fixed smile on her face.

Red glanced down, dusting imaginary lint off his trousers.

“What?” Francis rolled his eyes, “I was kidding.” he exasperated.

The smile remained fixed. Red lifted his head sensing Lizzy’s thoughts. He met Francis’ gaze easily.

“We know...”

“Do you?” Francis was astute at times, “What’s going on?” he questioned Liz more than the man sitting beside her, “I’m getting some bad vibes here. Did I do something?”

It suddenly occurred to the man, his manner altering visibly, “Oh!” he realized, “I was supposed to bring something!” he breathed a sigh of relief, “Sure... right, but I didn’t want to take the time to stop at a flower shop or arcade.”

Red’s brow went up at that last one...

Francis was patting his person down, his face suddenly brightening, “I got gum!”

He offered the package over, “It’s not even opened yet!”

Red smiled gently, taking the offering when Lizzy couldn’t.

“Thank you for the thought... and gift.” Red held the gift aloft.

Liz relaxed a bit, “...Oh, Francis.” a slight chuckle escaped, but she paid the price for it.

Each man winced in empathy, “That had to hurt.” Red frowned, lifting her fingers to his lips.

“Bet it’s gonna leave a mark.” Francis nodded sagely.
Liz laughed again, “S-Stop...” she pleaded her case.

Francis did as he was asked, “Sorry...” he nodded at nothing in particular, “so what do you need next? I’m here...” he was ready to help in any way.

“We’re covered but I might call on you later if it’s no imposition.” Red ‘covered’ nicely.

“Imposition?” Francis scoffed, “Are you sniffing Kaplan’s good stuff again? What’s with this imposition shit?”

A thought occurred, “She didn’t leave any, did she? Kaplan... the good stuff?”

“You ever known me to share?” Red ‘shared’.

Francis’ face fell, “...Major bummer.”

Red felt better, Lizzy’s eyes had softened on the kid.

“Look, I’m going to go, let you get some rest because Kaplan said if I didn’t, she would ‘cap me’.”

Francis arose, taking Liz’s hand, “I know you’re worried about those stupid kids,” he sensed as much, “I’ll go check out the hospital. Sometimes just not having to worry about the medical costs helps out... that, I can do.”

Liz’s eyes misted, “... Thank you, Francis.”

Kaplan appeared at the door, her face stern but when was it not, Red wondered.

She zeroed in on him in particular but Francis had taken her arrival as a warning for himself.

“I’m sorry all ready.” he hastily released Liz’s hand, “Keep it in the holster, woman.”

He glanced fretfully at Red, now realizing the other guy was in the hot seat, “I would rather face a Klingon Tribunal...” he sympathized with Red’s fate, confiding secretively, as he took his leave.

He cautiously made his way around the diminutive woman, smiling as he passed, “Have a good evening, Mr. Kaplan.”

“Leave, Francis.” the woman replied dryly.

“Thank you, Ma’am.” Francis bobbed his head, making a hasty retreat.

Red arose, smiling down at an apprehensive Elizabeth Keen.

“I’ll only be outside the door.”

Kaplan turned, exiting.

She waited patiently watching Red close the door to the room.

“You should have informed me of the... situation beforehand,” she began without preamble, “I could have ordered tests which might otherwise be detrimental to a-”

“Perhaps I thought...” Red interrupted, his manner frosty to say the least, his speech clipped, precise, “it was really none of your business... my personal life.”

Kaplan fell silent, “I am only thinking of her well-being... and the child, if one exists.”
“Is that what you’re thinking of?” he doubted it, clearly, “Or is it the fact that you have disapproved of any association which might conceivably develop between Elizabeth and a man twice her age?”

“I don’t question the ‘age’ issue...” she spoke bluntly as was her way, “I have grave doubts about pulling her into a way of life which can only... ultimately mean Elizabeth’s downfall.”

What rebuttal could there be to that, Red wondered bleakly.

“There is so much we have yet to do, Raymond,” Kate reminded, softening a tad, “Have you lost sight of the goals you are trying to accomplish? Why we started on this journey in the first place?”

_Had he? Perhaps so._

“You have a weakness now... where none existed before.” it was reminded, “Which puts her life in imminent danger. With a child... what _limits_ will you put upon yourself?”

“I have been doing this, trying to accomplish these goals for twenty years now, Kate.” the man fumed inwardly. “Twenty years. I’ve lost _everything_ I’ve ever valued...” he raged, “when do _I_ get a little happiness?” he spat. “Is that out of _the_ question? Don’t _I_ get a chance at _some_ kind of life?”

The woman was torn, clearly, “I don’t know what my purpose is any longer... I can’t protect you from yourself, Raymond.”

The man hung his head, his eyes closing.

“I can’t be of assistance if you no longer trust my judgement.” she was truly floundering, “Or heed my advice.”

She lifted troubled eyes.

“There is no one’s judgement I value more, Kate,” he told the truth, “I could not function without you about to keep my ass in line but...” he moved slowly, the last thing he wanted to do was alienate the woman now.

“I’m trying to find my way as well.” he was struggling, reaching out to someone he trusted implicitly. “This is all new territory for me. Sometimes I feel...” he searched the emotions churning inside of him, “my intellect, what there is of it, has always dictated my actions in the past.”

He shook his head minutely, the silence resurfacing but this time it was less tense.

“I’m tired, Kate.” he ran a hand across his brow, his shoulders slumping with his mood, “I’m just... so tired of it all.” he sighed.

Kaplan digested the moment. She had a decision to make, clear and simple.

She made it.

“We can do a simple urine test,” she handed over a plastic cup, “You’ll have at least one answer. I can’t guarantee it will be the one you hope for.”

Red looked at the cup.

“We can determine if x-rays can be done safely.” Kaplan looked through the glass pane of the door. Elizabeth hastily turned her head as the dark eyes met blue.

Kaplan’s lips cracked a bit, “She’s worried... I wonder about who?” those dark eyes shifted almost
mischievously. “You... or me?”

“She think’s you’re invincible.” he confided.

“She thinks incorrectly,” it was simply stated. Kate sighed lightly, “I’ll give you both a moment’s privacy then...”

She turned, leaving without another word.

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Red waited on pins and needles.

Kate had said it wouldn’t take long.

It didn’t.

The woman entered stepping quietly forward.

Elizabeth stiffened, anxious... uncertain as to her own feelings at present.

Did she want a baby so soon into the relationship? Was she ready for such a gigantic challenge?

Part of her was all flushed and excited to think she might be carrying a little spark of life inside her.

Part of her was terrified of the very same thing.

She tried to read Kate Kaplan’s face, but it was impossible until... the severity softened solemnly...

“...I’m sorry,” the woman spoke quietly, “the test was... negative.”

Red had carefully composed his own face, years of practice kept his devastation completely hidden.

Elizabeth’s eyes darted to his.

He forced a smile, reaching for her hand, “It’s fine,” he stated almost automatically, “It’s all right... really.”

Elizabeth relaxed visibly, “Ohh... okay.” she wasn’t sure how, or what, she was feeling, “...Okay.” she repeated absently.

Was she disappointed? Was this... disappointment? Of course she was disappointed.

She didn’t think it would be this... intense.

“Well...” what should she say? Was there an acceptable response one was supposed to give to such news, “...okay.”

Kate Kaplan lay a gentle hand on Raymond Reddington’s shoulder.

She felt the tension radiating through the man’s body. She squeezed reassuringly.

He was hurting, she knew.

The news had hurt him. She hated being the one to do so.

His hand covered hers for a brief second then dropped aside.
He was thanking her in his own way.

He had to be strong for Elizabeth, but inside, Kaplan knew he felt anything but.

“I’m sorry.” Elizabeth apologized sincerely, “I’m so sorry, Red.”

“It’s fine.” he smiled reassuringly, “Everything is fine, baby.” he turned to Kaplan, “Can we get those x-rays now? Get her out of that damned neck brace at least?”

Kaplan nodded, “It will take a second. I’ll have them bring the machine.”

Red hastily put a restraining hand when Kate would have removed hers from his shoulder, “Thank you, Kate.”

She smiled down at him, quietly taking her leave.

Elizabeth thought, for one second there, the other woman truly looked at peace... truly appeared... not so severe, not so... austere.

Elizabeth wondered what Mr. Kaplan had looked like as a young girl.

But then, Elizabeth’s thoughts turned to...

Other things.

No baby. She had no little, tiny person inside her.

Why did she suddenly feel so bereft?

No... it was fine. Red had said... it was fine.

They could try another time.

They had... so much time in the long run.

She shook her head, sighing heavily, “I’m so sorry, Red.”

“Stop it.” he advised softly, “We have all the time in the world, Lizzy.”

She sought him out.

“God will bless us when it’s time.”

“...Do you believe in God, Red?” she had asked him once before, but wasn’t sure if he was being serious in his reply.

“In this instance...” he leaned, kissing her mouth, “... yes, I do.”

She felt infinitely better, “... So do I.”

They had all the time in the world.

Red Reddington practically promised as much.

She could take it to the bank.

She lay quietly listening to the sound of the man’s steady breathing.
It calmed her need to weep...

Chapter End Notes

Gee, Silas sure was in a grumpy mood...

And then he wasn't. :)
“You and I both know, if Carver is aware of our location...” Silas broached the subject while Kaplan prepared Elizabeth to depart from the make-shift hospital, “we have two options.

Red listened attentively, trusting his friends input implicitly, even as the large guard hid the fact he was in pain from any interested on-looker.

But he knew better... and admired the man all the more. Even in serious agony, Silas was at the top of his game.

“We can haul ass, set up at another location...” Silas continued, “which only postpones the inevitable, if you ask me.” the large shoulders shrugged bringing a grimace to the handsome face. But it was fleeting and then gone. “Or we find the leak in the organization. It’s apparent we have one. Who, is anyone’s guess at this point.”

Red nodded his agreement his own features tense. To think someone he trusted was out to betray him, royally pissed him off.

“I don’t want Elizabeth run out of her own home.” Silas snapped.

Red’s jaw tightened, angered by the idea that her home... her very stability, her bit of normalcy had been compromised.

“This son-of-a-bitch is taking her security away. We’ve worked too fucking hard to get her to this point.”

“You aren’t a hundred percent.”

Silas fell silent at the veiled accusation, “...No,” he admitted grimly, “but I am functioning.”

“Are you?”

The grey eyes shifted, “Yes.”

“You need time to heal, as well.” Red reminded, “I know the variables. Let me have time to think them through.”

Silas nodded curtly but Red could tell the guy was itching to get at Carver. To put an end to the fucker.

Who wasn’t?
“We’ll get him.” Red laid a hand on his friend’s shoulder. Silas winced. Red eased the pressure. “But on our terms.”

Silas remained silent.

“Can we protect her for a couple days?” Red needed more input.

“He’ll hit us at our lowest point.” Silas reminded.

“Is this,” Red needed to know, “our lowest point?”

“He thinks it is.” Silas grinned. “Might work to our advantage, but I don’t want Elizabeth within a thousand miles when we confront the bastard.”

Red patted the stocky shoulder absently, “Give me twenty-four hours.”

Silas inclined his head minutely.

“Right now, she needs to be home.” Red realized, “She needs to feel normal for a while. Can we give her that?”

“We’ll give her any damned thing she wants,” Silas rolled his eyes, “when have we not?”

“Which is how it should be.” Red grinned, “It’s our job to pamper and spoil.”

“You take it to the extreme with this one.” a beefy thumb was jerked in the appropriate direction.

“You disapprove?” Red’s grin widened.

Silas thought about it, “Nah, I guess it works in this instance but don’t expect me to put up with her crap.”

Red rolled his own eyes. Silas was just as bad, if not worse, about babying Lizzy. Today was proof of that. The man had left his sickbed in order to make Lizzy... feel better.

Though, it wasn’t Red’s preferred method. He had enjoyed watching the woman almost go for the guards throat. By the looks of Silas, it was perhaps a good thing Lizzy had been strapped to that backboard. She could have easily taken him down.

“God forbid,” Red held up pacifying hands, “I realize you are a throw back to the Neanderthal period. I wouldn’t think of disturbing the natural order of your evolution.”

“Just so we know where we stand.” Silas wanted matters straight and clear.

“You’d give your fucking life for her,” Red called the guy’s bluff, “and you know it.”

“It’s my job to give my fucking life.” Silas explained patiently as if to a young child, “Doesn’t mean I have to put up with shit.”

Red nodded sagely, pointing to a chair, “Sit down before you fall down.”

Silas looked at the object and surprisingly... sat.

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The ride home was quiet. Each person too tired from the day’s events to put out much effort for small
Red’s heart went out to Elizabeth Keen.

She had not had an easy time of it this past year.

The woman sensed his gaze, turning her head to offer a small smile.

His gaze softened, his fingers seeking the small hand. He brought the cool appendages to his lips, “Are you tired?”

“Glad to be going home.” she avoided the direct answer, “Silas, are you feeling better?”

“Don’t bother me, woman,” the guard looked out the window, “I’m contemplating the universe.”

Liz leaned, smacking the side of the guy’s head smartly, “Not in my presence you aren’t.”

Red winced for the man. That had to hurt, but the guard hid the fact well. He frowned his confusion when he realized the guard was holding his smile and Lizzy looked... disgusted.

“He contemplates the universe... a lot.” she grimaced, her hand mimicking a jerking motion.

Red sighed, dropping his forehead into his palm. His head was throbbing. Pushing his fingers against his skin, he dulled the ache briefly.

“Can’t you do something about her?” Silas turned his head lazily but even he returned to a brooding silence not having gathered a rise from the woman.

Lifting his head, Red kinked his neck moving closer to Elizabeth. Leaning into the small frame, his arm tugged her close, “When we get home, how does a nice hot shower sound and a late dinner?”

“Amazing.” Liz was happy again, Silas forgotten for a moment. “We can make omelets or–”

“Nora stayed over,” Francis leaned forward, resting his arm along their seat, “she said she couldn’t let her little angel come home to cold leftovers.”

“Little angel,” Liz quirked a brow, “meaning you?”

“Who else could she have been talking about?” Francis was stumped.

Liz sighed lightly, exchanging cryptic glances with Red, “I’m glad she stayed. Red,” the woman was suddenly apprehensive, “should she have her own guard now? She should stay with us... we have the private apartment downstairs.”

“Why does Nora need a guard?” Francis sat forward again, alert, “What’s going on that I don’t know about?” he shot Red an accusing glare, “Is Nora in danger? Why would she be?”

The throbbing in Red’s head intensified. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with this shit.

“The man who accosted Lizzy in Vegas...” Red reminded the young man.

“You think he’s responsible for the accident today,” Francis followed Red’s train of thought, “but what does Nora...”

“Before the accident, he called Elizabeth, threatening her... and Nora.”
“Are you fucking kidding me!” Francis unbuckled his belt, sliding even closer to get the lowdown.

“Francis don’t!” Liz reacted, “Get back in that belt!”

Red shifted non-committal eyes at the unexpected outburst.

Francis slowly complied, “Okay....” he drawled, his face twisting comically Red’s way in response before he settled back into the seat, clicking the belt in place.

The silence was uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry...” Liz felt foolish, “...I guess I’m a little shell-shocked.” she didn’t like how fast the car was moving. The road sped by at a ridiculously high rate of speed. Everything was a blur.

“It’s only natural,” Red soothed, “after a bad accident.”

Dembe slowed to a more acceptable speed, “Forgive me, Elizabeth. I simply wished you home as soon as possible.”

“No...” she laughed hollowly, “I’m all for that. I’m just being stupid. I’m sure everything will get back to normal... in time, right?”

She sought the answer from a serenely relaxed Red Reddington.

“Of course it will.” he caressed her temple with the soft pressure of his lips.

Liz sighed again, her gaze fixed on the passing scenery, “Will it?” she had to wonder sometimes.

Would things ever be normal in her world? Did she even want that?

Right now, the word and the idea sounded wonderful.

“Yes, baby.” Red had heard the wistful rejoinder, “I’ll see to it.”

Liz pulled herself out of her doldrums forcing a smile, her fingers squeezing his reassuringly, “I’m just hungry. You know how cranky I get.”

“We all do.” Silas piped up from the front seat.

Liz’s mouth tightened but Red could see the remark made her feel... normal.

She settled back against him, cuddling into his warmth, “That man needs a keeper,” she decided, “or a muzzle.”

Red chuckled, so very glad to have her safe in his arms again.

Francis joined in and Dembe even cracked a smile.

“...What?” Liz was pleased to have amused them all, for she sensed she had, but couldn’t figure out why.

“You sounded like Eeyore.” Francis laughed appreciatively.

Liz chuckled as well at the thought, “Have you seen my tail?” she mimicked playfully.

“Yes, I have.” Red whispered seductively for her ears alone, his look sending delightful shivers down her body, “And I can’t wait to see it again.”
“Behave.” she scolded, glancing fretfully to the other passengers in the car.

Red cast her an innocent look, his palm rubbing along her spine.

“Well, I’m sorry.” the woman hastily moved forward with but one chastising glance at the man beside her... but allowed his hand to settle on the curve of her bottom.

Red stopped his advancement, content in its placement.

“I guess I’m in a mood. I wasn’t expecting this set back, you know?”

She sought Silas’ assistance, “We were doing so well, weren’t we, Silas. I was getting stronger... wasn’t I?”

“Set backs don’t mean shit,” Silas grumbled, “Let it roll off your shoulders. I’ll have you back up to par in a week’s time.”

She brightened, “Oh,” she reconsidered, “that’s not so bad at all.”

“Look on the bright side,” Red chimed in, lifting her wrist, his fingers gently probing the bandaged area, “you didn’t break it.” he included her leg in his assessment with a look.

Liz definitely felt better, “You’re right.” she decided. “It could have been worse.”

Each person in the car turned his head simultaneously as Francis cheerfully began to whistle the Monty Python classic, “Always Look On the Bright Side of Life.”

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After a shower and a change of clothes, Liz felt more herself.

She sat now, around the large dining table, close to Red, listening to Dembe and Silas debate the pros and cons of semi-automatic versus automatic weapons.

Nora was admonishing both men about the proper topics one should discuss at the dinner table.

Liz’s thoughts turned inward. She recalled earlier tonight, just after she and Red parted company for a time with the others.

It was agreed they would all assemble in an hours time but Red insisted she shower and change.

“Doing something normal... brings normalcy.” he stated in that matter-of-fact way he had about himself.

Liz had to agree. The shower renewed her spirits. Being home, made the days miseries fade into the background.

They would have to be dealt with emotionally she knew but this time was a welcomed reprieve.

She had stumbled in the hallway.

She wasn’t watching what she was doing. She stumbled.

Red had been there to catch her.

When had he not been of late? She smiled.
The man lifted her into his arms. She felt weightless engulfed in that strong embrace.

His eyes stole her heart from her body.

She hadn’t even protested. She wanted him closer. She wanted to be in his arms. She needed this moment all day.

When Red had lifted his mouth away from nuzzling her neck, she kissed him passionately, wantonly, allowing him to know how deeply he affected her.

She wouldn’t have cared if they had missed this dinner.

It was so good to feel his hands on her body. He undressed her, joined her in the shower but he had not made a move.

Only kissed her body, in innocuous places. He seemed to enjoy touching her.

She enjoyed his touch, tremendously.

But tonight, she wanted more.

Was it wrong? She kept thinking about those poor teenagers. Was she a bad person for thinking about...

But something primal happened between Red and her in that hallway.

He lifted her so easily. He wasn’t even breathing hard when he sat her down in their room.

And the way he held her gaze all the way down that long corridor...

“A penny for them.”

“Big spender,” she quipped, giving over her full attention, “just thinking what an incredible man you are.”

“Should I be suspicious?” Red draped his arm along the back of her chair, “Or appreciative.”

“I would have showed my appreciation,” she lowered her voice.

The debate was getting loud. Francis had joined the discussion. He advocated a gentlemen’s weapon... light sabers.

Red’s interest was caught by Liz’s words however, clearly enjoying the turn of the conversation immensely.

“An hour ago,” Elizabeth lifted perfectly arched brows, “in our bedroom... our shower.”

“Do you know what it took for me to...” Red stopped, he wouldn’t proceed with that thought, “that’s not what you needed.”

“Shouldn’t I be the judge of that?” she was confused even more so.

Red concentrated on his expensive shoes.

“You were just so... loving. I wanted to return the gesture.” Liz tried to explain.

He reached, covering her hand with his.
Nora opened the door, signaling, “I thought you would all prefer a more... comfortable setting.” she motioned.

Liz could see food set up buffet style laid out on the large island.

It signaled to her that Nora didn’t want to be left out tonight. That the other woman needed to feel connected.

“Oh God,” Nora shook her head at her own stupidity, “I forgot about your injury. How could I be so–”

“Oh, fudge and cornflakes,” Liz laughed gaily, “you build it, we will come.” she quoted an old Kevin Costner movie haphazardly, “I’m already there.”

She took Red’s support in the way of a steady guiding hand and in moments everyone had found a plate, looking over the scrumptious offerings laid out so appealingly by a loving hand.

“I’ll get that for you, Silas.” Nora took Silas’ plate.

“Hey, hey!” Francis let his feelings on the matter be known. “He’s not dead. I am your go-to guy, remember?”

“Now you sit,” Nora scolded, “I’ll get to you after the injured are taken care of.”

Francis sulked effectively.

“You’re still my favorite.” Nora soothed.

Francis felt better, clearly, making certain Silas had heard the comment.

The large guard sat heavily, his look speaking volumes. Behind Nora’s back, he flipped Francis off.

“Doesn’t matter.” Francis was secure. “She still likes me best.”

“Placates you best, you mean.” Silas countered.

Liz watched Red, her eyes gentle on the man. He was doling out drinks which tonight did not include the heavy stuff.

Beers, tea and soda were the choice of beverage.

“Oh, Nora, this is absolutely lovely. Thank you for staying.” Liz accepted her plate graciously, “You are invaluable and a good dear friend.”

“Well, this is my new home or at least,” Nora looked to Red, “you’ve all made me feel as much. I wanted to help out in some way. No matter how trivial.”

“Oh, angel face,” Francis arose, leaning to kiss the woman’s cheek in open affection, “this isn’t trivial,” he waved the banquet over, “this is a feast fit for royalty... am I your knight in shining armor.”

“Sure.” Nora smiled placatingly, “More casserole?”

Francis wasn’t shy about seconds.

“We haven’t even started.” Silas grumbled moodily. “This guy’s already asking for seconds.”
“I didn’t have to ask.” Francis pursed his lips suggestively at Nora.

“Honey, are you all right? Truly?” Nora smiled absently at Francis, her true interest for Elizabeth.

“Silas is the one who got the worst of–”

“I said don’t be mothering me.” Silas mechanically snapped. The man winced, cricking his neck slightly when fingers pinched his ear. “Ow, damn!”

“I’ll show you mothering.” Nora snapped right back. “Don’t be surly.” her tone demanded no nonsense, “Eat! You need food!”

Silas begrudgingly... ate, to Elizabeth’s shock and delight.

Red beckoned, “Nora, sit.” he indicated a vacant spot by Dembe, “tell us about your day.”

The woman laughed bringing her coffee to the seat. Dembe arose, assisting her to situate herself comfortably.

“Well, it wasn’t anywhere near the excitement of yours.” she lifted an arched brow, “I baked a cake. I ran the dishwasher.”

Red smiled, “You baking anything is the equivalent to Rembrandt painting another masterpiece.”

“Not sure he would agree on that one.” she chuckled delightfully, “but thank you and yes, Francis... I made your favorite dessert as well.” she held up placating hands.

“Told you so...” Silas mumbled, even as he protectively covered his ear from Nora’s grasp.

As he had many favorites, Francis grilled the woman about which dessert in particular she had made just for him. Silas and Dembe sighed, returning to their plates, barely listening to the man rattling off sweet treats he adored.

Liz looked at Red, finding the man looking across the room, his eyes unfocused. His fingers tapped a rhythmless beat on the tabletop, nodding to himself as though having come to a decision about something. Liz’s brows furrowed, wondering what the man was contemplating.

“You all look exhausted.” Nora scanned the faces at the table in good time.

“Move in with us, Nora.” Red said in response, shocking the woman silent.

Liz’s mouth fell agape, before widening into a delightful smile, “Oh, Nora, please say you will.”

“I’m...” the cook sputtered her disbelief, “pardon me?”

“Lizzy would like you to stay,” Red replied, “and so would I.”

Dembe and Francis lifted their eyes searching out Red, the smiles on their faces sobering.

Silas sat back in his chair, wrapping an arm tight about his rib cage.

All the men were pleased Red was taking the cook’s safety into consideration. They liked Nora and hated to think of her being put in harm’s way.

“There’s a private fully equipped two-bedroom apartment downstairs.” Red added to the allure, “All the amenities on the house grounds are available to you.”
“The pool, tennis courts, entertainment room, the lake, river, stables...” Francis added, sweetening the pot.

“We don’t have horses.” Liz rolled her eyes.

“She gets her own parking too, doesn’t she Red?” Francis continued on, ignoring Liz.

Red smiled at the man, inclining his head, “Enclosed parking.”

Francis lifted a hand, gesturing excitedly, “No more cleaning your car off in the winter.”

Liz was nodding eagerly herself, “And... and you can paint and decorate it any way you want.” she added her two sense.

Nora swiveled her head between each person, trying to take in all the information flying at her.

“Whoa...” Nora chuckled, holding up a stilling hand, “what’s this all about?”

“We would love for you to stay here...” Red repeated, “with us.”

Nora looked at her boss, her head cocking slightly.

“You live alone, yes?” Red questioned.

“I do, but...”

“There is twenty-four-hour security here.” Dembe joined in the fray.

Nora looked at the man with interest, garnering Red’s interest.

“Is something wrong, Nora?” the man questioned.

“No...” she drawled, her fingers idly tracing a flower etched into the tablecloth, “I suppose it would be nice to have reliable security about.” she murmured, “I am getting older after all...” she chuckled flatly.

Silas sat forward, a frown creasing his forehead, “You don’t feel safe at home.”

Nora laughed shortly, sitting up in her chair, “We women hear noises at night.” she waved away his concern. “Just rats in the attic.” she smiled at Francis and Liz, sharing the in-joke from a favorite movie.

Dembe reached, patting the woman’s hand in understanding.

Francis fell unusually quiet. Silas turned knowledgeable eyes towards his boss.

Carver...

Had the son-of-a-bitch been watching her? Making noises to frighten her?

Or was it just the sound of an empty house?

Red couldn’t be sure. And he didn’t want to find out.

Red lifted a calming hand to the both men in turn, looking Elizabeth’s way.

His heart tightened painfully, finding her fearful eyes boring into his. He remain calm and determined
which relaxed the younger woman visibly.

“You know who I am...” he addressed Nora.

Nora stared across the table, her gaze steady on the imposing man, “...I do.”

“Then you know I’m a dangerous man.” Red said.

“I don’t believe you are.” Nora countered.

“Not with you.” Red’s face softened, “Never with you.”

Nora’s shoulders relaxed, a questioning look on her face wondering what his point was exactly.

“I can’t promise that my...” Red hesitated, “occupation will never follow me home.” he breathed, a sorrow filling his heart, “But I can promise you that no harm will ever come to you as long as you are here.”

Liz swallowed the knot in her throat.

“I think you are well aware I would do anything to ensure Elizabeth’s safety.” Red stated a fact.

“I am...” Nora replied without hesitation.

“Know if you stay with us,” Red continued, “I offer you the same protection I give the woman I love.”

“I demand nothing less.” Francis said, smiling at the woman. Though everyone at the table, including Elizabeth, knew he was absolutely serious.

Silas rolled his eyes, shoving his plate forward, garnering the woman’s attention, “I demand nothing less.”

Nora’s eyes flit from one person to the next, until falling on Elizabeth’s face. The woman pushed back from her chair, walking to the younger woman. She reached out, tucking a stray strand of hair behind Liz’s ear.

“I’ll stay...” she murmured.

Liz’s face lit with joy as she pushed from her own chair, wrapping her arms about the woman.

“Tell Joe and David to take Nora home and gather her things.” Red quietly directed Silas. “I don’t want her staying there tonight.”

“I’ll have a moving company gather the rest of her belongings tomorrow.” Francis said.

“I will see to her safety personally until such time a private guard can be assigned.” Dembe stated succinctly.

“We’ll handle all of that tomorrow.” Red decided. “All I want tonight is Nora safely here with us.”

Red turned finding Lizzy hobbling towards him, beaming brightly. She threw her arms about his shoulders, squeezing him tightly.

“Thank you...” she whispered in his ear, burrowing closer to him.
Nuzzling his nose behind her ear, he inhaled her sweet scent, his heart calming. “Whatever you want...” he whispered, “you shall have.”

Reluctantly stepping back, Red cupped her small face in his hands, kissing her forehead.

“...Anything.” he murmured.

Liz lifted blue eyes to his, taking the breath from him. She looked so content, so happy...

Pleasing her gave him so much pleasure in return.

“I have everything I need,” she smiled softly, “right here.”

Red inclined his head, kissing the mouth lifting to his. Settling into the soft kiss, he flicked his tongue against the sweet mouth, deeply grunting his pleasure when it opened for him.

Pulling the woman closer, Red lost himself in the hot little mouth, gently caressing the small tongue, capturing her delighted little moan in his mouth.

“You’re blocking the way.” Francis jolted the two from their affectionate embrace. “Nora needs to get my dessert.”

Red growled his displeasure when Lizzy’s mouth broke from his, breathing heavily.

“Uhm...” Liz swallowed, capturing her breath, clearing her throat, “Get your own dessert.”

Francis relaxed, walking past the two crossing his eyes at Elizabeth’s reprimand.

“She’ll be safe here.” Red rumbled, drawing Lizzy’s attention back. “I promise.”

“I know.” she leaned into the thick fingers threading through her hair and massaging her scalp.

“That’s all you had to say.”

Red’s stomach flipped in response. Knowing Lizzy held such unrelenting trust in him still shocked him sometimes.

He was broken from his reverie by the return of Francis and their newest tenant... Nora, carrying plates of cakes and a tray of coffee.

Reseating themselves at the island, they enjoyed their sweet treat and more in-depth conversation.

“Oh!” Francis became animated, “Speaking of which...” he settled in and Red immediately knew they were about to regaled by one of the boy’s infamous off-colored tales.

“Francis...” Red sighed heavily, “there are ladies present.”

“I’ll clean it up.” Francis jovially hit Liz on the shoulder, one ‘guy’ to another.

“Is this the one about the mermaid?” Dembe halted his food, mid-lift.

Nora laughed heartily, “That was a good one, right Dembe?”

Dembe smiled his remembrance, “Colorful to say the least.”

“What the hell goes on in this house when I’m not here?” Red bemused.

Liz grinned over at him. She was beginning to lose the tightness in her muscles.
Francis tore through the bawdy anecdote complete with gestures, pauses for effect and infectious abandonment.

Liz was relaxing by degrees, the soft spot in her heart for Francis Holbrook prying back open, minute by hilarious minute spent in his company.

Francis, regardless of his choice of vocation, would always just be... Francis.

Unpretentious, forthright, up-front...

A good friend.


While she felt some trepidation, she couldn’t help but appreciate that while Red had wanted an evening alone with her... he had extended the invitation to allow her to get back on an even keel with Francis.

And she was never so lighthearted.

The somewhat questionable joke was rounding down and Liz gave her complete attention over.

“So the daughter asks, A Christmas tree?”, Francis said, “And the mother replied, Yes, dead from the root up and the balls are just for decoration.”

Silence fell around the table except for the sound of a barely contained raspy chuckle from Francis.

Liz leaned over, chuckling quietly despite the questionable content just shared.

Lifting her eyes, slowly, she found the other occupants shaking with silent laughter... except Red. Which only increased her amusement.

Red sighed, ignoring the unladylike snort that came from his right, “Thank you, Francis, for keeping it clean.”

Silas finally broke, a deep throaty chuckle welling from his chest. He instantly protected his rib-cage.

Liz caved as well, a bubbling well of laughter bursting past her quivering lips.

Red eyed the woman, his face minus any expression at all. Which amused her all the more because she knew secretly, he was just as entertained as they had been.

His eyes softened, pleased to see her in such good spirits and more importantly, the reason why.

“You’re a nutcase.” Liz hugged Francis’ neck fiercely, holding tightly about his sturdy frame.

Red sat back, enjoying the moment. He had hoped Lizzy would come to such a conclusion on her own. He had been a little worried when she had said less than five words in the first twenty minutes of dinner.

But when he had found Lizzy, who was admittedly shocked by the retelling... muffling her infectious giggling into her hand, he knew everything would be all right.

“Whoa, woman...” Francis returned the hug but was overpowered by the unexpected exuberance of the embrace and its duration.
It was as if Lizzy didn’t want to let go.

“…What’s this?” he questioned Red more than Liz’s action, “Was it that entertaining?”

Liz chuckled, releasing the man reluctantly, “I’m just happy to be home... with all my family.”

Francis beamed, “You consider me... family?”

“I consider you hopeless... but family, yes.” Liz reseated herself beside Red. “Where did you hear that awful joke?”

“Lia.” Francis announced proudly.

Even Silas did a double take at that bit of information.

Red laughed his delight, “That girl has hidden depths.”

As the evening wore on, Red and Lizzy showed Nora her new accommodations which she loved before Joe and David took the woman to gather her things, leaving the others to settle into a familiar routine.

Silas intended to hit his rounds but Red vetoed that notion past-haste.

“You’re no good to me in your present state,” he pointed out the obvious, “delegate the minor shit, Silas. Heal your body.”

Surprisingly, the large guard agreed to the sound reasoning for once, “I’m staying in-house tonight.” was his only stipulation.

Red shrugged his compliance.

An hour later, he was relaxing on the lanai, cigar and drink in hand. He could just make out the profiles of his two companion’s in the quickly fading light of another day ending.

Upon Nora’s return, Liz attempted to help Nora gather her belongings only to be shooed away by Nora and the guards alike. They assured her it was only a few items and would only take one trip with just the three of them.

Grudgingly she kissed the woman’s cheek, wishing her a good-night and a peaceful sleep before meandering her way back to Red just in time to watch Francis struggle with juggling his phone, cigar and drink.

She shook her head. She was beginning to hate the cell phone. It seemed they could not have even one relaxing moment these days without an interruption of some sort.

The night air was heavy with the scents of the garden wafting on the gentle breeze.

Liz loved this time of night. She sat next to Red propping her feet on the ottoman even as the man had done earlier.

“Yeah?” Francis sighed, flicking the thick ash off his cigar. “No, I’m not home, I’m at Red’s.” he scowled slightly, shrugging.

“Well, how the hell should I know.” he scratched his forehead having set his tumbler on a nearby table, “You still pissed at Adam?” he directed the question to a totally spaced out Red Reddington.
“...Adam who?” Red needed clarification... which was so Red, Liz chuckled mentally.

“Adam Fields.” Francis supplied.

“Depends.” Red hadn’t thought about the subject matter one way or another. It was very low down on his priority list. “What does he want?” he asked, blowing a stream of smoke in the air.

“He has a new shipment.” Francis related the answer. “Wants you to have first crack at the consignment. Says he owes you.”

“Yes, he does.” Red rolled his cigar lovingly watching the red embers on the end spark to life. “He almost cost me a good client last time.” he recalled. “Could have turned ugly ‘cause the kid was late.”

“He respectfully reminds you,” Francis was taking on the role of go-between, “it was a holiday and no one expected the cops to set up the road blocks for drunk drivers.”

“He should have called.” Red’s anger was resurfacing.

“It’s best you let it go.” Francis advised Adam Fields, sotto voce. “Not a wise move to rush Red.”

“Does he have the merchandise on hand... now.” Red had calmed. Business was business.

Francis nodded, “The safe house?”

“Tell him to hold for a moment.” Red gestured his head towards the woman.

Francis got up and walked out into the yard, most likely explaining that Red’s fiancée was in residence and was making plans to distract...occupy her.

“Safe house?” she frowned. “You were staying with me tonight.”

“I will.” Red assured, he glanced at Lizzy, laying his hand on hers, “We have some business headed our way. Can you spare me for a while? Silas has doubled the–”

“Like what happened with Cheung?” she fretted.

“Nothing like that.” Red waved his cigar about gracefully, “It’s not dangerous per se, only advisable for you... if the transaction occurs elsewhere.”

She was intrigued, “You’re trying to get rid of me.”

“I am, yes.” Red nodded amiably. He sensed she wasn’t going to ‘go gently into that good night’ with this one, “It’s drugs, Lizzy.” he confessed.

She tried not to react, “I... I thought you didn’t deal with–”

“I do the semi-legal sort. At least... in some states.” he waved the cigar to and fro.

She caught on quickly. “It’s legal in Colorado.”

“Be that as it may...” Red conceded, “it’s not here, not yet.” he reminded.

“Do you know something I don’t know?” she was sensing as much.

“I always know something you don’t know.” Red grinned at her expression. “Trust me, it will
become legal in DC by next year.”

“I don’t see what the big deal is here.” she shrugged. “You met with that one guy, Jamie, about the
same thing.”

“And I recall you getting in a tizzy about my meeting with Jamie.” Red recalled vividly.

“I did not get in a tizzy.”

“You did.” Red disagreed. “And just like last time, very large quantities are involved. I assumed you
would rather opt out of the proceedings.”

“I... I said I wouldn’t get in the way of your business and I won’t.” she staunchly stated.

“You do understand in keeping with appearances,” Red didn’t think she did, “we will have to
sample the product.”

Red looked out at Francis, gesturing the meeting take place here. Francis gave a ‘thumbs-up’ gesture,
returning his attention to the phone.

“Have to,” she chided, “or want to.”

“I don’t put anything out there I haven’t given approval on myself,” Red advised, “and yes, I want
to. It’s been a shitty week.” he confessed just as he heard Francis come up behind him. “He’s on his
way?”

“They are, yes.” Francis replied, then side eyed Liz.

“She knows.” Red said.

“All of it?” Francis asked.

“Yes.”

“We need munchies.” Francis clapped his hands , rubbing them together briskly.

Liz watched the man exit, a bewildered expression on her bemused face, “Didn’t he have four plates
at dinner?” she said helplessly.

Loud clattering and clanging coming from the direction of the kitchen interrupted the flow of
conversation.

“What is he doing in there?” she made her way hastily to the spot in question, “Nora will kill him if
he messes up her spotless kitchen!”

Red followed more languidly.

She watched Francis clear the cabinets of chips and junk food.

“You’ll need all that?” she shook her head.

“Can you make some of those sandwiches Nora taught you how to make?” he loaded down a tray
with his bounty, “the oven baked ham and what not?”

Liz threw her hands out, exasperated, “I...I guess so.”
“Oh!” Francis remembered, “and some of those little pizzas.” he motioned to a pile on the counter Nora had pre-made and froze for them.

“How many people will be at this little... get together.” she unwrapped the pizzas, setting them on oven trays.

“Well the guards aren’t involved so...” Red wanted most present to have a clear head, “we’re not doing what we did last year.” it was warned to Silas who had just wandered into all the commotion.

“They might still be hungry.” Liz countered, before grabbing a loaf of bread and slapping a package of ham in Red’s hand. He looked at it queerly, but held the package.

She hesitated in her busy movement, eyeing the guard.

He had napped a whole hour, by Liz’s calculations, “What are you doing up?”

She sighed fretfully, staring expectantly at Red.

“What?” Red held his grin.

“You’re not helping...” she waved over the cheese laden bread.

“Baby, I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what you’re doing.”

She rolled her eyes, taking the ham from the man. She slapped two pieces on the other slice, then shoved the meat back in his hands. Red nodded amiably, doing as directed, turning his attention back towards the guard.

“Couldn’t sleep.” Silas grumbled, “Joe said we have company on the way?” he clearly wasn’t pleased with the news.

“We’ll go to–”

“No.” Liz quickly arranged her sandwiches, setting the temperature, “Have your meeting here. It’s less work for Silas and his team.”

Red checked with Silas, “You want to postpone?”

Silas thought about it, “Nah, just keep it contained to one area, don’t disturb Nora.”

“The patio?” Liz queried. She was new to this type of entertaining but was determined to meet the challenge.

“And share with the neighbors?” Red quipped. “Better the Great room.”

It had a lot of area to sit and relax. There was a full bar plus fridge for other refreshments... it would work well.

Shooing Francis off with another tray, Liz scurried about the kitchen cleaning and arranging quickly.

“You’re still not helping...” she rushed past Red, only to be caught and pulled back his way.

“Everything is fine,” he looked about the spotless kitchen. “Take a breath.”

Liz inhaled a deep breath, rolling her shoulders... relaxing. She sucked in a startled breath, rushing away again, mindless of Red’s quiet sigh. She peered into the massive ovens, checking on the
already bubbling pizza and sandwiches.

She opened the door just as Francis breezed back in, loading his arms down with bowls of chicken wings and potato salad.

He inadvertently bumped into her butt sending the woman off-kilter for a beat.

Reaching out to catch herself, her hand scraped along the inside of the oven door.

“Dammit!” she yelped, shaking the burning appendage to rid it of the sharp sting.

Red instantly grasped her wrist guiding her to the sink. Cool water eased the burn instantly.

“Shit! I’m sorry, Lizzy!” Francis had hastily unburdened himself of the excess luggage needing to see the damage.

“Oh it’s... fine.” she dismissed, “I swear, I am the most clumsy person in Washington D.C.”

She examined the red wound critically, “We need to get those sandwiches out of–”

“Got it.” Francis was instantly on the task, “...I know why they keep you out of the kitchen though...” he tease, chuckling at the woman giving him the evil eye only to fall silent a moment later when he found a stone faced Red Reddington glaring at him.

Red sighed, holding his temper. Francis didn’t know Tom used to tease Lizzy mercilessly about that very thing.

“Your big ass knocked me into the stove!” she wailed.

Red grinned over at the distraught woman, pleased to see she found fault in Francis... and not herself.

“He’s just trying to get a rise out of you.” he lifted her wrist, planting a gentle kiss on the flesh.

“Well...” Liz settled, enjoying the way Red was babying her right now, truth told, “he does have a big ass.”

“My ass is perfection.” Francis demurred, reloading his arms with his bounty. “If you are finished kissing hers... you can push that tray into the room for me.”

“I bet women just love your bedside manner.” Liz taunted, upset for Francis’ needling of Red.

“If I kiss anything that starts with ‘B’ it won’t be a boo-boo, trust me.” Francis scoffed, already well down the connecting hallway to the opposite side of the house.

“Oh, that man!” Liz pulled a decorative platter down from the pantry, loading neatly cut slices of pizza unto the large surface. “Silas, can’t you just shoot him or something?” she lifted hopeful eyes, “Just a flesh wound... maybe.”

Silas took one of the sandwiches laying out on the counter into capable hands, “Why, he’ll just hold up here during his entire convalescence period and you and Nora will wait on him hand and foot.”

Liz fell silent trying to ignore Red’s grin of amusement.

“Well, no sandwich for him!” Liz proclaimed staunchly.

“What are you...” Francis breezed back through, “the sandwich Nazi?” he grabbed up a convenient
golden brown cut of bread and meat stuffing the delicacy into his mouth.

“Is that any way to treat a guest in your home?” he motioned to a reticent Red.

“You’re not a guest.” Liz snapped, “You’re a pest!”

“You say tomato,” Francis countered just as snippily, “some say to-mah-toe.”

“These are really good, baby.” Red soothed frayed tensions expertly, having bitten into one of the crispy delights. They were so delicious in fact, he hoped like hell he kept the surprise from his voice, because he was... surprised as shit.

Liz beamed happily, preening under Red’s attention and more so... enjoying the glowing compliment to her cooking. A first in her lifetime.

“These are really good, baby.” Francis mimicked expertly.

Liz pinched her lips, scowling hard at the man. Red ran a hand over his mouth, hiding his smile.

He really enjoyed watching her get riled up way more than he should.

“God, you baby her to death, are you aware of that fact?” Francis disdained.

“Yes.” Red drawled lazily. “Any objections from the psycho ward will be duly noted and summarily dismissed.”

Francis shut up.

Silas put his radio back on the counter, raising his sandwich. He had gotten a beer from the fridge to go with his snack.

“Your guests have arrived.” his tone left little to the imagination as to just how high on the food chain Silas considered the new arrivals, “Shall I show them in?”

Red chuckled, waving the task aside, “Francis will see to the comfort and well-being of his friends.”

“Not my friends.” Francis sneaked a pizza slice his way, “thought they were your friends.”

“Whatever.” Red rolled his eyes towards the boy, his jaw working feverishly, “Go greet them.”

Francis threw up his hands, sighing, “I don’t know why I have to play host...not even my house,” he grumbled, “do I look like Lurch?” he questioned, pushing his way through the door.

Red turned his attention elsewhere, the matter forgotten in his sphere, “Can you occupy yourself?”

“I’m a big girl.” Liz reminded, “I’ll be fine.”

“The door will be open,” he reminded, leaning to kiss her mouth lovingly, “if you need me, don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“What a sweet thing to say.”

No one noticed Silas rolling his eyes.

“I’m just that type of guy.” Red was in a good mood, a playful one. Lizzy was home, having averted a major catastrophe to his way of thinking.
Silas would keep her safe from the maniac running around out there. A plan was already set up and working if Carver dared storm the Citadel they had improvised.

Red took a swig of his beer, motioning accordingly with the bottle, “Stay with one of the guards... no roaming about on your own tonight, agreed.”

“I’m just gonna read and relax.” she had devised a working plan of her own in her head, “that’s all I’m gonna do.”

“Good girl.” he approved, “I might be late tonight, don’t wait up.”

Red hesitated, he had wanted to ‘connect’ with the woman tonight on more than a spiritual level, so to speak.

Maybe this meeting could be postponed after all...no, on second thought.

The last thing Lizzy needed was some man rutting about her person. She needed to rest tonight. Sleep.

It would be better if he occupied himself elsewhere for the evening.


“When have I not?” she demurred.

Silas almost choked on his sandwich at that one, his head jerking about sharply.

Liz chuckled, “It was almost worth it just to see that reaction.”

Red laughed his mirth.

Silas’ look said it all. Red took his leave with but one moment of silent communication with the large, burly guard.

Liz cleaned up the last of the mess in the kitchen, dusting her hands primly at a job well done.

Nora would be none the wiser when she came up for breakfast tomorrow morning. Liz was glad the woman agreed to stay here and make it her home.

“I think I’ll take a walk before I–”

Silas’ glare stopped Liz in her tracks, “What? I was going to take Joe or...someone.”

“You just told Red you were going to read and–”

“Well, it’s not written in stone is it?” Liz objected. “Am I a prisoner now? In my own home?”

“Don’t take your usual path.” he grumbled, “And stay away from the front gate. Stalker boy got the courage to get out of his car tonight.”

Liz’s lips quivered, “Joe offered to shoot Tom for me. You never have.”

“Not today anyway.” the guard shrugged. “My plans for him today are more on the macabre side.”

Silas ventured, turning about on his stool, hand to hip, “Want to hear them?”
Liz chuckled, “No, thanks. I’d like to sleep tonight.”

The man looked slightly disappointed.

“Silas?” Liz’s curiosity was more than piqued. “Have you ever... sit in on one of those business meetings? The kind the guys are having tonight?”

“I keep my head clear at all times... for the most part.”

“So you’ve never... indulged?”

“Didn’t say that.”

Liz sat on the opposite side of the island, absently fingering a decorative salt shaker, “When I was in college that stuff was every where, of course.” she felt comfortable sharing with this man, “I went to a few parties, ya know.” she wrinkled her nose.

“I knew I had to stay clear of that stuff,” she lowered her voice, “considering the direction my career choices would take me but...” she leaned into her narrative.

“You were always curious.”

“Well, yeah.” she spread her hands out, “That’s natural, right?”

Silas nodded casually, “Knowing Red and Sam, they probably would have sheltered you from such activities when ever they presented themselves.”

“I was at college, what could they do?”

Silas remained mum on the matter.

“Anyway,” she sighed lightly, “guess I’ll go for my walk...” she brightened, “would it be okay to swim a few laps afterwards?”

“As you wish...”

“Oh, that’s from the Princess Bride.” one of Liz’s favorite movies. She had clasped her hands together, pleased by the man’s delivery as well as his quote.

“Yeah, whatever.”

“Well, that moment passed quickly enough.” she grumbled. “Must you ruin everything?”

“My ex-girlfriend says I do...”

“You had a girlfriend?” she leaned into her fist, her interest caught.

“It surprises you I have an ex-girlfriend?”

“No...” she sighed, “not one bit.” she curled her lip disgustedly. “I’m getting my shoes on.”

“I’ll alert the media.” Silas used another famous movie quote.

Liz’s head fell back, grumbling once again, “Whatever!” she snapped, going on her way.

She did not notice her guard’s genuine smile in her wake.
The sound of The *Doors* drifted down the hallway.

Liz was at once tickled yet miffed. *The Doors? Really.*

She half expected strobe lights to filter out into the adjoining space as she approached the massive Great room.

She had discarded her day clothes, having changed into a bathing suit for later but a discrete silk robe covering in dark royal blue hid her figure from view.

Sighing despondently for her lot in life, she secured her boot about her leg before slipping one lone suede sandal on her foot. Lifting her leg, she smiled at the cute little butterfly and flowers adorning the sides and top.

Pushing off the bench, she walked down the long corridor. Aside from the heavy black boot... she felt kind of... sexy. The silk of her robe felt luxurious as it billowed in a dark ripple behind her. The one sandal highlighted her bare leg and manicured toes.

Liz rolled her eyes expressively having come along par with the opened doorway.

Sure enough, a large strobe light swirled lazily around, the walls dotted with psychedelic patterns of streaking lights.

“Jesus...” she chuckled involuntarily.

Where the hell had Francis procured such a thing on short notice? He was always talking about proper ambiance so maybe he carried the thing around with him.

Strings of “People are Strange” filled her ears, *Well, it describes Francis to a ‘T’,* she had to agree.

She scanned the dimly lit entranceway, her eyes not adjusted to the difference of hallway and ‘mom’s basement’ atmosphere as yet.

Red Reddington sat on a long ‘L’ shaped sofa, his arms spread out on either side.

He was alone.

She sensed others in the room but none were close enough to the man.

His eyes settled on her.

Liz stood, transfixed for a long moment, she wondered on his thoughts.

He was trying to convey something with that stare but she couldn’t quite grasp its meaning.

Did he want her to join him? Should she move away, continue on her way?

Red held his expression, wondering what the woman would do, how would she respond.

His fingers twitched along the cushion edge. He wanted so badly to wave her in, but the decision would have to be hers.

The man realized how curious Lizzy must be. She was ever curious. About a myriad of things.
He enjoyed that about her.

He would never deny that part of her.

He and Sam had taken the necessary measures to ensure she never be confronted by drugs or other illicit activities when Lizzy was growing up... her college days were more of a challenge, of course.

She wasn’t exactly a wall flower in those days.

Parties where booze abounded were plentiful and frequent. She was of a legal age for alcohol, and there wasn’t much they could do about that. But Sam was particularly inventive and cagey when it came to his little girls proper upbringing... and drugs were off limits.

Unseen, unheralded body guards would discretely intervene at the right time, always be at the right place. Her college years were littered with a series of tripped fire alarms.

It was a running gag between he and Sam, that no one could find a fire exit faster than their girl. He bet even now, no one could find a fire exit route faster than his Lizzy.

The FBI would take a dim view on any police record a candidate might garner along the way.

Lizzy’s ambitions to enter the law enforcement community were always carefully kept uppermost in Sam’s mind.

Red knew, secretly, the other man would have put the restrictions on Lizzy regardless but it was a good enough reason when the girl got a little touchy about overprotectiveness displayed.

Lizzy wasn’t a little girl any longer. However, Red believed, experimentation often lead to enlightenment of some sort and as Francis had pointed out just a few minutes past, “Wasn’t it better for her to experiment when they were around than not?”

Red was torn, to be truthful.

Liz started, the spell broken. Some clumsy oaf had dropped a tumbler, the heavy glass thwacking gratingly against the marble counter top of the bar.

Red cast a disparaging glance, hastily seeking out his prey once again.

Liz smiled wistfully, offering a small insignificant wave before continuing on her way.

Red watched her trek, catching glimpses of her as she made her way past the large picture windows he had installed to look out onto the garden path outside the rooms.

He checked his instinct to follow the woman’s route.

He didn’t really want to be here. He had enjoyed such pastimes before. He wondered at the change which came over him.

“Red?” Francis held several different pipes aloft, “Which one do you want?”

Red frowned superficially, “The ‘red’ one...” he quipped, determined to get on with it, “of course,”

Liz walked into the pool room. She was a little surprised no one was here.

“Joe?” she called out.
The echo sounded hollow coming back across the spacious pool.

Silas had said the other guard would meet her.

Indecision pulled at the woman. Her senses were calm however. The warm air surrounded her. The pool looked inviting.

She hadn’t swam in what seemed like ages and so loved to float in the heated water.

Joe was likely on his way.

She was being silly. She took off the soft wrist cast and her boot and sandal, setting them aside.

The flowy overgarment was discarded on a convenient lounger. She stepped gingerly down the first few steps into the luxurious arms of the welcoming water.

After a few laps, her leg felt better. She hardly noted the stiffness of her wrist.

This set back wouldn’t be as bad as she had imagined, she realized.

She refused to allow negative thoughts, floating lazily in the delectable sphere of the buoyant water.

After a spell, she decided enough was enough. The water had healed her soul if not her wounded body.

Liz walked up the stairs, wringing her hair of excess moisture, heading for a towel.

She loved this place. The house, the beautiful grounds. She felt stable here. Safe.

A tiny scowl fixed her brow.

What an anomaly... had she not felt the same in her first home? Where she had been spied upon. What a creepy thought... still.

Once Red informed her she had been spied on, she had changed her shower curtain for a solid colored one. Changed in her closet. Even sleeping had been a challenge, feeling like she was a unwilling patient in a sleep study.

But here....

Liz glanced about the lush surroundings.

This place had proven a safe haven. She was mending, not only physically, but emotionally.

She didn’t feel so fragmented any longer.

She ate here with people she cared for, she laughed here... here, she slept peacefully, soundly.

It could be the guards, she supposed. But she attributed Red’s solid presence beside her as the deciding factor.

The fact he slept with a loaded .45 under his pillow didn’t hurt either, she mused her amusement.

She slipped the casts back into place, pulling the flowing cover-up over her shoulders, setting it about her still damp body.

After the trauma of the day, such moments were miraculously healing.
As large and extravagant as this house was, to Liz, it was cozy, inviting and most welcoming.

Hooking her sandal on her finger, she made her way across the tiled space, her thoughts pleasant and varied.

She rounded the corner, pulling up short, suddenly confronted by a totally unexpected barrier.

“Oh!” the woman gasped her shock, hands out to steady herself, “I’m sorry... I didn’t see you there.” she laughed the situation aside, stepping back cautiously.

“I saw you.” the smile the man offered was not exactly pleasant although Liz was sure it wasn’t meant to be.

Liz’s expression cooled by degrees, “If you will excus–”

“I saw you... out the window of the room,” the guy persisted, blocking her intended escape route, “I didn’t catch your name earlier.”

“I didn’t throw it out,” she stated flatly, “but if you must know...it’s Elizabeth. Red’s fiancée.” she stressed the latter frostily. “Now, let me pass.”

“That’s a beautiful name.”

Liz sighed mentally. Her ploy had not worked. She really wished there was a rule book of etiquette to follow in these awkward moments.

“It’s a little cold out here. I would like to change.” she plastered a fake smile on her face.

“My name is Travis.” he gave it the old college try, “I’m great at warming lovely ladies up, just FYI.”

Liz blew out a long breath. One well placed palm straight to this bastard’s nose would put a swift end to this stupid situation.

Would Red’s fiancée be expected to know such a calculated move?

The creep leaned closer. Liz’s scowl deepened, her body tensing. She wasn’t going to put up with much more of this shit.

“You’re such a little bitty thing.” the creep was saying. He drew a finger over her collar, easily moving the silky garment, baring her shoulder. Ignoring all the warning signs of a move gone bad.

Liz’s eyes dripped ice. She moved from the contact, “Are you fond of that hand?”

“You are very beautiful when you’re all fired up.”

“Red thinks so.” a deep masculine voice intervened. “Back up...now.”

Both participants reacted to the new arrivals presence differently.

Good old Travis backed the hell off, his manner suddenly a little sheepish, definitely awkward in nature.

“Hey, man,” the guy ducked his head, “just passing the time of day here. That’s all... really.”

“Pass it... elsewhere.” Silas suggested, his tone rather chilling to Liz’s ears.
“Sure,” Travis hastily took the cue, “no problem. Just trying to make a connection, ya know.”

“That would be like...” Silas moved steadily forward.

Travis... retreated.

“A bastard breed trying to ‘make a connection’ with a thoroughbred show pony.”

Travis’ ears burned bright red, “Hey man, you never know until you try, right?”

“I catch you anywhere near Red’s territory again...” it was no threat, mere fact, the way it was stated, “even a Forensic team won’t be able to find even ‘little bitty’ parts of what’s left of your sorry ass after I get done with you. Do we understand each other?”

Travis’ Adams’s apple bobbed nervously, “It’s okay, everything’s cool here... all right? We don’t want to ruin the business going on inside, right?”

Travis was desperately searching for an exit... any exit.

“Go join the rest of the doper squad.” Silas jerked a thumb to the Great room, “You’re out of your league here... fucker.”

Travis gratefully made his retreat, his face flaming with humiliation.

Liz stood, arms folded, expression set, “I could have handled—”

“Look,” Silas held up pacifying hands, “that’s my job. That’s what I’m here for. Red expects appearances to be kept.”

Liz wasn’t quite pacified.

“I know you could have dealt with that insufferable punk. Hell, you could do that much with your FBI training alone.” Silas shook his head woefully. “That’s not the point, is it.”

The woman tapped her foot impatiently, unaware of her actions.

“We keep up appearances. We put up a front when a business deal is going down.” Silas waved a massive hand to the imaginary place this was all transpiring, “that’s what you agreed to... wasn’t it?”

“Where’s Joe? This is his fault.” she lashed out. “He was supposed to—”

“Joe has... intestinal problems. He had Mexican earlier.” Silas shrugged. “I was here and that’s all that matters.”

Liz pulled a yucky face, “Can I help? I mean... I have some medic—”

“Yeah, it’s all covered.” Silas held up a testy hand.

“I’m going to have to talk to Red about this crap.” she allowed the man to take her arm and lead her down the hallway. “I don’t know the rules. How can I?”

“Yeah, yeah...” Silas sing-songed his head, “If I got paid for everyone who bitches at me for one thing or another...”

“You do get paid for that.” she jerked her arm from his, sending him a scathing glare.
The man grunted quietly.

He walked with her to the master, checking the room before his exit.

“Keep your radio close.” the man directed, “Lock this door.” he motioned from his position in the corridor. “That fucker approaches you again, beat the hell out of him until I take over and kill him. Got it.”

“Is that a rule.” she grumbled.

“It’s my rule.” he let go of the handle motioning to it, “Follow it.”

Liz closed the door, locking it soundly.

She glanced around the silent room her eyes falling on her romance novel, sighing heavily. It just wasn’t what she wanted to do tonight, she suddenly realized.

She knew exactly what she wanted. It was suddenly crystal clear.

Showering hastily, she rushed to the closet, choosing a dress Red bought for her.

Liz really liked it now but at first, had reservations about the style. It was kind of Bohemian and wispy. Liz didn’t think it suited her. But when she had tried it on the other day, besides the fact that it was comfortable as hell, she felt very pretty in it.

And it was very versatile. She could wear it up on her shoulders or push it down, baring them, which was kind of sexy.

It sat just at her knees. She usually covered her knees because she’d scraped them when she was younger and hated how the scarring looked. But her scars got lost against the jet black of the dress, which almost hid them, blending beautifully with the shade of fabric.

Twisting her hair up loosely and pulling down a few tendrils along her neck, she studied her reflection in the mirror. The look satisfied. It seemed very put together for once. She approved.

She readied herself, marching from the room, determined and spirited.

Red saw the woman’s entrance.

She halted uncertainly at one point, her eyes adjusting to the light or perhaps it was the rapid beat of Jefferson Airplane’s “White Rabbit”, he couldn’t tell.

Her eyes adjusted and fell on Red.

She crossed, head held high, plopping down next to the man.

He could sense something amiss, “Anything wrong?”

“No one little bitty thing.” she cast Travis a granite stare, then softened, “Nothing I can’t handle.”

She cuddled to Red’s side, watching Francis’ actions, Travis all but forgotten, “What’s he doing?”

“Tamping down the leaf.” Red explained.

“This one is sweet,” Francis clearly did not like ‘sweet’, “What you’d think?”
Red lifted the small metal pipe, wafting it under his nose, inhaling the sweet aroma.

Francis drew in deep, holding the breath. He hung his head, bouncing it with the slow beat of “Free Bird”.

Liz’s lips quivered slightly as the man’s head fell back, bobbing along with the music before gradually blowing out a billowing cloud, “Has a nice strong after affect,” Francis’ heavy lids cracked slightly, “...good buzz.”

She backed up a little as the pungent scent assailed her nostrils.

Red smiled indifferently, lighting up. Drawing on the pipe hard.

Liz’s attention was rapt. Her eyes were glued to the man’s profile.

The woman glanced around the huge room. “Mama told me not to come.” she whispered as the eerie atmosphere filtered into her brain.

“That’s right.” Francis pointed an accusing finger at the woman. “You should always listen to your mama.”

“I like that song.” Dembe nodded at nothing in particular.

Liz’s eyes were as big as saucers, “Dembe?”

She was astonished to find the man present.

“Et tu, Dembe?” Red asked mellowly, sensing the woman’s dismay.

Dembe nodded minutely, gallantly bowing deeply from the waist, his hand slicing the air theatrically.

“The phrase spoken by Roman dictator Julius Caesar to his friend and protégée, Marcus Junius Brutus at the moment of Caesar’s assassination but also referenced in an even earlier play, Caesar Interfectus by Richard Eedes.”

“Act Two, Scene One.” Red nodded sagely.

“Dembe knew Julius Caesar?” Francis was confused.

Liz giggled, “Oh, Francis...”

She settled in for the ride... suddenly glad she came.

Chapter End Notes

Nora quoted a tid-bit of dialogue from a favorite movie of mine. *Journey to the Center of the Earth*. The cast included James Mason, Arlene Dahl and Pat Boone.
Red cleared the pipe of resin, taking a new offering being passed his way.

He studiously studied, then placed a small amount of product inside the receptacle, his brow furrowed, his manner intent.

Elizabeth Keen watched, her attention fixed, rapt.

The man inhaled leisurely on the deep draw holding it auspiciously.

The woman unconsciously mimicked the move, releasing her breath long before Red Reddington did his.

She couldn’t hold it any longer. How the hell did the man hold his breath that long?

He must possess the lungs of an Olympic swimmer.

Color her impressed.

She frowned critically, her attention returning to the unfolding melodrama.

The entire room was pungent with a sweet melodious odor, the dim lights adding to the ambiance.

Red exhaled slowly, a white smoke pouring from his nose and mouth.

Liz waited impatiently for the verdict which was finally forthcoming.

Red looked at the pipe critically, “...Good taste, mellow... but a potent aftertaste I personally find... amusing.”

Liz relaxed. She felt as if the compliment was for her, “You sound like you’re rating a good wine.”

“It is nothing like a good vintage.” Dembe almost scolded, lifting his feet to a nearby coffee table.

Liz gasped softly for the breach of etiquette.

“I was recently in the South of France.” Dembe continued.

“Where he got laid,” Francis stated moodily, “I didn’t get laid.”

“What about Lia?” Liz enquired pleasantly.

“Perhaps if you journey to the South of France?” Dembe lifted a brow, ignoring the comment all together, “As I was saying...” the man garnered everyone’s attention.

But to Liz’s consternation, the large black man fell silent, though she was the only one who seemed to notice.

“What was the middle thing you said?” Francis had lost track of the conversation, apparently.

He scratched his head, leaning forward to check with Dembe.

Dembe turned a mellow gaze, but he did not reply.
“I was in the South of France once.” Red remembered back, a contemplative look on his face.

“Did you get laid?” Liz cut him a disapproving look.

“It was Summer,” Red recalled, “there was lavender in bloom everywhere. It rained the entire time,” he smiled, “it was glorious.”

“That is so deep.” Francis talked around the breath he was holding, little puffs of smoke blowing out of his nose.

He reminded Liz of a dragon.

Francis laughed at nothing, another cloud of white smoke caught in the air, the blue lights of the disco ball highlighting the now hazy grey smoke. He instantly replaced the mist with a chicken wing.

The woman felt a ridiculous urge to sing “Puff the Magic Dragon”. She stifled the urge hastily, realizing a moment later she was humming the upbeat ditty. Though no one seemed to notice.

Red’s head tilted to one side. He shut his eyes, his expression blissfully serene.

“It’s like floating on a marshmallow floatie.” Red’s head tilted the other way, “No, a marshmallow cloud.”

Liz shifted confused eyes.

“This one is giving me a good buzz.” Francis was staring hard at yet another chicken wing.

Liz wasn’t sure if the ‘buzz’ was coming off the pipe or the chicken wing.

She leaned, examining the product lined up haphazardly on the long surface of the coffee table.

She could not for the life of her, figure out why anyone would find those little balls of prickly looking lint so damned enticing.

“What do you think, Dembe?” Red obviously wanted input.

“The third and fourth... very mellow.” the man nodded his approval. “The second lacked potential. The first...” he offered a disgusted smirk.

Red sat back, seemingly totally satisfied with the critique. “There was an electrical storm,” he held up a scholarly finger, “it struck the very top of the Eiffel Tower. Very impressive display indeed.”

The man sat back, easing his shoulders into the cushy length of the couch.

Liz’s lips twitched, positive they hadn’t heard the last of his tale.

“Puff the magic dragon...” Francis sang, “lived by the sea and,” he sat back, packing his pipe with flourish, “frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honahlee.” he lit the herb, inhaling deeply. Holding his breath, he continued in his attempt, his voice muffled.

“A dragon lives forever but not so little boys.” he sang on the exhale, a cloud escaping his parted lips, “Painted wings and giant rings make way for other toys. One grey night it happened, Jackie Paper came no more...”

Liz pinched her lips together, holding her smile having enjoyed the lively rendition. She shifted her eyes when a deeper voice joined in.
Dembe added his own tone to the song. Tapping the metal pipe in cadence with his singing, “Without his lifelong friend, Puff could not be brave.” he smiled at Red, taking the offered lighter, “So Puff that mighty dragon sadly slipped into his cave oh...”

Francis sniffled from his seat, mournfully dragging the last of his smoke into his body, “That is so sad...”

Liz covered her mouth, hiding her giggle.

“Lovely rendition, boys...” Red nodded his approval, “Do you happen to know Tom Dooley–”

“That makes me cry.” Francis scowled.

Ignoring Francis, Red continued on, “Or perhaps,” he hesitated, his brow furrowing, “...What was that damn song you entertained us with the other day.”

“He has to pick just one?” Dembe enquired, remembering Francis had regaled them with a few choices.

Francis evil-eyed the man. Dembe waved off the dirty glare, giving an encouraging thumbs up of approval.

“You sing!” Liz perked up thrilled that her friend had a pleasing singing voice.

“Like a jailbird.” Silas quipped from the corner.

Snickering, Red tapped his pipe clean, nodding at the woman beside him, “He’s quite the little warbler.”

“Did I have to pee?” Francis was confused as to why he was standing.

Liz sighed under her breath, her shoulders slumping. Francis’ attention span was that of a monkey distracted by a shiny object... most of the time anyway. Tonight, it was amplified to the extreme.

“No.” Red pointed to the tray of pizza slices the boy had been intent on before getting lost in the Cosmo’s.

Francis beamed happily at the newfound treasure. Snatching a large piece, he settled back into his chair, devouring the treat.

Red reached for the next container, breaking off a minuscule piece. He passed the supply around graciously. “When I remember that song, you will sing it.”

Nodding indifferently, Francis held out his hand taking the newest batch. “I was in Montana once.”

Nodding indifferently, Francis held out his hand taking the newest batch. “I was in Montana once.” he caught up to a long past conversation. “There was a mother of a thunderstorm but it didn’t strike the Eiffel Tower or anything.”

“The Eiffel Tower can grow more than six inches during the summer.” Red added after the fact, “The high temperatures make the iron expand.”

Dembe nodded patiently at nothing in particular.

Elizabeth tried to read the men present.

No one seemed impaired per se. She didn’t know exactly what she had expected.
Red and Dembe just appeared more relaxed than usual.

Red always used an ottoman when... if he kicked back. Tonight he sat, long legs stretched out, like Dembe, making use of the coffee table.

Aside from Red having more than the usual number of interesting facts on hand, Liz couldn’t understand most of what was being said because the guys never finished a sentence.

No one seemed bothered by the fact and what’s more, seemed to understand each and every syllable muttered.

“Aren’t you supposed to pack that down pretty good?” the woman didn’t know protocol but wasn’t it similar to smoking a pipe? The legal kind.

“Only sampling, baby.” Red corrected the misconception, “we’re going for taste and affect.”

“If you consistently fart for 6 years and 9 months,” Francis held up a knowledgeable finger, “enough gas is produced to create the energy of the atomic bomb.” he waved a cheese stuffed pretzel around like it was Excalibur.

Dembe’s brow furrowed, but he remained passively quiet.

“What the hell does that have to do with anything?” Liz demanded to know.

“Weren’t we talking about things expanding?” Francis was suddenly animated, “I’ve got another one,” he seemed inordinately proud, “Cornflakes were invented to prevent masturbation.”

Francis face fell, “It doesn’t seem to be working with me.”

Silas, who had been leaning against the wall, could not pass up such a golden opportunity. “A man will ejaculate 18 quarts of semen in his lifetime... you have exceeded the expected norm.”

Francis was happy again.

Liz was getting a little hungry. Hadn’t she ate an hour ago?

But that pretzel looked delicious.

“...Shit.” Francis dropped his forehead into his hand.

Red glanced over as did Dembe. Both men watched and waited.

“Are you all right?” Liz was instantly concerned. She moved closer to the young man.

Francis cocked his head from side to side, “Oh man...” he totally approved, his tone soft and awe-inspired, “that one made my head expand.”

Red took another hit off the same stuff, bobbing his own head, nodding silently.

Dembe shifted more comfortably into his chair smiling at the supplier who kept hovering about, presenting containers, talking amiably.

Francis drew odd little designs into his forehead.

Liz leaned forward, grabbing a pretzel.
She listened to the stilted communication wondering what plane of existence they were on...

“This can not be helping your headache.” she sipped her tea absently.

Red was impressed with her perception, “I did indeed, have a headache,” he hefted his pipe, “but this only helps, trust me.”

“Do you want a pretzel?” she offered hers over.

Red’s eyes deepened, “Can you ‘do’ a pretzel?”

The woman’s expression altered, “Are you being uncouth?”

“Could be.” the man philosophized, “there once was this woman in Marrakesh…”

“Is this a limerick?” Francis asked.

Dembe sighed, “She was a student of the Kama Sutra... very proficient at the art.”

“Not that one.” Red wagged his finger back and forth disapprovingly.

“The chick in the dirty limerick?” Francis was... lost.

Liz reached out, smacking his arm in a bid to silence the man lest she distract Red and Dembe.

“Her sister?” Dembe asked.

“No, the other one.” Red sighed heavily.

“I had a headache the other day,” Francis remarked then grew contemplative, “or was it a sinus infection?” he questioned, then shrugged, “I thought I was going to die.”

Liz rubbed her forehead, pushing against the gathering ache having suddenly realized, Francis had been one step behind in the conversation since she joined the fray.

“This one is just for newbies. It takes the edge off,” Adam was animated as he presented his prize, “has a nice finish. It’ll give mom and dad a nice buzz. Perfect when the kids are…"

He glanced around the room, something catching his attention. The guy had a very short attention span. He and Francis would get along well, Liz surmised.

Red pulled little pieces out of the small container, rubbing it between his fingers before picking something out and throwing it.

“Are those yucky?” Liz had noted the process before, “Why do you do that?” she asked conspiratorially, looking at Adam suspiciously.

She had to lean very close to be heard over, ironically enough, “The Sounds of Silence”.

“Adam delivers top-notch product, I just prefer mine clean of stems and seeds.” Red explained his actions. “Besides, I’m gonna load up on this one because it’s weaker and will need the added space in the bowl.”

“I saw lightning strike a cow before...” Francis commented. He had taken off his shoes and socks, counting his toes and fingers.
He seemed troubled by some obscure fact. Liz wondered if Francis was thinking about the cow.

“Seven percent of American adults believe chocolate milk comes from brown cows.” Red shook his head woefully.

Francis frowned, “Are you implying it doesn’t?”

Red continued on, accepting the challenge, “It used to frighten me that these people not only voted... but procreated.”

“I’m missing a finger...” Francis murmured, holding his hands out in front of his face.

Red inhaled deeply, a contemplative look on his handsome features as he stared at the boy.

“...You’re fine.” he assured around the breath he was holding.

“How can you say that!” Francis gasped his disbelief, showing his hands as proof. “I’m missing limbs!”

Liz leaned, poking each finger, “One, two, three—”

“Slow down!” Francis focused his pin-point eyes, “You’re going too fast!

She dipped her head, stifling her laughter.

“Okay... okay...” Francis nodded, his unblinking eyes wide and alert, “go ahead.”

“One...” she started over, slowly counting out the man’s fingers until reaching ten.

“Oh my God...” he wailed.

Liz sat back, content her work there was done.

“There’s two missing...” Francis whispered his despair.

The woman beside Red looked at him with open wonder, drawing a throaty chuckle from the man.

“How many fingers do you think you have?” Red enquired.

Liz watched Red casually tilt his lighter, the flame igniting and burning the green lint. The herbs were fast disappearing.

He held his breath, patiently waiting for Francis to respond.

“I don’t know...” Francis groaned his dismay.

Laying the pipe down, Red lifted his hands, showing the young man his wiggling fingers, “Ten, Francis.”

Francis turned his hands about, curling the long fingers into his palms before unfurling them slowly.

“Well, that’s well and good for you.” he rasped. “What about us normal people?”

Red shook his head fretfully, “You’ll survive with ten. Trust me”

Francis watched the fingers waving about slowly, “...Streamers,” he complained somewhat coherently, “what the hell is in that pipe?”
“I told you to watch the laced shit...” Red reminded.

“Laced?” Liz sat up, suddenly alert.

“He’s fine.” Red sat back, patting her knee with his free hand.

“We need to make this a top seller.” Francis pulled at his fingers, content they remained in place. “It’s amazing.”

Red blew out softly, allowing the smoke to roll off his tongue, “That would feel so good on your clit.” it was his turn to lean over and share.

Liz’s body tightened with longing, an erotic sensation traveling to her center having caught up to the imagery painted. She leaned into his arm, pushing her breast into the muscled flesh.

“Horizontal refreshment was a nineteenth century slang for sex by the way.” Red shared again.

She opened her mouth to relay she would enjoy a little horizontal refreshment, right about then... but was waylaid by the man himself.

“This isn’t bad, Adam.” the man approved. “Probably be your best seller?”

“We’ll make it up in volume if nothing else.” Adam agreed, “I’ve got a few more...” he was off, across the room conferring with one of the two men who had accompanied him.

Liz’s gaze fell on the other member of the small trio, sipping her tea absently.

The guy’s eyes fell hastily as he noted her looking his way.

She shrugged mentally. He appeared uneasy now... fidgety.

Could be Silas’ constant presence over by the doorway.

The guard had not left his post except for one brief second to confer with another guard who had vied for his attention.

She eyed him critically, noting Silas was favoring his side. She glanced at the clock, wondering why time was moving so slow. It seemed like the next shift would never begin and her guard needed his rest.

“So you remember the name of that Sherpa in Nepal?” Red was asking Dembe.

“Kami?” Dembe was helpful, “Back in ’98?”

“No, no...” Red waved his hand about almost theatrically, “the one is ’53, with Edmund Hillary.”

“Tenzig Norgay?” Dembe supplied the answer.

“Exactly.” Red pointed sharply.

Both men returned to their pastime.

Liz scowled. She wasn’t going to let this one pass, “What about him?” she demanded.

“Speaking of mountains,” Red continued on, “did you know... were you aware, that Zurich is considered one of the twenty-five best places on Earth to live? Would you like to move there?”
“A lovely city.” Dembe concurred. “Founded by the Romans. They referred to it as Turicum.”

“Ehh... no?” Liz faltered at the sudden turn in the conversation. “I asked about the Sherpa guy.”

“I think I was a Sherpa in a past life.” Francis stated quite seriously.

“He complained about hiking the Foothills of Malibu.” Red reminded sotto voce.

“Do you believe in that stuff?” Liz was curious. “Past lives, I mean.” she felt she should specify which topic she was on.

“Who do you think I am?” Francis scoffed, “Shirley MacLaine?”

The woman sighed heavily.

“China is the best place to live.” Dembe almost scolded the fact.

“It is quite picturesque.” Red stated, “If you ignore all the glaring issues, that is.”

“They invented something important...” Francis seemed relatively sure of the fact, “peanut butter or something cool like that.”

He went off in search of peanut butter in the next instance.

Liz hung her head resigned, opening a fresh bag of chips. Understanding they all seemed to be communicating on a wavelength only they understood, she popped a chip in her mouth, intent on enjoying the show.

While it was frustrating to only hear short bits of their inner thoughts, she had to admit... she was fascinated by how quickly topics changed and how they all, aside from her, seemed to understand the thought process.

A sudden thought this should be part of psychology courses came... and went as quickly as the thought entered her mind.

“Did you know,” Red inhaled the sweet smoke, his head easing back into the couch cushion, “peanuts are not nuts but seeds.” he toed his shoe, easing it from his foot.

Liz eyes widened as the other shoe followed, both hitting the floor with a loud thunk. Red never took his shoes off until they were in their room.

“In fact,” he continued on, “walnuts, cashews, almonds...” he lazily rolled his hand indicating there were more, “they’re seeds too.”

Where he came up with these random facts, she didn’t know. All she knew for certain was that while odd, they were kind of interesting.

“Speaking of seeds, the man who planted the Johnny Appleseed trees didn’t expect his fruits to be eaten, but rather made into alcoholic apple cider.”

Smiling softly, she leaned closer to the man, “What else do you know?”

“The Chinese invented everything that is important.” Red stated succinctly. “Papermaking, printing...”

“The compass.” Dembe added regally.
“There were four...” Red searched his mind, which at this stage of the game was expansive indeed, “four great inventions.”

“They invented ketchup.” Francis reminded.

“Yeah....” Red nodded absently, “but that’s not it.”

All three stared out into various parts of the room, falling silent.

Liz’s head fell back into the couch cushion, groaning her dismay before looking to Silas for help.

“Gunpowder.” the man stressed, as though it should have been the obvious answer to the people sitting in that particular room.

“Yes!” Red smiled happily.

“What about that Terra cottage cheese army they found over there?” Francis was back full force, arms loaded down with goodies.

“Oh!” Liz stood hastily, helping the man unload his bounty, “I want these.” she rattled a package of chocolate chip cookies.


“They found the army.” Dembe pointed out the flaw in Francis’ thinking.

“Were they lost?” Francis queried. “What the hell kind of army gets lost?”

Dembe shook his head, his eyes closing, “The army wasn’t invented.”

“Well, somebody invented it.” Francis debated artfully. “Harry Potter didn’t conjure it up did he?” he seemed rattled by the idea.

“Merlin.” Red chuckled his belief. “Much more powerful a sorcerer than a kid with a broomstick.”

“Sometimes,” Dembe deep timbre soothed Elizabeth’s ears, “I imagine myself consorting with the Lady of the Lake.”

“Hot chick...” Dembe had Francis’ total approval. “Scotland has 421 words for ‘snow’.”

“You made that up.” Liz was relatively sure. She pointed an accusing cookie at the guy. For a second there it concerned the woman she had followed Francis’ train of thought from the ‘hot to cold’ metaphor.

“Sadly, no.” Red empathized with the woman.

Dembe stretched luxuriously, “I so enjoy these sessions... much is learned.”

Silas snickered from the doorway, “And forgotten the next day.” he straightened slightly, lifting his voice, “Hey Francis, did you know banging your head against the wall will burn 150 calories an hour?”

“Yeah, that’s an out and out lie.” the young man countered.

Silas broke out into a hearty laugh, “…The Slovenia Incident?”
Francis threw him a side-ways glance, “We’re not talking about that.”

Red set there, head resting comfortably, eyes closed. A smiled graced his lips, “I’ve got you all beat.”

Dembe had assumed much the same pose, “We all wait with bated breath.”

“Wombat shit is cube-shaped.” Red announced with a flourish.

The silence was deafening.

It did not last long.

“So what,” Francis exclaimed, “so is mine if I’m constipated.”

“And you thought you had him.” Dembe chuckled lowly. The man mused thoughtfully for a long beat, “There is something I once read in Reader’s Digest…”

“So it must be true.” Red nodded sagely.

“In 1965, a patent was filed for a ‘birthing apparatus’,” Dembe continued, undaunted, “which would spin a pregnant woman around at as much as 7G’s until their baby was flung out from the centrifugal force.”

“Dembe!” Liz was horrified at such an outrage. “That is not funny, okay.”

Everyone was afraid to offend for a few seconds.

Silas was holding his side to protect it from the quaking of his body as he tried desperately to hold his mirth.

“But it would explain Francis so well…” he pointed out to all present.

At which point, the laughter exploded.

Liz rolled her eyes, patting Francis’ shoulder sympathetically only to find the man rolling with laughter himself. She gave up.

She put her hands on her hips, facing her adversaries squarely, “I have one which seems to apply.” her eyes darted from smirking face to face. “The Declaration of Independence was written on hemp paper.”

Red glanced over at her amid the chuckles and reluctant admiration displayed by his contemporaries. “I think I’m in love.” he purred seductively.

“She’s showing off again, Red.” Francis beamed his pride. “You go, girl.”

“Read a book.” Dembe rolled his eyes, “Google isn’t the answer to everything, you know.”

“What Google doesn’t know, Alexa does.” Francis pulled a face. “Don’t even pretend you knew that.”

“It’s okay Francis,” she soothed, thanking him for the support.

Francis was instantly better, “Want a hit?” he offered to share.

“Francis!” Red’s tone was sharp.
“What?” Francis was dismissive, hadn’t they discussed this earlier. “You do want to try it, right? I mean... I wasn’t meaning to pressure you or...”

Liz looked at the pipe the man held, its allure growing stronger with each minute spent here.

“...I ... I don’t know?” she faltered, the decision surprisingly difficult. She sat her chin on Red’s shoulder, “What’s it like?”

The man hesitated, “Would you have asked such a question a month ago?”

Red felt the weight of a problem he hadn’t noted before. Was association with him forcing Elizabeth to do things she might not attempt otherwise?

“I’m not a child, Red.” she wasn’t certain if she should even have to ask permission of the man. “I can make my own decision.”

“Is it a decision you would have made on your own, had it not been easily accessible.” he clearly doubted the fact. The man arose.

Dembe followed suit out of habit.

“I never should have brought this shit in here tonight.”

Silence fell over the room.

All stopped in their tracks, waiting, breaths held. Red started for the door, Liz hot on his heels.

“What’s the big deal?” Silas’ deep voice broke the tension and silence. “All her buddies at work do it... it’s not like you’re offering her the hard stuff.”

Red shifted a cold, empty stare, “I wasn’t offering it to her at all.”

“Lighten up.” Silas’ tone softened. “Where’s the real harm?”

“What do you mean, all my buddies at work?” Liz was flabbergasted by the guard’s implication.

Large blue eyes sought Red’s bloodshot ones.

“Not as white washed as you thought, huh?” Silas was blasé about the whole thing.

The conversation was kept between the four of them. Dembe stood off slightly, his eyes keenly aware... watchful.

Red cocked his head sharply to the left, his mood altering slightly.

“What does he mean, Red?” Elizabeth’s gaze shifted between Silas and the other object of her interest.

She moved closer, lowering her voice, “Who is he talking about?” she couldn’t fathom any of her colleagues doing something so totally illegal.

“It’s like drinking a couple glasses of wine,” Red motioned, “a few beers.”

Silas kept his expression neutral.

“The profession they chose can be a bitch, you know that.” Red continued.
“I’m not judging them.” Or was she? Did she feel unsettled that one... or more of her contemporaries–

“It makes the stress more bearable.” Red felt compelled to offer excuses for her friends but he wasn’t exactly sure why? In doing so, perhaps he would find one which suited himself.

“Well... of course,” she strived for an open outlook, “I mean, if Cooper–”

“Not so much Cooper,” Red sing-songed his head, “...Ressler...” he shrugged lackadaisical shoulders.

Liz’s mouth fell agape, “Ress?”

“Occasionally, Aram.” Red liked the guy better when he was high, actually.

“Aram?” Liz was shocked. “No! No way!”

“Oh, yes...” Silas assured her.

“Samar, if she’s on assignment and it’s required.” The woman became softer, gentler. The dark eyes smiled more Red had noted.

“Or if you approach her just right...”

Red threw Silas a dark glare. The guard’s mouth twitched irresistibly, but he shut up.

“I... I don’t know what to say.” how could she not have known such a thing about her...friends?

Especially Ress, who read her the riot act about proper procedures and what not.

Moments passed.

Francis arose, crossing the area slowly. He came alongside the woman.

“Why are we all over here?” he looked back at the expansive area.

The room almost glowed with a Moorish blue mist.

Streaks of colored lights whizzed by on the walls.

Shadows seemed elongated, exaggerated.

Music pounded into the brain but the steady beat somehow calmed the heart.

“Well, I will not be the only one who hasn’t tried it.” Liz was adamant.

“You think an aspirin alters your mental capacity.” Red warned putting a restraining hand on the woman’s arm. “Have you ever even smoked a cigarette in your life?”

Liz felt her cheeks flush. All eyes were on her.

Dembe’s were gentle and patient. Silas’ were sarcastically amused. Francis’ were... blank and expressionless.

Red’s were... very concerned.

“I... I have.” she lifted a defiant chin.
“What, that one time Sam caught you?” he remembered that one.

Sam had flipped his lid. It took Red an hour to calm the man.

It was a normal teenager thing... it’s what they did. Smoked, drank and had sex in the back seat of cars.

Well... all except Lizzy.

The man read the determined set of her mouth.

He relented, his hands spreading graciously, “If it’s what you want.”

Liz wasn’t sure but she couldn’t back down now.

“You can back out, Lizzy.” Red stressed, giving her an out... hoping she’d change her mind.

She turned, pointing to the table, “Show me.”

Francis gallantly waved her on, following the woman’s path as she practically skipped back to the couch, her eyes eager and excited.

He glanced back over his shoulder, damning himself for bringing it up when he saw the dejected set of Red’s shoulders before the man straightened his posture.

“She’ll be fine, Red.” Silas muttered. “It is better she is here, safe, with us.”

Red nodded aside, watching the woman take her seat as Francis took a new pipe Adam handed over.

“If she did it with Aram...” Silas pointed out, “or even Samar, she’d be down on her guard.” he reminded. “I’m here... you’re here. She’ll be fine.”

Red blew out a long breath, “I just didn’t...”

“I know.” Silas sighed as both men watched Francis showing Liz the basics.

Red set his jaw, working his way back to her side. Dembe set back into his chair, getting comfortable.

Silas shook his head slowly, still feeling the waves of despair coming off Red Reddington.

Elizabeth Keen was the only pure and innocent thing in his world... and by association, Red believed he tainted that innocence.

When in reality, by subjecting her to the harsh reality they all lived in, Red was allowing Liz a safe space to broaden her outlook, gain confidence and a street savvy know-how she needed in her line of work.

Besides, Silas honestly believed after tonight, they would not repeat this little endeavor.

Elizabeth was just curious by nature and needed to know.

Once she achieved that knowledge, she would move on to the next unknown.

If anything, to see her facing this unexplored activity with such determination made him very proud.

Unlike a kid not wanting to leave their mothers side out of fear or shying away from a new exotic
food... Liz was ready to step out on her own and take a bite out of the new experience.

Silas stepped back into his alcove, leaning casually against a nearby chair.

His eyes scanned the room and passing guard outside the windows, doing exactly as he had promised Red Reddington.

“I’ll work the lighter.” Francis ended the tutorial. “Are you sure you want to do t–”

“Francis...” she sighed, holding her pipe aloft.

He glanced at her shaking fingers which negated the determined set of her eyes. Nodding once, he flicked the lighter, holding it over the small bowl.

Two hits in and the woman’s limbs felt oddly heavy. She felt tingly and warm.

She was having trouble controlling the cough. No one else had coughed.

“Light weight.” Francis teased, seeing the effect the drug was already having on the novice.

Liz shook her head, blinking as the lights of the room slowed considerably. The music had a dreamy quality to it.

Like one of those old 45 vinyl records slowed down to a crawl. It was soothing in a distorted sort of way.

It was not an unpleasant state at all.

She tilted her head, and it felt like it kept moving.

She put her hands up to stop the fluidity of the movement.

Red sat close to her, his gaze intent.

“What do you want to stop?”

She kept her eyes closed, “No... but don’t leave.”

“Not going anywhere.” she was assured.

Red sat back, alert and functioning.

The woman had turned a blind eye to most of his activities of late.

He had wanted her closer. He had wanted her to be a part of his world.

Not this part though...

It bothered him terribly that he allowed her into this seedier side of what he had become.

Was he changing who she was?

He looked at her half mast eyes, her entire manner altered from minutes before... that’s what this shit did right?

Was it a bad thing? He had never thought so until...
“My heart is beating so fast.” she put her hand over the area.

Red’s brow furrowed. She shouldn’t be experiencing that. Just the opposite.

Was it just nerves?

“Come here.” he welcomed her into the comfort of his arms, hoping to crush any anxiety creeping in.
Liz scooted into the security offered, snuggling in. She laid her head onto his chest, listening to the slow, steady beat of his heart.

Red’s fingers trailed a pleasurably searing trek over her temples, his hand languidly brushing the side of her head absently.

Elizabeth sighed lightly letting the weird feeling flow through her body.

“I’m all floaty.” she smiled at nothing in particular.

“You need something in your stomach.” Red waved the next round of product aside, starting to rise, “I’ll get you some food.”

“No, no.” the woman waved his efforts aside. “I’ll get it. You stay.” she smiled down at him.

Had it taken an inordinate amount of time to stand? She wondered absently, dismissing the thought in the next instance.

She traipsed to the long bar, checking out the array of food set out on decorative plates.

Had she done that? Well, what a good little hostess she was turning out to be.

She giggled at the thought.

“Hey...”

Elizabeth frowned hard at the hand touching her forearm, following the arm attached up to the owner’s face.

Her own face hardened.

“No, hey... I wanted to say I’m sorry for... before, ya know.”

That guy Travis was standing beside her.

“You’re too close.” she retorted, pointing a finger at the man.

He stepped back instantly, “Oh... sorry.”

He glanced nervously at very vigilant guard whose grey eyes bore into his with a steely glare.

“I was out of line. I thought if you were of a mind, you know?”

“I wasn’t and I’m not.” Elizabeth’s mind wandered freely and for a second she forgot her train of thought. “…But it’s okay. But go away now.” was all she truly wanted.

The guys eyes hardened for a brief second but then he smiled.

Elizabeth felt creeped out.
“Okay, just wanted to clear the air.”

“Good luck with that.” Elizabeth waved her hand trying to move the heavy smoke floating everywhere.

Travis ducked his head, heading for the opposite side of the room.

Red had patiently watched the exchange.

He was worldly enough to see some sort of connection had been previously made between the two people he focused upon.

Lizzy had evidently handled the matter sufficiently. All the same, Red’s stare was a cold, calculating one as it met the tall, gangly man’s.

Travis smiled instantly to alleviate any possible misconceptions.

Red wasn’t buying it, clearly.

The guy cleared his throat, shifting his gaze to a safer subject matter.

Red continued to stare however and within seconds, Travis had arisen, seeking out his contemporaries just as Lizzy plopped down next to him nibbling on her snacks.

Even as Francis and Lizzy chatted amongst themselves, Red held his vigil.

Dembe and Silas glanced at one another, then back to their friend, waiting with bated breath for the explosion.

Both tensed, ready for action when Red abruptly shoved at the table with his foot, sending it sliding in a glide across the hardwood.

Silas stood slightly, one foot perched on the rung of his chair as Dembe clasped the arm rests...

Francis stilled at the quick movement, darting his eyes Red’s way, fighting for clarity in the murky surroundings.

Red stood, holding his hand out to the woman.

Liz glanced at the other’s in confusion at the sudden change but took the offering only to be pulled into Red’s warm embrace.

A soft blush covered Elizabeth’s cheeks, being the center of attention, before suddenly being drawn into Red’s sphere.

His large hand settled about her back, his fingers wrapping about her smaller hand.

She quickly fell into step with the man as they swayed to the romantic, yet haunting, melody which filled the surrounding space.

Rubbing his cheek against the soft strands of her hair, Red spun them slowly, his dark eyes settling on his foe.

Tearing his eyes from the couple, Francis glanced at Dembe and the guard intently focused on Red... and the problem at hand.
Francis smiled, finally understanding. Though he missed whatever transpired, it was obvious to him Red was staking a claim.

Francis hummed the melodious tune, smiling warmly at Dembe as the man relaxed in his stance.

The other occupants in the room stilled in their movements, afraid to break the spell they were under. Francis had to admit, it had been a long time, at least over twenty years, since he had seen this side of Red.

It had been sorely missed.

He craned his head towards the guard, snickering. Silas turned the dial on the lights, lowering them even more, setting the tone of the romantic atmosphere.

Possibly in hopes to quell Red’s urge to kill their guests.

Though, Lizzy seemed to be doing the job well enough on her own.

The hazy fog of smoke and dancing lights, subdued colors flickered across their bodies, casting them in shades of blues, reds and deep purples.

Glints of shining illumination flittered across their faces, highlighting and drawing attention to their mouths and eyes in the brilliant light show.

Red lowered his gaze, his eyes softening when the woman wrapped her arms about his neckline, snuggling up into his embrace.

Neither noticed Dembe subtly restarting the song as the woman unconsciously pulled Red further under her influence.

Silas settled back into his chair, crisis diverted for the moment.

Red focused his full attention on the woman in his arms, his hand tracing the gentle swell of her hip.

The crystal clear azure depths, as stunning and unpolluted as the waters off the Maldives, lifted slowly.

Mesmerized, he watched the long lashes flicker, almost bashfully, before revealing the shimmering blue eyes just as the powerful lyrics washed over him.

His lungs seized, his breath stolen from him.

Grasping the woman, he pulled her closer, dipping his nose into her neckline needing her touch so badly.

Francis felt a pull in his own chest as he watched the man almost burrow into the woman.

How could anyone truly not understand how very much Red needed this... needed his Lizzy.

Francis’ eyes trained on the couple and the shadow of their reflection dancing hypnotically along the wall in unison.

The sensual impression of their lovemaking only an echo of the deep love present between the two.

He harmonized with the singer, drawing an unexpected smile from Dembe and Silas.
Teasing the woman, Red’s lips subtly brushed over her cheek, the silken skin heightening his senses. Leaning, his long lashes caught hers. The soft tickle fluttered against his cheekbone, urging him closer.

His full lips grazed the corner of her mouth, drawing a deep breath from the woman.

“Lonely rivers sigh,” Francis sang, his focus on the loving couple, “Wait for me, wait for me. I'll be coming home, wait for me.”

Capturing her lip, Liz bit at the plump flesh as Red’s eyes bore into hers. Almost willing her to hear his inner thoughts.

Dropping his gaze, Red licked his lips at the sight of the rosy mouth swelling under his attention.

“Oh, my love, my darling,” Francis continued, feeling the tension between the couple, “I’ve hungered, hungered for your touch…”

Lifting her hand, she tenderly cupped Red’s cheek. The subtle sound of the shadow on his face scratched roughly against her soft palm.

Nuzzling into the gentle touch, Red’s eyes fluttered closed, savoring the intimacy.

“A long,” Francis’ eyes softened as Red’s hand curved into her dress, bunching the material tight in his fist, “…lonely time.”

Her lip quivered as Red’s eyes flashed with pain as the words hit home.

“And time goes by,” Francis fought at the knot in his own throat, “so slowly.”

Red’s dark eyes penetrated hers, needing Liz to understand how long he had waited for this… for her.

“And time,” the young man blinked against the gathering wetness in his eyes, understanding Red’s desire… his need for companionship, for her, “…can do so much.”

Tears skirted down Liz’s cheeks as she felt every aspect of the man. Did he feel healed by having her in his life as much as she felt complete with him in hers?

Threading his thick fingers through the silky tresses, Red cupped the small head in his hand. Drawing her closer to his mouth, his lips just barely touching the inviting ones.

“Are you still mine?” Francis choked out, his breath taken by this powerful moment.

Liz gasped as Red’s pupils contracted, the pinprick orbs fluctuating, showing his arousal.

“I need your love.” Francis fought to breathe, as Red pulled the woman tightly against his body slowly dipping his head.

Red captured the tempting mouth, swallowing her sharp gasp.

She trembled against him, the emotions… the sensation of his deep yearning for her, overwhelming.

“I…” Francis felt the ache in his own chest that Red must feel at this point, “I need your love.”

Tightening his embrace, Red lifted her into his frame, gently flicking his tongue against the rosebud
mouth, demanding entrance.

Opening for him, she sighed shakily, the bruising kiss robbing her of any equilibrium.

Backing her into a wall, Red furthered his loving assault. His hand curled about her waist, drawing her flush against his body. His other cupping her bottom, the large fingers kneading the supple flesh.

“*God speed your love...*” Francis breathed just as shakily, a sudden wash of melancholy overtaking him, “...*to me.*”

The song floated away in a rising crest of strings before flowing into another sensual ballad. Not that either seemed to be aware of the fact still caught up in their passionate embrace.

Shifting embarrassed eyes, Francis breathed a sigh of relief finding the guard focused on the couple and not his uncustomary display of emotions.

Silas worried his thumb across his lips, sighing heavily. He knew of Red’s longing for Elizabeth and even now knew the man grasped hold of it with both hands... afraid it would slip away.

But then, they had reason to feel as they did. Red had lost his family... and he, Anya.

No one more than he, understood the desire for a soul-mate.

Movement in the corner of his eye broke the moment. Shifting his keen eyes, he zeroed in on Adam crossing rapidly, approaching the pair.

Red sensed the nearing intrusion, growling under his breath. Breaking the lock on the woman, he turned dark eyes on the interloper, barely controlling the urge to strike out when he felt the woman’s panted breaths against his neckline.

He needed her... not this shit.

Adam stilled in his tracks, his head lowering respectfully. Waiting...

Taking a deep breath, Red kissed the pouty mouth once more. His groin stirred when Liz mewed softly as he pulled back.

“Why don’t you get us a drink, baby.” his roughened voice coaxed silkily. “I’ll only be a moment.”

Lowering to her feet, she nodded dejectedly, pushing her bottom into his warm palm.

“I promise...” he soothed, squeezing the rounded flesh. He pat her gently, pushing off the wall, allowing her room to move.

Red watched the sway in her hips as she crossed the short path, collecting their drinks as she spoke quietly to Francis and Dembe.

He turned his eyes, the dark orbs menacing. He inclined his head after a second, allowing Adam’s approach.

“Hey man,” Adam sent a scathing glare back at Travis, “I’ve been informed there’s an issue going down... am I right?”

Red remained silent, his gaze a direct one.

Adam swallowed hard, “Look... all I want to do is sell my stuff and not piss you off.” the guy was
sweating profusely, “I was stupid to bring the asshole but... he’s one of my distributor’s and...” he swallowed again.

“I would consider a change in distributor’s.” Red suggested deliberately.

“You know how it is,” Adam was practically whining, “you can’t get good help anymore. This guy thinks he’s irresistible to chicks... can’t keep it in his pants, you know?”

“A guy could get it chopped off that way.” Francis pointed out as he came alongside the men.

“Yeah...” Adam’s day was going from worse to dismal, “yeah, well... he’s tried to make it right with your old lady...” and at Red’s altered expression, “not that she’s old... oh, God.” he winced, “It’s just an...so anyway.” he stopped for a breath.

Red remained pointedly silent.

“Look, all I’m trying to do here,” the guy motioned dejectedly, “is trying to make a living. I came from shit... I don’t want to go back, all right.”

Red tilted his head slowly, the light slate-blue eyes giving away nothing.

“I’ll get rid of the problem. I’ll send him home if you–”

“No one leaves once the deal has begun.” Dembe vetoed the suggestion all too quietly, the dark eyes as unreadable as Red’s.

“No... no, sure. I get that.” Adam got that. “I’m just trying to keep this thing contained. So...” he spread his hands haplessly, “I’m open to suggestions here.”

Red took his time in a reply, “I’ve always found, you’re only as good as the people you surround yourself with.” he hated ending his sentences with a preposition, but grammar aside, “Men like him,” Red motioned his head, “are always a liability.”

Adam scowled, following Red’s meaning, “...He’s family.” he stated his despair.

“Worse kind of liability.” Dembe nodded sagely taking a hit off his pipe.

“It’s your decision.” Red shrugged, retaking his seat, “But when the shit hits the fan, don’t expect any leeway from me.”

Adam looked deeply concerned.

Elizabeth made her way around Adam’s tall frame, plate in hand. She sat, handing Red their drinks. Adam envied the woman. She clearly had this man’s total approval.

Liz sat her plate on Red’s upper leg, nibbling delicately on a carrot.

“Orange food makes your poop look a Wombats.” Francis pulled a face having noted her choices.

“Are we okay here, Miss?” Adam needed some sort of confirmation.

Elizabeth lifted vague eyes, “...Are you talking to me?” she motioned to her person, surprised to be singled out.

Adam hastily checked with Reddington. Just receiving a cool stare, he worked on instinct.
“I thought there was a problem,” he jerked his thumb to indicate, “I wanted to apologize personally if one of my–”

“Oh...” Liz got it, “No,” she could feel Red’s eyes, moving carefully, “no, everything is fine... really.” she assured Red more than Adam.

“Is everything fine, Mr. Reddington?” Adam needed concrete confirmation.

Red considered his options.

This was an ongoing issue he had intended to speak to Elizabeth about.

It was a Catch-22. And not the likes of what they had faced in Las Vegas and with Brad.

If a man approached, which men were known to do with a beautiful, young woman... choices had to be considered.

His instinct told him to simply beat the bastard to a pulp. It would eat at him if he did not follow his natural instinct.

It was eating at him now.

If he intervened somehow, she would think he didn’t believe her capable of handling the matter.

He sensed the woman was walking a tightrope. She didn’t want to make waves with his associates... didn’t want her presence to interfere with business as usual.

As far as Red was concerned, his associates could kiss his ass.

No one he worked with was as important as Elizabeth Keen.

He would have to inform her and in no uncertain terms... that he didn’t care what she did, if she felt the need to defend herself.

Even if some creep made her feel slightly uncomfortable, he wanted to know about it.

He wouldn’t step in hopefully until a discussion of the matter had ensued.

He leaned conspicuously, kissing behind her ear. He smiled when she reacted, giggling.

“You’re tickling me.”

He chuckled sensually, enjoying her reaction.

Adam breathed out a sigh of relief, “Those two were hard hitters,” he got things back on track hastily, directing the remark to Dembe, “not wise for the lady to try the next few, okay?”

Red crooked his chin, the feel of gentle kisses leaving him a little off-guard.

He glanced hastily finding Elizabeth snuggling ever so close. He made room for her, scooting slightly as her thigh nudged him enticingly.

“You smell so good...” the tiny nose nuzzled the hollow of his nape.

Liz felt the masculine prickle of shadowing on Red’s leathery skin.

“I love how you smell,” she closed her eyes to the erotic emotions washing over her.
Adam cleared his throat, grinning sheepishly.

Generally, Red would enjoy the hell out of such a little interlude but his senses were prickling in alarm, “Francis, did she take a hit off your–”

“No.” Francis held the pipe away covetously. “She has her own... which is just the mom and pop shit.”

Red examined Elizabeth critically.

“It’s just the generic stuff, Red.” Adam was quick to point out. “I would never–”

Red’s scowl increased exponentially as he observed the woman’s behavior.

She kissed him, her arms lovingly wrapping about his neckline.

The warm lips passionately intimate in nature, made his senses tingle in another fashion entirely.

While the man returned the antics, his mind was on another subject.

The man gently put a halt to any further display, “Tell you what, baby,” he smiled down at the upturned little face, hanging on his every utterance, “why don’t we take this to a more–”

Elizabeth looked about, jerking a startled exclamation, “Oh my, God...” she gasped, frantically searching for Red’s stability, “the cops are coming!”

In the distance, far off sirens could be heard. They were so faint, Red was at a loss momentarily as to what she had actually referred.

He chuckled listlessly, “No, baby... there’s no–”

“It’s only an ambulance, man...” Francis affected his best Cheech and Chong accent.

Liz’s eyes were wide with alarm, however.

“It’s fading,” Red assured, “there are no cops... I promise.” he felt a twinge of guilt for her state, “See, no sirens now.” he sighed mentally for Lizzy still seemed totally adrift, “Baby, I think it’s time to stop now, okay.”

“Oh...” she settled little by little, almost cowering into the protection of his embrace, “...okay.”

“I swear to God, Red...” even Adam was picking up on the older man’s vibes where the woman was concerned, “She didn’t get any of the laced shit. I swear on my mother’s grave. You said you wanted a few heavy hitters, so I loaded up for you and your guys here but...”

Red glanced at Dembe.

Elizabeth couldn’t seem to get close enough to Red. Her skin literally crawled when he would move even a fraction away even for a second.

She grasp his forearms, clutching tightly, nuzzling him at every possible vantage point.

“...God,” she couldn’t take in enough air and she felt so drowsy.

Not warm and fuzzy drowsy but a heavy, almost hypnotic state which left her irritated yet... subdued, “What’s wrong with me?”
She watched Red’s lips. He had the most sensual mouth in the entire world. She could feel those thick lips on her flesh... tasting, teasing...

She moaned weakly, her fingers grasping his nape, dragging his mouth hungrily to hers.

Red allowed the move only for a fraction of a second, pulling back, “What the hell is going on here?”

Elizabeth was never so openly affectionate when strangers were about.

“Y-you don’t... want me?” the thought devastated, tears threatened in the sapphire eyes.

“Fuck that...” he dismissed such a stupid statement irritably, “Look at me!”

His fingers forced her face up, his eyes examining the vacant gaze feverishly.

Elizabeth was listless now, allowing his every whim.

“Shit.” he read the signs easily. “Some fucker spiked her drink.” the bitterness and frigid iciness shocked even himself.

Those emotions were transferred to...

Travis... who had been standing apart from the other contemporary who had accompanied Adam this night... started visibly to be the sudden center of attention.

Silas’ head jerked meaningfully to the little bastard. The guard moved his bulky frame with amazing grace and agility, his mammoth hands securing a rigid stay hold on Travis’ clothing as Silas lifted the guy effortlessly aloft.

“You fucking little bitch.” Silas’ face was inches from the terrified man’s, “I’ll rip you apart with my bare hands! I told you–”

Adam was instantly there, attempting reason where none existed he realized early on, “We don’t know for sure what happened here.” he frantically sought Red’s assistance, “He’s going to kill him.... please! Do something!” Adam was afraid to intervene where Silas was concerned.

He approached a higher source.

“I’ll hold his coat.” Red gently disengaged from a rather desperately clinging Elizabeth Keen.

“Don’t go.” she whispered piteously, “I can’t stand it if... you go.”

“I’m not going anywhere, baby.” his mouth caressed hers hungrily. “Francis!” he handed her off to a capable friend.

“It’s okay, Lizzy.” Francis forgot all about his pipe and the remaining product. “He’s not going anywhere, see?” he pointed.

Liz held tightly to Francis’ hands which squeezed her smaller ones reassuringly.

Red approached Travis who by this time was one quivering mass of denial and desperation.

Silas held the guy by the scruff, his look a dangerously quiet one. He awaited Red’s decision.

“Look, I’ll do what has to be done here just...” Adam was desperate but Red wasn’t sure of the exact
reason as yet, “I don’t want to know anything about it, all right?”

“For God’s sake, Ada—” Travis screeched hysterically.

“Don’t!” Adam jerked a shaky finger at the man, “You got yourself into this mess! I told you to keep it in your pants, but you just couldn’t, could you! Now,” the young man was livid, “I’m supposed to risk everything to save your sorry ass!”

Red waited it out.

“The future I’ve planned for my kids? My wife?” Adam was trembling. Red wasn’t sure it was from rage or fear. “You know, above anyone else... what I’ve had to do to get to this stage of the game and you jeopardize—”

Words were simply too difficult.

Adam turned his face away, “What you said before, Mr. Reddington...” his voice was harsh with regret and anguish, “I understand it, I understand about...liabilities.”

Red read the sincerity of the man. He straightened to his full height, tugging his vest down in back, turning his attention to Elizabeth Keen.

“...Do you also understand that—” Red turned back, his features bleak, “no one hurts what is mine without repercussions.”

“I totally understand that, Sir.” Adam knew how he would feel is someone, anyone, hurt or even disrespected his wife. “I can only apologize for bringing this into your home.

Adam had meant Travis.

“I brought it in.” Red meant... more than Travis. His gaze was tender on Lizzy, “And believe me...” his voice dropped as did his spirits, “I’m paying the price.”

He drew in a deep cleansing breath, “I want the product. The entire shipment.” he turned to something over which he had control.

“The entire...” Adam’s mouth fell agape.

“Dembe?” Red sought out his friend.

“I will handle the particulars.” Dembe lifted a casual hand.

Adam knew a polite brush off when he heard one. He sought out Travis.

“Don’t leave me here, man.” desperation had turned to anguished pleading.

Silas jerked heartily, silencing the little fucker, “One more word and it actually will be your last.”

Travis’ eyes beseeched Adam but something in Silas’ threat rang true so... he kept silent.

Adam was torn, clearly.

Red waited patiently for the guy’s decision. It didn’t matter to him one way or another.

Dembe sat an expensive looking brief case on the nearby bar opening the silver catch to reveal...
“Half now...” Red motioned, “half on delivery of the goods.”

Adam scanned the neatly stacked hundreds. Row after row after row of them.

His kids college education was in that case... a new house out of the neighborhood, a good life for the new baby on the way...

“I’ve been in this country for six years,” he ruminated quietly, his eyes never leaving the cash, “it hasn’t always been...” his voice trailed away.

The guy checked on Elizabeth who sat huddled down close to Francis Holbrook.

“My daughter is just fifteen,” Adam reminded himself, “fifteen... if anyone ever...”

Red could only guess on the man’s thoughts.

Adam held his hand out.

Red took it.

“What are you doing, Amigo?” Travis’ accent was suddenly very pronounced, his true ethnicity coming to the fore, “you cannot do this!”

Both men had been very careful not to conceal but certainly not advertise their race.

“Pay them... give them back the dinero,” Travis was beside himself, “I didn’t even do it, she’s fine. It was a joke that’s all. A fucking joke! I said I was sorry!”

Silas’ eyes hardened, his fist clamping down, knuckles white, “How’s that working out for you?”

“Wrap this up.” Red was anxious to get back to Elizabeth. “What’s it going to be? I need an answer.”

The woman sat quietly seemingly disinterested in the proceedings now.

“Compañero,” Travis was scared shitless, “por favor!”

Adam’s face set grimly, “Go take care of your woman.” he stepped, clicking the briefcase shut, hefting it aloft.

“How’s that working out for you?”

Adam hesitated only slightly before addressing Red. “I will call you?”

Red nodded, “Dembe will show you out.” he caught Silas’ eyes, instant communication passing between them.

Red stepped strategically, his body blocking Liz’s viewpoint.

Silas pulled his weapon instantly, setting it in the direct center of Travis’ forehead. “How much?” he growled threateningly, “How long?”

“Half hour... maybe twenty minutes.”

Travis winced as the steel barrel was pushed meaningfully into his skin. “One pill..” the answer was immediately forthcoming, “Half hour... maybe twenty minutes.”

Silas yanked the guy closer, his face a mask of frozen rage.
“You son-of-a-bitch!” Red seethed his fury. “I should kill you where you stand.” he moved, his manner more than intimidating.

Silas snapped, hitting out instinctively. The heavy blow sent Travis’ head cracking sickeningly against a hardwood column. The sound imminently satisfying to Red’s ear.

“Get that fucking trash away from me.” Red snarled.

Silas jerked Travis, hauling his ass down the long corridor, the guy yelling and screeching the entire way.

“If it’s a roofie, it will wear off.” Francis had been gently questioning Elizabeth. “What the hell is in a guy’s mind to fucking do that?” he murmured dispiritedly. “It’s okay, Lizzy…” he soothed, patting the woman’s back. “Silas will kill that prick for you, good and proper.”

“What prick?” Liz was floundering, her mind too slow to catch up to all that was being said, “…Is Tom here?” she looked about absently.

“No, baby,” Red stooped before her, “don’t worry about it… everything is fine.” he smiled softly his hand cupping the side of her face.

“What do these things keep happening to me?” she wailed.

Not certain exactly what was happening, she knew what she was experiencing was not normal.

“Is this what it’s like?” her voice shook.

If smoking that shit made a person feel this crappy… she pushed the pipe across the table, far away from her reach.

“Good girl.” Red leaned, placing his lips to her forehead. “Now if only I had the foresight…” he mused.

“To what, Red?” Francis sensed the man’s guilt. “There is nothing you did that caused this.” he motioned to Liz who had leaned into Red’s comforting embrace. “Where is the harm in a little smoking? Really?”

“I open up the door and shit like this just floods in.” Red shook his head, his large palms soothing, caressing Lizzy’s back and shoulders, “I thought…”

Francis waited but Red had fallen silent, “…You thought what?” it was encouraged.

“I wanted her to see my world… to accept all that I am.” Red closed his eyes for a beat, “It wasn’t enough the other way.”

Francis sat back, sighing heavily, “What guy doesn’t want acceptance. Even his dark side.”

Red wasn’t pacified.

“You can’t shield her every second of the day,” Francis reminded, “give her a little credit for God’s sake. She’s resilient, capable and a hell of a sight stronger than you think she is.”

“What if that fucker’s plan worked to his advantage?” Red growled.

“Don’t fight.” Liz asked, her palm going to each man’s chest front, “Can’t we all just get along?”
Francis chuckled away the pent-up frustration, “Yeah, Red... come on. I love you, man.”

“Aww, that’s so sweet.” Liz was touched.

“Tell him you love him too, Red.” she pleaded, “let’s all just love one another.”

“What a wonderful would this would be.” Francis commiserated, finally sensing some sort of humor in the situation.

Red threw him a stare.

“Oh, lighten up. She’s going to be fine.” Francis patted Liz’s head affectionately sorta like a favored pet. “I’ve got this covered, so go maim and kill the little prick that started all this.” he motioned, “It’ll make you feel so much better.”

Red sighed mentally, examining the woman worriedly, “I want Kaplan to look at her.”

“Then you call her at three in the morning.” Francis suggested, strongly, “She’ll tell you what I’m gonna... let her sleep it off.”

Red didn’t think he would follow that advice at all.

“Don’t call Mr. Kaplan,” Liz whispered secretively, “she doesn’t like me. She’ll be mad I smoked shit.”

“She doesn’t like anyone,” Francis stated, “don’t take it personally.”

Liz looked at Red, those big blue eyes ripping his heart asunder, “Baby, she can get this stuff out of your system so much faster.”

“Don’t tell her I smoked—”

“That shit. Sure.” Red knew that was one promise he would have to break, but it was for the greater good, surely, or maybe he could spin the tale so Kaplan didn’t have to know everything.

“Sure.” Francis echoed agreeably.

He and Red exchanged benign looks.

“Are you out of your fog?” Red wanted to know.

“Mostly.” Francis self-evaluated.

“I have to...” the blue eyes were watching every move he made. He moved carefully, “...speak to Silas.”

“Elizabeth?” Red changed tactics and manner his hands covering hers lovingly, “Can you go with Francis to our room? I’ll call Kate, then get you something on a tray. You haven’t eaten anything to speak of...”

Liz looked at Francis.

“He’ll get you comfortable and settled in, okay?” Red ducked his head to catch her wandering attention, “Okay?”

“Sure.” she said.
Red was having second thoughts, “Maybe I better stay with–”

“You don’t trust me to do a simple meet and greet?” Francis was hurt.

“Meet and gree–”

“You know what I mean.” the younger man grimaced, “I didn’t want to say babysitting in front of...” he cocked his head to Elizabeth Keen.

“I’m Red’s baby.” the woman piped up cheerfully having heard half of the sentence in truth.

Red’s heart softened, “Yes... that’s right.”

Liz snuggled up into the man, ducking her face into Red’s neck, sniffing the man to her hearts content.

“Ugh... sugar shock.” Francis moved onward, “Come on... baby.” he smirked.

Red chuckled quietly when the woman turned on Francis, frowning hard.

“Red’s baby...” she repeated firmly, smiling impishly up at him.

“You’re only Red’s baby, huh?” Francis grinned at the woman nodding seriously.

Red’s eyes softened on their own accord. He truly hadn’t expected to hear something like this from her.

He had read that when you called your woman baby, it caused instant emotional stress relief. He had to wonder if there was some truth to the statement because when he used the endearment with Lizzy, her eyes lit happily. She was more relaxed and content.

He knew when he said it... he felt at peace... yes, and happy too.

Red stared down at the woman. She was chattering away as if she had not a care in the world.

He set his chin on the crown of her head, vaguely listening to what Francis and Lizzy were discussing.

“How about lizard tongue?” Francis asked, drawing Red back into the fray. “That’s a great nickname I can call you.”

Liz scrunched up her nose, shaking her head that she didn’t like it. Red smiled at the seriousness of her expression.

“Sweetheart,” he rumbled softly, “I want you to–” he hesitated when the woman turned away from him, sighing heavily.

“I sense a problem.” he kissed the shoulder available to him.

“Now, what’s your malfunction?” Francis wanted to know.

She sought out Red’s gaze, her own definitely annoyed.

“What the hell did you do to piss her off now?” even Francis picked up on the faux pas.

“I didn’t do anything.” Red grinned at the woman but her scowl begged to differ. “Or... maybe I
Liz leaned towards Francis, waving him closer. She shared a confidence.

Red leaned forward, straining to hear what was being said. Francis sniggered his amusement.


Liz sighed heavily, appreciating Francis commiserating with her. She refused to even looks Red’s way, enjoying her sulking tremendously.

Forget the fact she still was hugging him, she wasn’t going to give him the time of day until Red said what she needed to hear.

Which, just amused the shit out of Red.

The man bit his lip, hiding his smile.

Francis continued a serious conversation with the woman.

“But you know, you are his sweetheart.” the man reminded, tongue-in-cheek.

Liz batted those large stoned eyes, nodding a little in agreement, following so far.

“You’re also his Lizzy.”  Francis’ lips quivered as the little chin jutted out obstinately.

She now ignored both of them.

“Well, now I know what I did wrong.” Red nodded his understanding.

“If we told you once...” Francis rubbed salt in the wounds, “we’ve told you a thousand times.” he cocked his head, “It’s baby... baby... baby.”

Red beamed at the little face, dropping a kiss to her cheek, “...I’m sorry, baby.” he rumbled deeply, nuzzling the soft cheek.

Liz pushed into the affection, a smile lighting her face. She turned rewarding Red with a kiss.

She stretched up on her toes, nuzzling Red’s nose with hers which drew a soft chuckle from the man.

She sure was expressive when she was lit.

Speaking of which... he had an issue to handle.

“Baby, go with Francis.” he started to transfer her into Francis’ capable hands but was waylaid when the woman puckered her lips in an over exaggerated manner, signifying he was about to commit yet another cardinal sin.

Red obligingly lowered his head, obeying the silent request for a good-bye kiss. He smiled against her lips amused and charmed by her manner.

She literally skipped towards Francis, linking her arm through his, “...I have to pee.”

Red’s mouth quirked irresistibly, “Watch her.”

Francis crossed himself in a semi-religious manner, “I’ll get her snuggled up safe and warm... as God
Red’s steps were swift and sure but to be honest he couldn’t be certain of the direction he needed to go.

He activated the Comm he had retrieved from his office.

“...Silas, on my way,” he informed his head guard, “...which would be where exactly?”

“It’s being handled,” a curt reply was immediately forthcoming, “take care of Liz.”

“I believe I asked–”

“I said...” Silas’ tone was brittle, “he is being handled... or don’t you trust me to do that now?”

Silas was in pain, he should be in bed. Red knew that. Just because the guy was up and functioning didn’t mean shit at this late date.

Red took the man’s state into consideration, “I missed it too.” he grumbled, understanding Silas’ emotional state for what it was in both men’s book... dereliction of duty, “I didn’t see the cock sucker do the deed either.”

“According to shitbag, he was only trying to do you a favor,” Silas’ tone was contempt itself, “said he was trying to cement good relations between Adam and you.”

Red stopped in his tracks.

“How far do you want me to take this?” Silas asked, “Cause I have no problem seeing it through to the endgame.”

“I know that.” Red nodded, his shoulders relaxing a tad.

The silence came, and it was semi-comfortable now.

“...I feel responsible.”

“That’s not on you.” Red stated tersely, “Did you hear that.”

“Yeah,” Silas’ tone was back to normal, “I heard that.”

Red ran a weary hand over his face.

“Not on you either... we have the douchebag who is responsible.” Silas reminded.

Red rubbed his eyes, “Put shithead on ice. I’ll decide after...” he had lost that ‘killing’ feeling.

“If that’s what you want.”

“It is for now.” Red hoped any decision he made could be a logically thought out one but you just didn’t ever know in life.

He turned about, retracing his steps.

“Make this the worst night of that son-of-a-bitches life.”
“Copy that.” Silas signed off.

Red felt better as he rounded the corner of the hallway which led to the South wing of the house.

That good feeling went away in a flash as he witnessed the scene taking place before him...

He must have been a good fifteen meters away, but he covered the distance in record time.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

Elizabeth was perched on the side of the pool looking down into the crystal depths below...

The sparkling, shimmering blueness was almost hypnotic in nature.

It drew her closer... down... down....

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

Red hit the water at a full running gait, clothes, shoes and all... the force sent water splashing haphazardly high.

His body sliced the surface effortlessly, pushing hard into the deep end of the pool.

His strokes were powerful, bringing him closer and closer to Lizzy’s limply floating body. Reaching out, he grasped her arm pulling her into his hold. Pushing towards the surface, he lifted her upward until hands came out of nowhere, lifting her quickly out of Red’s reach.

Following her ascent, Red quickly broke the surface.

Francis was smoothing the hair from the woman’s face, “Talk to me!” His tone, while authoritative, was by no means panicked... as Red’s mind was, at that moment.

Lizzy’s cheeks billowed. Seconds later, a warm gush of water hit Francis’ face full force.

She giggled infectiously as the man swatted and peddled backwards immediately.

Liz rolled, giggling her amusement to see the man disappear over the edge and out of sight into the shimmering depths behind him in a spectacular splash.

“You little shit!” Francis broke the surface, sputtering, washing his face frantically, “You scared the fuck out of me!”

“Good!” Red barked, his own concern overriding the common sense that told him, the woman was just fine. “You can handle the situat-”

“She faked me out!” Francis tread water effortlessly, “Said she had to pee!” the young man scowled at the woman, then checked hastily down to the water he was treading as if to ascertain if the pool had been contaminated by said ‘pee’.

“Uhh...” realization dawned on Liz, “I do have to...”

Francis sighed his relief as the woman’s eyes widened, “Red! You came swimming with me!”

Red’s jaw worked tightly, “Elizabeth... are you all right?” he needed someone to take something, anything, seriously.
“I’m ‘A’ okay!” she snapped off a smart salute before crawling to the water’s edge. “Let’s go again!”

“Get back here, dammit!” Red rushed after the woman, just missing her by inches as she took the plunge once more. “Dammit!” the man hissed as he went in after her.

Kicking away from the wall, Liz evaded capture. Laughing with abandon, she swirled about, relaxing in the warmth.

Red pushed towards her, capturing the slowly descending woman. Pulling her about face, he frowned his displeasure over her antics.

“Swimming makes you grumpy.” the woman pulled a ‘grumpy’ face.

“You’re not swimming,” the man tightened his hold on her, “you’re sinking.”

Francis’ powerful strokes had landed him ‘on deck’ long before Red who tarried with the slower moving woman.

“Arms up!” Francis called down as Liz reached the edge of the pool.

She lifted her arms obediently which Francis latched onto, lifting her effortlessly.

“Whee...” she was deposited soundly next to a chuckling individual.

Red fluidly hoisted himself, shedding clothes as he neared.

“Your shoes are still down there.” Francis had noted the brown leather laying at the bottom of the pool.

“My shoes are the least of my concern,” he hastily lay his ear upon the woman’s wet top, “Breathe in,” he stated brusquely unaware he used his ‘command’ tone.

Elizabeth pushed back, turning pointedly aside, her arms crossing willfully over the area in question.

Her chin lifted defiantly.

Red was given pause for thought, seeking out a reluctantly amused Francis Holbrook.

Red’s temper rose, “Cough, Lizzy!”

“Do I turn my head?” she bitched right back, not losing the aforementioned attitude.

Francis’ head dropped down and Red knew instinctively, the guy was enjoying the hell out of his dilemma.

“I’m just trying to ascertain if you have any water in your lungs.” he gritted.

“Ascertain... this.” she flipped him off.

Francis stifled a chuckle... unsuccessfully.

“You think this is funny?” Red took his worry and anger out on a safe subject.

“Sure.” Francis shrugged amiably. But then the man relented, “Hey, Lizzy...”

“What?” she replied briskly.
“Are those clothes wet?”

She glanced down, “Oh my God...” she scrunched up her nose her fingers picking at the saturated garment, “I’m all wet.”

“Accident.” Francis replied airily, “You know what would probably be wise?”

Elizabeth was all ears, “What?”

“For you to get into some dry clothes.”

“You are absolutely right!” she started off post-haste.

“Hey...”  Francis stopped her in her tracks, “Red is all wet too,” he smiled benignly at a put out Red Reddington, “And I mean that kindly,” he returned his interest to a patiently waiting woman, “can he tag along and dry off too?”

“Oh, sure.” Liz smiled warmly at the older man, “this has been one strange night... hasn’t it?” she questioned.

“I second that emotion,” Francis nodded contentedly, “You kids run along now...” he smiled that shit-eating grin Red was slowly beginning to hate. “I’ll check in with you later.”

Upon seeing Red’s look...

“Or maybe not?”

“You stay here tonight you little shit.” Red grated as he passed, “You’re as high as a kite. I don’t want you running a perfectly good Aston Martin into a tree and wrecking the car.

Francis reached for a towel, “Wasn’t gonna drive my car... gonna borrow one of yours.”

“Like hell.” Red called back over his shoulder.

It was his way of saying a reluctant, thank you, but he was in no mood to be actually forced to say the fucking words.

“I love you too, man!” Francis hit his chest twice, sending out his arm, his fingers poised in the universal sign of ‘peace’.

Red returned a ‘sign’ all his own all of which Lizzy missed so intent upon holding her clothes away from her body was she.

Francis chuckled for Red’s mood.

The night was looking up.

The silence in the bedroom was difficult for Red.

He followed Liz into the bathroom giving her a little space while she discarded her wet clothes.

He divested himself of his own, tying a robe about his waist as he carried the sopping garments to the sink.
The woman emerged, a towel securely tucked into the cleft of her breasts.

She smiled warmly at him.

He was a little taken aback, having expected her previous mood to have prevailed.

“...I love you.” she scrunched her nose adorably, forcing a reluctant chuckle from the man.

“...You do, huh?” he leaned back on the sink, folding his arms over his chest.

“Yeah...” she approached slowly, a mischievous glint in her eyes, “do you know why?”

He mellowed in spite of himself, “... Tell me.” he coaxed, ever so glad when the woman eased her way into his ready embrace.

“Well...” she mused overly long, and he knew she was deliberately taking her time, deliberately pushing her body into his straining one, “you’re a pretty good kisser... as kissing goes.”

“Am I?” he lowered his head, holding her eyes hypnotically, enjoying the slight catch of her breath as the luminous lids shut dreamily just a second before his lips made contact with hers.

She moaned into his parted mouth causing his organ to expand exponentially.

His arms tightened systematically as he deepened the kiss.

The woman’s tongue played a sensual dance with his...

When she finally pulled back, his breath was more shallow than it should have been at such an early stage but...

She had been so giving, so open...

“You’re a very nice man. I like... nice men.”

“I can be.” he knew he wanted to be... for this woman. “If anyone had told me ten minutes ago that we would be...” his eyes dropped to where their bodies melded together, “as we are, I would have called them a liar, to their face.”

“What?” she was puzzled.

“No reason,” he moved on hastily, loathe to remind her of the ‘reason’, “you were extolling my virtues... do I only possess two?”

She pressed those luscious breasts into his chest, her arms lifting about his neckline.

“Let me count the ways...” an old poem flitted across her mind but the rest of the stanza vanished like vapor in a mist.

“That we’ve made love?” he trailed soft, breathy little kisses down her neckline, his voice husky with growing desire.

“No, no....” she scowled, leaning her neck gracefully for more of his pleasurable attention, “that you’re a nice man.”

“I prefer the other topic.” he bit gently on the hollow between her shoulder and nape, eliciting a moan of delight.
“I fucking love those sounds you make,” he tried very hard to assure she made them, “makes my dick hard.”

Her fingers traveled over his sides, inching between their bodies.

He sensed their destination, allowing the move.

“Don’t you believe me?” he smiled, the gesture disappearing in the next second as that little exploration trek found its mark.

He grunted savagely because a thought suddenly occurred, “...We can’t do this.”

Her fingers stopped their excruciatingly gentle trace down the side of his engorged cock.

She sought him out, “We can’t?”

“I,” he amended determinedly, “can’t.”

“You feel like you can.” Liz was confused.

“No, baby,” he had exhausted his patience but only with the world in general, “I can... I shouldn’t, not when you are... like you are.”

She glanced down her body mystified, “Should I put on a dress or someth–”

“No!” he answered too quickly, too loudly, catching himself in the next instance because all he really wanted to do was flick that towel loose, lift her leg and slide inside that hot, tight pussy.

That’s what he wanted to do...

“No, what you’re... wearing...” for lack of a better term, “the towel is charming.”

She smiled charmingly, “Aren’t you sweet.”

“Another virtue,” he sighed mentally, “Hard to live up to all those moralistic rituals at times.”

“Doesn’t sound like you.” she concurred, her hands went to the ties of his robe.

Red instantly covered those busy little fingers with his, “You know what we should do?” he took a page from Francis’ book... divert, misdirect...

“Yes.” she assured him, her fingers wiggling about under his, her attention going back to her pastime.

Red shut his eyes, “Baby, you’re killing me here.”

“Oh?” she was instantly concerned, her hands stopping their activities, “Is your head hurting?”

“More than you know.” he shifted his cock to a comfortable position, his hand easing over the poignantly aching head, “…No, sweetheart, what I mean–” he halted his train of thought for her countenance had altered visibly, “What?”

She lifted pouting eyes, her beautiful mouth trembling.

“What?” Red was totally at a loss, “Really?”

“You called her... that.” a dark scowl creased her forehead, “I’m not... that.” she lifted a scolding
She demanded he remember.

He remembered, “I apologize.” he took for granted Lizzy was referring to Madeline Pratt, “but honestly, I never ever referred to her by that endearment. I swear.”

“You didn’t?” hopeful eyes sought his.

“I did not.”

She snuggled closer, her arms embracing his waist, “I’m cold... you have to keep me warm,” she sighed blissfully, “it’s your job.”

He smiled, planting a kiss on the top of her head, “It most certainly is. I would like nothing better but you remember, Mr. Kaplan is coming soon.” he had found his salvation, “Shouldn’t we get ready for her visit?”

“She doesn’t like me.” she warned.

“I think you’re mistaken.” he wasn’t really sure of his facts on this one. “It just takes a lot of time for her to warm to anyone. Look at me.” he gestured, “Look how she treats me.”

“She loves you.” Liz dismissed with a sigh, “All women love you.”

“She tolerates me.” he passed over the latter remark entirely. “She cares for me and I, her, of course. Is that okay?”

“Oh! Yes, Red,” her eyes lifted, “I care for her too. I do!”

Red smiled, “You should get into your pajamas.”

He wasn’t sure how much longer he could keep pushing her away otherwise because he knew every inch of that delectable body hidden by that towel...

He wanted to touch it, taste it... revel in its glory.

“I don’t like clothes.” she grimaced.

“But Mr. Kaplan does.”

Liz turned, making a bee-line for the closet. Red sank back on the sink basin, drained emotionally and physically.

What have you been smoking?” Kaplan’s gruff accusation caused Elizabeth to gasp her dismay.

Big blue eyes turned accusingly to...

“I didn’t say a word!” Red held up pacifying hands, “I swear.”

“I’m just so damned intuitive.” Kaplan snapped, “No one had to tell me anything.” the woman tsked, “I’ve got eyes.”

Liz fell sullenly silent... for all of two seconds, unreasonably depressed suddenly.
“I told you she hates me.” she shared with Red, whispering the statement, her voice quivering slightly.

Kaplan heard, of course, her hands halting their busy work for a brief interval.

She sought Reddington’s eyes, her own resigned.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Kaplan,” Liz wanted the air cleared, “it wasn’t my fault... it was somebody else’s fault.”

Kaplan drew in a breath, opening the IV line, “Drink the water.” she motioned, “you are severely dehydrated... again.”

Liz snatched the bottle indicated, drinking hastily.

She emptied another when the older woman handed it over.

“The medication will run its course.” Kaplan couldn’t help that, “The line will lessen the effect at least.”

She trained a critical eye on the pouting brunette under her care. “Did you... take care of the man who put her in such a state?”

“No yet.” Red didn’t want to discuss that issue. “He’s with Silas.”

That seemed to satisfy Kaplan’s righteous indignation.

“Are you all right?” she approached Elizabeth slowly, her manner without its usual edge.

Liz lifted trusting eyes, “I’m fine, Mr. Kaplan.” she smiled brightly, “Really, thank you for asking.”

Kaplan lifted a brow but remained silent.

Red was shocked when the stern-faced woman reached out, gently brushing Liz’s bangs out of her eyes.

“You must be more aware of your surroundings.” Kate tried a smile but it only half succeeded. “People are rarely what they appear to be.”

Liz nodded eagerly and Red noted, she had leaned into Kate’s gentle touch.

The woman turned aside brusquely, studying Red’s pinpoint pupils critically, “Do you need anything?”

“Have I ever?” he countered.

Kate huffed a reply, gathering her supplies.

“You interrupted my dinner, I’m going to the kitchen.” Red was summarily informed.

“You were having dinner at three in the morn—” he shut up after the caustic glare he received, “Can I send for carry-out?” he offered to buy on his dime.

“I’m going to inform Nora that you said that.” Kaplan arched her brow.

Liz cast worried eyes Red’s way. The man sighed, patting her hand consolingly, “She was joking.”
Kaplan remained silent on the matter though her brow moved an inch higher.

“I’ll stay here tonight,” she left the rest unsaid. In case of complications.

Red felt infinitely better, “Thank you, Kate... as usual.”

“Tell Dembe to bring me a bottle of that precious wine he so covets...”

Red nodded, “Anything for you, Kate. You know that.”

Kaplan glanced at the woman sitting so primly and quietly in bed.

“Goodnight, Elizabeth,” she stated quietly, “Sleep well.”

Red’s heart warmed. He watched the small woman exit with no further word of farewell for the likes of him.

“Why don’t you lay back, try to get some rest.” he smiled down at the woman who looked so small in the gigantic bed.

Liz sighed, obeying, closing her eyes as she sank back onto the welcoming pillow. She stiffened, fingers clutching the covers frantically.

“The bed is spinning!”

Red was instantly beside her, “It'll pass, baby,” he soothed, holding her tightly in his embrace. “It’s all right.” he whispered his encouragement, “I’m here.”

Liz held onto him, clutching tightly, the spinning roller coaster ride she was on speeding faster and faster along shaky tracks.

She felt nauseous, her breathing deeper and faster, panic rising.

Red’s stability kept her focused, centered.

“I promise, Lizzy,” he knew what she was experiencing. “Just hang on, it will pass.”

He closed his eyes, holding her ever so close, “This is why...” he grated his own misery, “I didn’t want you to feel this!”

“I’m s-scared.” she tried to burrow into his being.

“Yeah...” his voice was grim, “I know... I know.” he stressed. He leaned into her, adding a measure of his weight. “It’s getting out of your system... don’t fight it, sweetheart.”

He glanced rapidly to the steady drip of the IV line, “I could kick the shit out of myself for–”

“Don’t,” she clung to him for dear life, “I’m fine.” she soothed his torturous mind, “I’m good, Red... just...” she breathed out, “hold me.”

His powerful arms obeyed, taking the breath from her body. He eased slowly as he felt her relaxing by degrees.

“Don’t let go.” she whimpered, her full lips searching aimlessly for the sweetness of his mouth.
“Never.” the man vowed, breathing directly into the warm hollow, the tip of his tongue flicking sensually to her waiting one.

The kiss melded into prurient possession within seconds, Red holding himself in reserve for her state.

His solid frame stabilized Liz enough that the panic started to ebb.

The warmth of his mouth working erotically on her lips enthralled and delighted her overloaded senses.

He could feel the heat of her center through the lightweight fabric of the sleepwear she had donned.

She had looked utterly ravishing when she had exited the closet earlier.

He had expected her to come out in one of his shirts and some panties...

He did not expect the little thigh length black chemise and matching panties she was wearing.

The triangle cups sat snug against her breasts, a tiny red satin bow sitting front and center. The top tapered off into flowing pleats of semi-translucent fabric that swished around her thighs as she walked towards him.

He had stood, rooted to the spot as the vision came nearer to him. His mouth watering. He had stared at the negligee for countless moments before getting his wits back. He grabbed her satin robe, hiding the teasing sight from his view.

She was his very own gift that he wanted to unwrap. He wanted to uncover those pert nipples... ease that tiny strip of cloth over the ample swell of that incredible backside...

He shifted uncomfortably, another pang of longing shooting through his ball sack, traveling the length of his cock.

His defenses were low tonight. That shit was messing with his head too... and his libido.

God, was it affecting that.

He had to get some space because if he didn’t he’d wind up taking advantage of her vulnerable state which made him just as fucking wrong as that cocksucker Travis.

She was quiet now, the IV doing its job finally. The tremors had stopped. Her body was calming down.

He wished the same could be said for his.

His senses were heightened by the drugs he took. The mellow buzz had been replaced by something more... urgent.

He hated to disturb her but something had to give. If he stayed under the influence of that rather lethal body tonight, he could not be responsible for his actions.

“Baby,” he tried to keep the desperation out of his voice, “my head is killing me.”

Well, that much was true.

“Would it be all right if I took a quick shower?”
Liz stirred from her dreamlike state. She had been drifting in a very pleasant place, “Are... are you okay?”

“I’ll just be a few feet away and I’ll make it quick.” Or as quickly as he could masturbate the problem away... “I hate to bail on you but... I’m in agony.”

“Poor baby.” she tried to rise.

“No... stay.” he tucked the covers about her chin. “You rest... you need to rest.”

“I want to shower with you.” she stated sleepily.

“No, you don’t want to do that.” he managed through clenched teeth, “Kaplan wants you to finish your IV and get some rest, remember?”

“You... you won’t be long?”

“I won’t go if you–”

“No...” she smiled sleepily up at him for he had moved out of the bed a few moments back, “I’m much better now. Just... come back quickly. I can’t sleep without you.”

Red didn’t believe that. She was already out of it.

He smiled finally, “Keep it that way.”

He kissed her mouth gently, heading for the shower in the next instance.

Keeping the water stream low in case she had a nightmare or something, Red’s head cleared once under the hot, pulsing spray.

He simply stood, keeping his thoughts on neutral subjects.

It was going to be a long night...

A part of him dreaded going back out there... facing his weakness for the woman.

Another part reveled in it.

So he stood quietly allowing the water to wash away some of the dirt of the night, some of the guilt...

His selfishness had almost cost Lizzy dearly tonight.

Did he need her acceptance so desperately?

He had some reevaluating to do. Some self-examination surely.

Finally, stepping out of his self-imposed exile, he reached for a towel.

Drying himself absently, having tucked a smaller towel about his waist, he checked on Lizzy.

She slept peacefully, one hand curled beneath her cheek.

A sweet pang shot through his heart. It was a moment which moved him.

Sometimes he loved Lizzy so much, it hurt.
In the best way possible.

The man closed his eyes, wearily crossing the room, moving closer.

He checked her IV then settled in the chaise lounge, close to the window. He lay his head back, staring out at a starry sky.

He found the constellation, Cassiopeia. The Queen on her throne.

_Ah, Cassiopeia, more beautiful than the Nereid... hell hath no fury like a Sea Nymph scorned._ Red mused.

It was the last conscience thought of the night.
Sweet Addiction

Chapter Notes

Trying out a little something different. We'll see how it goes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 4

To say Red Reddington had an interesting life would be a gross understatement. The man ruminated on the many twists and turns of said life tonight. He often found himself in a pensive state. It was as if an enormous decision loomed on the horizon. One he dreaded to make. It was a reprieve of sorts... to allow his mind to rest tonight. The drugs pushed the troubling doubt and recriminations back for a brief spell. But always, his mind would clear and all too soon, the cycle would begin again. There was so much guilt for allowing Elizabeth Keen into his sphere. So much joy... she brought so much to his life but he wondered, what did he bring to hers? In the quiet of this room, he could not hide from the questions which plagued him. To an outsider, Red appeared a rather easy-going guy. One might even say, frivolous, devil-may-care. He took great pains to present such an image. No one ever took such a man seriously or considered him a threat... until it was much too late. But those who knew Red well, realized how complicated, how dangerous he could be when he set his mind to it. Life taught hard lessons. Red learned well and adjusted each and every time. He glanced at the slight form in the bed beside him. Elizabeth slept peacefully all curled up like a kitten in a basket. The chaise was comfortable enough, but he longed to cross those few steps...a hunger burned inside him. A hunger for the taste of Elizabeth’s favors. Why he didn’t just get up and go over there? He had no answers this night. None that satisfied at least.
It bothered him.

Why he allowed this slip of a woman into his heart was a genuine mystery.

He had experienced many more sophisticated, worldly women in his life. Lovely women really.

Red loved all women. God put this creation before man to be worshiped and adored, didn’t He?

But Elizabeth was different. Had been from the beginning. When had the protective nurturing side of the man turned to some stronger emotions?

He knew exactly when. He remembered the night like it was yesterday.

Red’s eyes traveled the well-rounded hips. The sweet dip of Lizzy’s waist.

He fought the emotions for months.

He remembered that as well.

Was he so weak? That one small creature could bring him to his knees?

He didn’t mind that position. On his knees before the woman... gave him better access to... wondrous things.

Tonight had shaken him.

The ‘could haves’... ‘should haves’... ‘what ifs’...

Another weakness emerged. The need to have the woman accept him fully, completely.

Hell, most days he couldn’t accept himself. What he had become.

He never used to think about such things. What he did, what he did not do that he should... water under the bridge.

So what...

Life had kicked the shit out of him. He learned how to stand and kick back... so what?

He was trying to be a better man for Lizzy. Too little, too late, he supposed.

Would God give him something so precious a second time only to take it away in some capricious whim?

Did God even give Red Reddington a second thought these days?

He didn’t think so, and that was scaring the shit out of him.

If God didn’t give a shit, what was to protect Lizzy from all the evil forces out there?

He had purposely steered the woman into the den of iniquity he called his domain this night.

He tried to protect her from such things especially if he was involved.

How did God like that?

Red wasn’t religious, but he was a devoutly spiritual being, deny it though he may to any and all
onlookers.

In his heart, he knew there was a Higher Power one answered to when the time came.

He hoped that Higher Power was a patient one. Red’s list of cardinal sins would fill a phone book.

The man gave up his musings for the night, his soul and mind depleted.

He stepped to the bed, carefully removing the IV before making a spot beside the woman, even more careful not to disturb her.

Red fell into a fitful sleep.

He refused to allow the strong sexual urges their lead this night, stubbornly denying his need to sate them in Elizabeth’s warm, succulent body.

At least that was one thing he had jurisdiction over, one thing he could control.

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Liz flipped over, urgently pulling at her panties. Her fingers fumbled clumsily, the damned things catching at every possible venue to her dismay.

“Leave them.” he had no time for formalities, his body on fire.

Red tugged her, positioning her legs astride his hips as she drew up on her knees.

“Hurry...” Liz pleaded, her cheeks still flushed.

Hooking the filmy fabric with nimble fingers, he moved them aside, lining himself up with her drenched core.

Red pushed at her hip, choking on the air as her hot little hole engulfed his cock head easily. Settling her hands on his chest, she sat back, taking the full erection in one deep plunge.

“God...” Red moaned sharply, curling his fingers tightly into her hips. His body more than grateful for the gift bestowed, “You have no idea how much I needed this, Lizzy.” he managed to croak out his ardent entreaties.

He sent up a silent prayer on-high, “I ached so badly... denying myself this sweet addiction.”

She panted, already deeply involved with the movement, finding her rhythm within moments, “I told you earlier,” she stated tightly, “there was no need to ...wait.” she moaned urgently as the man pushed strongly up against her downstroke.

He needed better leverage, physically bringing her to a sitting position.

He suckled her through the thin gauze of her top, drawing her tiny nipples into sharp peaks within seconds. Nipping the buds, he snarled through his teeth as her pussy clenched snugly around him.

Glancing down, Liz gasped sharply at the sight of her body sliding along the man’s rigid shaft. The heavy girth pushed at her walls, disappearing from sight.

Red sighed shakily as the woman tightened her knees about his thighs. She rocked harder against the stiff rod between her legs.

Clasping his head to her breast, Liz drove the heavy weight of him deep inside her core. Tilting her bottom, she rut her clit against the hard flesh, drawing a rumbling growl of approval from her lover.

“...Yes,” he hissed, watching the soft fluff of her mound impact against his, “find your pleasure.”

Because he knew, in finding her pleasure, he would find his.

Red was living the dream which had awakened him earlier.

The man had been deep within the luscious depths of an erotic world his mind had created.

To wake... to find his Lizzy all hot and ready for his attention, was something out of the best kind of wet dream.

Recapturing her breast, Red’s mouth drew against the wet flesh, suckling her in time with her frenetic and unrelenting rhythm which only increased with the suction of his heated lips.

Grappling with his hand, Liz wordlessly placed it against the cheek of her ass, hoping he received her silent message.
Tightening his fingers around the full globe, Red rocked her fervently along his throbbing shaft. Working his fingers under her sheer panties, his cock throbbed as his fingers felt her labia part as the hard girth vanished inside her warmth.

The reality of the warm, smooth flesh beneath his fingertips aroused and tantalized his already heightened state.

He deliberately slid between the crevice of her plump cheeks, increasing the pressure, teasing the sensitive skin behind where they were connected. She clenched hard about him in response, drawing a deep groan from his chest.

He smiled around the pink nub in his mouth when the woman snarled her pleasure, riding his cock much more determinedly than she had been.

He was doing something right.

Running his hand over her silky thigh, he clutched the soft muscle in his hand yanking her closer, nudging the tight passage intimately with his cock.

Squirming closer, she keened softly when the full sack pushed against the sensitive skin of her bottom. Dropping her gaze once more, she took in the visual of the union, her mouth falling agape. The emotions of the moment rather overwhelming a thing to deal with.

Everything she was experiencing seemed magnified to unbelievable proportions.

How Red’s cock felt was indescribable.

He always felt amazing, but tonight the tip was engorged and rock solid, spreading her wide open.

The sensation of the extra skin on his shaft dragging against her labia and clit sent jolts of incredible pleasure throughout her entire body.

Sharp tingles flowed from her head down to her toes, leaving her primed and coiled tight for the release she knew he could give her.

Liz felt on the edge of orgasm from the moment he entered her body. And the intensity kept rising with each deep plunge of his shaft.

Even the soft hair of his groin brushing against her clit left her shaking and trembling inside. Thick cream rushed from her opening in copious amounts in response to the overpowering stimulation.

Red tightened his hold on the small bottom aiding the woman in her goal, something primal... possessive, in his touch. Lizzy unfurled warmly with each passing moment spent under his influence.

He had never seen her so impassioned. So relentless. So focused.

She had been an incredibly pleasurable lover from the start. Opening herself to his lust each time he bedded her, but tonight, she was a force to be reckoned with... and he was very much enjoying the challenge such a desirable partner presented.

Regardless of the fact his ego said he was the catalyst for such an erotic display, the man was positive this randy escapade was due to the last of the drugs in her system dissipating.

It didn’t matter.

He had truly never seen anything so captivating as Lizzy letting go, allowing her baser needs to
dictate her behavior. She was breathtakingly beautiful... wild and free.

He leaned, his mouth capturing her lips. He nipped the swollen flesh tenderly. “You’re so enchanting...”

Her little brow furled, too concentrated to focus on a mere man for the time being. Her moans turned desperate as she strove for the release she needed.

He cooed sympathetically, rubbing his thumb against her lust laden sex, coaxing her closer to relief. “There...” he soothed, pressing harder against the fleshy nub, “is that what you need.”

Over time, he had learned to read her face and body’s reaction to fulfill any needs she had quickly.

He chuckled as she bit into his neck and rut that little pussy needily against his hand. She presented her breast to him, silently demanding he suckle.

Obeying, his warm mouth pulled at the pink flesh, eliciting yet another soft moan of delight. He worked hard for those sounds, after all. Red groaned his own pleasure when her core clamped hard about his body which stiffened in gratitude.

“...I’m...yes...” she moaned breathlessly as the man tugged gently on her panties, sending a pleasant jolt through her clit, “oh, shi...” she tensed sharply before cresting a high peak of rapturous bliss.

It seemed to come out of nowhere with a force that rocked her world. She had been working toward coming but when the crescendo hit, it felt like a bolt out of the blue.

The man had pushed her through an endless portal filled with vivid, brilliant colors, sharply swirling into a startling white light.

Liz cried out involuntarily, tiny pricks of electricity traversing her body.

Her tunnel quivered violently, pulling at Red’s shaft in violent waves of intense pleasure.

A harsh, guttural sound, deep in the man’s throat rushed freely from his parted mouth. His head fell against the soft padding of her breasts, the scent stimulating him even more so.

Her passionate embrace enfolded his cock, demanding he relent to the summit to which Elizabeth had exquisitely taken him.

Wrapping his hands about her waist, he lifted the woman from his stiff erection, hissing when the hot flesh met unrelenting cold air.

“Shh, baby...” he shushed her mewling protest as he lay the woman flat against the soft mattress, “you have no idea how much I want to come...” he rasp roughly.

Rolling to his knees, he parted her quivering thighs, kneeling in the open space. His cock strained towards the soaked slit, his crown throbbing painfully. The creamy little hole beckoned him.

Liz dropped her gaze, her hand reaching for the man. Her breaths came in shallow bursts, the sight of his engorged flesh shining with her wetness excited her. She opened her legs inviting him in.

Red panted harshly, pushing the boxers further down his stocky thighs. His cock bobbed heavily with the frantic movement.

Leaning into her open space, Red snarled deep in his throat, lifting the heavy flesh, his large hand
encompassing the stiffness. He studiously stroked her clit, the weeping center mesmerizing his attention. The dark red crown pushed at the fluttering opening.

Liz lifted her eyes, watching Red’s face as he submerged himself in her body. The relief shown made her tummy flip with anticipation.

Red’s head fell back, a low groan rumbling in his chest. His cooled cock rejoiced as her heat engulfed him once more. The tight sheath grabbed at him, pulling him deeper into the delectable little body.

Expertly rolling his hips, he pushed against the tiny obstruction barring his path, demanding entrance.

“Sweet little pussy...” he breathed.

His eyes darkened, dilating as she lifted her bottom higher, wiggling against him in enticement.

Quickly adjusting his stance, he rocked against the offering. Nuzzling her pubic bone suggestively, the soft hair massaged the sensitive skin intimately until her thighs trembled against his side.

Withdrawning slowly, Red heard a whispered breath pass her lips upon his exit. The soft fuzz of her folds, dragged along his shaft. His hips shoved indulgently as he sank back into her hidden depths. The tight lips of her slit collapsed around his girth.

Her tunnel closed about his shaft in a wave, the tight cushion massaging his erection. His toes curled into themselves as the hot walls collapsed around him, covering every inch of the hard flesh in liquid velvet.

He had often wondered before what it would feel like...look like... to slide his cock inside Elizabeth... and now he knew.

Red had known for a while now. Seeing the image over and over, again and again...had not waned in the least.

The slit of his penis trickled with thick warmth and hardened, his sack pulling up against his groin. His heart raced, his mouth parched. The man’s physical love for her... soared to new heights.

Every time truly felt like the first time.

A piteous moan escaped Elizabeth. Her small hands clutched Red’s broad chest, capturing his attention, drawing him back to the present.

“I’ll give you...” his roughened voice washed over her, “and your greedy little pussy what you want.”

Leaning into his arms, Red pumped her slick depths in long languid strokes, his face a mask of concentrated effort.

Liz rode the storm, grasping his forearms, the sinewy muscles contracting, flexing under her fingertips.

Panting with excitement, Liz traced the bulging lines, captivated by the sight of the strong arms tightening with each movement.

His pectoral muscles hardened under her touch. She curled her fingers into the fine hairs covering the area.
She could feel his heartbeat, the rise and fall of his chest, the warm skin.

Liz nuzzled the tiny nub of his nipples with her nose, the tip of her tongue darting out to make contact, teasing the coral flesh.

The man hissed sharply through his teeth, enjoying the excruciatingly satisfying caress.

Forcing her eyes open, she took in the sight of his body moving suggestively over hers. The beads of sweat dampening his chest... the inviting hollow of his throat. The shadow of his hips brushing repeatedly along her thighs.

She felt empowered... bold... so very alive. Everything around her was in vivid technicolor.

The sound of their lovemaking titillated her. Red was usually a very vocal lover. The fact he was uniquely less verbal tonight, expressed how intensely engaged he was in their lovemaking.

As the man’s deep breaths grew ragged, Liz experienced a delightful tightening in her tummy and clit. His low grumbling moans of pleasure grew closer and more punctuated as they moved in their sensual dance.

The raspy catch of his calloused hands brushing against her sheer negligee, the rustle of the sheets... the slide of his erection gliding effortlessly into her body sounded inordinately loud in the silence of the room.

“...Ray.” she breathed her awe of his abilities. Clasping his arm, her hand rested over his heart as she grasped for stability. Her senses were inundated by sensation.

If what he felt was heightened to this extreme, Lizzy had to be overwhelmed by the sights, sounds and intensity of their bodies connection.

The white mounds of her breasts swayed erotically against the jet black negligee. The billowing fabric brushed against his stomach as he thrust his cock against her.

Lizzy’s dark, bed tumbled hair stuck to her flushed face and neck. Her dark blue eyes slit seductively, the long lashes fluttering like delicate butterfly wings against her rosy cheeks.

Her kiss-swollen lips parted, releasing a plethora of breathy moans that delighted him.

Red dreamed of hearing the desperate sounds of sexual pleasure escape her lips.

“I know, baby...” he growled. He could well sympathize with those precious little mew of unrequited passion.

She cried out, arching her bottom, which allowed his cock to push in further.

The man’s large crown slid against her cervix, gliding wetly along the seeping womb.

Red’s jaw clenched as her body accepted him to the hilt, the sensation robbing him of coherent thought.

“Good girl...” his velvet tone tingled on her spine, “take every last inch.”

Curling his fingers into the strap on her shoulder, he pulled, exposing more of her creamy mound to his gaze... and mouth. Craning his head, he flicked his tongue rapidly over the tight peak, coaxing the tiny nub higher and tighter.
Wrapping his tongue about the tip, he moaned against the wet fabric, sending shivers down between her legs.

Suckling her in rhythm with his ever deepening force, he encouraged a response. Her tunnel rolled about him, pulling at him in insatiable waves.

The subtle sound of their bodies connecting and her sharp, panted cries were driving Red out of his fucking mind.

Liz’s brow furrowed anxiously, the emotions the man evoked inside her, boiling to a fevered pitch in her center. She quivered uncontrollably, her face lighting with ecstasy.

That pouty mouth gasped, falling agape, for the intensity flooding her body. She tried to assimilate the turbulent reaction she was experiencing.

Grasping the man’s forearms, the only port of security afforded her, the woman squeezed tightly, arching into the exquisite pang. Her entire body shuddered with unrestrained passion.

Red reveled in her release, closing his eyes to his own particular brand of exquisite deliverance.

“God...” he whispered hoarsely feeling her jerk under him.

A delectable rush of warmth encompassed his erection, those succulent walls fluttering helplessly around his shaft.

“I needed this so much...” he lifted his head, enjoying the lovely pass of emotions over her expressive face.

He loved watching her climax.

“Fuck...Lizzy,” he panted, having waited as long as humanly possible, “baby, I’m gonna come.”

“Y-Yes...” she implored avidly, “come inside me.”

The raw request unleashed his primal instincts.

Clutching the sheet tightly in his hand, his erratic thrusts shortened. He rode the rising tide of stimulating sensation gratefully. The tight pull of her center manipulated his cock as he yielded to the rapture encompassing his senses.

His heavy sack convulsed with a potent, searing heat. The pent-up cream burst from the crown of his shaft in copious amount, flowing freely into her warm body.

Driving his cock deeper, he hissed heatedly as he allowed the sensations he was experiencing free reign. Red stayed deeply encased in her rising heat, pushing urgently at her womb.

His vision blackened when Lizzy whimpered as a deluge of their combined release once again engulfed his pulsing cock head.

Panting against her breast, his eyes finally opened as he drifted down from the very high pinnacle he had attained. His eyes took in the damp fabric of the sexy lingerie.

The man smiled wistfully, forcing himself to move. He struggled to his forearm.

Bunching the filmy material in his hand, Red lifted the soft material off over her head.
Lizzy grumbled for being disturbed which amused the man.

He dropped her top beside the bed. It drifted unnoticed to the floor.

He situated himself, laying against the soft mound of her breast. Red smiled languidly watching the peak tighten as his warm breath brushed against it.

“I love you...” he whispered, welcoming the lethargic surge inundating his body.

Wrapping herself about his bulky frame, Liz squeezed him tiredly, gently kissing his neckline. “I love you...”

Once again managing an ounce of motor control, Red pushed up on his arm, bracing himself. They both groaned their dismay as his spent shaft slid free of her body.

He watched earnestly as his cock head emerged from the steamy hole, allowing a rush of their love to follow his retreat.

His heart sped up a tad, very much enjoying the visual of their coupling.

Shoving at his boxers, he kicked them free, turning his attention back to his lover.

Curling his fingers in the thin strings at her hip, he tugged the sodden panties down over her legs, carelessly tossing them somewhere off to the side.

Laying back, he gathered her close, feeling her tremble with the aftershocks of her powerful climax. He wasn’t fairing much better, truth told.

Lizzy settled her head unto his chest, her heavy breaths stirring the fine hair. She exhaled shakily moments later, having finally regained her breath.

Red brushed his hand through her thick hair, sighing his contentment.

“Next time...” she swallowed, a matter coming to mind, “just fuck me...okay.”

“Do you plan to get drunk or high often?” Red questioned, holding his amusement for the casually stated proclamation.

“I plan to relax and enjoy myself,” she corrected, “now that I can. But no, it will not become a habit.” she wrinkled her nose at the thought presented, “What I did tonight will definitely not become a habit.”

Red enjoyed that she felt comfortable enough to let go of her inhibitions, or at the very least, trust in him to make sure nothing happened to her when she was vulnerable.

But to make love to her when she was in an altered state... did not set well with him no matter what she claimed.

“We did...” she reminded, another thought resurfacing, “in Las Vegas.”

“You were tipsy in Las Vegas.” he countered. “You were wasted tonight.”

“I'll always want to be intimate with you...” she had hesitated to admit such a weakness, “besides, I knew what I wanted.” she stated boldly to hide the self-doubt.

He was undecided in what course of action he should make regarding that. She was more sober now,
more aware of herself.

“You were still under the influence of the drugs, Lizzy.”

If he should do as she suggested, and she wasn’t of a mindset to be intimate with him... it would be a violation he would never forgive himself for committing.

“I said it earlier... all of which you ignored,” she continued, “I wanted it then, just as much as I did a few minutes ago.” she raised her head, kissing him softly to lessen the reprimand. “You have my permission. I will always want to be with you... regardless of how *wasted* I am.”

He sighed, keeping his thoughts to himself, for the moment.

“Look,” she noticed the quality of the silence, understanding it for what it was, “just try it once, all right.” she negotiated. “If it doesn’t work for you or I decide it didn’t work for me, we’ll discuss it *then*. Okay?”

“Why is this so important to you?” he wanted to know.

“...It just is.” she couldn’t put it into words right now.

“And if you see it as a violation?” Red questioned, voicing his fears.

“I won’t, because of this discussion, right here.” she replied. “I said you had permission to play with me, you took me at my word.” she yawned sleepily, snuggling into his warmth. “Besides, just because I’m wasted doesn’t mean I can’t say, no.”

“All right.” he agreed. “But if I feel you aren’t really–”

“I know.” she cupped his face, tenderly kissing his soft lips. “I love you more than I did moments ago.”

He smiled at the quip, “I should hope so.”

Both settled into a quiet moment.

Tracing his fingers idly along the curvature of her spine, Red felt his eyes getting heavier with each exhalation of the woman’s soft breath, as her body further relaxed into his.

His weight settled deeper into the mattress, sinking him further and further into a warm abyss of blessed weightlessness as sleep pulled at him.

Red’s mouth tugged at the corner, realizing the signs. His body was completely and truly devoid of any tension.

Only Lizzy made him feel that utter sense of contentment and completion.

Red settled his head on the crook of his arm, preparing to enjoy a well-deserved sleep.

His body was relaxing into the tiny frame, the warmth of Lizzy’s naked body soothed every nerve ending he possessed.

A perfect end to an ‘iffy’ day.

The quiet of the room enveloped him. He listened to the sweet sound of Lizzy’s breathing which had become even and steady.
Suddenly, he jerked awake unaware just how far he had slipped into the nether regions of a dream state.

His eyes hardened, training on the black comm which sat so innocently on the bedside table.

Red Reddington knew the sound of muffled gunfire when he heard it.

Lizzy was up and scrambling for the device, handing it gingerly over to its proper owner... her once totally relaxed body now on full alert.

Red sighed more than heavily. His hand lazily unfurling just in time to take the communication device as it cracked to life.

“Situation contained.” Silas stated crisply. “No need for alarm, resume your activities... whatever they may have been.”

Red shifted a lifted brow Lizzy’s way. She sat upright, covers pulled up to her neckline, eyes wide and watchful.

“What the hell happ–”

“Minor incident.” Silas iterated, “It’s under control.”

Red read between the lines. Minor incident in Silas’ world could be anything from a fellow guard throwing his guts up after a long night’s binging to a Special Forces team storming an enemy compound.

“Do you want to tell me what happ–”

“No.” was the stoic reply.

Red glanced again at Lizzy’s unsuccessfully attempt to stifle a muffled giggle.

Red cut his losses, “We’ll discuss this tomorrow.”

He would have to talk to the bastard about his evasiveness... tomorrow. The sooner Silas finished showing Travis hell on earth... the better.

“Copy that.”

There were indistinguishable sounds in the background that sounded vaguely like someone dragging a heavyweight... say... like a dead body or some facsimile thereof, before the comm went dead.

“What was that sound?” Lizzy too, had her doubts now.

Red cut her a blank but telling look.

“They’re probably just covering for some intoxicated guard.” she sounded less sure than she felt.

“Whose weapon...” Red scorned, “discharged accidentally?”

“...Sure, why not?” Liz was suddenly covering for the guard as well, her loyalties kicking in, “At the Quantico firing range, Agent Smith’s weapon discharged when he was re-holstering it.” she felt proud she had come up with a possible explanation.

Red looked at her much as he had the comm-link.
She sighed mentally.

He clicked the device to life, “Silas...”

“I want to go to bed dammit!” the large man snapped belligerently, “Can’t a man get any sleep around this place?”

“I might ask you the same,” Red snapped right back, “What the hell do you think I was trying to do!”

“I think you were banging the little brunette.” Silas countered.

Red’s jaw pulsed, his eye twitching irritably, “I’m gonna kick your fuc–”

Liz covered the man’s mouth, taking the radio from his hand, “Get some rest, Silas.”

She tossed the radio to the dresser, gently pushing Red back.

Laying back into the pillows, Red spread his arm open in invitation, “Come here, baby.”

Lizzy looked over her shoulder, her teeth worrying her lip, “Mr. Kaplan should look at Silas. I’m concerned he isn’t–”

“Everything’s fine.” she was assured. Red rubbed his palm against her chilled skin, “Lay down,” he pulled the sheet free, beckoning her closer, “you’re cold.”

Nodding reluctantly, she lay against him, snuggling into his warmth.

She lay stiffly against him, quieting her breathing.

“Relax,” he rubbed his thick fingers along her scalp, massaging gently, loving the feel of her thick hair, “Silas would tell us if there were a problem. You know that.”

“Oh, he would not.” she scoffed, “damned macho asshole.”

Releasing a shuddering breath, she looked up at him, “Why are you men so thickheaded?”

“It’s part of our charm.” Red quipped, “You women find it irresistible, admit it.”

Liz sulked, settling down once again, “We think we can fix you.”

Red felt her warm palm rest against his chest. It comforted him somehow.

“It makes the world go round, Lizzy.” he placed his lips upon her forehead, “The differences between male and female.”

“A centuries-old struggle,” she cut him a teasing glance, “who’s winning the war?”

“If I were a betting man,” Red shrugged, “which I am. I would put my money on the ‘weaker’ sex.”

Liz lifted, her mouth parting his lovingly, “You get a gold star,” she settled her leg over his thighs, “you always know just what to say.”

“It’s called self-preservation.”

She laughed softly, snuggling back down.
“Sleep, baby,” Red was suddenly tired.

He continued to massage her back, easing her into a rested state until her breathing became heavy, her body melding to his.

Red closed his eyes pushing the days concerns far back into his consciousness.

Sleep came blissfully fast.

Chapter End Notes

Another reminder that you can reach me at:

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

Who I get story suggestions from remains just between you and me. You will remain anonymous. Unless of course, you spill the beans yourself in a review that it was your suggestion ;)

To discuss fanfic or see updates:

Lizzington Fanfic Discussion: https://www.facebook.com/groups/LizzingtonFanfic/
Bereavement and Bravado

Chapter Notes

Silas is in a grumpy mood. Just warning you. :)

June 4

Elizabeth had hated to leave the inviting place of warmth and security this morning.

Red’s arms were a sanctuary she could spend countless hours within, given the choice.

She studied her reflection in the three-way mirror her dressing area provided. Did her face look puffy? No more late nights for her, she determined. That time she was roofied in college was nothing compared to last nights fiasco.

Red’s supply was of a higher quality than the college fare. Which accounted for the obvious distinction.

She had chosen a simple, tailored black dress suit for the funeral.

She hoped the service wouldn’t drag on.

Maybe that was a terrible thing to wish. When her time came, she was determined to go with as little fanfare as possible.

Morbid thought that.

Liz shook the mood, going off in search of her contemporaries... and Red Reddington of course.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Red poured his drink, watching the amber liquid swirl about the expensive tumbler.

He left Lizzy to her shower, going to his office early today.

He rarely imbibed so early but he needed a quick bracer this particular morning.

He hated funerals but there was no getting out of this one.

When it was his turn, he hoped no one took any real note until a couple days passed.

The ritual involved with death was for the living. The need to say goodbye... one last moment to connect... to hold firm to what once had been, he supposed.

Humans needed ritual. It gave comfort of sorts no matter how truly useless it was.
He made a few calls, tied up a few loose ends that had been dangling for the past week or so in the business arena.

Nothing really large loomed on the horizon this day, thankfully.

Still, he would prefer to spend it with Lizzy, out on the lake perhaps. Sailing always gave him a new perspective on life.

He heard footsteps coming down the corridor outside his office. Familiar footfalls indeed.

Dembe rounded the corner, coming into view.

The man sported a dark suit, a dapper yet subdued tie, you could see yourself in the shine of his leather shoes.

Red lifted impressed brows, “You look...” he swept the large bulky frame with approval, “very elegant, Dembe.”

“I hate these things.”

Red held up a tinkling glass, “Helps me get by... want one?”

“It is ten o’clock in the morning.” Dembe pointed out.

Red took solace in the pungent scent of his whiskey, “It certainly is.” his brow rose higher, “Your point?”

“Elizabeth will think it disrespectful.”

“No disrespect meant.” Red stated sincerely, “Just a simple coping mechanism,” he sobered for his tone had been a little light-hearted, “helps keep the guilt down to a manageable level.”

“You can not take on the guilt of the world.” Dembe scowled, “In our line of work, there will be losses.”

“He was too young.” Red stared out the window into the grey haze of a stormy day, “the young should stay... live out their time here as it was meant to be.”

“Kevin chose his–”

“He didn’t choose to die!” Red snapped then... closed his eyes, regretting his tone, “...Sorry.” he managed bleakly.

Dembe recognized the outburst for what it was, “The burden you carry is a heavy one, my friend,” he sighed heavily, “but you are correct... the young were meant for something better.”

“Are we so ancient, Dembe?” Red wondered. “It feels so today, I must say.”

“I prefer seasoned.” Dembe corrected, sorting through the stack of correspondence on Red’s desk, “...I thought everyone emailed or texted these days.”

“They tried, but I forgot to check the damned thing,” Red shrugged mentally, “They went back to the old-fashioned methods.... the hard to trace methods.”

“Or they phone you.” Dembe stated wryly.
Red glanced at the dreaded thing, “They do that.”

“How is Elizabeth fairing today?” Dembe enquired graciously.

“We discussed the matter,” Red took a few of the envelopes handed him, glancing through the selection Dembe had deemed important, “she is of a mind to ‘keep and open mind’ but I’ll be damned if I ever bring that shit around her again.” Red frowned over a bill he perused, “What is this for? Two thousand and sixty-two dollars?”

“The bar tab for Kevin’s wake.”

Red’s mouth fell open, then he shut it resoundingly, “Pay it.”

“Of course,” Dembe took the papers back, “we have received no new letters of late.”

“No,” Red confided, “which is good news, I suppose.”

“If he is not writing letters,” Dembe questioned, “what is he doing?”

The thought was unsettling. Red took another bit of his drink, “Speaking of parasites, is he out there?”

“He will not be an issue, Raymond.” Dembe assured. “Tom will not disrupt the proceedings or approach Elizabeth this day. You have my word.”

Red was satisfied, “A display would not be appropriate.”

“I will be discrete.”

“I know you will.” Red hefted the last of his liquor in mock ‘salute’. “When have you not? I only stated my thoughts.”

“The men are outside... on the front drive,” Dembe continued, “The vehicles are ready for departure. The neighboring guards kindly offered their services in our absence.”

Most had been referred by Silas for the man liked competent allies about him at any given time so Red felt comfortable leaving them in charge for a few hours.

“They have been briefed about Carver?”

“In a round-about manner,” Dembe knew Silas’ established routine, “but a thorough sweep will be made before Elizabeth’s return... by our present security team. You know that.”

“I’m just feeling antsy today,” Red sighed the feelings aside, “...What about Nora?” their newest guest came to mind.

“She wished to attend. Silas will drive her himself.”

“I hate,” Red’s lips tightened, “that this is even taking place.” he iterated his growing frustration and anger, “Kevin is...” he caught the slip, some of the anger replaced by a useless sadness and worse still, accepted resignation, “was... a good man.”

Dembe remained silent in deference to the fact.

“Silas and I... and you...” Red motioned, “we strategize, we plan, we work up all the solutions, think we have every contingency planned and still—”
“An unfocused man is a vulnerable man.”

“Meaning me.” Red faced the fact grimly.

“Meaning, Kevin.” Dembe corrected. “He was on duty, his mind elsewhere. A lethal combination in our profession, yes.”

Red mulled over the words, then nodded slowly.

“Unforeseen circumstances befall us all.” Dembe had realized years and years ago, “Now it is time for us to pick up the pieces, to honor our contemporaries as best we can, in whichever way conceivable... and move forward.”

“I know all you say is true,” Red did, “but it doesn’t take away from the fact... I am responsible yet again for another person’s demise.”

Liz had hesitated outside the door, having followed the men’s voices to her present position. Her heart ached for Red Reddington.

She entered, her eyes full of concern and empathy.

“Red...” she approached hesitantly, really not knowing what to say. She could never be as erudite as Dembe, “If Kevin were here, right now... what do you think he would say?” she hastened to add, “Knowing he couldn’t stay, that he had to leave his family behind? What would you want to say?” she hated the scenario, but it had to be faced by everyone in this room, eventually.

Red lifted his head, taking in the lovely sight of her almost ethereal beauty. Dressed so solemnly, her complexion so fragile against the black clothing. She looked like an angel descended from heaven.

Perhaps, at this moment, that is exactly what she was... reminding him of the frailty of life itself.

“I would say...” the man pondered his words seriously, his brow furrowing deeply. His eyes transferred to Dembe, “take care of my own...” a silent communication passed between the men.

Keep her from harm.

Elizabeth’s eyes softened on the man who returned his attention.

“If she is alright,” he reached for her cooler fingers, his expression unreadable, “I am alright, no matter where I end up.” he smiled slightly to lessen the barb for he knew his final destination.

“You could rest... knowing that,” she fought the lump in her throat, “couldn’t you.”

He nodded slowly his eyes warming considerably.

“Then why would you think Kevin is any different?” she asked. “I have to live with the fact, Kevin died because of me...” she held up a hasty hand when both men would disagree.

“I can’t change that fact and neither can you. What I can do,” she turned slightly, her thoughts turning introspective, “is watch out for his sister. Make sure her life is what he would want it to be.”

She turned back forcing a smile, “I can be her friend which is exactly what I intend to be.”

Red’s heart swelled.

She straightened her posture, lifting her head.
“Be my friend...” Silas poked his head in the opened doorway, the rest of his bulky frame following as an afterthought as he sauntered forward. “You people move your respective asses and let’s get this show on the road.” he checked his watch to illustrate the ‘why’ of it all.

She drew back, totally shocked. Silas was dressed in a dark suit, crisp white shirt and stylish tie. She didn’t even know he owned a suit, let alone a tie. If that weren’t shocking enough, every hair on his head was in place and he had trimmed his facial hair.

“You look... decent.” she voiced her awe, her mouth still agape.

“I may look decent,” the guard smirked, “but that’s about as far as it goes.”

Liz sighed, “You...” she pointed at the man, “don’t even think of speaking at the funeral.”

“I’m giving the eulogy,” he spread his hands, his expression innocence itself.

Elizabeth’s shocked expression was comical.

“Are we ready?” Red interrupted the two before they started trading barbs.

“We were born ready.” Silas quipped, enjoying Liz’s huff of exasperation.

Grabbing his glasses and fedora, Red set them in their proper place. Settling his hand on Elizabeth’s back, he guided her towards the door.

The turnout was better than Red expected. Dembe parked the large SUV in a long line of cars.

Red grabbed his fedora, stepping from the vehicle.

Silas was already at Liz’s door, their eyes meeting over the top of the car.

Red rested his hands on the latter, scanning the area. He lifted an enquiring glance not finding the object of his perusal.

Silas jerked his head in the needed direction, “Little prick is across the street, behind the blue Jeep.”

Liz had collected her thing, accepting Silas’ hand as she too, exited the car, “Why does he keep hanging around?” she joined the men in their activity as all three sought out Tom Keen.

Red’s eyes had found the ostentatious car easily. For a supposed spy, Tom really didn’t understand the art of subtlety.

“He will not be a nuisance this day.”

Red had felt the presence before actually having seen the older gentleman approach.

Antonio Crocetti lay a comforting hand on his counterparts shoulder.

Red smiled a welcoming smile, “Antonio,” he extended his hand, “I didn’t expect to see you in attendance today.”

He was frankly shocked in reality. And to add to the sensation, Anthony Burke stood off to the right, his gaze averted.
“No,” he agreed quietly, “he will not sully such a solemn occasion.”

Two rather imposing large gentlemen approached Tom’s vehicle, flanking both doors in time.

Their muscled girth and deliberate air of ease dissuaded Tom from even attempting to exit the safety of his automobile.

“Antonio...” Liz welcomed the older gentleman’s gentle attention, lifting her cheek for a chaste kiss, her hands secured by the strong grasp of confident fingers, “how lovely a surprise.”

“I wanted to see for myself that you were well,” he pulled back, a gentle smile caressing his face, “after your recent accident.” he motioned to the soft cast on her foot.

“Just an old war injury,” she quipped, “I am healing rapidly and how is your lovely wife?”

“Francis assured me you were,” Antonio wasn’t sure who was charming whom? “Maria is feisty and content. She sends her condolences.”

Elizabeth had wormed her way into the old mobsters heart. Why, he could not have said but staring down at the deep blue eyes blinking up at him in such a beguiling manner, Liz’s unguarded expression warmed his heart.

It was no wonder Reddington was so attracted to Elizabeth. Aside from her beauty and attractive form... her innocence was a captivating enticement for men such as he and Reddington.

To this day, his own Maria had an air of innocence. He knew she was well aware of his business dealings, but he had gone out of his way to secure a sphere of serenity and contentment around the woman that she could almost forget who he was... what he did.

When he went home to her, he wanted nothing to take away from their time together if at all possible.

From what he knew of this slip of a thing, Elizabeth would not stand for such tactics... not that he did not admire the young woman for her spirit and gumption. And most of all, her tenacity.

She was a fighter... that much was apparent. A woman after his own heart.

“I am so glad you are here today.” Elizabeth meant the words. “You somehow center me. The world doesn’t seem so scary when you are about.”

“Really?” Red spread his arms out at his side, slightly gesturing to himself.

Antonio chuckled, a warmth settling in his chest. Elizabeth was quite the little charmer.

Waving a hand to the grand church, he offered his arm, “Shall we?”

Obediently accepting the gesture, Liz took Red’s hand in the other as he came alongside.

“Oh,” she drawled taking in their surroundings as they walked the paved walkway to the grand entrance, “it’s so beautiful.”

The church was grand indeed. The gothic cathedral looked better suited to fairytale weddings rather than funerals.

The tall spires seemed to stretch on forever towards the heavens. Stained glass windows dotted every window, painting the sidewalk and surrounding grounds in glittering shades of vibrant color. Lush
landscaping and well-placed trees decorated the lawn.

It was a tranquil... peaceful. The sun had come out, the clouds drifting away.

“I promised you,” the older man patted her hand, “Kevin’s family would not want for anything.”

Liz’s eyes shimmered with wetness. It touched her Antonio remembered her guard’s name, “Do you ever break a promise?”

“With you, little one,” he murmured affectionately, “... never.”

Red’s mouth pulled at the corner, listening in on the quiet conversation. There seemed to be a natural fondness between Elizabeth and Antonio.

He knew the man had always wanted a daughter... a little princess to dote on.

Red’s heart ached suddenly, understanding Antonio more than he did moments before.

They walked though the grand entrance, Liz’s eyes flitting from one thing to another, taking it all in.

The warm glow of the stained glass danced against the dark mahogany wood. The gentle scent of aromatic candles burning and numerous flower arrangements filtered through the cavernous space, giving it a welcoming atmosphere.

Gesturing to a row of seats, Dembe walked into the space dominating it, followed by Red, Liz and finally Antonio.

The hushed reverence of the area quieted all speech.

Nora unhooked her arm from Silas’, taking the seat the man offered. Silas settled in beside her. The other guards filled the rest of the seats.

Two spaces directly behind Liz and Antonio were kept for some unseen persons as yet, but everyone seemed to instinctively know not to take them.

Red shifted his eyes as a side door to his left opened, allowing Anthony and Francis to enter.

Red’s eyes softened when Lizzy’s brightened seeing her friend in attendance. He nodded his gratitude to the man, pleased Francis kept his word.

Francis inclined his head in deference, extending his hand to the old mobster. He slipped in behind Liz, playfully tugging her hair.

“Hey, squirt.” he murmured affectionately, leaning to kiss her cheek.

Red’s chest ached as her little face looked up at Francis, a small smile gracing his features.

Even as somber the occasion was, he couldn’t help finding her impish features... adorable.

Francis rested his elbow along the back of Red’s seat, leaning between him and Dembe.

“Extra guards are on Tom,” he whispered, “and the exits.” he took his seat next to Nora and Anthony.

The service was very emotional for the family, of course. Liz was moved to tears several times, Kevin’s younger sister touched her heart when she tried to say a few words about her brother.
The graveside memorial, at which several of Silas’ men spoke, was more a celebration of Kevin’s life.

Silas himself, recounted an amusing incident that happened the first few years of their acquaintance when Kevin was a member of an elite search and rescue unit out of Kuwait.

Kevin and his team went in country in search of a missing government official. The guy had gotten himself in a shit load of trouble by assuming he was above established protocol.

They had learned from a supposed exchange of information involving an alleged Iraqi informant, the man’s location.

The ‘reliable source’... Silas air-quoted the phrase, rolling his eyes which said ‘reliable source’, in his world...equaled incompetent asshole.

The Iraqi informant must have felt along similar lines.

The information he had supplied Kevin and his unit concerning this ‘high-placed government official’, landed them in a ‘high-end’, fully operational and very, very busy... house of ill-repute.

Our government had released two political prisoners as a show of good faith... on the basis of this sterling bit of Intel.

Kevin had a hard time making out his report because he had been laughing so hard.

Red couldn’t really concentrate on the proceedings. He watched the activity across the way.

Had now for some time, although he was trying hard not to allow anyone know of his distraction.

He wasn’t being disrespectful to Kevin. The hairs on the back of his neck were tingling.

There was another service being held a goodly distance away. Red knew he recognized several faces in the gathering. He could count on one hand, five Underbosses of the local mob underground.

The men with their white carnations, requisite sunglasses, lit cigarettes dangling from their mouths... the women in their fashionable lace coverings over their heads and bling purses. Black handkerchiefs discreetly placed under grieving eyes.

The garish floral decorations spelling out the name of the dearly departed. The crowd could have filled the Colosseum in Rome.

Antonio nudged his shoulder inconspicuously.

“A small gathering, as it were, considering,” the older man had picked up on Red’s preoccupation, “Big Louie passed.”

Red’s interest was caught. He kept his tone as low as Antonio, “...Passed?” he quirked his brow.

“Natural causes.” Antonio spread his hands innocently, “The man was a walking coronary waiting to happen.”

“And Mr. Kaplan?”

The woman in question primly picked particles from skirt and sleeves.

“Since when does she feel the need to attend—”
“Oh, she asked a favor of me.” Antonio shrugged the question aside, “She is a hard woman to refuse.”

Red searched out his head guard.

Silas frowned... nothing else, before averting his eyes.

Alarm bells chimed in Red’s head, “Antonio—”

“No need to fret,” the old mobster soothed kindly, “the hole was there...” the matter was settled in the man’s mind. “Louie hated to be alone anyway... this way,” Antonio patted Red’s forearm, “he will have company for all eternity. A win-win situation, right?”

“Although, admittedly,” Anthony Burke was finding the whole situation amusing, obviously having eavesdropped on the private conversation, “Big Louie preferred the fairer sex to males.”

Antonio shrugged, “Perhaps, but at least these two have something in common.”

“Who is buried in that grave?” Red feared he suddenly knew. The supposed ‘lint’ Kate was brushing from her clothes, now looked suspiciously like dirt smudges... as in... from a gravesite.

“I told you,” Antonio clipped his reply, “no harm will come to Elizabeth.”

Red shifted his eyes towards Silas, meeting the stoic grey ones.

Obviously, his head guard had neglected to inform him of a certain conversation that had taken place with Antonio. A conversation that related to Elizabeth’s well-being.

“Reddington,” Antonio scolded, “we are disrespecting a brave young man here.” his look was a sad one. “Should we not turn our attention to Kevin’s grieving family?”

Indeed, the service was breaking up, people drifting back slowly, aimlessly to their cars.

Antonio led the way as each man in turn, consoled Kevin’s mother, expressing their condolences.

“Kevin had set aside this sum.” Red pressed the check into her cold palm. “He planned for Amelia to go to college. I’m certain you knew, of course.”

“...No,” the bewildered woman stared at the envelope, her mind befuddled from the stress of the day, “no, he never said a word.”

“He did to me,” Red lied, “it’s a modest sum and should your daughter ever finds she needs more, I would be only too happy to—”

“We-we could not possibly ask—” she floundered, “We d-don’t even know you, Sir. I mean...”

“I knew your Kevin and had... have a great respect and affection for your son, Madam.” Red brooked no argument, “I couldn’t live with myself, in good conscience if I thought the people he cared for were in any way... wanting.”

“I don’t understand the ins and outs, but...” she was clearly lost, vulnerable, “apparently Kevin left an annuity... whatever that is.” her fingers shook as she lifted them to trace her forehead, “A man came to the house. He said a bank account was opened in my name before,” the tired faded eyes misted, “... before...”

She closed her eyes. Red’s heart softened.
“It’s a normal precaution most soldiers take.” Red pacified, “Kevin was only thinking of you and your family.”

Antonio nodded agreeably, “A thoughtful young man.”

“Pity more aren’t as conscientious.” Anthony Burke put in his two-cents.

“You are associated with Kevin... how?” she enquired taking in the erudite men.

“We were privileged to have known him.” Antonio side-stepped the question artfully. He took the weathered hands in his, “Had I a son...”

Red’s eyes shifted, his head shaking negligibly. The man in fact had sons, but that wasn’t important now.

Antonio continued, “I would want him to be just like the man you reared.”

The woman was mollified, “I could not have wished for a better...” her own voice broke. Guests gathered about hastily, comforting their friend and relative.

Red replaced his hat, nodding his farewell. Antonio Crocetti patted the lady’s shoulder comfortingly before taking his leave as well.

Liz waited patiently, Francis by her side.

On their way to the car, Liz conveyed to Red, “Remember, I have that appointment,” she cocked her head, her brow furrowing, “Is that Mr. Kaplan?” she was thrilled to see the woman herself, in attendance.

Red scratched at his neck, his eye ticking, “Lizzy, I–”

The older mobster stepped forward, blocking Elizabeth’s line of sight, taking the woman’s hand in his.

Red blew out a controlled breath, thankful for the distraction. Until he knew the particulars of why Silas had made use of Kate’s services... perhaps this was not the best time to delve into that incident.

Liz smiled at Antonio, as the man placed gentle lips to her hand, “It was so good to see you again. Even under such circumstances, Antonio.”

“And you little one.” the man was genuine with the comment, “You must come and meet with my Maria. We are celebrating our fortieth wedding anniversary soon.”

“I would love that.” Elizabeth leaned, kissing the weathered cheek affectionately, “don’t forget to issue an invitation.”

“Consider it an ‘open’ one,” he jerked his thumb, “Reddington knows the address.”

Francis took the man’s attention for a beat.

“I need to borrow Silas, can Nora ride home with you guys?”

“You sure you don’t want me to–”

She kissed Red’s cheek, “Do your business. I’ll see you at home later today, okay?”
He glanced across the gravestones, his expression a brooding one.

“Tom is well contained.” she sensed his thoughts, “It’s just a routine doctor’s visit. You said I should keep my scheduled—”

“I know,” he held up his hands, “Okay, just, be alert out there.”

“I don’t for one minute underestimate Carver’s abilities.” she had read his mind again.

“Yeah, well, I’m sending another car just to be safe.”

“You always do.” she smiled, caressing his lips gently, her eyes soft for the man. “...Say, if you really want to make me safe and content,” she tried a ploy, “you’ll give over the name of that—”

“She’s one of my most valuable sources,” Red declined, “I won’t help you make a case against—”

“It was worth a shot.” she teased, flirting openly, “I will graciously concede defeat.”

“That’ll be the day.” he prophesied gloomily.

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Elizabeth emerged from the office door, scanning the busy area with curious eyes.

She finally saw Silas’ bulky figure.

He was ‘guarding’ the corridor.

To Elizabeth, his methods seemed questionable this day.

The man leaned, casually... his body conveying confidence verging on arrogance. His hand propped against the wall.

It appeared to Liz’s trained eyes that Silas was hitting on a little ‘stacked’ blonde but perhaps it was just an erroneous misconception on her part.

If that were the case, however....

He had great taste, Liz had to give it to him.

The petite, little angel had an amazing figure, glorious hair and large, brown doe-eyes.

A dangerous glint splashed in Liz’s eyes. She set her shoulders, keeping an evil grin under wraps as she flounced across the well-decorated room.

“Angel baby!” Liz sidled up to the handsome man, her expression a poutful one, “I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

She spared the gorgeous blonde a ‘mean’ look.

She wrangled her arm into the man’s muscled bicep, turning an endearing face his way.

“This is so exciting, isn’t it!” she managed ‘bubbly’, “I hope it’s a boy, and he has your...” she glanced down meaningfully, “...personality.” she snuggled to him lovingly.

Silas’ expression was... priceless. “What the—”
“I can’t wait,” it was emphasized, “to pick out things for the nursery!”

The blonde huffed indignantly, gathering her pride and flouncing away.

Silas exploded, “What the hell,” he turned his attention post-haste, “was that!?” he watched the hot blonde bounce away, his mind filling with mouth watering images.

“Paybacks are a bitch.” Liz mused thoughtfully.

Silas jerked his head about, his mouth agape.

“Banging the little brunette?” his words thrown back at him in that saccharin voice he was beginning to hate.

“You couldn’t just dock my damned pay!” he hissed, headed off in the direction needed.

“I think I heard the nurse say your little friend was here to pick up a prescription for syphilis,” Liz called after him, stopping the man in his tracks.

Silas looked helplessly from Liz to the tight little ass showcased so well by the yoga pants his ‘little friend’ sported.

“Syphilis?” he mused desperately, “That’s curable right?”

“Eww! You are hopeless.” Liz chortled, giggling her mirth, “You still think you can salvage this situation... daddy.” she patted her tummy playfully.

“I’ll ‘daddy’ your ass.” he started toward the object of his ire.

“I’m saving you a lot of ‘shot time’ here, fella.” she teased, “Show a little gratitude.”

“You are one cruel bitch when you want to be, you know it?”

“You kiss the mother of your child with that mouth?” she batted her eyes innocently. She shielded her stomach protectively.

The man shook his head as an old lady sitting nearby gave him a scathing look of disdain.

Liz had noted the interchange, “Breastfeeding or bottle?” she queried, a glint in her eye.

“I was going for the breastfeeding,” he quirked his head to the blonde, “now, I’ll go home to cradle the bottle for solace.”

“Oh, honey! You picked up on the theme!” she beamed a ‘happy’ smile.

The old woman... did not.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

“How does that woman do it?” Elizabeth sighed blissfully, kicking off her shoes before heading to her most favorite spot in the room, beside the huge monstrosity of a bed, “Nora excels each and every time.”

The chaise lounge looked so inviting as did the marked pages of the novel she immersed herself in these past few days in her off time.
Red caught her hand, seeing her destination.

It had been an established routine these days.

Elizabeth would finish off her cases for the day, then read for an hour or so before dinner. The man would pile into some comfortable clothes, heading for his laptop.

There were so many emails to answer these days. Red longed for a time when technology did not invade every aspect of one’s daily life.

A tech-based world was his reality. Red dealt in ‘reality’. He didn’t have to like it. He just had to do it.

He had also set aside three days a week for some downtime with Elizabeth.

A relationship required the proper amount of time and effort.

He was only too glad to give over the hours needed.

But this afternoon was not supposed to be a free day.

Try telling his libido...

He drew the woman back within the sphere of his arms, his lips coaxing a response from the full, sensual mouth he captured.

The best feeling in the world was when Lizzy’s arms crept slowly upward, winding lovingly about his neckline.

The feel of the warm, fragrant body crushing intimately to his was a feeling he was beginning to treasure.

One of the worst feelings in the world was when his fucking phone jarred him from such a pleasant place of contentment.

Lizzy scratched the underside of her chin with a sculptured nail, her eyes dancing with flirtatious amusement.

“Duty sucks, huh.” she commiserated, pulling a ‘sad’ face in the next instance.

Red sent her on her way with a meaningful smack to her backside, enjoying the muffled giggle his actions produced.

He sent her a look before turning his attention to the phone caller.

Red listened half-heartedly to the person babbling on the other end of the line. His look was a sour one had anyone cared to note.

He had definite plans for Elizabeth Keen tonight and now, it appeared those plans would have to be put on hold.

He sighed repeatedly, shifting from foot to foot, “If I ran my organization the way the FBI runs the one you work for...” he concluded his opinion, “I’d be out of business in a week’s time.”

Liz looked up from her comfortable perch by the window, shooting him an are you including me in that assessment look.
The ‘look’ he gave her sent tiny little shivers of repressed flame between her thighs.

“Whatever!” he snapped at the person on the other end of the line, “Don’t get your panties in a bunch. We’ll be there when we get there!” he closed the phone with a definite snap.

The man crossed to an inquisitive female, grasped her hand and led her on a wandering trek across the room.

“Are we going to have sex on the basin again?” Liz was in a playful mood.

Red stopped, his head dropping with his mood.

He cast her a ‘grumpy’ shift of his eyes, “No, we’re not going to have sex on the basin again.”

She held her giggle for his sour mood, “On the ottoman?” she was flexible.

The man groaned, “I can call Ressler back and tell him I’m tied up for the night which means...” he smiled pleasantly, “we’ll be having sex on the dining room table. The legs are perfect for securing ropes.”

Liz chuckled, “Nora would kill you if she found out.” she quipped, “What’s up with the team?”

“Oh, so now sex is off the table.”

“I said, Nora would kill us anyway.” Liz remarked, “but the ottoman is still open. What’s up with the team?”

Red glanced at the ottoman wistfully, “We’re going to Montana.”

She pulled a face, “Montana?” she was growing curious, “What’s in Montana?

“Open skies and buffalo I hear tell.” he trudged into the walk-in closet, pulling down suitcases. He filled her in on what info Ressler had given over.

Liz considered her options, “How long will it take to ready the jet?”

“About forty minutes give or...” he stopped pulling clothes out of drawers, “...Why?”

The woman smiled serenely, crossing to sit primly upon the large circular ottoman gracing the center of the closet.

She shifted patient eyes, “Well come on, Sailor... we don’t have all night.”

Red threw the boxers which dangled from his fingers over his shoulder, moving his body fluidly forward unbuckling his belt...

His mood incredibly improved.

Dembe nodded, taking Red’s instructions as they drove. The man stifled a yawn, “...Sorry.” he apologized for Red had halted his narrative.

“No, I apologize, Dembe, for the short notice.” Red smiled at the man in the rearview mirror, “You’re a good friend.”
“Perhaps I am simply an adrenaline junkie.” Dembe offered an alternative synopsis.

Red chuckled, his attention caught as Liz snuggled closer to his side. “Are you cold?”

She shook her head, stifling a yawn as well, “I’m out of the routine... you’ve babied me for too long.” she smiled up at him, “Not used to these last-minute junkets any longer. Not that I’m complaining.”

“That would be a first.” Silas grumped from the front seat. “And that’s not why you’re tired.”

“What’s up his ass?” Red had made note of the other man’s bad mood this evening.

Granted, the man was right. Lizzy was more... sated, than tired. But the guard’s tone held more disdain than usual regarding their alone time.

“He’s still mad at me for spoiling his fun at the doctor’s office.”

“You’re still mad at me for spoiling his fun at the doctor’s office.”

“Your little bundle there has the hots for me, by the way.” the guard crooked his head about enough to speak, “She wants to have my baby. Thought I should be up front about things.”

Red’s brow furrowed.

Dembe rolled his eyes.

“That’s right, Red.” Liz nodded amiably, “I’ve tried and tried... just can’t keep my hands off that magnificent body of his.” she yawned once more.

She felt the man’s own body lose some of its tension.

“We all know he’s too much for just one woman, of course.” she smiled sweetly at the back of the guard’s neck, “But I just didn’t feel like sharing today. I made that horrible little blonde floozie go away, didn’t I baby cakes.”

“Kiss my ass sweet cheeks.” Silas grumbled, “I could be in Seventh Heaven right now instead—”

“You could be at a clinic getting syphilis shots.” Liz chided playfully.

Red exchanged looks with Dembe in the rearview mirror once again.

Silas went back to his brooding, happy to do so, “I still vote to muzzle her.”

Liz stifled her giggle into Red’s jacket.

Red shook his head to clear it, “I’m still on the ‘wants to have your baby thing.’” he turned expressionless eyes towards his guard, “Which is not going to happen by the way.”

Silas waved the issue aside, “All I’m saying is... when I’m circling my prey. Maybe she should shut the hell up and let me enjoy the meal.”

“Is that a metaphor or a simile?” Dembe was curious.

“Your meal would have made your little soldier fall off.” Liz muttered.

“I’ve had a stretch of bad JuJu,” Silas vented, “and I think I deserve a little downtime between the sheets if you get my meaning.”
“How could we,” Dembe asked, “you are such a subtle creature.”

“I had a clear shot with that blonde and she wrecked it all.” he jabbed a finger at the back seat in Liz’s vicinity.

“I would say she was anything but ‘clear’.” Liz shared her thoughts with Red.

Silas turned about, his expression incredulous.

Red’s laughter mingled with Dembe’s low, controlled chuckle.

“Is that why you came along?” Red had wondered over the fact. “To air your grievances?”

He had informed Silas that there was no great need for him to accompany them to the airport. That the man could fly out in a day or so.

Red actually was concerned that his head guard just might possibly need some ‘heal’ time.

Lizzy would be surrounded by her team and Red didn’t intend to leave her side so, he felt it advantageous to allow Silas some much needed personal time.

“I’ll not have her saying I shirked my duties.” Silas was still in a mood, clearly.

“Oh, I say that all the time.” Liz needled artfully, “Don’t I, Red.”

“Yes you do, baby cakes.”

Liz laughed her delight at his dry delivery.

“At least you have the good sense not to listen or believe the afflicted.” Silas threw a knowledgeable look to the back seat, “And if you must know...I came along because I know Dembe can’t see to drive at night.”

Liz was instantly concerned but also a little puzzled, “Then... why aren’t you driving?”

“Well, I didn’t want to hurt the guy’s feelings.” Silas managed, straight faced.

Dembe shook his head woefully, shifting into a more comfortable position, “You are full of shit, my friend.”

Silas chuckled appreciatively.

“Dembe, are you all right?” Liz scooted up, her hand on the back seat, her expression a worried one.

“He’s fine,” Red reassured, “not so sure about pretty boy, here.”

Silas laughed again, “She always falls for it.”

“Perhaps because of her innate kindness?” Red suggested.

“Nah,” Silas dismissed the thought, “just that innate naïveté... and she’s just a sucker for a sob story.”

Liz sat back, a sheepish look on her face, “He’s right... I’m an idiot.”

“You are not an idiot.” Red nuzzled the woman’s temple, “You are–”

“Mentally challenged.” Silas corrected magnanimously.
“A brilliant profiler.” the man continued, his eyes narrowing, “Which is infinitely better than being unemployed.” Red stated a warning.

Silas sighed heavily, “You always take her side.”

“Well...duh.” Dembe offered in that eloquent way he had about him.

Silas laughed again, his good mood restored.

Red sat back, his thoughts turning elsewhere. He watched the lights of the city from across the river as they shimmered in the reflecting waters.

Now was as good a time as any he supposed, to broach a matter that had been on his mind.

“Lizabeth,” his brow was furrowed. He was glad Dembe had started up a conversation with Silas, “I need to ask you something.”

Red was striving for a measure of privacy. He glanced at the occupants of the front seat, moving closer to the woman, lowering his voice discretely.

She was attentive, the slender fingers intertwining with his, “A problem?”

“I’m not sure,” he confessed, “listen, this will be the first time we’ve connected with the team since we...” the tip of his tongue pressed to the center of his upper lip as he pondered his options, “...well, our relationship has evolved considerably. Wouldn’t you say?” he turned patient eyes her way.

Liz processed, “We are all adults here, Red.” she thought she understood what he was asking, “I don’t see why there would be–”

“Speculation?” he sat back, sighing mentally.

Sometimes he forgot how the young could rationalize any rule... bend them to suit the moment.

“Lizzy, I am a known criminal,” he understated, “I am supposedly your CI.”

“So?”

“You are half my age,” he continued, “trust me... eyebrows will raise when people find out we are... associated in the Biblical sense.”

“Since when do you care what people think?”

“I care if they say or think derogatory things about you.”

“My friends wouldn’t–”

“I’ve come to terms with it all.” Red had long ago. “I’m not sure anyone else can say the same at this point.”

“I’m just saying,” he held up a staying hand at her expression, “it might be easier if we...” he couldn’t even say it, the thought going against every principle he believed.

The man bit his lip thoughtfully. Could he do it for Lizzy? Could he pretend that none of what had transpired between them simply did not exist.

“I have no intention of running around hiding my true feelings.” the woman was getting angry.
“You know that is not the case.” he stopped that line of thought cold in its tracks. “A lot has gone
down between us that even Ressler and Samar–”

“They can handle it,” Liz stated firmly, “well...maybe not Ress.” she teased to lighten the moment,
“Hey... let’s give him the business.”

Red tried to pick up on the woman’s mood but... “I’m kind of up in the air on this one.” he admitted.
“This could conceivably affect your career. I don’t want that, Elizabeth. I don’t want to be the
cause–”

“I understand what you’re saying.” Liz’s tone softened.

“Do you?” he didn’t think so. “If you want to keep our situation under wraps for the duration of this
outing, I will understand.”

It rather hurt Liz, truth told, “Could you do that?”

Red sat back, returning to the passing scenery, “I can do what has to be done.” he thought he might
be able to, at least. He cut her an unreadable look, “It doesn’t mean I have to like it. Make no mistake
about that, Elizabeth.”

“Well, I don’t like it.” she let him know her feelings. “Not one bit.”

“Think carefully before you make a decision on this one.” he advised. “Bravado is all well and good,
but if this gets to the wrong people in the Bureau...” he let it hang between them, “You’ve worked
long and hard to get where you are. Move carefully, baby.”

The conversation in the front seat had died down on that note.

Liz fell silent, given food for thought.

Silas was ticking off time on his fingers, Dembe picked up on the action, a smile spreading slowly
over his handsome face.

“If that’s the type of organization I work for...”

“Three seconds,” Silas muttered to his companion, “I knew she couldn’t keep her mouth shut for–”

“Maybe I shouldn’t work for it.” Liz was becoming incensed more she thought about it, “They
wouldn’t even have these cases if it weren’t for me...” she caught the slip, “and you... helping me.”

Red smiled.

“My private life has nothing to do–”

“Be reasonable, Lizzy.” Red sighed, “Our situation is a little unique, you have to admit.”

“It’s because of my job we were put in this situation.”

“With the understanding, it was all supposed to be a means to an end.”

“And we’ve delivered enough of these ‘ends’,” she pointed out, “they should be more than satisfied
with the results you have provided.”

Red knew that would not be the case.
“Your friends accept us,” Liz stated, “Mine will as well and as for the others,” she shook her head stubbornly, “they don’t matter. I like my job but not enough to allow anyone other than myself, to dictate my life choices.”

Dembe and Silas exchanged looks, “Easy words to say,” Silas stirred the pot for Red’s sake, “can you live up to them?”

“I can get another job if I have to.” Liz wasn’t worried, “Nothing is written in stone.”

“A few things are,” Red disagreed, “like, if you say we’re ‘on’, I have no intention of pulling any punches for appearance’s sake.”

Liz blinked over at the man, “I’ll kiss you when I want, I’ll hold you in my arms if the mood strikes,” he ticked off his conditions.

“You can play footsie,” Silas quipped, “It’ll be like foreplay.”

“...We will sleep in the same bed.” Red continued.

“If I’m on the mood.” she had provisions of her own.

“I can get you in the mood.” he wasn’t worried.

Liz chafed at Silas’s throaty chuckle.

“I just want everything clear before we hit the airport.” Red could see the object looming on the distant horizon.

Dembe eased the vehicle into the lane which exited the freeway.

Liz sat back, “Pity really,” she had made her decision, “it would have been nice to give Ressler the business.” she smiled finally, “He’s always bragging about how astute his instincts are... how intuitive he can be.”

“I didn’t say we couldn’t harass Ressler,” Red sort of liked the idea of screwing with the other man, “but when you say it’s over... it’s over.”

Liz cast him a scornful glance, “You’re getting as bad as him.” she motioned to Silas.

“I only meant,” Red amended tactfully, “I’m not sure how long I can go between any kind of intimacy with you. I’d like to know there will be a reckoning at some point.”

“Good save.” Silas approved, throwing the comment back over his shoulder, “Keeping in mind, this is coming from the guy who was held captive once for eight days without any hope of ‘reckoning’ in sight.”

Red lifted an annoyed stare, “That was my pride.. The other would involve my libido.”

“Ahh,” Silas hadn’t thought in those terms. He understood all about libidos these days.

“Why am I even here?” Liz was confused. “I’m still on leave, aren’t I?” she fidgeted in her seat. Suddenly, this outing didn’t seem all that exciting anymore.

“Two reasons,” Red explained, “firstly, Silas here won’t take a break with you about.... it’s something to do with his job, I’m given to understand.”
“I don’t need a friggin’ break,” the man mumbled, “who said I did.”

“Your libido?” Dembe muttered aside.

“And secondly,” Red ignored the interruption entirely, “I don’t trust you at home to do the things the doctor said you must, to heal.”

“Excuse me!” she sputtered indignantly.

“He doesn’t trust anyone to watch you while Carver is on the prowl,” Silas corrected, “that’s the excuse I got at least.”

“I trust you when you are in peak condition,” Red soothed any ruffled feathers, “but the truth is,” he turned back to Elizabeth, “this particular case should be relatively straightforward. It provides an excellent opportunity for you to get your feet wet with the least amount of—”

“Danger?” Liz dared him to say it, her eyes narrowing.

“Stress or exertion,” he continued, “Aram is another factor. I’m sure he will appreciate your calming presence.” Red could come up with any number of excuses or reasons if pressed. “He hasn’t been in the field since you left.”

“What aren’t you telling me?” Liz was beginning to read between the lines where this man was concerned.

Dembe guided the large SUV effortlessly around the buildings, along the back lot, onto the tarmac.

Dembe pulled up alongside a government issue SUV, the jet waited in the background, its door open and inviting.

Liz took in the area and the people gathered alongside the other car.

Red slid effortlessly out of his side of the car, patiently waiting as she struggled with her gimpy leg. A reluctant smile pulled at her lips at the thought. At one time, she would have considered it her injured leg. Now, due to Silas’ bad influence... she was gimpy.

“I hate this damn thing.” Liz groused morosely, suddenly not looking forward to facing those who waited.

She wished she had grilled Red more about the case. She really had fallen out of old habits.

She hadn’t realized how much until this minute.

“What the hell happened?” Samar approached gingerly, meeting Liz and Red as they made their way around the car. “You were out of that damn thing when I saw you last!”

The woman wore dark pants and low scooped neckline shirt. A colorful scarf adorning her neckline draped in a fashionable cowl dip.

Her hair was down, windblown from the open field lining the runways on this side of the airport.

She looked lovely as usual.

Liz had not second guessed her apparel until just now. Had she been the only one not in a suit, she would have been embarrassed. Only when she realized Samar was dressed in a similar fashion, did she relax.
“Little accident...” Liz glanced down at the offending object, accepting the warm reception, “It’s only for a couple days.”

Red’s earlier encouragement, echoed his earlier sentiments bringing a smile to his lips.

She leaned, accepting Ressler’s earnest handshake.

Over his shoulder, another man waited patiently, an expectant look on his oddly symmetrical face.

She knew this guy. Or at least... he seemed familiar. She searched her memory.

“Hey, Keen,” Ressler broke free, motioning the guy forward, “you know Andrew Wilson, right? He came over from Organized Crime and Domestic Threats a couple months before you....”

A memory stirred, “I do know you,” she managed a smile, “the break room about... what was it, four months ago? It was still cold outside.” she remembered that part vividly.

The man took her hand, shaking it, smiling sheepishly, “I spilled coffee... well, everywhere.”

“Been there,” Liz made him feel more comfortable, “done that... too many times to count.”

“Four,” Ressler counted, “to date.”

Liz slipped him a wry side glance catching Samar out of the corner of her eye.

The woman was discretely poking fun at Wilson’s ‘bright’ choice of tie. Samar feigned momentary blindness.

Liz was hard pressed to hold her smile, but managed, “I love your tie.” she hoped she sounded sincere. But she wasn’t. “It’s so... stylish.”

Wilson seemed genuinely pleased, “We’re always accused of being so traditionally boring.” he shrugged unassumingly. “Don’t know if it works, but it brightens a long day.” he quipped.

Liz liked him instantly, “It brightens mine too.” she decided.

“It’s so good to finally, formally meet you,” Wilson continued, his manner open and friendly, “I’ve learned so much about you from your team and I understand you are an excellent profiler as well?”

“Don’t know about excellent,” she modestly denied the praise, “but I enjoy that aspect of the job, yes.”

Red stared hard at the hand holding Lizzy’s, more specifically the thumb stroking her. He sighed deeply as the other agents approached, the day just getting all that more gloomy.

“Do we really have time to hold a family reunion or gab session?”

Liz scowled darkly at the new arrival on scene. Another car had arrived moments before, delivering another of their ensemble.

“...Moore.” Elizabeth’s tone had definitely altered having recognized the guy, “I thought you would have been assigned to a field office in Nowhere, Idaho by now. What are you doing here?”

“Scott,” the same acerbic response met her ears, “good to see you too.”

“It’s Agent Keen, actually.” Liz corrected coolly.
“He was in Nowhere, Nebraska.” Samar interjected, more than intrigued by the animosity between the two agents. “And before that, it was Nowhere, Alaska wasn’t it, Dick?” she smiled pleasantly at the man.

“You two should take it on the road.” Moore bitingly replied, “You’re hilarious.”

Dembe stepped between the two warring factions, his attention focused on Agent Richard Moore, “We are commencing boarding.” his silky voice brooked no argument.

“Now would be an excellent time to... take your seat.” Silas narrowed his eyes.

Moore unconsciously backed away, looking the man up and down, “And you would be?”

“The guy who told you to take your friggin’ seat.” Silas’ attitude lacked the finesse of Dembe’s, “So take your fucking seat before I–”

“Silas.” Red intoned quietly.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” Dembe didn’t sound as if he cared one way or other if the guy did or didn’t, “he hasn’t been laid in a while.”

“Makes me... cranky.” Silas’ stony expression was foreboding on the best of days.

“Poor baby.” Samar’s silky caress grabbed the guard’s attention, as it did every man present, Liz assumed, “That’s so sad.”

Silas was instantly by Samar’s side having moved very, very close to the woman, “Yes, yes it is sad. Almost criminal, you might say.”

Liz noted his tone had changed considerably as well as his manner.

“You’re a law enforcement specialist aren’t you?” Silas’ eyes moved slowly over Samar’s beautiful body, stopping in all the right places, “Can’t you do something about a situation like that? I mean,” the light grey eyes lifted sensually, “if you were of a mind?”

Samar’s lovely mouth hinted at a smile, the dark eyes examining Silas much as he had her.

“Help a man out, can’t ya?” the guards tone dipped erotically, hidden innuendo behind the statement.

“No!” Elizabeth gasped, rushing to the rescue before the situation got out of hand, “No, don’t help a man out... don’t do that.” she scolded Samar soundly, guiding the woman out of harms way, “Not at all.”

Silas was not deterred this time, seeking a higher court.

Samar smiled playfully back as Liz continued to drag her to safety.

The large guard eyed the Iranian beauty covetously, “Hey, Red,” he interrupted a conversation between Ressler and his employer, “about me staying behind...”

Samar pretended to be listening to Liz’s lamentation concerning the terribly unwise move a woman, any woman, could make if she even considered getting involved with a degenerate such as Liz’s guard was turning out to be.

It was clear to Red, Samar wasn’t taking any of the well-meaning advice to heart.
Silas smiled charmingly back at the receptive playmate, “I think I could best serve—”

Another car appeared on the tarmac, this one speeding forward in an erratic manner.

Silas stiffened, halting his narrative.

Dembe stepped decidedly closer to the two women by the steps of the jet.

Red’s brow furrowed darkly, he too, preparing for action if indeed, action was called for.

The car skidded to a halt. Even before the vehicle pulled to a stop, Aram’s long legs exited, his arms full of laptops, tech gear and other odd looking paraphernalia.

He stumbled hastily towards the gathered group of Agents, his look a harried one.

“Oh, thank goodness. I thought you might have left already... without me.”

He unloaded his burden, handing off equipment to Ressler and Wilson as he spoke, “The traffic was horrendous, we couldn’t catch a break.”

The man rushed back to the car, extracting luggage and yet another laptop.

“I tried to phone, but no one was picking up,” he was upset, “I thought– Agent Kee–Liz!” his face beamed, “I didn’t realize you would be here!”

He approached both women, “You didn’t answer your phone.” he looked hurt.

“I’m sorry,” Samar took the laptop he juggled, “it was hectic. I didn’t hear it.” she lied to lessen the blow.

“Oh.” Aram was happy again.

“...Silas?” Red pulled the man’s attention away from the proceedings, “What were you saying?” he knew, of course. But Silas’ manner had altered now.

The man seemed abnormally quiet, “Eh... nothing,” he shook his head, “it wasn’t... it was nothing important. Can I help with the luggage?”

“If you want to go, you can.” Red encouraged, his eyes seeking out Samar purposely, “No reason you shouldn’t.”

“Yeah,” Silas pulled his eyes from the woman who tried desperately to find a moment to connect with the brooding stare, “there’s one important one.”

Red was concerned for the man’s lackadaisical manner. It wasn’t like Silas to give up so easily on anything, let alone–

“He laid claim first.” Silas clearly meant Aram, “I don’t trespass on another man’s dream.”

Red scowled, “She a free agent, Silas.”

“I need to rest.” he replied curtly, hefting two bags in capable hands. He crooked his head, “I’m good.” he forced a smile, “Really, when have you ever known me not to be?”

“It’s not like she’s not interested.” Red stated encouragingly. He had seen the interaction between the two.
Silas shook his head, going to the plane. Red watched the bulky form disappear then reappear moments later.

Silas cast a regretful smile Samar’s way, waving nonchalantly as he passed the gathered trio.

Liz noted the man’s quietness, a studied frown on the handsome features.

She sought Red out, a questioning look passing between them.

Red spread his hands, a helpless gesture signifying, his ‘hands’ were tied on the matter.

Liz’s scowl increased. She fought a tendency to go after her guard. She bit her lip anxiously.

Samar appeared a little down now as well.

Aram kept a running discourse going, to take the woman’s mind off what ‘could have been’.

“You’re loaded up.” Silas proclaimed, taking the keys from Dembe, “I’ll call when...”

He glanced at Moore who was pretending to check the closures on his luggage.

The guy was blatantly listening in on any and all conversations available.

“...That matter has been handled,” Silas stated, “If there is a problem out there, call.”

“There won’t be a problem.” Dembe stated.

Silas glanced longingly at Samar, “No... I guess you guys can handle that part of the equation.”

“You never know.” Red couldn’t dash hope in such a cold manner.

“I think there is enough agents on hand,” Moore was amused a want-to-be hired mercenary thought his assistance might be called for, “we can handle anything thrown at us. Civilians will only be in the way.”

“Who the fuck asked you?” Silas bristled, his beefy hands curling into massive fists, “A fucking moron like you couldn’t cross a street without consulting a fucking manual first.”

Moore hefted his backpack and one lone valise, choosing to ignore the surly guard’s attitude.

“Fuck you.” Silas grit.

Reddington set a calming hand on the guard’s forearm, stifling his amusement.

Moore ducked his head, crossing to the luggage compartment of the jet.

He felt three sets of icy stares the entire way.

A tiny trickle of fear ran the length of his spine. He chose to ignore that as well.

“I want to put a round in that idiot fucker’s brains.” Silas snapped.

“Why waste a bullet?” Dembe was curious.

“He’s paying for it.” Silas commented, Moore forgotten as soon as the bastard was out of sight.

Red grinned, “I wonder if it’s a right-off?”
“It would be a service to a government agency,” Silas grumbled, “it should be.”

Red watched the man cross the tarmac, entering the vehicle they had exited. The SUV spun out at a high rate of speed.

Dembe waved wistfully in its wake. Red shook his head, “He was never one for long goodbyes.”

“Lizzy,” Red had other priorities now, offering his hand, “that leg bothering you?”

Liz grimaced, accepting his assistance readily, the small fingers grasping his for needed support, “I can see I’m going to be a big help.” she prophesied.

Red was silently pleased she took his hand without a second thought. She would not have a couple months ago.

“Lean on me, sweetheart.” Red’s arm snaked about her waist. He guided her toward the steps of the plane.

Wilson checked the strap on his holster unit, “...Sweetheart?” he drawled to Ressler who was cleaning the lens on his sunglasses with his tie.

“It’s just Reddington’s way,” Ressler dismissed, “Every woman is sweetheart or angel or... something inappropriate.” the agent placed his hand on his hips, “We try that today and we’d get written up for sexual harassment.”

“Which is a hanging offense.” Wilson quipped, “It’s getting so a guy is afraid to open his mouth.”

“Open mouth, insert foot.” Ressler grinned, “Moore hasn’t caught up to this century yet.”

Both men shared a chuckle.

“I’m surprised Keen lets Reddington get away with it.” Wilson said.

“I think Liz gave up on trying to sway him a year ago.” Ressler shrugged. “Besides, I don’t believe he means it in a demeaning manner when speaking to her,” the man shrugged, “or any woman for that matter.”

“I hate to say it,” Ressler watched the pair’s progress up the steps, “Reddington really stepped up and supported Keen after her ex went off the rails.”

Reddington quickly steady the small brunette, looking worried for a moment until Keen waved a negligent hand indicating she was fine.

The strawberry blonde spared Wilson a glance, “You heard she was attacked by a psycho, right? Shortly thereafter?”

Wilson’s face clouded.

“She’s had a hard time of it this past few months.” Ress picked up his bags, “Sucks really. She’s... okay.” he shrugged off the compliment.

“I don’t mean to cause trouble but a thought occurred.” Wilson’s brow was troubled, “how do we know Reddington didn’t orchestrate the events.”

Ressler pulled up short, his temper flaring, “What the hell is that supposed to–”
“I don’t know the guy at all,” Wilson hurried to catch up to the rapid steps of the other man, “Could he be manipulating the situation? Save a Fed... get a gold star.”

“Reddington is a lot of things,” Ress said, tossing Navabi’s bag into the cargo hold, “but he’d never hurt Keen.” The accusation was blown off. “Especially for something he couldn’t give a damn about receiving.”

“What do you–”

“Reddington could disappear in the blink of an eye,” Ressler disgusted, “he couldn’t care less about appeasing or pleasing a government piss-ant.”

“I’ve wondered about the reason he made the deal to catch these Blacklisters.” Wilson agreed, “He will only share info with her, correct? But... why?”

“Take a wild guess.” Moore had retraced his steps, bag in hand, “They tell me I have to put my stuff in here. She gets her bag on board... do I have to explain that as well, Wilson.”

“Explain it to me.” Ressler got the jest of the accusation.

“Hey, I didn’t mean to cause trouble,” Wilson hastily interjected, “I’m new here,” he looked from one to the other, “I’m just trying to understand the dynamics of the team.”

“Keep out of this,” Ressler snapped, returning his ire to the object of his disdain, “you implying something about Keen?”

“Open your eyes,” Moore suggested caustically, “Something is going on between those two,” he pointed in the vicinity of the jet, “It’s not just normal interaction between a CI and his–”

“Do you think Reddington was sleeping with Liz before he turned himself in?” Samar approached, hefting Aram’s computer bag, “Or that he wants in her panties now? Winning her favor by supplying the Blacklisters.”

“Liz was married.” Ressler bristled even more so, not liking the implication one bit, “I’ll knock you on your ass–”

Samar soothed by placing a hand on the man’s stocky shoulder, “Let’s clear the air because...” she glanced at the plane, “if Reddington catches wind of any sort of derogatory issue involving Elizabeth–”

“He won’t hesitate to put a bullet between your eyes...” Ressler stated flatly, “and quite frankly, I wouldn’t blame him.”

“Reddington does not play by any set of rules you are familiar with,” Samar continued, “he’s allowed your disrespect because of his deference to that woman in there...” again she pointed, “his patience is about at its end... my God, can’t you sense that?”

“I meant no disrespect to Agent Keen...” Wilson was quick to pacify, “I have heard–”

“I know what you heard.” Ressler grated, knowing very well the office gossip.

“I understand you’re curious, we all are,” Samar admitted, “but it’s crass to judge someone on the basis of appearances... and what if it is true?” she wanted to know, “We are all adults here, aren’t we?”
“It isn’t right!” Moore snapped, “There is such a thing as professionalism.”

“Oh, grow the hell up.” Ressler suggested strongly, “you’re trying to get to first base with that blonde in accounting... what makes you any different than–”

“You shut the hell up about Melody,” Moore advanced threateningly but Ressler wasn’t impressed, “she’s a decent woman.”

“And Liz isn’t?” Samar was suddenly livid, “You American men make me sick, acting all pious where women are concerned and you assholes running with your dicks hanging out, panting after anything that will spare you the time of day.”

Ressler’s mouth quirked irresistibly.

“Liz is good at her job, better than you will ever be, Moore,” she flared, stepping toe-to-toe with the guy, “if Reddington and she have established a bond, there is a good reason!”

Ressler stood back and watched the sparks fly, proud of his partners verve truth told.

“He took care of her emotional and physical well being when we couldn’t,” she motioned to Ressler and herself, “he saved her from a serial killer’s gentle administrations... we weren’t there to do that either!”

Moore’s expression altered slightly, “I know she’s had a hard time of–”

“Hard time?” Samar was incredulous, “Yeah, she’s had a little trouble of late in her personal life... just a tad.”

“Listen...” Wilson seemed very uncomfortable with all the dissension, “please, this isn’t getting us anywhere.”

“Keep your damned mouth shut and your thoughts to yourself,” Samar snapped in Moore’s direction, “I don’t want to hear them.” she started off only to turn smartly on her heel.

“And what if they are fucking each other?” she was beyond livid, “it’s none of our damned business. We’re here to do a job... get psychos off the street.”

The lovely eyes flashed fire.

Ressler grinned, enjoying the show.

“We’re doing that with flying colors regardless of what is or is not, happening between Red and Liz’s sheets.” she pointed out, “I don’t remember our stats being so good before Reddington came into the picture.”

She marched off without a backward glance.

Ressler chuckled his delight closing the compartment with a thud, “What she said.” he sauntered away, his mood very much improved. “And one other little tidbit, you wreck this arrangement with Reddington in any way shape or form... and I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes when you have to explain the why of it all to Cooper.”

Grasping his computer bag, Ressler took a step, hesitating.

“Watch out, Navabi’s got a mean right hook.” he warned in reminder... to Moore.
Red watched the fiasco from his seat, peering out the window of the jet in the dusky light.

“You do know they’re discussing us, don’t you?” he turned a lazy stare to the woman beside him.

“Yes.” she giggled, twisting the cap off her preferred tea. She sat back getting comfortable.

“Samar is pissed,” he watched the woman pace back and forth just off the stairs, “she defended your honor.”

Liz craned her neck to see, “How do you know?”

“A woman doesn’t get that livid over anything less.”

“I’ll go talk to her.” Liz felt bad.

“Give her a little time,” Red suggested, “emotions are raw right now.”

“I don’t want her feeling bad because of me.” Liz objected.

“She feels great, actually.” Red chuckled, “She just wants to kill someone. Moore, probably.”

“I sympathize.” Liz pulled a face, “I wish we could push him off the plane after we were high enough.”

“How high is high enough?” Red smiled.

“Thirty-thousand?” she questioned. She hadn’t done anything of the sort before but the height she quoted seemed reasonable.

Red looked at her oddly, “We must go below radar range...” he informed her, “it will still kill him.” he reassured.

She giggled at the conversation, going back to her original thought, “I wonder what was said?” she wasn’t sure if she really wanted to know though.

“I wonder what wasn’t.” Red stowed Lizzy’s computer bag.

“Samar told them, if we are having sex, it’s no one’s business but our own.” he said.

“Well, it isn’t.” she agreed, “Still, Samar is so cool. I admire that style she possesses.”

“She came by it the hard way, baby.” Red’s voice was wistful, “She’s done a hell of a lot of undercover work... Honeypot operations and the like,” he scowled. “A shit poor thing for a woman to be asked to do.”

“How far do you think she had to go?” Liz often wondered such things, “Oh! Not that I’m judging–”

“I know you don’t.” he patted her hand comfortingly, “odd, men judge her more harshly than one of her own species.”

“I... couldn’t imagine having to do... that.” Liz scowled deeply, “I would hate to make the decision.”

“Any woman does.” Red knew, “She had a very different life than you, Lizzy.” he was sad for the fact, “You were sheltered, Samar... wasn’t. She had to grow up quickly, learn how to survive in a
world you can’t even imagine.”

Liz couldn’t, she knew.

“She’s a hell of a woman.” Red chuckled quietly.

“What does that make me?” Liz was a little concerned.

“A survivor.” Red replied, glancing at the girl affectionately, “with your own special qualities.”

“I have a gimpy leg,” she ticked off the ‘qualities’ in rapid succession, “I bitch and moan about everything under the sun, according to Silas... and can’t cook worth a damn according to...well, anyone that has ever tasted my efforts—”

“You are an excellent profiler, capable of seeing the broader side of any personality,” he began, correcting her misconception of herself, “you are now, thinking outside the box, you are getting stronger mentally each and every day.”

Liz loved the touch of his hand. It traced the side of her face gently.

“You are pushing past your boundaries, becoming more self assured.” he was proud of her achievements, clearly.

“You are smart... and beautiful,” he concluded, “You are finally becoming your own person, Elizabeth, and that is a woman I am privileged to know.”

Liz leaned into his soft touch, smiling.

“You and Samar have become quite formidable in your own right.” he nodded amiably.

Liz sat back, the praise delighting her. Red sat back as well, turning his attention to the outside world.

“I wasn’t aware you knew Moore.” a thought occurred. The man in question had glanced up at the portal of the plane before turning aside.

“I didn’t make the connection until I saw the asshat on the tarmac.” Liz admitted.

Red lifted his brows silently waiting for the tale to unfold because he sensed there was one, his interest keen.

“We went through training at the same time. Quantico is a very competitive place.” she shifted comfortably, “It seemed he and I were always pitted against one another in some form or another,” she rolled her eyes, “Isn’t that the way of things. The thing you hate most is always shoved in your face.”

“Who won?”

She looked hurt, “I did!”

Red chuckled his amusement, his hypothesis confirmed.

She leaned closer, “I’m surprised he’s here,” Liz admitted, “on the team, I mean.”

Red glanced back out at the man who was pacing up and down, Wilson following back and forth, speaking animatedly, “Why? Because he’s not worth anything?” he sought her out, “Or you thought
he’d be dead by now.”

“Wishful thinking on my part.” she crinkled her nose, “That was tacky... sorry, but,” she sighed under her breath, “You know he never did make any of the top ten spots.”

Red watched the man, his shrewd eyes summing the guy up.

“I overheard one of the instructors talking about him,” Liz had, “Mediocre at best, was the verdict.” she shrugged, “I always wondered how they classified me?”

“Classy and hot.” Red supplied the answer.

She waved a dismissive hand, “Bumbling but game, more like it.”

Red chuckled under his breath, taking a drink from his tumbler.

“One of the team back then remarked something to the effect,” she continued, “one white supremacist would probably end up taking down one of their own,” she motioned to Moore out side the plane.

The guy was getting pissed off at Wilson now, clearly.

“Another said, Moore would be a victim of an unfortunate case of friendly fire.”

A bubble of laughter collected in Red’s chest. He shared a smile with an amused Dembe.

“I have a weapon,” Liz’s eyes narrowed considerably. Moore stalked off, leaving a bewildered Wilson in his wake.

Liz felt sorry for the tall, gangly agent. Wilson seemed so eager to fit in... to belong.

Red broke the woman’s train of though, his fingertips under her stubbornly set chin, “Don’t kill him... just yet.” he cooed lovingly, “Get your badge back and make it legal.”

She smiled, leaning to kiss the lips that had given her a glimmer of hope, “You always give the best advice.”

“I always give the best everything.”

He slowly pulled away as agent by agent filtered through the loading door. He winked at Liz playfully before arising, joining Dembe at the flight deck.

They closed the cockpit door, sharing a private conversation.

Liz smiled brightly to their ‘guests’, “Bar is to left, bathroom... rear,” she motioned much as a flight attendant might, not even realizing the fact.

The engines whirred to life.

She fell immediately silent, hastily buckling her seat belt, her fingers gripping the arm rests tightly, her body tensing.

Red’s low chuckle for the woman’s state was pointedly ignored, “We haven’t even started to move yet.” he eased into his seat grasping her cool fingers in a tight clasp, “You know flying is a much safer mode of transportation than driving.”
“Tell that to the pit of my stomach,” she squeezed his hand in a death grip.

Ressler noted the contact. Red noted Liz noting the fact.

“She hates flying,” he explained the obvious, grimacing slightly as the plane started to move because Liz’s grip had viced-up a notch, “...a lot.”

Ressler glanced once again to the contact. “Man up, Keen.” he remarked, “We all have to go sometime.”

Red sighed heavily, “Not helping,” he tried to wriggle his fingers a little bit.

“Really?” Samar snapped her pique, throwing a disgruntled look Ressler’s way, “Shall we have a discussion about the smell of baby diapers.”

“Oh my God woman,” Ressler’s face turned a sickly green. He wretched visibly as the images conjured, rushed though his minds eye.

Dembe laughed appreciatively for the agent’s discomfort.

“Lizzy, we’ll be perfectly fine,” Red patted her ice cold hand soothingly.

“I know that.” she replied way too fast, her tone clipped.

“Would I let you get on here if I wasn’t sure it was safe?” Red tried again.

“No,” she watched the plane taxi slowly, the ground outside a safe haven she wished she was on at the moment.

“I have this jet serviced at each and every stop to ensure your safety,” he stretched out his legs, purposely taking a relaxed pose.

“That’s nice,” she swallowed hard. The plane was turning onto the runway, “what do you do while we’re in the air,” was a more prevalent question, “you should issue parachutes for your passengers.”

Red held his smile.

“Liz, flying really is very safe these days.” Samar interjected.

“It’s unnatural,” Liz was certain. The plane was positioning for take off. “If God meant man to fly, he would have given us wings.”

“The plane has wings.” Aram pointed to them, his finger falling slowly when Reddington shook his head minutely.

“That frequently fall off.” Liz reminded.

Samar and Aram shared a quiet chuckle.

“I wasn’t going to tell you this...” Red tried another tact, “I know it will probably piss you off.”

Liz turned her head fleetingly. The plane was picking up speed fast.

“It’s something Silas said before we boarded.”

Liz scowled darkly, her head whipping back. “What did he say?” she demanded.
Red held her attention and her eyes willfully, “He said...” the plane lifted effortlessly, gliding through the air with precision accuracy, “be sure and think up something to take the dingbats mind off the lift off... you know how crazy insane she gets.”

Samar compressed her lips, a musical chuckle finally escaping.

Liz was slightly annoyed.

“I’m sorry,” Samar seemed genuine, “but...” she motioned to their present position, “it worked. We’re airborne.”

“And still alive,” Ressler’s tone was slightly superior.

“*Baby shit...*” Samar gave the man a caustic look and yet another reminder of his own fallacies.

Ressler gagged yet again. Red knew instantly, exactly what Donald Ressler’s Kryptonite was.

“See now, that wasn’t so bad was it?” Red inquired.

“You did that on purpose,” Liz accused, “Silas didn’t even say anything, did he!”

“He did.” Dembe assured.

“Can I have my hand back now?” Red eased the appendage out of Lizzy’s death grip. “I would like to regain feeling in it before we reach Montana if at all possible.”

Liz turned up her nose, “Very funny,” her tone implied otherwise. “It’s perfectly natural to be a little uneasy when flying,” she stated. “There are national statistics on the subject, you know.”

Everyone shared in the easy teasing of the woman except Moore, who sat apart from his contemporaries further back in the plane.

If anyone noted his anti-social behavior, they didn’t remark on the matter.

Wilson kept continuously casting fretful glances to the man, even once or twice trying to draw him into the conversations.

Otherwise, the flight was uneventful.

The plane did not fall down from the sky... no one needed a parachute that Red noted.

After a few drinks, Liz even settled down enough to enjoy a short lived reunion with her friends and colleagues.

Every once in a while, Red would bring up the subject of baby shit just to see Ressler’s reaction.

Stretching back into his seat, Red closed his eyes, relaxing into the warmed leather, “Lizzy...”

“Hmm?” she hummed distractedly.

“You’ll let us know, of course...” he lay his hand on the arm rest in anticipation, “if you see anything on the wing of the plane?”

“Damn you, Reddington!” she bitched, leaning over his seat to look at the wing before clutching his hand like it was a life line.
Chuckling under his breath, Red squeezed her hand back.

All in all, it was a very nice flight.
Sleight of Hand

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

June 4

It was an idyllic setting in which they drove.

Liz took in the serene countryside with large ‘city girl’ eyes, “I’ve never seen so many trees in my life.”

Red’s mouth quirked. He craned his neck, catching a glimpse of the other SUV behind them.

He decided on white this time. Less conspicuous. More ‘family vacation’ oriented, he hoped. Draw less attention to their presence.

One white, the one he and Lizzy shared, silver.

Dembe maneuvered the vehicle expertly through the two-laned highway system.

“It’s so beautiful out here,” Liz was still entranced by the scenery. She turned her head, seeking him out, “but... why cabins? Is it a prerequisite form of lodging out here?”

“We’re not on Mars, baby,” he quipped, “they do have hotels.” he grinned at her expression. “But no, Lawford bought a retreat just offset to the one we booked.” he explained.

A dark scowl still graced her pretty face.

“What’s the matter? You a ‘city girl’ at heart?” he teased, already knowing the answer. “Afraid there won’t be any Starbucks out here in the wilds.”

Liz sent him a sturdy look, “I’ve roughed it before, Mr. Reddington.” he was assured. “Sam took me fishing all the time.”

“And you complained...” Red remembered the tales, “all the time, you and he were bonding over fish guts.”

Liz sighed peevishly, “I did not.” she lied, “I can clean a carp better than you can.” she imagined.

“Well, good. That’s what we’re having for dinner tonight,” Red sat back, “after you and Dembe catch them.”

Dembe laughed his mirth.

The car fell silent.

Dembe counted in his mind, remembering what Silas had said concerning the woman’s lack of stamina where speech was—
“There really are Starbucks here though, right?” Liz seemed genuinely concerned.

Both men found the remark amusing.

“...No,” she needed an answer, “really.” it was earnestly asked.

Dembe had pulled off on a well-paved road that winded this way and that up into what clearly was, private property.

The metal gate had been opened, welcoming them. But the further they drove, the more evident it was... the area was secluded and very set apart from the open road they previously traveled.

They pulled up into a circular drive and Dembe shut the engine down.

To her right, a spacious lawn stretched into infinity ending gradually, disappearing entirely as mammoth pines and cottonwoods swallowed it up.

Before her stretched majestic mountains towering the bluest sky Liz had ever seen.

She turned her head, her senses stunned by the quiet beauty of an ice blue river which gurgled and danced over boulder like rocks of magnificent hues.

“Oh my God,” she breathed out a sudden fear, “I’m not really going to have to catch dinner...” wide blue eyes full of apprehension sought out an amused Red Reddington, “...am I?”

Red laughed his delight, shaking his head sorrowfully, “Oh dear, Lizzy,” he lamented, “only if I wished to die of starvation.”

“Yeah... is that a no?” she scooted out the car door he had only just exited, lifting inquisitive eyes.

Something more astonishing caught her interest, however, “...Is that...” she accepted his assistance to exit the vehicle, her mouth agape, “your idea of a little cabin in the woods?”

A two-story structure loomed large directly in front of the visitors.

A-framed with an enormous addition stretching out back, elegantly placed into a nearby hillside to blend in with its natural surroundings. Their new lodging took on the scale of a five-star hotel in Liz’s eyes.

Gigantic windows surrounded the stained oak walls affording a spectacular view from all sides of the structure.

A long wrap-around porch with a rustic railing ran the length of the front and west sides.

Sets of colorful rockers welcomed one to sit and enjoy the show Mother Nature provided.

“Oh, Red,” she clasped her hands beneath her chin, eyes bright and shining, “how utterly breathtaking. This isn’t like any cabin I’ve ever seen!”

“Well, I’m not Daniel Boone.” he philosophized having watched for her reaction, pleased he had surprised her.

Ressler pulled his car alongside the other, Agents exiting in droves.

Samar’s lovely face echoed Liz’s delight as she came alongside the woman, “Your United States offers breathtaking beauty, I must admit.”
“Your accommodations are a little further down the drive,” Red showed the woman a spot about two hundred meters away, “It’s up on a hill so catching a signal will be easier and Lawford’s place is just through that patch of Fir.”

“We aren’t staying here?” Ressler was confused.

“Samar is... if she so wishes.” Red lifted the woman’s hand to his lips sparing her his attention for a beat, “you guys will have to rough it.”

“Yeah...” Liz had eyed the second cabin for sometime now, “that place probably doesn’t even have electricity.”

In truth, the second set of accommodations was just as beautiful as the first.

“This cabin only has four bedrooms.” Red explained the problem.

“Only four you say.” Samar managed a sad commiseration face.

“One should seek comfort when at all possible.” Red stated his philosophy.

“There’s comfort,” Moore grumbled, “then there is excess. Is this all on the tax payers dime?”

“It’s on my dime.” Red smiled pleasantly. Never a good sign. “But if it makes you feel any better, I can scrounge up a tent and sleeping bag for your personal use if you would prefer.”

The guy fell silent. Ressler chuckled for Reddington’s comeback.

“No, Mr. Reddington,” Wilson seemed enthralled by the surroundings, on the other hand, “this is simply amazing. It’s very kind of y–”

“Shut up, Wilson.” Moore snapped his irritation.

“Well, it is!” Wilson snapped right back. “And I for one, appreciate the hell out of his generosity. You know something, Moore...” the guy was agitated, “you have no class.” the fact really seemed to bother the agent. “You really don’t.”

All eyes were on Moore.

“What I have is integrity.” Moore’s face was flushed with anger. “Maybe you all should try a little of that once in a while.”

Wilson grimaced, “Whatever.” he grated. “You should try loosening your asshole once in a while.”

Moore stopped in his steps, his mouth falling agape. He wasn’t accustomed to Wilson showing any kind of bravado, especially in connection with him.

“If we help with your bags,” Wilson’s mood brightened, “Mr. Reddington, will you help with ours?”

“You are the diplomat of the group, I see, Agent Wilson,” Red nodded, “An agreeable exchange.”

Dembe popped the hatch.

“After we get settled, we’ll get eyes on Lawford.” Red laid out a plan securing a couple suitcases in hand. “If that is agreeable as well?” he glanced at a sulking Moore. “To all concerned.”

“I’m starving.” Ressler’s stomach was conveying the fact, “Can we order some takeout?”
“I think we can do a little better than that,” Red said, “Lizzy, I’ll get that.” he took the suitcase from her hands.

“Hey, I’m not an invalid.” she resisted his tug.

“Then why are you limping?”

“The ground is uneven.” she flushed feeling Samar’s eyes more than the men’s.

“Your ankle is swollen.” Samar motioned, “At these altitudes, that will be the case.”

Liz looked down, having pushed through the pain for some few hours now. The ride in the car had taken its toll because gravity was working against her.

“I’m going to be a hindrance.” she forewarned. “I should have stayed behind with Silas.”

“I should have stayed behind with Silas.” Samar murmured dejectedly. “No, Liz... you may not be as ambulatory as you like but your input is needed on this one, trust me.”

Red was grateful for the woman’s remarks. He had not heard the one concurring Silas but Liz had, her eyes blinking the shock away in time.

Samar leaned close to share a confidence, “Wilson tries, but he’s green. Moore knows everything so there’s no common ground there. I, for one, am ever so glad you are back on the team.”

Liz beamed her joy, “Really?”

Samar smiled, “Go sit down. Lift that leg.”

“This cabin has a downstairs bedroom,” Red sat the bags down, indicating a room off the main corridor, “Lizzy can navigate here. The bedrooms in your cabin are all upstairs.”

“I miss my cart.” Liz confided to Samar.

“Your what?”

“She has transportation at home but I was forced to take away her keys after she mowed down several of my guards at a very high rate of speed.”

Red had taken the time to harass the young woman. It was one of his favorite pastimes anymore.

“It was only one guard, and he was fine.” Liz aggravated. “You embellish any given story.”

Samar took up for one of her own, “Your guard’s reflex’s are clearly off.”

Red shut his mouth knowing a no-win situation when he heard one.

“Mr. Reddington, where would you like this?” Aram held up a valise.

This was one of those pivotal moments Red had waited for, “Just sit it on the bar, Aram. Thank you.” he motioned, “I’ll probably just camp out on the couch there.”

The L-shaped divan was a sprawling sectional constructed of cushy leather and sensible pillows thrown about.

“In case Lizzy might need me.” he smiled pleasantly.
“We have a system down.” Liz interjected. “But... I can take the couch. I’m smaller and smarter than you.” she smiled pleasantly right back.

Samar chuckled.

“I can see the writing on the wall.” Red nodded sagely. The women were forming a tight-knit bond already. “We’ve had this conversation a hundred times before... minus the intellect remark... your leg will be cramped on the couch.”

“Your entire body will be cramped.” she continued, each knowing very well just where Red Reddington would be laying his head this night.

It was a show to be played out for the others, nothing more.

“I’ve slept in worse places.”


Aram chuckled at the bickering.

“He also sleeps with a gun, can you believe it?” Liz confided to those present. “Slept in a chair one night, woke up complaining about a peculiar pain in his side.”

Red took the good-natured jabbing in his stride.

“Well, yeah,” Ressler nodded knowingly, “this surprises you?”

Laughter erupted from those gathered.

“What?” the agent was lost, “What’d I say?”

Liz turned to Red, her eyes softening for the discomfort he had suffered on her behalf.

“Peas in a pod.” she murmured.

“Get off the leg and ice it.” he shrugged off the gratitude clearly shining in her blue eyes.

“Get off that leg and ice it.” she mimicked playfully, “He’s so bossy.” she crinkled her nose over at Samar.

“In a nice way.” Samar reminded, her tone a gentle one, “Enjoy it while you can.”

Liz shrugged, finding a comfortable spot on the divan, “Oh look, Red,” she propped her leg dutifully, “an ottoman.”

She lifted innocent eyes.

The man’s deepened, “She has a thing for ottoman’s” he smiled tightly at Ressler whose expression was quizzical... and confused, “Freaky really.”

“I’ll say,” Ressler agreed, looking at the woman oddly, “You’ve changed.”

“Have I?” Liz queried, “For the better, I hope.”

“Jury is still out.” Ressler decided.

Liz chuckled lowly accepting the ice from Red’s hands, “Service with a smile?”
“You move from that spot before I return...” he warned, “you don’t get... dessert.”

Liz picked up the man’s double entendre, narrowing her eyes at him.

Samar barked her amusement, “Oh, that is just cruel and unusual punishment.”

“I know her weaknesses,” Red held Liz’s willful stare easily, “no fruit cup for you.”

“Thank you, Nurse Diesel.” Liz imparted sarcastically, “You’re so strict.”

“You like that... right?”

“If I don’t get any...” she left him hanging for a beat, sending the guy a message, “neither do you.”


Ressler sniggered catching the reference.

Samar sent him a look that quieted his mirth.

“Go get your guests settled,” Liz grumbled, having been bested and knowing it. “Ressler has infected me... I’m suddenly hungry.” she waved him off as if shooing a fly.

“Gentlemen, and I use the term loosely.” Red gestured towards the door following the slowly filing agents to the exit.

Samar waved goodbye to her contemporaries, “I’m gonna stake out the best bedroom upstairs.” she hurried up giggling as Dembe rushed past her in attempt to top the stairs first.

“I actually believed you to be a gentleman, Dembe.” she cleared the first landing a second behind the man.

Dembe waved a gracious hand indicating she should proceed him.

She inclined her head regally before once again making a race of it, her look a mischievous one.

Dembe renewed the good natured rivalry lagging behind purposely, Liz knew as she had watched the play.

“Rest that leg.” Red’s warm breath thrilled her nape and ear lobe. He had tarried just enough to give her fair warning.

He braced himself on the back of the couch, leaning dangerously close.

“I want to fuck you later...” his sensual demand titillated and teased causing the special spot between her legs to twinge with delicious awareness of his abilities, “hard and fast so... you better be ready.”

He pushed off the couch, heading out the door without a backward glance.

Liz watched him move with that confident swagger easing his body forward.

She blew out a tremulous breath as the door snapped closed behind him.

Pushing restlessly at the seam of her pants, she eased the ache the man had created... just barely.

“He always has to have the last word.” she mused.
It was going to be a long damned night.

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Ressler had established a workable routine within an hour of their arrival and settling in.

They had spotted the target arriving at his resort shortly after the Agents set up their equipment but then, the guy just as hastily hauled his ass back in his Landrover and headed out to parts unknown.

“I told you guys one of us should get our ass down there.” Ressler groused moodily.

“Our vehicles are too conspicuous.” Red vetoed the idea. “Dembe will pick up a Jeep while we’re in town, but relax,” he continued, “Lawford is just going for supplies I’ll wager. Which is what we should do as well.”

“Hey, if the house is empty,” Aram held up his electronic gadgets pointing to the area across the sparse thicket, “Now would be a good time for me to tap into his systems.”

Ressler felt better, “You’re sure the guy is coming back?”

Red called his own computer expert who tapped in to Lawford’s GPS which located him in town, a short distance away.

Thirty minutes later, job accomplished on Aram’s part, they all headed out for dinner. Finally.

Driving back through the scenic surroundings, Dembe pulled up to a cozy-looking restaurant.

“Oh, no...” Liz muttered dejectedly seeing the long line of waiting customers. “Uh, Red,” she lamely pointed to the lengthy line, “my stomach thinks my throat has been cut.” she held her stomach trying to halt the rumbling.

Red smiled, helping her from the car as Liz’s team pulled alongside them. They had all changed into more casual clothing to better fit in.

“I hope they come out with an appetizer tray.” Ressler said, looking around for another place to eat.

“Oh, ye of little faith.” Red motioned, leading his ensemble to the front of the line.

Which did not set well with one of the locals. A big guy with a mean looking expression on his face.

“Hey buddy!” he carped as Red passed, “The line starts,” he jerked a thumb, “back there.”

Liz’s fingers dug into Reddington’s arm, her body tensing. She cast a hasty glance up to Red’s striking profile, her look a worried one.

How would he handle this situation, with her team present... law enforcement agents who would be put in an awkward position if the matter wasn’t handled with the greatest finesse.

“Not to worry.” Red patted Liz’s hand absently. “I’ll only be a minute.” he had waved Dembe’s intended assistance aside as well.

Red sized the guy up, “Couple hints of advice,” he stepped right up the guy’s position, eyeing him stare for belligerent stare although Red’s own expression was more than amiable, at present.
Liz knew how that could change in a flash.

“It’s always pleasant when a man takes the time and effort, if only for his lovely lady’s sake,” Red smiled brightly at the man’s companion, “to make reservations in advance... that she does not have such a tedious wait in line...”

Several wives and sweethearts gave their husbands and dates a frosty glare at the news conveyed.

“Secondly,” he made note of all the overly interested stares they were receiving which clearly unnerved the belligerent guy’s companion, “you want to impress the lady?” Red waved his hand, “Don’t draw unnecessary attention her way.”

The man glanced, even he taking note of the woman’s embarrassment.

Red pulled his wallet free, holding a couple twenties aloft for a cab.

The woman snatched them gratefully, slipping off into the crowd, making a hasty retreat from all the attention garnered.

The guy seemed stunned by the turn of events, “Angela, wait–”

Red put a solid hand of the guy’s shoulder when he would have hurried after his date.

Reddington’s eyes were different, cold and empty suddenly, “Never put a woman in such a predicament again...” his tone matched his eyes, “you just never know... who you will come up against next.”

“Yeah, like the FBI’s fourth most wanted.” Ressler muttered under his breath.

Something in Red’s demeanor alerted the loud-mouth to his mistake. The man swallowed hard, taking off at a clipped pace to salvage what he could from the situation he had created.

Red turned, all grace and poise, the smile back on his face, as if the incident had never even occurred, “What an amazing place–”

Liz lifted her head, proud to be on the arm of a real gentleman who knew exactly how a lady should be treated.

“Shall we begin our adventure?” he escorted the ensemble following along at an easy pace.

Liz’s eyes were drawn to an older man who had exited the establishment and now waited patiently at the doors.

“Red,” he grinned, offering a hand of welcome, “teaching the locals some manners, are we?”

“Probably not.” Red had already dismissed the matter, taking the hand offered, “Greg, this is Elizabeth,” he waved a fan-fare of a hand, “my fiancée... and some of our friends.”

Introduction were made by name. Though Red stumbled over Moore’s name. The habitual urge to call him ‘asshole’ biting at Red’s tongue.

Greg led the group inside, down the atmospheric aisles of his domain, “The private room,” he gestured to a secluded area of the restaurant, “your waiters and sommelier are in attendance.”

“Superb.” Red was happy again.
“Ohh...” Liz clasped her hands together.

A gigantic window afforded a magnificent view overlooking a crystal blue lake set amid a towering forest of crisp, green trees.

“How lovely a setting.” Samar smiled her pleasure.

“I am so pleased it pleases you.” Greg was a consummate host, seating the woman himself, leaving Red to assist Liz.

“I’m simply overcome by the views.” Wilson mimicked the women’s reaction.

“Well, hell...” Ressler pulled out a seat for the man with a flourish, “take a seat, buddy.”

Both men laughed at the shared moment.

“You’re both amusing... assholes.” Samar took the jesting in stride.

Elizabeth made a face at the two.

“One must choose one’s friends carefully.” Red quipped to Greg Forester. “As you can see, I learned that lesson too late in life.”

Greg chuckled, “I know, Red. Don’t forget... I’ve met Francis.”

Samar managed a beautiful pout for Red’s slight concerning his friends.

“Not you, of course.” Red soothed instantly. “Present female company excluded.”

Samar flashed him a grin, “Always the perfect gentleman.”

“Nobody’s perfect.” Moore managed under his breath but Ressler heard, sending the guy a caustic look and a veiled suggestion...

“Lighten the hell up.”

Red took his designated seat next to Lizzy having waited for Dembe to seat himself as usual, apart from the rest.

He grinned for the man’s ways, shaking his head, “Dembe, I think on this occasion, you may join us.” he swept the room meaningfully. “We have enough collective fire power between us to overtake a third world country.”

Dembe waved the request off, his ever vigilant eyes scanning and re-scanning the area they occupied and beyond.

Red sighed mentally, knowing a losing battle when he fought one, “He is so conscientious.”

Liz cast a fond glance Dembe’s way, “He is that.”

“I will check on you periodically.” Greg inclined his head to his guests. “Enjoy your evening. If there is anything you wish, please simply ask.”

Liz watch the man’s exit, “I understand he is an associate,” she took for granted, “what in God’s name is he doing up here, so off-the-beaten path?”
Red leaned closer, “Trade routes.” came the simple reply. “The border patrol between the US and Canada is, shall we say... lax? In this particular area.”

Menus were supplied. Red was handed a wine list which he now perused studiously.

Liz scanned the variety of selections, her brow crinkling quizzically. She checked Red’s menu shifting a questioning stare. There were no price lists available.

“He owed me a favor.” he smiled over at the confused woman.

“How much does this stuff cost?” Ressler had questions of his own. He flipped the menu back and forth, his eyes scanning the pages.

“Order whatever you please, Donald.” Red continued his own perusal of selections. “Their fresh caught trout is to die for.”

Ressler was clearly uneasy with the situation.

“Would you rather have a burger and fries?” Red teased. “A footlong chili dog, perhaps?”

“I intend to order from every selection offered.” Dembe had evidently cast his decision, mentally ticking off items in his head.

Red laughed outright.

“Is that a challenge?” Liz took up the cause, hoping to make everyone else feel more comfortable.

“If I had a gauntlet,” Dembe lifted his noble head, “I would throw it down.”

“Oh, it is so on, fella.” Liz went back to her menu with a vengeance. “Well, I’m starting with an appetizer but I’m going to build from there.” she mused openly.

Red chuckled, “I’m duly warned.”

“That trout actually sounded delicious.” Aram fell into the spirit.

“It is superb.” Red encouraged, his spirits lifted as Lizzy’s friends rallied.

Moore grumbled his discontent, pulling forty dollars from his wallet, tossing it to the table, “I’ll pay my own way.”

Red genuinely was amused, “Not with that meager amount, you won’t.” he sat back, spreading his hands wide, “My God man, look around you... you couldn’t even walk through the doorway of this establishment for that sum.”

Ressler snapped his breadstick in two, his look a murderous one. Even he had picked up on the slight offered their host.

“You aren’t at the Outback Steakhouse,” Red explained, “Not that I don’t frequent the place myself, I do but...really?”

“Yeah, Moore,” Samar batted languid lids, “show a little class why don’t you?”

“If we all put in a forty,” Wilson was calculating on his phone, his expression a serious one, “will that be a good enough tip at least?”
Red laughed his delight. It had been a long time since he gave thought to such things, “I apologize.” he even included Moore in the gesture, “I should have explained beforehand... this is entirely my treat. I chose this place. I thought it was understood. The host always pays.”

Liz’s heart warmed for the man. That he was offering to pay for her friends meant a great deal to her. “I would be incredibly insulted otherwise.” he turned cold eyes Moore’s way, “And since this is supposed to be a pleasant outing, let’s endeavor to keep it that way, shall we?”

“No more talk of money.” Liz beamed hastily. “It’s settled. Please.” she pleaded her case. “It’s such a nice place and the food just smells heavenly... can’t we just all have a good time and forget about formalities for one evening?”

Moore opened his mouth. “Have a freaking breadstick.” Ressler snapped the object the man’s way. Moore for once, kept his peace, although reluctantly, Liz could tell. “It beats eating off the government dime.” Ressler inclined his head graciously in thanks to his host.

Liz squeezed Red’s hand tightly under the table, a sure sign she was pleased at Ressler’s gesture. Red sent the man a nod in return. He and Ressler often butted heads, and he knew that would not change. But in this instance, he was grateful for the man’s tact, if only for Elizabeth’s sake.

The dinner proceeded with no further incident, thankfully.

Wilson playfully kept track of whether or not Liz was outdoing Dembe, pigging-out wise. As Red was later to comment, wine flowed, good conversation abounded as God’s creative abilities delighted the senses.

Liz thought he had summed it up perfectly.

She had missed her friends, and it was good to be back with them. Her life had been so busy and fulfilling with Red, she hadn’t paid attention to anything other than living in the moment.

She had changed in so many ways she had not realized. Samar mentioned the fact even.

Liz tried everything suggested in the way of appetizers, wines or food, for example.

“You never would have that before.” Samar had motioned to the bite Reddington had slid to Liz’s plate for her to try that was summarily eaten without hesitation. “You were strictly a meat and potatoes kind of gal.”

“Was I?” Liz asked around the delectable morsel, astonishment in her tone. “...No...” she disagreed. “Yeah.” Samar debated. “Remember when I brought in that pot-luck for Aram’s birthday a couple months back?”

“It was delicious.”

“You barely touched it.” Samar laughed. “And now look at you. Association with Reddington had broadened your outlook.”
Liz sought out Red’s opinion, “Told you I was good for you.”

Liz was given pause for thought. She suddenly realized, life with Tom Keen had been rather routine.

Friday nights, dinner at the Italian bistro. Saturday’s, Thai food. Starbuck’s in the morning before work, comfort food at night for dinner. Chinese takeout was written in stone.

Was there anything wrong with that though?

She looked around her present surroundings.

She was momentarily confused over the matter.

Was she more content now and if so... why?

She studied Red’s profile.

He sensed her interest, those grey-blue eyes turning her way, a question in them as well.

“...Was I boring before?”

“I didn’t say you were boring.” Samar interjected.

Liz needed the man’s input, however.

“I would never assign that adjective to you.” Red stated. “What’s this about?” he had missed some of the conversation.

“I told her... her interests had broadened.” Samar explained. “Which is a very good thing.”

“Self-growth is always a good thing.” Red agreed. “For anyone.”

Liz felt better, “I’m just hungry.” she stuffed another hors d’oeuvre in her mouth, letting the subject go for now. “Try one of these.” she held the treat aloft.

“Lizzy,” Red’s smile graced his lips, “I’ve ordered a rather large meal.”

“So did I.” she was not understanding. “You don’t see it slowing me down, do ya?”

He accepted the finger sandwich, the tip of his tongue darting out to caress her fingers lovingly.

Liz blinked having felt the delicate sweep. She swallowed, quickly covering the moment.

“Would you like to try a stuffed mushroom?” she asked brightly.

He leaned closer to inspect the selection on the decorative tray, speaking for her alone, “I’d like to sample you.”

He shifted her an erotic glance.

“Oh...” she murmured breathlessly. She straightened, gathering her wits, “F-Francis would have said he’d like to stuff my mushroom.”

Red snorted softly under his breath, shaking his head knowing a truth when he heard one, “What the hell does that even mean?”

“I don’t know...” Liz giggled.
Red collected a few tidbits, popping one in his mouth before sitting back to continue his interrupted conversation with Dembe.

Red was pleased the agents had not once fallen back on shop talk this evening.

He was well aware of the dour mood and reason behind Moore’s refusal to accept the situation now at hand.

Personally, he would have enjoyed taking the asshole out back, beating the shit out of him and leaving his carcass hung up in a tree somewhere for the bears to play with but...

Lizzy would then have to deal with the consequences of such actions.

Whether she wanted to admit it or not, there would be repercussions concerning the attachment they now shared.

Whether those repercussions were in the form of Moore’s tactics tonight... vague, cruel innuendos or the unmistakable disapproving looks the fucker was constantly giving over to Elizabeth... it did not matter.

They would be damning to her.

She had her friends about her this particular evening. They were softening Moore’s slights. Lizzy could shrug it off...chalk it up to ‘consider the source’.

But what would she do, how would she handle it, were it Cooper, say... being forced to address the issue.

If Moore followed through on his obvious disapproval for the relationship he was witnessing between Red and Liz... criminal prosecution was a definite possibility Lizzy would have to face.

Cooper would deflect as much as possible, of course, but Moore was a ‘by-the-book’, ‘don’t step out of boundaries’ kind of asshole. He would give anything to crucify Elizabeth.

Red could spot them a mile away.

People so deathly afraid to step outside their own comfort zone, they envied and even hated those that had the courage and foresight to take that leap of faith. They lacked something vital inside themselves.

It would be no problem to rid the world of one less fucker, of course, but how many would Lizzy face in the future if word of their true relationship surfaced.

Even Mr. Kaplan could not clean up that big a mess.

Lizzy would find herself in a world of trouble all because she associated herself with him and his organization.

Red looked about the table measuring each individual present.

Ressler? He started out by-the-book. Ressler would blame Reddington, not Liz for any infraction of rules broken. But he would still expect her to act the part of a professional agent.

Samar? She would applaud ‘fuck buddy’ status but anything more? She had standards she adhered to, and she expected no less of any other female agent. Sex was a tool Samar took advantage of but no true emotions were to come into play... ever.
Aram would hurt Lizzy the most and he would be hurt in return. He might surprise though. Red was still considering which direction the man might go.

He honestly hadn’t given Wilson much thought, but he seemed to be a doppelgänger for Ressler and being a stickler for the rules.

Seeing Lizzy with her friends this afternoon only cemented Red’s feeling concerning the need to conceal his and Lizzy’s true involvement.

She had been adamant earlier today. Perhaps losing her position at the FBI wouldn’t concern her all that much. But it would affect any other position she attempted to secure.

Red wasn’t sure why she felt the need to work but it was clear, she was independent and would hate not making her own way in the world.

She had grown accustomed to the instant acceptance his world offered. Francis, Mark, Dembe... while they encouraged their romantic entanglement, it would not be so with the outside world and Red sensed as much.

Red could whisk her out of the country before ink dried on ‘criminal charges pending’ papers. Set her up with a new identity? It was second nature to the man by now but at what cost to their relationship?

Would Lizzy eventually blame him for destroying the life she had made for herself before he came into the picture?

Leaving her established life would cause strain, he knew from experience just how much. Elizabeth had no concept.

Would she tire of the stress? Would she want him out of her life?

There had to be a middle ground. He would find it.

He had no choice.

The man was jostled from his thoughts, sighing his disgruntlement.

He lifted his attention moving subtly away from the intentional contact.

The waitress smiled down in a beguiling manner, “Is everything to your satisfaction, Sir?”

Had she meant the overt brushing of her ample breast against his shoulder or the meal and service provided.

Her look told him, it was the former.

Red shook his head, slightly bemused. Was he putting off some sort of pheromone which drew the opposite sex to him?

It was true, he wanted sex all freaking day but... really. This was getting ridiculous. True, he complained before but... he checked with Lizzy.

How things changed. A year ago, this would certainly not have been a problem.

Lizzy’s eyes held a certain sly amusement. She obviously picked up on the interchange.
Well, of course she had. It was just that type of day.

The waitress was attractive. She even had Lizzy’s dark hair and blue eyes but... she was not Elizabeth Keen.

Red had the real deal, sitting right here beside him. And even better, she would be warming his bed and other vital parts of his anatomy... later.

If he played his cards right, at this moment.

The waitress was not making his job easy. She leaned across him, a definite breach of etiquette, to secure Lizzy’s plate for removal.

“I am here to please.”

Even though the remark was directed to all concerned, Red felt an odd tick jerk his face because the woman’s smile was just for him.

“Anything you wish, you just have to ask.”

Ressler halted his fork half-way to his mouth.

Each male present felt the current run through the room.

Yes, even Moore, who squirmed about, shifting in his seat.

Wilson tugged at his brightly colored tie.

Aram blotted his brow with his cloth napkin.

Dembe sipped his wine deliberately.

Red sighed heavily, “We’re fine, thank you.” he addressed the situation head-on. “We’re wrapping up here... it’s about time to go.”

The woman’s face fell. She retreated silently into the kitchen.

Red shook his head minutely, musing quietly.

“I think she likes you.” Liz made mention, dabbing her mouth primly to hide her smile.

“You crushed her hopes.” Samar scolded.

“Seriously,” the man wanted to know. Red spread his hands helplessly. “Am I doing something?”

“You are not.” Dembe replied evenly, his attention rapt on his dessert.

“You’re just being you.” Liz shrugged. “I think they scent the masculinity.” she nodded knowingly, her lips quivering with delight for his predicament.

“Or the money.” Samar added her two-cents, sensing Liz’s amusement.

“Could be,” Liz leaned, sniffing lightly, “my God, he does smell like a crisp hundred-dollar bill.”

“Only a hundred?” Red wasn’t going to be topped. “I must speak with my tailor.”

“You guy’s talking about the waitress making eyes at Reddington?” Ressler dove into the fray,
popping fried shrimp into his mouth.

“How very astute of you, Donald.” Red lifted a frigid stare. “Thanks for the help here.”

“I’m surprised she hasn’t ‘accidentally’,” Liz air-quoted, “fallen into his lap.”

“Or just ‘accidentally’,” Samar couldn’t resist air-quoting as well, “pressed his face between her breasts.”

“You missed that?” Liz tittered. “A few minutes past?”

Both women shared a chuckle.

Red eyed them belligerently.

Normally, Liz might have been upset by the totally uncalled for behavior concerning the waitress. Some women had a lot of gall.

She realized, early on, that incidents involving Red Reddington where her species was concerned would probably be many and varied.

But really... while his woman was right there at the same table?

Can we say... tacky?

Red was so obviously put out over it and ill-at-ease in this instance, she could kind of take it in her stride.

Maybe Aram summed the matter up best as he concentrated diligently, twirling a lengthy pasta dish about his fork...

“Maybe she just wants a good tip?”

The comment broke the tension, all sharing a good laugh over the issue... all except Moore, of course.

“She wants more than the ‘tip’ of something.” Samar joked, bringing a vivid blush to Aram’s cheeks.

A peculiar lurch pitted Elizabeth’s stomach which had her clutching her fork abnormally tight for a few seconds.

She sought out Red Reddington. He looked so dapper this evening in his grey linen suit and darker pin-stripe vest.

But when did the guy not look good? Her eyes drifted involuntarily to the matching slacks... more specifically, to the junction where his legs met.

She knew exactly what that fabric covered.

Suddenly, Liz couldn’t blame the waitress for how she must feel.

Red was a very attractive man in every sense of the word.

Liz’s brows furrowed slightly. Did she used to be so sexually charged? She had never have a lover like Red.
Everything about the man screamed ‘male’.

Even now, sitting this close, his cologne was sensually stimulating.

The way his hand would reach every so often to cover hers, to squeeze gently as if he needed constant contact.

Was she just being fanciful?

Liz only knew, she would be the one going home with him tonight. She would be the one feeling his kisses, his caresses.

As much as they made love of late, one would think, she would have had her fill but that was not the case at all.

She never tired of his advances, of him wanting her.

Would he... tire of it all eventually and want to move on?

How many women had he made love to? Could one woman hope to satisfy such an eclectic lover?

“Problem?” Red had watched the emotions flit across the pretty face. “You don’t really think I’m interested in—” he crooked his head.

Liz smiled brightly, “You better not be.” she teased lightning her mood.

“Don’t complain about anything yet.” Wilson was holding up his glass of red wine. “This hasn’t been empty all evening.”

“The important things in life.” Red nodded his agreement, his hand squeezing Liz’s gently.

The woman noted the contact, her smile softening.

“Take one for the team, Reddington.” Ressler chuckled for the other man’s predicament. “Good service is hard to come by these days.”

Red smiled absently, his heart not even in the conversation. Liz’s skin felt so warm and soft.

He knew her entire body was... warm and soft with deliciously hidden alcoves of sensual delight.

He wished all these people would simply disappear for a spell... that he could be alone with the woman.

Make love to her under the watchful eye of these magnificent surroundings.

Maybe mountain air really did stimulate the appetite...

He only knew he was sexually charged right now... was that what the waitress was picking up on?

Was it a tangible force people could sense?

Those at the table seemed oblivious, thankfully.

Dropping his hand subtly to Liz’s thigh area, he allowed his palm to rest casually on the fabric of her short skirt.

The others were discussing the merits of fly-fishing versus deep-sea fishing.
Samar, surprisingly, was adamantly defending her views on the matter.

“You’ve been deep-sea fishing?” Moore clearly was skeptical.

“Swordfish off the coast of Greece, just last year.” she was proud of her accomplishment.

“Did you catch anything?” Moore baited.

Red flipped the flouncy skirt aside, shifting comfortably in his seat, his thumb probing as his fingers slid up the silk of Lizzy’s inner thigh.

“A hell of a cold.” the woman laughed at herself. “It rained the entire time we were there but it was exhilarating.” Samar’s eyes were bright and alive. “The ocean was angry and the fish... so magnificent. I was glad it broke the line, in reality.”

Liz swallowed hard, trying desperately to concentrate on cutting her chicken into precise pieces.

Red’s fingers brushed the lace of her panties directly over a spot he should not.

He smiled slowly.

He was positive just by the slight touch that little labia was already plump with arousal.

Perhaps Lizzy wanted more than just the tip of something substantial as well as the waitress.

He would gladly oblige the minute they were alone. He was relishing the idea, in fact.

“That looks good.” his eyes dropped to the confines of her lap. Liz knew instinctively he did not mean the meal.

“It is.” she parried, smiling sweetly at him, breaking from her trance-like state. “It's very... tender.” she squirmed a little under the constant, deliberate pressure his fingers exuded, “Very... moist.”

Red grunted a primal response, his eyes flaming to life, “I know...” he soothed expertly, “so is mine.”

Again, he wasn’t talking about the food.

Liz glanced at his half-eaten steak absently, her bare foot sliding slowly along his leg, feeling the roughness of the abundant hair found there.

It was Red’s turn to smile.

She had her way of playing... he had his.

He pushed in on the puffy slit, massaging carefully for a beat.

She tensed at the excruciating pleasure, shivering slightly in his wake.

“How are you cold?” he was instantly solicitous, removing his jacket, settling it about her shoulders.

But in doing so, he had taken away the exquisite feeling, much to her dismay.

She lifted luminous eyes, “That will get you into all sorts of trouble.” he predicted for the unconscious pout of reprimand.

“What are you doing there, Aram?” Red made the pretense of leaning over to crane his neck, seemingly interested in the computer geek’s diagram he was sketching on a convenient cocktail
Liz felt Red’s hand slip back to its former resting place.

She cursed herself as her legs spread willingly of the own volition.

Aram rattled on about something to do with their surveillance on Lawford.

Red’s head nodded sagely, his attention... elsewhere as his fingers hooked the rim of her panties, sliding under the lace.

Liz swallowed hard, her body tense and enthralled by his actions.

Her trimmed little bush teased the tips of his fingers.

Nodding critically at Ressler’s remarks concerning the pros and cons of Aram’s plans, Red ‘teased’ her right back, flicking Lizzy’s clit drawing a drop of wetness from her center.

He enjoyed the grunt of arousal he produced.

Slowly rimming the tiny hole, he drew the wetness across the length of that sweet nub, circling the swollen bump lovingly.

“I think we’re all on the same page here.” Red smiled happily to those gathered, including his ‘victim’ in the scan, “Right?”

“Yes, Liz...” Samar wanted Liz’s input as well, the brown eyes earnestly seeking the younger woman out, “what do you think?”

Liz’s eyes snapped to her teammates.

She had no idea of the response needed having lost track of the conversation moments back.

Why were they singling her out? She wasn’t even on active duty yet.

“I agree with... the consensus.”

Samar nodded, clearly pleased with the reply.

Ressler resumed his meal.

Liz had dodged the bullet on that one. She sent Red Reddington an annoyed glare.

He smiled amiably, sliding his middle finger unceremoniously forward into the hot depths of her body.

Liz practically gasped. Her traitorous center sliding forward almost greedily to accept the invasion.

Red seemed to sense as much, his finger began an excruciatingly slow rhythm inside her body.

“Lawford...” Red frowned superficially, “you’re wanting to catch him in the act of... what exactly? Why is he so special?”

Ressler sat down his fork, leaning his forearms into the table explaining his reasons for getting involved..

Red would bring Liz to the edge of orgasm by his calculated thrusts only to back off at just the exact
moment her body was ripe, wanting desperately to complete the delicious pang of unrequited lust.

“So you see, it’s not only the rise of crime in the area,” the man continued, “it’s the civilians getting caught in the crossfire,” Ressler explained, “that my friend has been trying to catch Lawford for years.”

Liz squirmed into Red’s activities.

“If we can follow Lawford, listen in to what he’s doing...” the man further explained, “maybe we’ll have a large piece of the puzzle we’ve been missing to shut him down.”

“That would be quite a coup.” Red admitted. “But that’s not all... is it?” He knew Donald too well.

While Red was not in the business of harming innocents, both men were aware that casualties happened. There was more to the story than what Ressler was telling him and Red had a pretty good inkling what it may be.

Ressler’s jaw tightened, his eyes scanning the table. Moore left moments ago for the men’s room. Wilson... he didn’t exactly trust yet, but the opportunity presented itself and he would not waste it.

“It is also of a personal nature.” Ressler conceded. “This piss ant Lawford put a hit on my friend’s son.”

“Was this son’s work involved with the mob?” Red wanted to know.

“He’s the D.A going after Lawford’s organization.” Ressler stated.

“The one in the papers recently?” Wilson was connecting the dots. “The one out of Chicago? Scott Benton, right?”

Ressler nodded.

Red knew of the situation, had been keeping tabs. He was aware of the invasion Lawford and his men had been making on the D.A’s life. More specifically, his family’s life.

Graffiti on the house. Tripped alarms at night. General nuisances that most would write off as minor incidents.

But Benton’s wife knew better and they were scaring her. Rightfully so, since Red knew they would only escalate. These were just warnings. If Benton didn’t back off...

It was one thing to threaten D.A. Benton. It was another to get his wife and child involved in the mess.

Red eyed the younger man, his focus intent. “Who is Benton to you?”

Ressler sighed, “Michael Benton is my mentor.” he replied. “I took the same criminal justice classes in college with Scott, his son.”

Red sighed as he felt the tiny quiver of Lizzy’s beginning climax on his finger building ever so slowly as he reluctantly slid free.

Liz’s bereft moan silenced the conversation, all eyes turned her way.

Red leaned, murmuring softly in her ear, “Not to worry, baby,” he soothed, his eyes lit with an inner flame, “you’ll get the dessert I promised.” he stated a little louder.
Liz blinked, unfocused, her body crying out for fulfillment.

Red twisted, grabbing the waitress’s attention, “Desserts all around.” he motioned accordingly to those gathered at the table, returning to Elizabeth solicitously. “There now... all better?”

His expression altered visibly as he made a pretense of situating his napkin on his thigh, “Don’t look now... and this means you, Donald...” Red eyed the man in warning, “but the man of the hour just strolled in.”

“He doesn’t know you, right?” Ressler’s tone was tight.

“Only in passing. Not enough to exchange pleasantries.” Red casually settled his arm along the back on Lizzy’s chair, “Don’t worry. Even if he recognizes me, I’m here with some associates having a pleasant sit-down.” he reminded. “Does he know you?”

Ressler shook his head, “No,” he assured, “I only did some background for Benton.”

When Lawford had settled at a table, each agent took their time in scrutinizing the target up close and personal so to speak.

The waitress sat a cart of various dessert selections close by.

Selections were made and coffee brought.

Red noted Lizzy’s quietness, amused by her subdued manner, “Have I broken your spirit?” he murmured lowly for her ears alone.

She lifted blue eyes full of animosity and sullen exasperation.

“Didn’t think so.” he stated.

Retribution was in order but her ire, he could weather. The time teasing that little hole was worth any price he had to pay.

They lingered at the restaurant for a bit longer, vaguely listening in on Lawford making lame overtures to his mistress leaving Red, in particular, ready to vacate.

“On that note...” he pushed his chair back, rising. He noted Lizzy’s stifled yawn as well.

She was tired. Jet lag had set in. All the agents were better accustomed to traveling. Lizzy had gotten out of the habit of late.

Besides, he desperately needed time alone with the woman.

Ressler had worked up a schedule. He favored working with Samar. They would take the second shift, so the woman would be returning with Red and Liz this night.

Dembe drove the short distance to the cabin, parking in the garage, allowing a shorter distance for Liz to traverse. Though, Samar was the one trudging tiredly into the house.

“I hope you don’t think I’m rude,” the dark-haired agent yawned, “but I’m going to catch some sleep before my shift.”

Liz smiled, as she eased from the back seat, “Goodnight.”

Samar gave a tired wave, pushing her way inside, leaving the three of them alone.
Red stopped short in his tracks as his phone broke the silence as the three made their way to the entrance of the cabin.

Liz halted her steps, hesitantly.

“Greg,” Red put all concerned at ease, “didn’t I leave a large enough gratuity?”

He listened politely, a smile breaking his lips. He lifted a scolding stare, “You forgot your purse.”

Liz gasped, realizing the object was indeed missing. She dropped her head woefully, sighing for her forgetfulness.

“No...I’ll come back and fetch it.” Red settled the issue. “I’m just a few minutes away. Thank you. I appreciate your kindness.”

Dembe headed back to the driver side.

“No,” Red waved him off, “get some rest. I’ll be back before you know it. Really.”

His look reassured the other man, “I don’t mind, Raymond.”

Red waved again, “You need to sleep.” he frowned, “I know you didn’t sleep very well last night.”

Dembe sighed, before acquiescing. “If you should need me...” he said before disappearing through the door.

“Please tell me...” Red turned on Liz, something coming to mind, “you didn’t have your badge tucked away in–”

Liz shook her head, “Truth?” she looked bemused, “I forget it most days. Odd, I never would have gone anywhere without it before.”

She wondered what that meant?

“I’ll be just a few if you–”

“No,” Liz shook her head, reaching for the passenger door, “no, I’ll go with you. I left it there so...”

“You don’t have to go, baby.” Red reminded her yet again.

“You hoping to see that little waitress again?” she half-teased. Red rolled his eyes, shutting the door on her quiet giggling.

“You know...” she looked longingly at the spacious area, “I would turn you in for a chance to put this damned leg up for a spell.”

He chuckled, “You can be bought. I always suspected as much.”

“For the right price,” she shrugged, “and the price on your head....” she whistled brightly.

Liz slid out of the car before Red could think to assist. She scooted the length of the seat bracing her
back against the darkened tint of the side window.

“I hate this boot.” she removed it, stretching her toes, massaging the tight muscle in her leg, “I hate the crazy bastard that put me back in it... more than I already did.”

That was an understatement. “I not only hate him,” Red seethed, “I want him dead.”

“You and me both.” Liz groaned as the muscle relented to the incessant kneading, “but you didn’t hear me say that. You know... since I’m a federal agent and all.”

Red smirked, “One who forgets her badge.” he snickered when the woman huffed indignantly. “You said it, not me.” he reminded. “When does that thing come off again?” he rapidly changed subjects.

Liz glanced at the dreaded thing, “I would like to accidentally lose it out here in the wilds.” she surveyed a suitable spot. “Would you rat me out?”

“In a heartbeat, sweetheart.” Red pulled the car onto the two-lane highway, “Because it’s good to follow the doctor’s orders.”

“Which you do at every opportunity.” she reminded tongue-in-cheek.

“My doctor is usually Kaplan.” he reminded, “if she really wants me to stay put and I don’t do as she says, she will shoot me.”

“Defeats the purpose.”

“But gets her point across quite aptly.” Red chuckled for the irony.

Liz sighed, glad to be rid of the cumbersome weight.

“Did Ressler assign me a shift?” her voice filtered from the back after a time. “I dozed off somewhere between the reenactment of the Alamo and the fly-fishing.” she quipped.

“You aren’t on active duty.” Red called back, catching her eyes in the rearview mirror.

“Doesn’t mean I can’t park my ass in a chair for a few hours to give someone a break.” she reasoned.

“You push yourself when you shouldn’t.” he scowled. “You’re tired, admit it.”

Liz shrugged, “If given the right incentive... I’ll perk right up.”

Red eyed the woman in the mirror, his brow lifting, “So do I, baby.”

He turned off the highway into an almost empty parking lot. It was late. The customers had vacated but there were a few employees vehicles near the back entrance.

Red closed his eyes, cursing his luck. A lone figure waited by the front entrance steps.

The man groaned his dismay as he eased the car closer, recognizing the waitress from earlier.

“Isn’t that sweet.” Liz’s tone baited him, “you don’t even have to leave the car... curbside service with a lecherous smile.”

“Brace yourself,” he warned, his tone low and edgy, “I’m snatching the purse then bolting.”

“Red Reddington, afraid of a little slip of a thing.” Liz teased, giggling. She relaxed back into the
shadows, interested to see where this might lead. “What would Francis say?” She tsked.

“He’d date her only to find her kneeling over him one night with a butcher knife and wonder why he hadn’t seen it coming.” Red muttered over his shoulder, ignoring the small snort of amusement as he pulled alongside the young brunette, rolling the window down, “... Good evening,” he decided on politeness.

“Hi...” the bubbly, cheerful greeting was like nails on a chalkboard. He forced a smile.

“Thank you for finding that. My fiancée was frantic.” he lied fluently, holding out his hand.

It was dropped to her side.

Red drew in a long breath, “I really should be–”

“I was wondering...” she was making a pitch, he sensed as much. She had stepped decidedly closer to the car, leaning her arms on the breach of the window casing.

Red moved directly back.

“Would you like to... spend some time together?” the full lips were wet with a sweep of her tongue, “I mean... tonight?”

The girl's bold approach slightly impressed Red. She had a poise beyond her years.

Most her age were all giggles and blushes.

Even Liz noticed the approach. She knew, in her younger years, there would have been no way in hell she would have taken on a man like Red Reddington.

“I can make it worth your while.” the young waitress had stepped up her game, her tone cool... absent of the flirtatious coyness. Now deliberate and calculated, that’s how Liz would label it.

“It’s such a nice night...” she gestured absently to an unseen spot, “there is a very private secluded area by the lake I would love to show you.”

Liz applauded the woman, her brows lifting of their own accord for such audacity.

“I noticed you tonight in there,” she referenced the restaurant behind her, “you’re not like other men. I was instantly... attracted to you.”

“That’s very kind, but–” Red tried graciousness.

“I’ve been told I’m very, very good at pleasing a man,” the battle ensued, “I love the feel of cock in my mouth.”

Liz’s mouth fell open.

“Okay...” Red nodded calmly, “I think what we have here is... a failure to communicate,” he quoted one of his favorite movies.

“I would love for you to fuck me.” the girl stated breathlessly, caught up in her own fantasy. “Am I communicating well enough now?”

“I got your drift.” Red answered, unperturbed. “But there’s only one person I am interested in fucking tonight,” he could be blunt as well.
He threw an oblique look to the rear-view mirror because that person was sitting right behind him... being as quiet as a church mouse... allowing him to stew in his own juices.

Being no damned assistance what-so-ever.

“So... while the offer is tempting,” Red softened the blow, not wanting to bruise the young woman’s ego or frighten her off for the next guy, “I will sadly have to... decline.”

The young lady bit the inside of her cheek, wondering about her next tactic where this incredibly sexy man was concerned.

“May I have my fiancée’s purse, please?” he hinted to yet another reason why he had rejected her invitation, holding his hand out.

“Oh!” the blue eyes brightened, definitely not what Red had hoped for. “Is that all?”

At that moment, the side door opened, spilling bright light out into the parking lot. A couple of wait staff emerged, chatting amiably, breaking the stalemate.

Red was more than relieved to see a bulky figure follow them out, immediately recognizing the silhouetted frame.

Greg Forester sauntered toward the car, his expression a bleak one, “...Give him the purse.” he was tense, no-nonsense.

The waitress scowled but obediently did as bid, handing Red the bag, her expression a sullen one.

Red lightly tossed it over the seat, purposely aiming for Lizzy.

He held his retort as a whisper of a giggle met his efforts.

“I explained why this man was different,” Greg’s tone was a scolding one. “He is engaged.”

“She can join us.” the waitress was being very solicitous this evening.

Liz’s mouth popped open once again, her eyes widening with awe.

“They don’t do that.” Greg was patience itself, “You don’t... right?” he was polite enough to check at least.

“Not at this date.” Red held his smile because he was visualizing Lizzy’s face... good, that’s what she deserved. “The future is not ordained.”

Greg nodded that he understood the parameters, returning to the problem, “I’ve told you... if you need a fuck,” he lifted the young woman’s chin, his eyes steady and direct, “come to me.”

Liz’s brows were as high as they were ever going to get for the blatant overture.

“Is that it?” Greg was concerned. “Do you need cock, honey? Is your little pussy aching?”

The waitress fell into his arms, whining like a little kitten, “I hurt so, Daddy.” she lifted luminous eyes.

Red knew a lost cause when he saw one. He could sense Greg’s weakness even from this distance.

“Go wait in my office.” Greg managed a gruff retort. “You’ve disobeyed me...” he cocked his head
towards Reddington, “there will be repercussions.” his scowl darkened. “You understand that?”

The girl nodded eagerly.

“You think about how disappointed Daddy is...” he sent her on her way with a sturdy smack to her bottom, “Go on now. I’ll be with you in a minute.”

The girl gave Red a last look. One that said, ‘look what you lost’. She flounced off, disappearing into the side entrance.

The door shut with a decided thud.

“I’m sorry, man.” Greg was instantly apologetic. “She was angry with me, wanted...” he trailed off. "I didn’t want to reprimand her too harshly...” he sighed.

Red waved the matter aside, “Save it for the ‘office’.” he quipped. “But, it was a little uncomfortable over dinner.” he admitted. “She does her act with the wrong woman present and... it could get ugly.”

Greg looked listlessly at the closed entrance door, “I don’t know what to do. She’s Big Jake’s daughter.”

“Shit..” Red shook his head sympathetically. “Does he know about...” he waved his between the man and the absent woman.

“Well, he knows we’re dating,” Greg nodded slowly, “not that we’re,” he cleared his throat, “...playing.”

Red lifted a brow, a silent warning conveyed.

“Was your woman upset? Offended?”

“Apparently not.” Red muttered under his breath, throwing a dirty look into the darkened seat of the car. “Since she left my ass floundering up here like a fish on a damned hook.”

Lizzy’s laughter pealed from the back.

Greg’s expression was priceless.

“Yeah, she heard it all.” Red smiled pleasantly. “The little shit has a warped sense of humor... damned heathen that she is.”

But the chastisement only brought more laughter. Lizzy leaned into the light, waving jauntily at a red-faced Greg Forester, “It’s Francis’ influence.” she kissed Red’s cheek soundly. “You both handled that so well. Color me impressed.”

Red grunted his discontent.

“It was interesting to see the Master at work.” she teased Red relentlessly.

“Why don’t you sit back down and... be quiet.” Red shook his head, a little vexed. “Since you’re so good at it.”

Liz fell back, tittering gleefully.

Red turned his attention to the other man.
“I didn’t know she wa–”

“Goodnight, Greg.” Red dismissed the intended apology.

“Yeah, goodnight,” Liz called from the back, “...Daddy.”

Red sighed heavily.

Greg laughed his delight, “Goodnight, Elizabeth.” he was back in form, “Drive carefully, Red.”

Red lifted unamused eyes, seeing the giggling woman squirm about in the back seat, full of malice and glee.

“I’m going to get you for that one, Lizzy.” he vowed which only brought on another bout of fitful joy.

“I’m shaking in my boots.” she snickered happily.

Red bit the inside of his jaw, already carrying visions of just how he might carry out his prophesy.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Ressler stretched out the kinks in his neck as he walked the quiet property.

He had laid down but sleep was evasive tonight.

He hoped a quick late night stroll might clear his head which was buzzing with ideas and plans.. and the dressing down he had given Moore for antagonizing Reddington.

The air was clear and crisp. The night filled with a billion stars.

You didn’t get a view like this in the city, he had to admit.

Maybe sleep would come easier.

His watch was coming up fast though, so he headed back to the cabin, hoping for at least a couple hours before he had to put in an appearance.

The man stuck his hands in the pockets of his lightweight jacket, hunching his head, directing his steps purposely.

He had only made it a few yards when the sound of tires crunching on gravel stopped him in his tracks.

He stepped back into the shadows of a group of Fir trees watching as a large SUV came around the bend which led to the cabins.

He could not recognize a driver or the vehicle from this distance but it was too late for any casual visitor to simply drop by.

The powerful beams of the car shut down as the driver continued on with only the fog lights to guide his or her way.

The car bypassed the two cabins entirely. It pulled off in a thicket far down the road and the lights clicked off.
Checking Lawford’s place instinctively, the agent found himself settling his hand on his weapon.

He returned his focus to the thicket and the unexplained vehicle.

He moved stealthily forward in a low crouch...

Chapter End Notes

References to movies:

High Anxiety
Cool Hand Luke
Cruisin'...

Chapter Notes

I got this idea while listening to “Cruisin” by Smokey Robinson and added a couple reviewer suggestions while I was at it. :)

I received a funny review back way back in chapter 55 that I’ve been patiently waiting to use... somewhere. I hope she has a good laugh if she reads it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The eternal struggle.

Red Reddington grappled with it this very night. He watched the night sky deepen in hue as it slipped from nautical to astronomical twilight. A range of blue fading from deep aqua to indigo merged effortlessly into the inky black of the heavens.

His calm eyes shifted, taking in the warm glow of soft light from the city tucked in the valley of the majestic mountains. The orange radiance also fading into the dark edges of night.

Pressing a button, the overhead sunroof slid back, giving him a quick unfettered view of the blanket of stars twinkling merrily overhead, the edge of the Milky Way highlighting the tail end of a shooting star.

A breathtaking night... with a breathtaking woman.

He glanced sideways, his thoughts on the silence of the woman beside him as she too, took in the resplendent beauty.

Usually, Lizzy was a chatterbox of questions, suppositions and endless inquiries.

He couldn’t gauge her mood.

Elongated shadows swept over the road as the white headlights moved along trees, road signs and the occasional mailbox.

The yellow hint of reflectors and the eyes of creatures tucked away into the heavy brush, shown brightly as they traveled further away from civilization and deeper into the darkness ahead.

His futile brain ticked away. It wasn’t easy keeping a woman, any woman... entertained. For what Red had in mind, he would have to be especially creative because this woman was... unique, well worth the effort.

But it was more than that even.

Red enjoyed the challenge presented, plain and simple.

He managed to sate Lizzy’s appetite for food. He too enjoyed the fare but... his appetite was running towards the baser things in life now.
Red shifted into a more comfortable position, his pants too restrictive on a certain part of his anatomy.

The short skirt the woman wore lay woefully neglected, the fabric rising far too high on the captivating cream of Lizzy’s exposed thighs.

The flimsy material draped provocatively into the crest between her legs.

He wanted to reach over, run his fingers into that neat little slot. Feel the warm flesh between those heated little thighs.

But... he hoped he had more finesse... more maturity than to simply ‘cop a feel’, like some teenage boy on his first....

An idea sparked.

Red slid a calculating glance to the pretty averted profile, his mind ticking away.

But... would she pick up on the role? It could fail dismally... explode in his face.

That was part of the thrill... the unknown, wasn’t it?

“What time is it?” he murmured aloud.

The woman jostled from her musings instinctively glancing at the sleek dashboard. This thing rivaled a cockpit of an aircraft. It not only displayed a digital readout of the time but the temperature, their location and knowing Red... the trajectory of outbound missiles he may have illegally obtained.

“Eleven twenty-three.” she turned quizzical eyes his way.

“We’re gonna be late...”

Liz watched his profile for some sign, “Late?”

Red turned a lazy stare her way, “The curfew your dad set for us.”

He watched the expressions flit across the pretty face as she... processed.

“Oh my God!” the startlement, the wide-eyed shock... all perfection. “You turn this car around and head home this very instant.”

“Well....” he flicked the lights down, easing the SUV past the cabin with expert precision causing the least amount of noise on the graveled pavement, “I would love to do that...” he turned woeful eyes her way, his face managing a ‘sorry ‘grimace, “...but.”

“Don’t you dare tell me we’ve run out of gas!” she dared him to do so, her body facing him squarely now, hand on her shapely hips.

Red clicked off the engine, the lights dying down almost instantly, the white light fading, leaving them in the dark.

“I filled it up, baby,” he spread apologetic hands, “I don’t know what the problem is... it’s been sluggish the past few miles.” the man fabricated the tale easily, “I’m afraid to push the engine too hard right now. Might overheat...”

Liz looked over the steering wheel and dash as if, by doing so, she could will the car to ‘go’.
"You're the guy... do something." she chided.

"I am." Red assured easily. "I’m letting the engine cool down." he motioned. "It will probably be
good to go in a few minutes."

"We don’t have a few minutes." she clicked the digital readout with a well-manicured nail as a
reminder.

"Hey, your dad knows this old jalopy is temperamental sometimes." Red debated artfully. "He trusts
me to take care of you if anything happens... and I will."

Liz slid him an amused look, “Does he...” she stated teasingly.

“Don’t get bent out of shape.” the waitresses' words coming to mind. “It’s a cool night. I’ve wanted
to show you this secluded, private spot for some time now. I’ve never shared it with anyone before.”

Liz’s amusement grew, “I’ll bet.”

“God’s own truth.” Red held up his hand. If he had a bible, he would have sworn on it, his look said
as much.

Liz thought briefly. What had Red Reddington been like as a gauche, young teenager? She couldn’t
see past the debonair, confident exterior he exuded as a man.

“We might as well get comfortable.” the man in question glanced at the back seat of the car. “...More
room back there.” he indicated with a nod of his head.

“You’re joking, right?” this game was getting out of hand quickly and while Liz held no objections
to ending the evening on a high note... the comfort of the cabin’s king-size bed was calling out to
her.

Red pushed at the interior doors, having flicked the switch to the overhead lights before attempting
the feat.

He walked casually about the car, popping the hatch, allowing the unseasonably warm wind inside.

“All the comforts of home.” he lowered one side of the seats with an effortless push of a button.

“I am not getting back there.” she turned about, crossing her arms over her chest.

Red sighed. She was going to make him work for this one.

All the better.

“Aww, baby, don’t be like that.” he sat on the bumper. “What’s the deal? We can’t sit back sit back
here and look at the stars while the engine cools down?”

Liz scooted back around, her expression a thoughtful one, “Well... I guess that would be okay.” she
exited the car, careful of her bare feet in the tall grass, joining him in time.

Red converted the back area into one large space by now, offering his hand as the woman came
around the end of the car, “See? It’s beautiful out here.”

He encompassed the starry night sky with its myriad of stars shimmering down.

“It is.” she sat comfortably on the bumper, bracing her hands on either side of her body. “It really
“Reminds me of you.” he took a shot looking down at her face in the waning moonlight...

“That’s so sweet of you to say.” she played her part, managing to look aside shyly.

He unclipped his weapon, discretely sitting it aside. She pretended not to notice. “It’s how I think of you,” he mentioned in passing, giving his full attention. “I think of you a lot.”

“Do you?” she queried. “Were you thinking of me when that car hop was making eyes at you?” she improvised.

“Baby, she is nowhere in your league.” he disgruntled. “She looked a little like you... brunette, passably pretty...”

Liz shot him her own disgruntled look.

“You are more than passably pretty. I meant,” he offered hastily, his eyes roaming her silhouette freely, “with a killer body.”

She stretched back, presenting her breasts in a much better light, “Really?”

“I dream about that body.” he put just the right amount of angst in his delivery.

“...You just want me to put out.” she snubbed his efforts.

Loosening his tie, he pulled the slip of silk, tossing it beside them.

“Where would you get such an idea?” he moved decidedly closer, his gaze a suggestive one as it traveled the ripe body. “It’s just that... for a guy,” he sing-songed his head, “… it’s hard.”

Well, that was a true statement if ever there was one.

Liz checked to see if he was telling the truth as well. She kept her gaze pinned.

“We have all these things happening in our bodies and...” he remembered back long, long ago, “it’s easier for you women, I guess.”

Liz leaned on her elbow, measuring the length of his play toy. “You think so?”

“Must be.” Red held his smile for the bold way she was looking at his hard-on. “You turn it on and off so easily.”

“I know what you’re doing.” she lifted a sultry stare. “You want to get in my pants.”

“You’re wearing a skirt... technically.” he helpfully pointed out.

His fingers brushed the flowing material to prove his point.

“And I don’t want that at all.” his eyes told her how much it was taking for him to sit here, making idle talk. “I just want us to be... closer.”

“How much... closer?” she leaned to his chest provocatively, her breath fanning his face smelling of cinnamon.

“I’ve been thinking about the last time, that’s all.” his finger traced the edge of her skirt. “You let me
“Only a little,” she pouted, “through my blouse.”

“You got me so hot.” he curved his hand about her hip, drawing her into his sphere, “I ached all night, baby,” his tongue slipped expertly into the slightly parted mouth. His arms pulling her close to finish the kiss to his satisfaction, “...just like now.”

“There was nothing wrong with what we did.”

“Oh, I know that, sweetheart.” he gently lay her back, his arms cradling her body lovingly. “You know I’d never pressure you.” his palm brought the hem of her skirt higher as he pressed his body half-on, half off her slender form. “I’ll only go as far as you want. I swear to, God.”

Liz looked above her wondering how she got into this prone position so very quickly. She was more than slightly amused.

Leaning on his elbow, his thick fingers idly danced over the shapely curves.

He spread his fingers just barely touching the beginning swell of that sweet succulent back-side, “I stopped last time, didn’t I? Just like I said?” he coerced her to see things his way.

“Well...” she squirmed her bottom into his waiting palm, “yes... you did.”

“Yeah, I did.” he cupped the rounded flesh, pushing her into his arousal. “Do you feel that?”

Liz’s breath escaped in a soft sigh. She closed her eyes, “...Yes.”

“That’s what you do to me, each and every time.”

“I know but....”

“I’m just saying,” he backtracked, his middle finger rubbing teasingly along the crease of her ass. “I love your skin... how it feels all warm and you smell good.” he nuzzled the front of her blouse. “So good.” he tugged the blouse free of her skirt waistband, joining his lips to hers passionately.

Liz moaned softly, their breaths mingling.

His finger deftly popped the pearl buttons on her top, exposing her bra to his lecherous gaze.

“You shouldn’t do that,” she whispered in enticement.

“That’s like saying,” he covered one straining lace covered nipple, his heated breath taking her breath away, “I shouldn’t breathe.”

Her skin erupted in gooseflesh for his antics and she lifted her mounds for his ministrations, groaning a breathy sigh.

Her tiny pink areolas strained against the white lace of her bra. The alabaster flesh pushing at the confinement, the heavy mounds overfilling the low cups with every breath she took.

Red ran his hand along the slender collarbone, his fingers sliding between the warm valley. The creamy mounds rubbed against his fingertips.

“You are better than a damned pin-up,” he recalled a few of those in his time as well. “Every man’s fantasy....” he murmured quietly, “*my* fantasy.”
Red’s scowl was fixed and concentrated as he stared longingly at the beginning swirl of amber circle his handiwork produced.

It was almost better than the real thing... partially seeing the beauty he knew the lace hid.

....Almost.

Liz’s heart thumped wildly, the ache between her legs surged, an overwhelming heat settling in her abdomen.

Fiddling with the buttons on his shirt she finally pulled them free. She loved the feel of his bared flesh pressed against hers.

He barely touched her lips, his mouth emitting hot, heavy breaths, canceling out all coherent thought.

It was as if he was denying her full access which maddened her senses. She strained nearer, trying to fulfill the need his actions caused.

Red’s fingers spread, traveling the slope of her spine until he encountered the ridge of the lace bra.

With one expert flick, the elastic bunched from the weight of her heavy mounds, freeing them from confinement.

Red’s hand slid under her blouse, taking the unresisting cup of the bra in its wake until he felt the stiff tip puckering against his palm.

The pliant orb bobbed erotically having been freed.

Liz moaned appreciatively, grunting as his experienced fingers gently rolled, tweaked, explored the wonder of her body.

With each touch, she trembled expectantly, her moans becoming a melodious symphony to the man’s ears.

He leaned, shaping the tiny nub teasingly with his tongue, his breath washing over the ripe melon. He palmed the full soft breast, kneading it tenderly.

Liz’s fingers threaded the back of his nape, holding him firm to his pastime. In doing so, she forced the quivering nub of her nipple into his waiting exploration.

She arched her throat, groaning rapturously as his hot hollow engulfed her flesh.

Red drew on the distended peak lasciviously, all his yearning expressed in that one simple movement.

“You’ve–” Liz breathed her awe, “never done this before.”

“I’ve wanted to,” he was falling more into his role, feeling very much like an oversexed teenager right now.

He wanted to see her nakedness, to recall the experience of a young man looking at his first Playboy centerfold, “I want to... feel you up so badly.”

“W-What does that mean?” Liz’s center strained with the ache of the reality of the meaning. Every inch of her body, calling out for his touch.
Red ran his hand up the outside of her leg, transferring deftly but unhurriedly to the opposite thigh, pushing the appendage apart.

Liz closed her legs, a Herculean task feeling as she did, “No!” she pouted up at him.

“I’m just showing you.” Red’s eyes told her, he knew she wanted to be persuaded. “You asked what I meant.”

“I don’t want to know.” she was being totally unreasonable, and she knew it but... hey, he wanted to play.

She hoped his patience would withstand the test. There was no way in hell she would not experience Red Reddington tonight.

Red returned his interest elsewhere, trying a frontal assault.

He captured the rosy bud, his tongue flicking rapidly over the more than sensitive skin, the gentle tug diligent for some few moments.

Lizzy’s legs loosened with each passing sweep of his tongue, drawing a soft breathy moan from his lover’s chest.

His nose nuzzled the lacy garment out of his way. He made certain his hand did not move an inch on her thigh.

Liz unconsciously squeezed her thighs almost rhythmically. She was not aware of doing so but the rising ache in her core dictated her behavior.

Red Reddington was aware, however. His eyes traveled the bared expanse of the full, ripe melons he uncovered.

“You are beautiful, baby.” his tone low and affected.

“Ohh!” Liz gasped, crossing her arms over her nudity in the age-old gesture of feminine modesty.

“Don’t hide from me.” that rough, gravelly tone caused a ripple of anticipation to traverse her body.

He gently captured one small wrist, his eyes holding hers easily.

“Didn’t you like it?” he provoked purposely, she knew. “When I sucked on your nipples?”

Her nipples stiffened painfully.

“Y-Yes.” she confessed breathlessly unable to pull her eyes from those all-seeing orbs that stared back at her.

She could feel that motionless hand laying so still and innocently poised between her legs.

The need to squeeze her thighs and writhe until this fucking ache subsided was a growing need....she wanted his hand to move higher still until he finally touched...

And what was worse... Red Reddington knew exactly what she was feeling.

“It felt good,” his eyes measured her hands more so, then what they attempted to cover, “…didn’t it?”

His lack of finesse amused him but there was something to be said about the straight and to the point
strategy as well.

Lizzy’s thighs had gapped considerably with the past few seconds.

He itched to inch his hands... higher.

“...It felt... okay.” she had to shift her eyes at such an enormous lie. *It felt phenomenal.*

Taking the slight in his stride for he knew it was a lie, Red lifted her wrist when she resisted, he stubbornly tightened his efforts, achieving his goal. His mouth descended.

“No..” Liz felt, at that moment as if she missed her calling, “... don’t.” she could have been a passable actress, “Stop...”

If he did. She would kill him.

Red’s lips and tongue quieted her protests instantly. His hand cupped her breast passionately, the nimble fingers working their magic.

In seconds, Liz was mewing contentedly like a little kitten.

Teenage boys, while crude and unrefined, were on the right track... get to the good stuff with as little fuss and bother as possible.

Red suckled, teased and bit on the delicious treat he found, taking Lizzy’s mind off his true objective.

His palm began a featherlike advancement up her thigh, dancing over her silky skin.

He transferred some much-needed attention to her forgotten breast, shifting his weight, his leg thrown carelessly into the chasm he created between her legs.

Liz pushed weakly on his chest, mewing her protests but he hastily squelched that denial.

His index finger stroked the entire length of her center, pressing just enough to feel the outline beneath that damp material which covered his prize... *if* he played the game correctly.

Liz whimpered her delight.

“I love sucking your tits.” a little of the baser needs he was experiencing surfaced. He enjoyed the freedom to be blunt, disguising the bumbling blurs of a teenage boy. “I could do it all night and not get enough.”

Liz hesitantly lowered the barrier between them, her fingers stroking his neckline seductively, sending shivers of pleasure along the man’s back and arms.

“It feels good,” he needed to hear it, “doesn’t it, baby.” he coaxed the woman to his way of thinking.

“G-God, yes.” she wasn’t sure if she meant his ministrations to her breasts or... other parts to which he attended.

His thumb slipped under the lace of her panties, running a constant back-and-forth beat across the all too sensitive wetness he found.

“W-We can’t do this.” her voice lacked any real conviction she knew. She willed her legs to close but... it felt so very good. His touch, the grunts of delight he emitted from time to time.
“Just a little longer, baby.” Red asked, his husky voice strained with need. His thumb passed teasingly over her clit to sway her decision.

An electric jolt shot through her body for his antics. She moaned her gratitude.

Red brushed her lips fleetingly with his own, refusing any real connection as yet.

He was driving her over the edge.

Her entire body was tuned to the man’s every whim, truth known.

Liz’s pride kept her in the game.

She tried to close her legs. She would show him...

“I can make you feel so good.” he rasped, his middle finger slipping into the hot cavern of her sex.

“Ohh!” Liz’s legs fell apart.

The skirt was bunched far above her legs now, the fabric laying on her abdomen.

Red took the time to glance at his domain.

“Jesus...” he breathed amorously at the sight.

The startling white lace of her panties lay against the contrast of her skin. Tiny bows trimmed the waistband lining her hip bone. He thought that was so cute.

His took in the dark thatch of hair that lay beneath and the shapely gap in her thighs.

A gap he would soon fill.

He kept his finger very still. A smile spreading, when he felt Lizzy slide her body provocatively up and down the filler.

He put a stop to that immediately, removing his finger from inside her body.

“No!” Liz gasped her shock, bereft suddenly, her eyes flying open.

Hooking the delicate lace, he pushed it aside, his eyes taking in the soft fluff covering her labia.

He grunted deep in his throat, thrilled by the sight. He traced the dark thatch of hair shadowed beneath the flimsy lingerie.

Liz felt the cool air on her exposed genitals wanting him so badly. Crying out for fulfillment only he could give.

Her fingers brushed the hair on his chest feeling the hardened muscles flex under the wealth of curly hair.

The pebble of his nipple tightened noticeably.

A tingling thrill shot through Liz at the realization. She was affecting him as much as he was her.

“I don’t think we should–”

His fingertip teasingly circled her slickness, causing a well of cream to trickle from the area.
Liz gasped, her body on fire.

Her brow furrowed critically when she felt that finger reenter her, inching into the creamy depths.

A searing ache spread through her sex in response.

She moaned piteously, despair washing over her as he withdrew his gift.

“Shh...” the man soothed quietly, peppering her neckline with small kisses. “Shh, baby.” he breathed out, his tongue gingerly flicking her rosy mouth, searching and connecting soundly at length.

Inching his way back into the tight hole, he gently pumped his finger into the rippled tunnel.

He increased the passion of his kiss, his thumb passing laboriously over her clitoris.

Dipping his head lower, breaking the lascivious kiss, he gently nipped the little nub. His tongue danced erotically over the tortured peak, his breath hot and heavy.

He did not feel like a teen any longer. He felt like a man... with a man’s wants and needs.

Red nuzzled his nose into the fragrant valley between the plump breasts, his fingers catching the top of her panties.

His hardness had grown by leaps and bounds.

He desperately needed an outlet.

He left the succulent feast her breast supplied, following an agonizingly indolent, invisible path, marking her ribs and tummy as he went, staking his claim.

He tugged the panties, his thumb hooking the material, easing it down, managing to persuade her to lift her hips. The delicate lace slid over the shapely bottom. Red was determined to reach his objective.

Liz realized his intent, her heat rising to volcanic proportions.

A hasty hand snaked out, covering his intended target but already her body was crying out for capitulation.

She felt carpet against her bare flesh, wondering at his abilities.

She didn’t even remember the incident.

Raising to his knees, Red gradually unzipped the front of his slacks taking in the sight of the white lace wrapped about her thighs.

Liz watched, transfixed, “I...you can’t do that.” she breathed her growing excitement.

“Actually,” he was working his belt, his movement efficient and unhurried, “I can do it... very well.” the man’s husky voice strained.

Liz knew that was no lie.

“I mean...” she faltered, something coming to mind, “I... I didn’t... you know,” she bid him to look, her fingers spreading revealing just enough to tantalize, “...shave or... anything.”
The soft fluff of her curls bristled quietly as it was revealed to his gaze.

The tight damp flesh of the pink mons beckoned him.

His tongue darted out, wetting his parched lips. His cock twitched painfully in his trousers at the idea of taking her in his mouth, tasting the delectable treat.

He unconsciously rubbed the ache in his cock.

Liz watched the hard bulge move this way and that with his maneuver.

The small hand deliberately covered his sight once again.

A disgruntled sound from his throat caused a blush of pleasure on Liz’s cheeks.

“We are moving so fast.” her tone was velvety soft. “Maybe—”

“Move your hand.” he gritted, his eyes holding a burning flame.

She captured her lip with her teeth, biting at the flesh. She loved when he was masterful...

“I don’t want you to be... disappointed.”

Red breathed in her scent in the clear mountain air, his system attuned, his blood heating.

He clenched his jaw, “Then... move your hand.” he took her wrist, accomplishing the task himself.

Liz waited, her nerves alive and tingling.

Red’s eyes surveyed his territory, “You are stunning,” he growled deeply, “just the way you are.”

He traced the neatly trimmed bush, his gaze lingering... possessive.

Liz flushed, breathing out shakily.

She knew the game had come to an end.

This was Red Reddington standing... kneeling before her.

All male... confident... all-consuming.

His fingers threaded through the small hairs he played in, his heart thudding hard in his chest.

“I love this,” he continued to gaze upon her, his tone soft, “so beautiful... so feminine.” he seemed entranced by the alluring vision.

His fingers danced lightly over the slippery little surface, petting the soft, dark curls.

Sensing... hearing how much her body turned Red on made her quiver inside.

“When I think of you, I think of sex,” he admitted, “in its most natural... primitive state.”

The low intense tone thrilled her no end.

The light eyes lifted sensually, “You are the sexiest woman I have ever encountered.”

“...It lacks sensation.” she felt bold and adventurous suddenly. Wanting desperately to live up to his
words. “When I... masturbate.”

Her fingers filtered with his over the tiny bristles of hair.

Red watched the process, his chest heaving laboriously.

“I want to watch that.” his throat was parched. He had barely been able to get the words out.

His fingers trembled.

“I need to... see it.” those eyes took her breath away. Liz flushed with heat, not embarrassment.

He passed his thumb over her clit adding pressure here and there, “Promise me something.” he whispered seductively.

Liz moved into his touch, “W-What?” her concentration was off. *What was it he wanted?*

His hand slid her panties past her thighs. They rested at her ankles.

Red measured the different hues if the beautiful flesh, captivated. “Promise me...” he leaned, his nose trailing gently along her inner thigh.

He felt Lizzy jolt at his touch.

Flitting his tongue over the silky flesh of that thigh, he tugged the lace hindrance off her legs, his tone rough with involvement.

“...You won’t touch this.” he grunted luxuriously, her scent alluring, drawing him closer, “It’s mine.” he leaned, making himself comfortable between her spread legs.

Liz gasped sharply, not having realized the man had advanced that far.

“It belongs to me, Elizabeth.” as if to prove his point, his tongue snaked out, flicking teasingly over her clit.

She shivered, a searing heat running through her veins. She moaned her encouragement.

“Promise.” his voice was almost scolding. He undulated his tongue about his favorite spot moaning deeply as a burst of scent and taste inundated his senses.

Liz’s entire body shuddered, a weak groan of acquiescence escaped her parted, panting lips.

“I... p-promise.” she whispered, parting her legs to give better access.

Red inserted his middle finger into the molten depths, feeling her response.

Liz lifted her bottom gratefully into the gentle pumping, grasping for a stay hold of equilibrium.

“Good girl.” his voice rumbled with sensuality.

The man groaned as his slick finger slid free of her tight hold and against his tongue, gifting him with her sweet essence, “Very good...”

The man shouldered closer nudging her creamy thighs further apart, caressing, searching, exploring the vulnerable flesh.

The sensation of his tongue gently parting her folds... the five o’clock shadow on his face brushing
tantalizingly against her over-sensitive skin.

His hot, welcome breath stimulated, excited her to new heights.

Her sex tightened deliciously, a sharp agonizing pang of liquid heat traveled through her center in waves.

She trembled with repressed desire.

The man’s lips moved erotically in a sensual rhythm, his tongue matching the action.

He was kissing her center very much the same way he did her mouth.

Tears pricked her eyes. He was caressing her so tenderly... so lovingly... down there.

He lifted, placing a tender kiss on the peak of her sex.

Liz stared at the man, her chin quivering uncontrollably. She was deeply affected... more than she thought she would ever be.

She sniffed quietly, unable to control her turbulent emotions.

Red hesitated, lifting from his pastime, his eyes meeting hers.

He sensed a problem, her face confirming his hypothesis, “...What’s wrong?”

He was instantly concerned, his body tensing.

_Dammit!

He abruptly realized... he wasn’t playing the game. He dropped the ball somewhere along the way but...

“Nothing’s wrong.” Liz sniffed once again, her smile quivering, the small chin lifting.

Red tenderly, carefully eased his finger free.

The blue eyes misted with tears of joy for his tenderness.

“Baby...” Red’s senses were telling him something else. He gently smoothed her hair back, his eyes searching her face religiously, “what did I do?” he was at a loss, a first for him. “Did I hurt you?”

He searched her person hastily for signs.

“You’re making love to me.” Liz suddenly realized.

The game stopped yes, but somewhere along the line, it evolved... at least on Red Reddington’s part.

“What a lovely thing, Red.” she misted again, “the way you were... touching me.”

“What are you–” he shook his head, agitated somewhat.

“It was so gentle...” she remembered, her love and affection for the man growing by leaps and bounds, “so... loving.”

To say Red was confused was an understatement. His face showed as much.
He ran a restless hand over his head.
The large blue eyes rested on him, long lashes spiked with wetness, framing the deep azure depths... taking his breath away.

He relaxed, comprehension dawning.
Lizzy had moved past the game as well. It had just taken a little longer.

Sensations and emotions were heightened to the extreme.
If you immersed yourself in the game... the role, coming out of the moment was difficult.
Emotions strong enough to break the spell shook one to the core.
He leaned, brushing her mouth, a small smile lightening his features.
She had felt when his emotions changed, morphed into a raw, urgent need.
But she also felt his reserve, his need to take the utmost care with her emotions.
No matter the cost to his own system.
It was second nature to Red, but he was gratified Lizzy recognized his efforts.
“I would hope, this is not the first instance you have felt... how very much you move me,” he stated almost absently, his emotions still involved with the need to connect physically with the woman.
“It was different.” she was certain.
“Each time...” he nodded minutely, “is different. Because you allow more of your true self through.”
She was befuddled, “What do you–”
“Your walls are dropping but then...” he lifted a subdued brow, “so are mine, I suppose.”
“Is that what I felt?” she was enthralled and a little frightened. Could she handle Red Reddington with all his many-faceted traits and darkly brooding emotions... that he kept hidden from others.
“I am falling in love with you more and more as each day passes,” he stated so simply, it shocked her senses.
Red’s love revealed itself in tiny increments a deep abiding emotion, which she believed to be genuine and steadfast.
“Whether that is a good thing or bad, remains to be seen,” he muttered.
“I don’t understand.”
“It’s a good thing for me.” he quipped. “You will have to decide on your own if I am worth the trouble.”
She relaxed a bit, kissing him languidly.
Red always tasted of the most delightful things. Exotic liqueurs, expensive tobacco, delicious chocolate truffles... always wondrous substances.
Tonight, even with his previous pastime... it was spearmint gum. She had not seen him chewing any sort of gum this evening. The man was an enigma who made her smile wistfully... an amazing puzzle to fit together, a mystery to be solved.

The hesitancy of her kiss brought a smile, “Is the game afoot?”

She wrinkled her nose, shaking her head negatively, “Sometimes I’m just not sure how to... approach you.”

He chuckled his delight, “Sans clothing comes to mind... what are you talking about?” he genuinely wanted to know. “I would hope you could ‘approach me’ at any time, for any reason.”

She shook her head. He wasn’t getting her meaning, “...I’m in love with you as well.”

“Good.” he approved whole-heartedly.

“It’s a wonderful feeling but...” she cuddled into his arms, snuggling to him, “it scares me too.”

Red’s eyes smiled. He planted a kiss on her shiny locks, “Any overwhelming emotions oft-times are frightening. Hard to deal with.”

He drew back a little, taking in the lovely features, “Are you trying to tell me something?”

Liz wasn’t sure how much to confess. What if what he felt was not as deep as her emotions?

“I’m just so glad you want to be with me.” she lifted shining eyes. “I’m so glad we’re... together.”

“That is the singular most important statement anyone has ever made to me.” his eyes held hers willfully, a dark glowing ember deep inside, “...Ever, in my existence.”

Liz’s heart hurt with joy.

She lifted her arms about his neckline, her mouth flowering passionately under his.

“I love you.” she sighed her contentment, nuzzling into his neckline, whispering the words.

Red’s arms tightened systematically, “I love you more.” he chuckled, more than willing to play this particular game.

“I love you to the moon and back.” she inhaled his exotic scent, nuzzling into the leathery flesh of his neckline as she nipped him playfully.

“I love you to the depth and breadth...” he had taken a moment to consider his answer.

“Depth and breadth of... what?” she countered, wondering if he would remember the first time he had said this to her? There was no way he could top that moment.

“The depth of God’s ability to forgive and the breadth of his awe-inspiring universe.”

Liz was shocked by such eloquence.

Red’s tongue slipped past the delicate moisture of her lips, his arms tightening on the small of her back.

He pressed her body lovingly to his feeling, a deep tremor run its length.
He broke the kiss, his brow furrowed, “Are you chilled?”

“No...” she whispered, her eyes shining with love for the man.

“Do you want to go home?” It was a two-fold question.

Did she need to go back to the cabin... end this? Or... did she wish to pick up where they left off?

“I want to stay,” she traced his face with her loving gaze, “with you.”

Red’s lips brushed over hers seductively, a gentle sweep, drawing a breathy moan from the woman.

He deepened the kiss second by urgent second, working ardently for more contented sighs.

“Thank the Lord.” he growled his relief, settling a knee between her legs, nudging them apart.

“‘Cause I really... really,” he eagerly sucked her neckline, his hot breath titillating, “need this time
with you.”

Liz mewed breathlessly feeling the rock-solid evidence of his statement nudge her inner thigh.

The heat took only seconds to rise for the man’s hands were fanning a flame to life, traveling every
inch of her body, stopping in all the right places.

His large palm cupped a bared breast, his thumb eliciting a response from her already straining bud.

She ran a painfully stroking pass over his engorged penis.

He grunted, encouraging such familiarity on her part.

He felt her rapid heartbeat through the full mounds of her breasts cradled so lovingly against his
chest, as he slid his fingers over her tumescent clitoris into the hot tunnel awaiting his exploration.

Liz’s kisses turned his insides to a quivering mess of jelly.

He pushed offending material of his slacks out of the way, grappling inside the confinement of his
boxers to release his painful erection.

The night air brushed enticingly against his heated flesh. His long, thick shaft flexed its freedom, the
head throbbing mercilessly.

His thigh gently shoved her legs apart, his eyes molten stones as he surveyed the handiwork he
revealed.

Taking himself in hand, he purposely ran his length along Lizzy’s slick, slippery labia, watching his
progress with avid interest.

Liz’s breath was raspy and uneven, her body lifting for his purpose.

He pushed incessantly at the gaping hole, parting the resistant skin teasingly.

Liz jerked, her breasts bobbing luxuriously.

“Let me, baby.” he whispered, sliding deliberately along the length of the wet crease at an agonizing
pace, testing the sensitive flesh, “…relax.”

Did she want the game to resume as well?
Women...

Red sighed mentally. No matter. Whatever it took was what he was going to do.

“It won’t hurt.” he panted shakily, his muscles quivering with barely contained lust, “Just the tip...”

Were they playing again? Liz felt her abdomen contract in response to the sexy intonation of his voice.

She wanted to please him. Desperately.

“I’ve... never...” she tested the water, her small hands holding him at bay. It was the very last thing she wanted in reality, but... what the hell.

She lifted doe-eyes slowly, “Well... once or twice with... you know..” her eyes deepened. “I have a few... toys.”

“Shit,” Red’s tone dropped to a sensual caress. “Toys... you say?” it was beyond difficult to speak clearly.

Red’s breathing deepened as he listened to the story she wove, the imagery she painted for him. His fists curled tightly, envisioning Lizzy with her hands between her legs, crying out as she brought herself to orgasm.

It was a stunning picture indeed.

And he wanted to play with that vision... wanted to lose himself in the world she created.

She nodded minutely, “Is it the same?”

“Yeah...” he improvised, “the very same. Your toys don’t hurt, do they?”

“No,” she silkily agreed, “well... what I’ve been able to use of them.” she bat large eyes at the man.

Red groaned deep in his chest, understanding the hint well enough, “Well then... what harm can just the tip of my,” he motioned, “...do?”

At any other time, this conversation would amuse him greatly, but right now, all he wanted was to enter her tight hole... fall into the sensual world that was Elizabeth Keen.

He was intelligent enough to know how to accomplish his goal.

He would figure out a way to work himself into her hot, succulent body if it killed him.

“We should stop.” she was pretty sure that should be her line along about now. She finally understood why teenage girls had such a difficult time saying ’no’.

Liz moaned hesitantly as Red shifted, the bulbous head passed purposely against her straining vagina.

“Let me.” he rasped roughly. “Just the head, baby. It will feel so damned good. I promise.”

Her eyes fluttered shut, she offered a tiny gasp. The pressure of the thick head at her center made her wish to obey anything asked of her.

Red moaned lowly as his cock oozed liquid heat, saturating the tiny hole as he prepared her for his
coming invasion.

Liz braced her palms on his shoulders, shaking her head minutely... playing her part to the hilt, the blue eyes managed a worried confusion.

“Just relax, baby.” Red’s voice shook with restrained lust. “I’ll do all the work... you won’t regret a thing.”

Liz knew gospel when she heard it but she still managed to shove weakly against the muscles rippling under her fingertips.

Pushing gently, Red breached the taut labia. He rasped a rather vulgar oath, euphoria rushing through his veins.

The man’s head fell back, his eyes closing to the rapturous joining he was about to partake.

“Jesus Christ!” he hissed, the ridge of his head pushing resolutely past the tight ring. He was instantly clamped inside the snug tunnel.

Liz cried out faintly. The sensation a joyous one. One which felt at once both familiar, yet foreign. She knew it was Red inside her, of course, and yet, the man was so skillful at play-acting, it almost felt as if they actually were some fumbling teenagers... on a country road somewhere secluded and shut off from the entire world.

Which is exactly where she wanted to be... with him.

Red lowered his eyes to the sight of their union. His bulging shaft appeared almost obscene against the small mound he invaded.

Pushing stubbornly against the resistance she was offering, the breathy exclamation of denial tested the man’s control.

He knew Lizzy was using her knowledge of the inner workings of his mind against him at this moment.

It made the game so much more challenging.

Why they had fallen back into the scenario, he could not have said.

All Red knew was he was having the time of his life.

Quick short breaths escaped Lizzy’s body.

Lips that called out to be kissed by someone who knew how to accomplish the feat, beckoned him.

The woman could not believe how good his penis felt. How very sensitive she was... down there.

The thick head raked against a bundle of nerves he usually by-passed.

She could not stop the continuous stream of gasps and moans the feeling elicited.

It felt... incredible.

It took everything Red had to keep still, to hold back from sliding his length into that luscious caress he knew awaited him.
But the knowledge that... “You like that.” edged out his libido’s need. His tone sounded edgy and tense even to his own ears.

“...Y-Yes.” she whimpered sweetly.

A wave of heat traversed his body for the hesitant acknowledgment. He groaned his gratitude, his palm kneading her breast religiously.

Bracing his body on his outstretched arms, the man swiveled his hips, a purpose in mind.

He watched his head disappear then... reappear with his steady, deliberate and agonizing pace.

His vision blurred momentarily, the emotions too raw as her labia parted and collapsed about his girth.

The lure of her delectable clit tugged gently at his movements. The white fluid of her arousal wetted his head, the silken liquid aiding his efforts.

“Damn.” his whispered awe washed over the woman, her reaction intensifying.

“It fills me...” a broken cry escaped her as Liz enveloped herself within the turbulent emotions the man caused, “... so full.”

Her tunnel fluttered convulsively as she pushed up to better feel his width but Red held back.

Capturing her chin with his fingers, he tilted her face to watch the chaos he was creating inside the woman’s body.

“Let me in.” his tone brooked no refusal, “I need to give you my whole cock.”

Liz’s hot panted breath brushed over his face. The vulgarity somehow heightening the moment for her.

“Every last inch,” his fingers shook visibly, his voice a shadowed whisper of repressed desire. “You can take it,” he eased down, his features set, “I know you can.”

Liz shuddered uncontrollably.

Red grasped her hair in a tight fist, his mouth parting hers hungrily. In seconds, his tongue mimicked the agonizing motion of his cock as he sank deeper and deeper... pausing at each inch gained to acclimate himself to the wonders her body could offer.

Liz was totally taken by surprise as her clit’s ache intensified to the extreme. Sudden waves of a strong orgasm grasped her body shaking it to its core.

Flame surged up like quick-silver as the woman cried out her elation.

Red’s eyes slid shut for a brief time when she quivered about him. His dark, brooding gaze penetrated hers, his jaw pulsing with checked reserve.

The man’s jaw shifted into a tight hold, his breathing labored... his chest heaving visibly.

“Tell me you want it.” nothing else would suffice, his impassioned statement left no room for debate.

Liz’s eyes measured him languidly. What she ‘wanted’ was to give him as much of herself as the man had shared.
She had been waiting for his control to snap... for him to reach his limits as she had done seconds earlier.

She forgot with whom she was dealing with but yet maybe...even Red Reddington had a breaking point.

Testing her theory, Liz wriggled about under him, her movements sliding his cock farther into her body.

“Son of a...” he snarled, his hand grasping those mischievous hips to still their actions, “bitch!”

She blinked innocently, wondering if that word had been directed at her.

“You want to play?” he asked tightly. “We can do that, Elizabeth.”

She felt reprimanded, like a naughty school girl who had been displeased her Professor.

What a delicious feeling.

“Answer me!” Red growled harshly, pulling back deliberately, she knew, denying his own needs. “Say... the fucking words.”

His crown slid purposely against her clitoris giving added incentive.

Liz sighed her contentment, lifting into the seductive touch.

But Red pulled back, beads of perspiration visible on his temples.

She was affecting him. It was enough... more than... enough.

“Yes,” she whispered almost eagerly.

“Yes... what?” he demanded.

“I want you inside me.” she gasped brokenly. “Deep...inside.” she could almost feel the ‘width and breadth’ of him. “I want to feel you.”

“You will, honey.” he panted his relief, his entire system attuned to her every wish now, “It’s so fucking hard for you.”

Diligently pumping his hips, he finally inched his ramrod cock deep into the tiny crevice, spreading her gradually.

Liz’s brow furrowed. She expected him to slide home. He earned the reward after all.

Her orgasm left her slick as hell, primed and ready for a proper connection.

She clamped as hard as she could about the pulsating girth willing the man to complete her.

“Shit...” Red groaned the realization, “You have the tightest pussy I’ve ever...” he trailed away.

Not the best time to bring up past... encounters, but it was true.

Liz pretended not to note the slip... but did chuckle inwardly at the slight grimace that crossed the man’s face for his faux pas.

Grasping her knee, he pulled it tight against his side, enjoying her moan of pleasure when his cock
raked roughly against her pink clitoris.

The tiny nub was once again, throbbing and alive with sensation.

Liz moaned as the intense pleasure racked her body.

“That feels damned good doesn’t it, baby.” his own organ was rippling with the effect.

His fingers reached, parting her already spread folds, allowing him a little freedom to sink even deeper.

“What you need…” his voice captivated, “is a good fucking.”

She could hardly dispute the fact.

“I can do that.” he promised. “I probably need it a hell of a lot more than you,” he admitted sotto voce, his attention fixed and riveted.

Elizabeth lifted her arms above her head, stretching in a kitten-like manner, basking in the rhythmic motion of their union.

The rising tide of sweet bliss inched closer.

Red caught her bared breast, suckling her feverishly.

“Feel me…” he willed, “inside you.”

The core of her being convulsed, his cock rippling inside the recesses of her body, the friction causing delicious pangs of awakening to stir.

She marveled at the feel of him... it was exquisite.

The sweet pang fluctuated around his shaft, Lizzy’s breathy cries of enjoyment stimulated him beyond scope.

He hit a special spot, feeling her form stiffen with delight, a shaky exclamation escaping the woman’s throat.

Red buried his face into the fragrant curve of her neckline, his hot breath fanning her electrified flesh.

“That excites the hell out of me.” he had no trouble admitting the fact.

Liz’s breath quickened, the tightness in her abdomen signifying she felt the same.

Leaning into his forearms, Red surrounded her with his warmth, murmuring softly, “Don’t stop... don’t hold back.”

Liz’s sex pulsed obediently, grasping the man’s erection.

Red groaned brokenly, biting her neckline teasingly as a reward.

“Come for me.” his tone laced with desperation.

But... she already had. Didn’t he know, wasn’t he aware?

“I love how it feels...” he whispered his encouragement, “do it again... .” his rough voice rushed over
her like thick honey.

Of course, he knew. He *always knew*.

Liz tensed sharply. She wasn’t aware she had been holding her breath.

Red wedged his arm between their bodies, his thumb rubbing teasingly against her swollen nub.

Liz felt as if she would shatter into a million pieces if she gave into his incessant prodding.

Her emotions were raw... Her body crying out for release.

But... if she didn’t give in... she felt her flesh would burn alive, her body would be consumed in flames.

“I love you, Elizabeth.”

The simple statement was her undoing.

She flung her arms about the man’s neckline, her mouth searching ardently for his.

Red pushed repeatedly into the tight sheath, his thrusts increasing fervently as the tension in his own body mounted.

“God, your pussy feels so good.” he panted warmly against her neck, sending shivers down her back. “It’s so good...” his voice shook with heightened passion. “Shit...I can’t stop.”

Liz’s stomach tightened watching... listening to the man lose himself to the passionate exchange.

“Baby...” his large hand wrapped about her nape, his fingers tightening in her thick hair, “I’m gonna come.”

Within seconds the most arousing, primal cry ripped from Elizabeth’s throat.

Red’s low, rumbling growl followed by a sharp guttural gasp, mingled with yet another feminine groan.

The atmosphere was charged with sexual tension for one brief eternity as both lovers found a common release in each other’s body.

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Ressler inched forward quietly, careful not to disturb the ground over which he walked.

Limbs and dried leaves were making a rough go of it.

A twig snapped under his weight. The man hesitated, grimacing for the fact.

The sound was muffled in the loose dirt. He hoped he had not given his position... or presence away.

Focusing his vision into the inky darkness, nearing the darkened outline of the large vehicle which loomed in the near distance.

He pulled up short. Even in the shadowed area, the glint of the deep silver alerted the Agent to the true color of the car.

It had appeared black in the indistinct light of a quarter moon.
Was that Reddington’s SUV? If so, what the hell would the man be doing out here in the middle of nowhere... this late at night?

The agent halted, uncertain as to his next move.

He was able to see through the windshield into the interior of the car. The front seats were unoccupied.

Creeping forward, weapon drawn, pointed down, out to his side, as was protocol.

He scanned the nearby surroundings.

Shadows hid much. The heavy brush and overgrowth a possible lurking spot for... anyone or anything.

His ears strained for any sound amid the rustling wind coming off the mountain range surrounding them.

He cocked his head, attuned to the low tone of a male voice carried on the warm breeze.

Ressler started. Lifting his weapon instantly.

A worried scowl puckered his forehead for a very feminine cry pricked the silence of the night.

His eyes dilated, his mind focusing. The man eased carefully down the side of the vehicle, alert and cautious.

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Red tensed.

Elizabeth felt the change, seeking him out.

The chiseled jawline was set, the full lips tight, pressed together.

Grasping his weapon, he sat his free hand on Elizabeth’s torso, stilling the woman’s normal reaction.

He first caught the movement as a shadow passed in his peripheral vision.

Red’s demeanor alerted Elizabeth. She remained still and silent waiting it out.

He placed his finger to his lips, signifying she should remain quiet.

Red turned, following the shadowy figures trek. He waited, gun targeted. He hastily adjusted his clothing best he was able and now was poised... weapon pointing out the opened hatch.

Ressler weighed his options. His senses told him, he had been seen. The night was too still. The hairs on the back of his neck tingled with alarm.

“Federal Agent!” he barked his best command tone.

Using what shield the back panel of the vehicle offered, which wasn’t much, if whoever was in the back of this damned car decided simply to shoot through the flimsy metal which seemingly protected him.

Red’s finger lifted off the trigger of his weapon with a heavy sigh.
“Exit the vehicle immediately!”

Elizabeth’s eyes widened drastically, a small gasp of shock escaping her.

Red’s large hand clamped over her mouth, silencing her instantly. The man’s dark eyes penetrated hers, the look on his face demanding she comply. She quickly jerked her head, understanding the parameters he sat down.

“Aren’t you…” Red spread his hands out to the Universe, his tone rather unfriendly.

Ressler lowered his weapon, annoyed beyond belief, “What the hell…” he shifted about the vehicle, his own ire present, “are you doing out…?” his words trailed away.

Federal Agents were trained observers.

Ressler observed… a set of men’s shoes laying haphazardly on the ground before him, a bunched up pair of lace panties… a pair of bare feet, very feminine ones, and Reddington… kneeling between them.

His mind clicked as he added up all the variables. He was a guy… so he got it almost instantaneously.

“…Oh.”

“Really?” Red was not a happy camper. He somehow scooted somewhat into view, his expression not exactly a welcoming one.

“Well, what the fuck!” Ressler spread his arms, allowing his frustration.

He noted immediately Reddington’s condition. The usually impeccably dressed man was now decidedly… disheveled.

The guy’s shirt was untucked, hanging askew. His pants loose, unattended.

The bare feet had turned into shapely legs.

“I always pay my debts,” Red explained patiently, his tone verging on sarcasm to Ressler’s ears. “My little waitress wanted her gratuity.” he waved an imperious hand into the shadows of the car, “I’m in the midst of… giving it to her.”

Ressler rolled his eyes, his head shaking his growing annoyance.

“Is that against some Federal Regulation of which I am unaware?”

“Well, how the hell was I supposed to know?” Ressler defended himself. “I was just doing my job.”

“And I was doing mine.” Red smiled ever so pleasantly. “A task I should very much enjoy returning to.”

Ressler dropped his head. He was never going to live this one down.

Reddington, on the other hand… seemed to have dismissed the entire episode.

The man scooted back to his previous position, a soothing tone used for the woman that waited inside.

“Forget about him… you concentrate on me.” the man was advising.
Ressler felt very much like a third party, but something perverse kept him rooted to the spot.

Red knew he had to get them out of this sticky situation and fast. He upped the ante hoping his ploy worked.

Elizabeth grimaced adorably, her expression an anxious one.

“I’ll give you all the tip you want, baby.” Red proclaimed to any and all drawing a stifled giggle from the woman. One she muffled with a hand over her mouth.

“Fuck... my balls ache.” Red enjoyed the small snort from Lizzy. “I’m going to fill you so damned full of cream....” the man continued, amused for her reaction, “it’s going to be running down your thighs.”

Ressler pulled an ‘eww’ face, turning quickly making his getaway back through the multitude of trees and shrubs which impeded his hasty escape.

He tried to block the visual provided, but couldn’t.

He trudged resolutely back to the cabin, his mind filled with the disturbing thoughts.

What would it be like... to stand there and watch? Would he even want to... join in at some point?

The man’s dick hardened. He winced, moving it about to ease the ache.

What the hell was wrong with him? Thinking such things!

It was Reddington’s fault. His twisted influence was rubbing off on him... yeah, that was it.

He pushed on, quickening his steps. The farther away he got from the SUV, the better it would be.

What was with Reddington anyway? Sure, the guy had needs. What guy didn’t?

Ressler had been planning on pursuing that avenue with his latest romantic interest himself.

They had only started the dating process and there was some question about the birth control issue. And... she apparently, hated condoms.

Ressler’s mood was dropping by the second.

Birth control.

The man mused.

Reddington’s statement led Ressler to believe the guy was riding bareback.

In this day and age? But again, Reddington was Old School.

Maybe the guy wasn’t aware, it was protocol today to carry test results around like they were credit cards, to be swapped as proof no STD’s were out there, undetected.

Besides, the Agent’s instincts had told him, Reddington had a thing for Keen.

The man could simply be blowing off steam with a very willing partner, sure but... the chance something detrimental could be passed on if ever...

Ressler dismissed the thought which was even more disturbing than what he had just witnessed.
Reddington would protect Keen with his life. Ressler knew that much at least.

He didn’t have to think beyond that constant.

Still, he envied Red Reddington.

A quick roll in the proverbial hay was exactly what Donald Ressler needed this night.

He admitted it, if only to himself.

His steps halted. The cabin loomed ahead.

It was a hell of a commitment to make.

Ressler’s thoughts turned introspective. He stood, leaning against the trunk of a large Fir, fumbling for a cigarette.

He promised himself he would give up the habit and succeeded to a degree. He only rarely allowed himself the luxury.

His head bent, his hands sheltering the flame of his lighter from the wind.

He inhaled the strong, tangy flavor of the tobacco, savoring the taste.

A hell of a commitment. Riding a woman without protection. He had done it with Audrey but they had been in a committed relationship.

Fuck, it had felt phenomenal.

His cock twitched in remembrance. He allowed the freedom, closing his eyes.

He did not lack for a willing partner these days. Sex was a need he fulfilled but deep down, he knew these encounters were transitory, meaningless.

No woman had touched him like Audrey.

There were moments with Samar...moments he usually dismissed rapidly from his mind.

It would never work... they were partners.

It never worked.

But she was so desirable, intelligent, a warm giving woman when she set her mind to it.

Any man would be lucky to...

Donald took another draw on his cigarette. His mind flitted this way and that. At the conclusion of the turbulent exploration of possibilities, he made a decision.

Upon his return to D.C... he would pursue the possibility of a more intimate, lasting relationship with the only woman he truly wished to do so...

It was time.

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“We got caught by a cop.” Liz was all giggles and lightness now.
Red chuckled along with her, “He wasn’t as bad as when Penelope Ann Marston and I were caught by Sister Mary Agnes.” his eyes traced the woman’s nakedness appreciatively, “behind the bleachers at the homecoming game.”

Liz chuckled her delight.

“That woman could wield a riding crop...better than Kaplan.” he loved to make her laugh, the sound was most delightful. “I still have marks, both physically and mentally.”

Liz shook her head, her eyes softening on the man, “Penelope Marston, huh?”

“Penelope Ann Marston.” he corrected. “I was the only one who could tease her about her middle name. Do you know why?”

“Please tell me.” Liz shifted comfortably in his arms. This was one of her favorite times. Basking in the aftermath of their lovemaking but also.... the intimate stories that emerged.

A personal side Red only shared with her... or at least she hoped as much.

“Because I’m special.”

“You’re full of horse hockey.” Liz corrected holding her need to laugh at his antics. “Besides, I thought you would say because you could tease her so well...” she arched her brow meaningfully.

“Well, that too...” Red shrugged, sighing at the nostalgic memory. “I thought I was so special back then.” he admitted.” Life has a way of dissolving youthful conceit.”

“You’re special to me.” she admitted quietly.

His eyes held hers so long she flushed a bit, hastily changing the subject.

“I thought you said you didn’t care if they found out about us... the team, I mean.”

Red nodded silently.

“Why didn’t you just...tell him who I was?”

“Firstly, it’s none of his business who I take to my bed... or in this instance... my SUV.” he advised. “And secondly, if we are to allow them into our private lives, there is certainly a better way and time to do so, don’t you agree?”

She couldn’t argue that point. She wasn’t sure how Ressler would have taken such a shock and now, she was beginning to wonder about Samar’s reaction.

“When did your little waitress come to mind?” she was curious. “You came up with that one pretty rapidly. Was she in your thoughts?”

“The only thing in my thoughts was... how I might get into your hot little pussy.”

“And here I was going to compliment you on your ability to say all those three-syllable words while in the midst of... copulation.” she teased.

“Does it get you off?” he asked, his voice roughened and raspy.

“How crudely put... but, yes.” this time the smile was allowed.
“I feed off your response.” he shared, his eyes boldly measuring her features. “You know that, right?”

Liz didn’t.

“I come harder... and cream longer than I’ve ever done with... the others.”

“Let’s not bring them up.” she scolded. “...Right now anyway.”

Red was given pause for thought. “The point is... I’m more involved all because of your reaction to my efforts.”

She pondered his words, thrilled by the admission, “It’s a two-way street.”

He inclined his head minutely, “I hope it is.”

“And when it gets old?” the thought troubled her. “Having the same old thing day in and day out?”

“Are you already feeling that?”

Her eyes widened, “Me?” she was astounded. “You are the one who likes the variety of life.”

“When it comes to food... wine. The possibilities of adventure...” he conceded. “But I would rather have one woman to which I am committed, warming my bed.”

“Or SUV.”

He smiled, then turned serious for a long beat before he continued, sensing how important the issue was to the woman.

“Lizzy, I’ve had more than my fill of... the others. It leaves you cold and empty inside.”

The man remembered the ‘after’ part.

“I prefer loyalty and love over a quick, unemotional fuck any day of the week.” he did. “Those are not simply words. I’ve lived them. I know what I want in life. There are no doubts on my mind.”

He studied her evenly, “I plan to ensure none remain in yours.”

“I don’t have any doubts.”

He smiled placatingly, “The bravado of youth, again?”

“Stop.” she snapped. “I know my own mind, Red.”

“I hope you do, baby,” he prayed as much most nights. “I’ll get my shoes.” he put an end to the discussion. “Thank God that boot was up front.” he laughed as he retrieved a particularly interesting article dangling it before the woman’s slightly flushed face. “It would have been a dead giveaway.”

Liz grasped the white lace panties from his finger, giving him a teasing look, “Want a souvenir?”

She twirled the lace about her index finger provocatively.

Red snatched out, his reflexes in perfect working order, seizing his acquisition, a smug look on his face.

Lizzy offered him an indignant huff which he found amusing. He stuffed the prized possession in his
pants pocket.

He helped her struggle out of the hatch, patience itself.

She primly straightened her clothing, checking her make-up in the side mirror before sliding into her customary seat.

“What am I, the chauffeur?” he laughed at the distracted action.

Liz glanced about immediately catching his meaning, “Oh!” she whacked her forehead, clamoring out changing her position to the front seat. “What the hell was I...” she mumbled, fastening her seat belt.

“What’s on your mind?” he closed her door with a decided click, leaning his forearms on the base of the window.

Liz had rolled it down to breathe in fresh, crisp air.

She loved this place already. It called out to her. The century-old mountains, the towering trees that reached up to the bluest sky she had ever seen.

She didn’t remember what state exactly was God’s country but this had to be it, surely.

“Oh, nothing of import.” she dismissed. “Just musing. Guess it’s one of those evenings.”

Red followed her gaze.

The night was full of sound. He had not noted before. The air smelled of an approaching rainstorm.

The lights of the cabins were dimmed, only the security lamps ablaze.

He craned his head glancing to the inky purple of the night sky.

“Do you believe those stars?” she asked wistfully staring up as well. “They take your breath away.”

“At night, out on the ocean,” Red nodded at nothing in particular, “they look like this, only closer.”

“How amazing.” she practically gasped at the picture painted. “I envy you, having seen them.”

“It reminds you just how insignificant a human being really is.”

“I don’t feel insignificant when I look at them.” she didn’t. “I feel....”

“Humbled?” he smiled down at her, the face lifted like a cherub praying to God.

“Yes.” he had hit in it exactly. She transferred her eyes. “Red...”

“Hum?” he encouraged she continue with her quiet response.

“...Do you see us...” she hesitated. Was it a stupid question?

“Tell me.”

“Growing old together?” she shifted placid eyes, watching his response. “...I mean, do you think we’ll be one of the few who actually... make it?”

“Yes.” he replied without hesitation.
The truth was, originally, the man had visions of himself dying long before he reached old age but... that image kept fading into the background these days.

Apparently, as long as Lizzy was by his side, his will to fight all life threw at him remained strong. He planned to live a long and contented life now.

“You do? You think that?”

“Even with gray hair, you’ll be quite the looker.” Red’s eyes twinkled as the woman’s face blanched at the image he presented. “What about you?” he pushed the envelope. “See us sitting in rocking chairs watching the sunset?”

“A couple of times I have.” she didn’t like to think about growing old though. Was that vain?

“And not once,” he chuckled, “did you imagine yourself with grey hair, did you.”

“Well!” she huffed, “Of course I did.”

“Liar.” he shook his head, knowing a lie when he heard one.

“I do not have a vain bone in my body. I’ll have you know.”

“All I know,” he tweaked her pert nose, “Is that we will finish this life together. If there is a God in Heaven... and I know there is for a fact, since he gifted me you...”

Liz blinked at the wetness gathering in her eyes at the wonderful words.

“...He would not be so cruel as to deny us that path.” Red continued.

“Really, Red?”

“I have no doubt.” he leaned in, kissing her sweetly. “None in this world... or the next.”

She beamed him a smile.

“Now that I’ve found you, Elizabeth.” his eyes held hers easily. “Nothing will take you from me.”

“I don’t want to go away from you.” she covered his fingers with hers, her gaze a loving, trusting one. “So you make sure you keep your word, Red Reddington.”

“I always keep my word,” he tilted his head slightly, his tone holding a confident edge, “...to you.”

Liz sat back, sighing her contentment.

The man crossed to the driver’s side of the car, sliding in.

“You know...” she mused playfully, her spirits high, “I’m past eighteen....” she slid him a seductive look. “I don’t have to go home... or at least... to my home.”

“Your old man doesn’t have to shoot me in where it hurts most,” he waved over his crotch, “with a shotgun but...” he smiled sweetly at her, “he will.”

“He’s not that bad.” she tsked. “Aren’t I worth it?”

“Well, I don’t know...” he sized her form up lasciviously, because even at this moment the woman had leaned her warm palm massaging his already receptive crotch with a loving stroke.
“Let’s go to my home...” he put the car in gear, “and find out.”

Chapter End Notes

If you see any errors, please let me know. I had the hardest time getting this to paste correctly.

Another reminder that you can reach me at:

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/DanielDavies1978

Email: danieldavies78@outlook.com

To discuss fanfic or see updates:

Lizzington Fanfic Discussion: https://www.facebook.com/groups/LizzingtonFanfic/
June 5

Liz floated between the evasive state of slumber and twilight sleep. Something had awakened her but... what?

Her mind was aware of sounds drifting about but her physical being relished in the warmth provided by the down comforter surrounding her naked body.

She fought the ever encroaching wakefulness.

The room was pitch black which is how Red liked it for whatever reason.

Liz secretly believed it was because the darkness gave an advantage if any would be interloper should intrude.

Red’s eyes were already adjusted. He could see where the other guy couldn’t. Those precious few moments the eye took to adjust was all Red needed to gain the upper hand.

Or... maybe she was just becoming more paranoid in her old age. The thought brought a smile to her lips.

Liz could head the steady hum of the air conditioner. It was somehow soothing.

She allowed her lids to slide shut once more, snuggling down into the cushy softness of her bed.

Fanciful thoughts invaded her mind, pushing any real attempt at sleep aside, however.

A smile curved the woman’s lips as memories surfaced.

A night under Red Reddington’s care... in his bed... would bring a smile to any woman’s lips, she thought ruefully.

After their romp in that damned SUV, Liz thought she would find her muscles stiff and sore.

That was not the case. Not one iota of tension or stress invaded her body.

Eyes softening, a well of happiness surged as details of what had transpired in that car emerged.

Playing with Red was oddly therapeutic. Not to mention, downright fun.

Opening herself to these odd little games had proven very fulfilling on a sexual plane.

Emotionally, she felt as if they were helping her to rewrite her own history, so to speak.
Replacing not so fond memories with certainly more acceptable ones. She didn’t know before, such a thing was possible.

Liz had timidly approached Tom with the thought that perhaps they could broaden the parameters of their sexual activities a few times in the past.

She wasn’t sure what she had in mind back then but something was lacking. She couldn’t have put a name to it at the time.

Now, she realized, it had been the fact there was no true connection other than the sexual aspect.

Red made her feel so many other emotions. Good emotions... amazing emotions... deep abiding ones that shook her to her core.

Last night for instance, he had fallen so easily back into the game, setting the tone for an even more exciting adventure which was to emerge.

So into the proceedings was she at one point that Liz half expected if she and Red became to raucous in their lovemaking... that a bevy of drunken frat boys would burst into the room.

Red wove the scene so well, she was allowed the freedom to immerse herself.

She recalled muffling her cries of passion into a handy pillow, even biting Red’s neckline on occasion when the joy of sex became too much not share with her lover.

Her lover found these incidents most amusing, of course. That he could move her to such heights.

That was okay though because she had moved him a couple times as...

The distinct sound of the door knob unlatching had those blue eyes flying open post-haste.

Liz’s body tensed.

A slight crack allowed the light from the hallway to throw a slanted shaft along the opposite wall... the light shut off hastily, the door gently closing.

Light footsteps scuffed along the hard wood of the floors.

She was no longer alone in the room.

Liz’s senses tingled but there was none of the alarm or uncertainty of danger lurking.

She waited, her ears pricked for anything which might alter that state.

She had not been aware of the running water from the bath before but then, the air conditioner had kicked off.

Someone was in the shower.

Liz processed quickly, her mind sorting rapidly through all possible scenarios.

She immediately ruled out Janet Leigh for the simple fact. If Janet were in the shower then the intruder into her private space would logically be Norman Bates.

Liz shook the morbid thought, wondering over the quirks of her mind. It was Francis’ fault, she concluded after a moment.
Red was in the shower... ergo... who would dare enter her bedroom knowing the man’s propensity for shooting first and asking questions later.

Dembe.

The footfalls were lighter than a man’s. They had progressed to the bathroom door having made only one error in judgement so far.

A slight bump against the ottoman which protruded slightly out into any given walkway.

Liz pondered her options.

Samar Navabi felt more comfortable now. She even searched the nearby wall for a light switch.

The shower water told her of Liz’s location, however.

At first, the agent had felt odd about simply entering someone’s bedroom, even another woman’s, but Aram’s jet lag had kicked in and Ressler said to ask if Liz wouldn’t mind filling a seat at the surveillance table until Aram’s eyes were open completely to the world.

Not finding the light switch, Samar used the small slit of light from the bath door as her beacon.

She opened her mouth to announce her presence just as her hand pushed the door ajar.

Words halted in her throat, no sound escaped at the sight which greeted her unsuspecting eyes.

The dark gaze roamed the male body appreciatively, “Holy...” whispered awe filtered into the woman’s tone as she voiced her opinion of the sight revealed, “...shit.”

Liz bolted upright at the totally recognizable voice, blankets were tossed unceremoniously aside as she fumbled for her robe.

Grasping the satin material, she jerked it on rapidly, clutching the lapels frantically, her senses reeling from the turn of events.

“Samar!” she whispered raspingly, rushing forward, making her way around the bed in record time.

“What are you–”

Samar had pulled the door to quietly, shushing Liz’s approach.

“Stop,” the older advised. “There is no way in hell we can’t take this opportunity... be still–”

Liz gasped indignantly, “What are you–”

“Shh!” Samar hit the woman’s forearm smartly. “You have got to see this!”

“I most certainly do not!” Liz was affronted for Red. She grasped the door handle securely over Samar’s strong grip.

The women were so loud, Red sighed lightly inside the shower, shaking his head woefully.

He lathered his hands absently, tilting his head back and forth, his lips pulling into a grin.

“Jesus!” Samar blew out a breath from pursed lips. “Have you seen what that man is packing?”

“Stop it!” Liz flushed. Red was her property. Samar had no right...
“A friend would not let a friend not see it!” Samar was adamant, hitting Liz’s hand aside, cracking the door slightly.

Dread filled Liz’s gut as she tried in vain to wrestle the handle from the other, more determined individual.

Samar crook her head, signifying Liz should take a peak.

Liz shook her head vigorously but Samar urged her forward with a not so gentle nudge which almost cracked her cheek on the door facing.

Red stood under the hot spray, his warm skin glistening with soapy suds.

One large palm ran across his head, his arm bulging with his movement.

The muscles at his side pulled, tightening his stomach in response.

His back was turned away from them so full frontal was allowed.

He briskly soaped his neckline and shoulders absently, eyes closed to the hot wash of water wetting his face.

Liz watched the suds cascade down his frame.

She was vaguely aware of Samar’s breath tickling the side of her cheek.

Red’s thick fingers massaged the white foam into the wealth of hair on his chest, trailing down slowly to the tapered hair at his stomach.

The frothy rivulets skirted down his slightly parted thighs all the way to his sexy feet.

Liz swallowed hard at the sight of his fingers dancing idly into the light hair of his groin, over his long thick erection.

His sack hung heavily between toned thighs.

His bulging shaft bounced with his languid movements. Soapy water trickled down the ramrod length, the steady stream mimicking the thick cream of his release.

“If I had panties on...” Samar whispered sacredly, “they would be dropping by now.”

Liz snapped the door shut, turning about, her expression more than harried.

“See?” Samar asked triumphantly, “I told you!”

“This was... unconscionable!” Liz was pretty sure of her facts, her hand fluttering to the closed door.

“Yeah.” Samar totally agreed. “Want to see some mo–”

“No!” Liz snapped, smacking the woman’s hand from the vicinity of the doorknob. “Be quiet!” she insisted. “He’ll hear you!”

Red glanced down to his raging hard on.

Thank God he wasn’t a particularly modest or shy man.

Having two women watch, one especially who had no desire to share... while you showered, had its
benefits.

He stroked his cock from root to swollen tip, easing the ache.

He lowered his head, letting the river of water run down his body. His thoughts pleasant to say the least.

What a wonderful way to start the morning.

“Hell, he probably knows we were watching.” Samar waved a dismissive hand. She flipped the light on, sighing lightly. “Why is it, all the good ones are taken... or on the Most Wanted list?”

Liz was still trying to regroup. She looked guiltily at the closed bathroom door.

“Did you see his dick?” Samar’s lovely features were incredulous. “I would pay good money to have that thing plowing between my thighs.”

Liz gasped audibly, “Samar!”

“Well, I wouldn’t really pay.” the agent rolled her eyes at the absurdity. “But I bet it would be worth it. It’s evident Red Reddington knows how to treat a woman.” she nodded amiably, crossing to sit on the ottoman.

“Sometimes he’ll give a look that makes my cherry pop... if I had one.” she chuckled. “I’ll tell you... that man is packin’ quiet a weapon and I’ll wager he knows exactly how to use what God has given him.” she arched her pretty brow. “You know, they say the more skilled they are with a firearm the more—”

“We shouldn’t have done that” Liz wailed, interrupting the woman.

“You’ll thank me later.” Samar was relatively sure. “When the shock has worn off.”

Liz sat on the bed, drained. She had to think of dead puppies... anything to get Red’s cock out of her mind’s eye.

That Samar had seen it as well left the woman feeling slightly ill inside.

Samar stood, her palms slapping her thighs absently. “Some woman will be a lucky recipient if she plays her cards right.” her eyes were suddenly all too knowing as they rested on Liz’s face.

“He’s a one woman man you know... you did pick up on that, right?”

“What d-do you mean?”

“Oh, like any man, he’ll fuck anything in a skirt but in the end...” Samar waved an airy hand, “he really will be true to only one female.”

“How do you know... that?” Liz had arisen, her face flushed.

“You know it as well.” Samar wasn’t buying it. “...Has he taken you to his bed yet?”

Liz’s mouth fell agape for such audacity.

“I have to wonder why not... if so?”

“Kill me now.” Liz threw her hands out from her side, her own expression aghast. I expect this from
Samar chuckled gently, “You need to blow off some steam... release some of that tension.”

“He’s my C.I.” Liz pointed out. Or was she getting a feel for Samar’s true reaction. Should she confide in the woman about the change in hers and Red’s relationship?

“I didn’t say fall in love with the guy.” Samar glanced about. Had she brought those papers in here? “I said... fuck him.”

Liz’s eyes blinked with shock.

“Use him for your own pleasure.” Samar tried again. “…Okay, Liz. When was the last time you got laid?”

“You’re picking up American slang far too well for my peace of mi–”

“Tom?” Samar rolled her eyes. “While I’m sure he was a stud in the sack... get real, all right. You need a man not some little wanna-be, between your legs.”

Liz shook her head, bewildered, “I haven’t even had my coffee–”

“Reddington gets it.” Samar continued undauntedly. “He would show you a good time without all the hassle. No muss, no fuss.” The woman swiped her palms together to illustrate, “It’s hard... in our line of work. Relationships fall to the wayside.”

Samar fell silent for a beat, thinking on a few of her own ‘failures’.

Liz watched the beautiful face feeling sadness descending but Samar quickly veiled her emotions.

“Reddington could be the perfect guy for you...” she walked to the door, hesitating, the dark eyes leveled and sincere. “As long as you keep your wits about you.”

Samar opened the door, stepping outside into the hallway, “Ressler sent me to fetch you. Feel like an outing today?”

Liz once again secured her robe cinch as she followed Samar to the front of the house.

“I came through the garage.” Samar motioned when Liz had traipsed the opposite way.

Liz’s eyes had fallen on something of more interest for the moment, however.

“Did you hear me?” Samar wondered at the other woman’s hesitation, gesturing to the back door she could now see across the kitchen expanse.

Liz turned questioning eyes to the waiting female.

Samar sensed something amiss, closing the few steps easily.

Liz stared at the pretty face, the disheveled hair of the bundle lying on the living room divan.

Samar thought quickly, “Dembe works fast.” she hoped she covered well enough. “Thought she was interested in Reddington but any port in the storm, right?”

Liz shrugged mentally, “I guess so... isn’t that what you were just advocating?”
Samar fell silent, “I’m not... judging.” but that’s exactly what she had been doing, she realized.

“So whether Red or Dembe,” Liz saw an opportunity and took it, “I’m not either man’s keeper.” she managed a smile. “I’ll get dressed.”

Samar’s cell rang, “Shit...” she fumbled for it in her pocket, “probably Ressler wondering what’s taking me so long.”

“I’ll see you in a bit.” Liz was careful not to disturb the sleeping beauty on the couch.

Samar picked up a stack of papers on her way out the back entrance, phone to ear.

Liz’s eyes fell on the still slumbering face of the waitress from last night’s dinner before returning to the room.

Once inside, she locked the door securely before crossing to the bath, her steps purposeful.

“Enjoy your peep show?” a very masculine chuckle greeted her arrival.

She cast a dark glare at the man, suddenly more upset that the man’s eyes were closed and he had missed it.

“And you women calls us perverts.”

“Why didn’t you call a cop.” she hung her robe on an available hook, sidling closer to the naked man. “Any hot water left?”

Something in her tone alerted him, not all was well. He opened his arms wide.

Lizzy tucked her body inside the welcoming embrace, snuggling lovingly, finding comfort in the man’s erection which slid across her stomach easily.

Her quietness alerted him to her mood. He could only guess at what had transpired.

“I rate only fuck-buddy status in Samar’s world, huh.” he threw out his hypothesis.

Liz lifted sad eyes which rapidly rimmed with unshed tears.

Red’s heart ached for the woman. He had hoped Samar might surprise him but...

“I thought she would understand.” Liz lay her head back on his shoulder.

“Shh...” he soothed, kissing the top of her wavy strands. The water glistened in the dark silk.

He gently massaged her back and shoulders, “We are so much more, Elizabeth.” he reminded. “Isn’t that all that should matter?”

His eyes closed painfully, the small head laying against him nodded dejectedly.

“Give them time, baby.” he suggested. “They might come around in the end.” he wasn’t sure if he believed the words or not, human nature being what it was...

“Dembe, Francis...Silas,” Liz sniffed, “they accept us.” she lifted a hopeful stare. “It’s wonderful but you’re right. I just need this.” she returned to his arms. “Your support... the comfort you give.”

“And hopefully,” he lifted her chin to stare into those blue depths, “my love?”
She smiled, happy again. Liz closed her eyes, relief flooding her very soul.

Yes, she had exactly what she needed here... within the sphere of Red Reddington’s arms.

Her fingers gently traced the bulging veins of his penis. The object had caught and held her attention for many seconds now.

The light touch caused the turgid shaft to jerk.

She felt the man tense.

“Lizzy, this is probably,” he cursed the nuisance which was his raging libido, “not the best time to...” his lips compressed, “I’m perfectly content to simply remain as we are.”

Lifting to her toes, her mouth gently silenced any protests he could make, “We’re more than that.” she whispered against his lips.

Red sensed her meaning. She needed the emotional connection. The thing that only they could share.

He sighed, all the stress of the last decision fading away, feeling her slowly stroke him, building the fire that would soon consume them both.

His lips trailed along the silk of her neckline, drinking in the fragrance he loved so well.

“I love you.” he whispered then abruptly moved, his powerful arms lifting her slight weight, his body pressing hers into the heated wall of the shower stall.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Red absently followed Elizabeth down the hallway, searching for his phone.

“Would you have a plausible explanation,” she stepped aside, waving a gracious hand, “for... this?”

“Jealousy becomes you.” he smiled slowly, sensing her meaning.

Liz snubbed him, pushing past him into the kitchen, “You are so amusing... and diluted.”

Red’s smile widened, “Greg called last night needing a–”

“I didn’t hear your phone ring.” she halted her perusal of K-cups for the coffee machine, her eyes suspicious.

“You were...” he grimaced sympathetically, pausing for effect, “ever so tired after our late night... exertions.”

Liz flushed, ignoring his implication. She crossed to drop the pod into the coffee machine

Red took the veiled slight in stride, preparing his personal blend with the air of an aristocrat.

“Business reared its ugly head. He didn’t want her in harm’s way.” Red had crooked his head to the subject matter now at hand.

The little waitress stirred groggily at the voices drifting from the kitchen, nothing more.

“More likely,” Liz watched the dark liquid drop merrily into her cup, her mood not so cheery, “he didn’t want her making a pass at any and all available associates.”
Red’s grin widened, “You’re in a surly mood this morning.” he sidled up behind the woman, careful not to touch her. He leaned ever so close, his tone holding just the right amount of sexual innuendo. “...I like it.”

Liz threw him a ‘surly’ look but inside, she was smiling.

She crooked her head, the brows lifting imperiously, “Are you supposed to drive her home?”

“Would you mind if I did?” he pressed his luck.

“Would you like your dick cut off with a butter knife?”

“I’m very turned on right now.” the man seemed surprised by the fact. He watched the woman sip her coffee, the blue eyes losing none of the frost of combat. “Greg is coming by this morning to...”

A quiet knock interrupted the explanation.

Red’s hand went instantly to his weapon. Elizabeth turned her head to the back door, “Do they knock politely now?”

“...Some.” Red’s tone was softly menacing as was his eyes until...

“Intruder alert.” Greg Forester pushed his head through the door, a grin on the handsome face.

He glanced at Red’s stance, “It’s always safer to announce one’s arrival around the likes of him.” he shouldered on through the door, sauntering forward.

“Porch pirates proclaiming their presence.” Red beckoned the man forward. “How polite.”

“Oh, please,” Greg looked covetously at the coffee cup in Liz’s hand, “I passed my plundering porch pirate phase back in prep-school.”


“Nothing ordinary about me, Elizabeth.” Greg assured. “Is that coffee free or do I have to plunder it?”

“Pilfer it,” Red corrected handing over a cup, “I believe is the correct terminology.”

“God’s own elixir.” Greg closed his eyes having drank the strong, hearty brew. “All’s right with the world.” he sighed happily.

He checked on the woman who still slept peacefully in the living area. The tiny bundle was visible from the large cut-out bar area.

“Was my little kitten any trouble last night?”

Red noted Lizzy’s flush of embarrassment. The way Greg had said the pet name held a wealth of meaning.

Liz busied herself, fumbling with bread for the toaster.

“Not at all.” Red covered the awkwardness. “Your playtime probably wore her out.” he shared the last with the man alone, his eyes twinkling.

Red understood young lust. There were times of late he found himself loathe to leave his own
“So much to play with,” Greg nodded, sotto voce, “so little time.”

Red smiled, “You should tarry a bit. Take a shower, wake up before you drive back.”

Greg ran a hand over his growth of beard, “These late night affiliations are killing me,” he grumbled, “I’m getting too old, Red.”

“For the work,” Red questioned, “or play time with her?”

Greg spared the man a sardonic glance.

Red chuckled, “Everything will look better after a hot shower.” he slapped the man on the shoulder.

Greg was unconsciously checking with Liz.

She smiled warmly at the man, “You’ll feel human again.”

“...That sounds really wonderful actually.” Greg kneaded his nape hard.

“Mi ducha es su ducha.” Red waved a hand toward the master bedroom.

“Oh, hell.” Greg’s shoulders slumped. “I forgot. I have to get back and approve the manifest.”

He dropped his forehead begrudgingly, “I didn’t want to make a nuisance of ourselves and all the product had not as yet been—”

“Do you have the list with you?” Red offered. “I’ll meet with the distributors and phone the count as soon as it’s in for your approval.”

“Oh, man.” Greg was beaming. “I would owe you big time, Red. I’d kill for an hour to shake the cobwebs.”

“Consider it done.”

“You guys are the best” Liz was included in the gesture. “Really.”

She smiled at Red, surprised to be taken into account by the other man, truth told.

“I have to go... see Samar.” she reminded Red. “You’ll have the house to yourself after a few minutes.” she held up her toast and jelly.

“Give me the keys.” Red waggled his fingers. “I’ll get the invoices. You relax for a while.”

“You don’t have to twist my arm.” Greg was out of the kitchen in record time. “Thank you again, Elizabeth... for extending such hospitality to virtual strangers.”

“Any friend of, Red’s...” she shrugged graciously. “Extra towels are in the linen closet.”

“This is so kind of you.” Greg made a discrete exit.

Red chuckled, sitting his coffee cup down, “Are you truly okay with this?”

“Oh, sure.” the woman shrugged. “I’ll get finished here and head on over to Ressler and the guys.”

“I’ll leave—"
“No, you will not leave Dembe.” she headed him off at the pass. “You’ll not walk into that meeting without back-up.”

“These are friendlies, baby.” he chuckled.

“Friendlies or not,” she put her foot down. “Ressler can come fetch me if he wants me that badly... or I can drive.”

“It’s not that.” Red didn’t want her driving, but it was just a short distance. “You’re unprotected.”

“Greg is here. Ressler is there.” she pointed.

Red hesitated.

“I’ll only be a few minutes, Red.” she exasperated. “I just have to get a few files and my computer.”

“I’ll fetch your computer.” Red held up a hand. “Greg is back there.”

“Well, okay.” she didn’t want any more surprise unveilings today, so she relented.

Red came back in seconds, “Promise me... right over to the team.”

“Hand to God.” she promised.

Still, he hesitated.

“...Really?” she questioned. “Are your spidey senses tingling?”

“No, and that’s what’s bothering me.” he grumbled.

“Go.” she pointed, her manner no-nonsense.

Red leaned, kissing her soundly, “I’m going to buy you a Dominatrix present.”

“Already have one,” she smiled sweetly up at him. “I borrowed it from Mr. Kaplan.” she waggled her brows suggestively. “It’s latex.” she smiled cheekily. “Because everyone should practice safe sex.”

“I won’t be gone long.” he chuckled his amusement. “See if you can stay out of trouble for the duration, hum?”

“Back at ya.”

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Samar had tried to reason it all out. Tried to see it from all sides but in the end her allegiance to one of her own kind had won out.

She was pissed, pure and simple.

Pissed at the way of things... at the world in general.

She didn’t particularly care who knew.

The woman shut the door behind her with a bang, entering the ill-lit area, her eyes blinking, adjusting from the bright sunlight outside.
Ressler started upright in his seat, snapping alert.

Aram struggled from his half-asleep state as well, both seeking out the cause of their disturbance.

“What the... hell?” Ressler demanded just barely managing to catch the equipment sent his way.

Samar plopped down opposite him in the chair provided, arms folded over her chest.

She eyed the other occupants of the room belligerently, the long tresses shaking ominously, the dark eyes flashing fire.

“What’s your problem?” Ressler wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Why are men so stupid?” she demanded an answer, rising angrily.

Both ‘men’ exchanged puzzled glances.

“Navabi... I got maybe an hour’s sleep last night. I’m not really in the mood for a philosophical chat or twenty-questions.”

She sent him a death glare.

“You want to cut to the chase here?” he tried a more reasonable approach.

“Reddington was supposed to be smarter than most of his species.” Samar ranted for Liz’s sake.

“Turns out... he’s just as stupid as all the rest.”

Ressler scratched a palm over his head, his own irritation rising.

“I’ve never thought of Mr. Reddington as... stupid.” Aram differed to disagree.

“Oh, really?” Navabi turned on a dime. “Then why did he bring his little fuck toy home with him last night?”

Aram’s face ashened. First, for the vulgarity coming from such a voluptuous mouth and second, “The waitress?”

Ressler’s head fell back. It was beginning to throb, “Oh, hell... not that.”

Samar’s interest was immediate and focused, “You knew?” she accused. “And you didn’t tell me?!”

“Why would I tell you?” was a mystery to Ressler clearly. “Hell, I didn’t even want to know myself!”

The silence in the room was deafening.

“I don’t understand,” Samar slumped back in her chair, the conversation sapping her strength, “I thought... hell, we all thought...”

She checked with her contemporaries, “Didn’t we?”

“That Mr. Reddington wanted to get in Agent Keen’s pants?” Aram offered meekly.

“Why are we even having this conversation?” Ressler pleaded his cause.

“Yes!” Samar pointed exactingly to the computer geek.
“But, isn’t that just the ruse they are perpetrating?” Aram was confused now.

“Didn’t you sense it was more?” Samar could not believe men were so blind and yet... if that were the case... “Then why did he bring that Jezebel home last night?”


“Trollop?” Samar offered cheerfully.

“It’s none of our business.” Ressler practically yelled his belief.

“I’m completely thrown on this one.” Samar stated. “I’m beginning to doubt my own judgement.”

“Well, maybe we should.” Aram agreed hastily. “We don’t know if the young lady is a... tramp, do we?”

“She said, trollop.” Donald reminded uneasy with the adjective.

“We have a pretty good idea.” Samar folded her arms, then sighed. “Maybe I am being a little harsh.” she shrugged. “Why am I bitching about her?” she scowled. “Reddington’s the whore.”

“What?” Ressler’s brow furrowed. “Did you expect Reddington to remain celibate for a long shot that might never materialize?” the man dropped his forehead against his palm, pressing hard into the ache, “What the hell am I even saying?”

“...No.” Samar sighed reluctantly. “...I feel like an idiot now.”

Ressler’s scowl increased, “And why would you feel that?”

“Because I was standing there, foot-in-mouth, trying to convince Liz to take Reddington on as her fuck-buddy.” Samar explained in an overly polite manner.

“You did... what?” Ressler questioned the woman’s sanity.

Samar continued, “All the while, not knowing Reddington’s little...”

“Trollop?” Aram supplied helpfully.

“Floozy,” Samar corrected with a smirk, “was lying there, half-naked on the couch after a night of God-knows-what.”

Unwarranted visions flashed in Ressler’s mind’s eye, “God, don’t bring that up.”

Samar glanced at him suspiciously, “What does that mean?” she demanded.

Ressler hesitated, then leaned closer, “Look, it’s none of our business of course, but...”

Aram was jerked back by his head set. He had slid too close to the hastily lowered voice Ressler adopted.

He rid himself of the nuisance hastily, getting as close as possible to the ensuing conversation.

Ressler shared his late night encounter, “So I rounded the corner just in time to catch them...”

“In flagrante delicto?” Aram murmured his shock.

“I drew my weapon on them.” Ressler wanted his side of the sordid tale told before Reddington’s
came out.

“You are such a prude.” Samar tsked.

“How the hell was I supposed to know?” Ressler defended himself. “I heard a woman... she sounded in distress.”

Samar lifted a brow, “Maybe she was... if you had seen Reddington’s cock–”

Aram’s gasp was more than audible.

“And when the hell have you ever seen his cock?” Ressler demanded to know.

Samar rolled expressive eyes, “This morning... in the shower.”

Aram gasped... louder.

“Not with me.” Samar dismissed the misconception. “He was alone.”

Ressler’s mind was boggling, his expression said as much.

“Oh, don’t even!” Samar refused to live under a double standard. “As if you two perverts wouldn’t grab a chance to see me or Keen naked.”

Aram blushed heatedly.

Ressler’s scowl increased.

“Don’t judge me because Liz was there too, right alongside me,” Samar informed the self-righteous bastards. “Little Miss Goody Two-Shoes.”

“The other agents call her that... not me.” Ressler bristled. “I used to knock the hell out of them for it but then I wondered, why?” he spread his hands out to Aram.

Aram shrugged helplessly, “It really isn’t a derogatory term.”

“Not in this day and age.” Ressler agreed.

“I’m sorry I said that,” Samar digressed, “... about Liz.” she grimaced. “You two just make me so crazy, that’s all.” she cast them both a look. “It’s your fault.”

Ressler threw up his hands.

“Well...” Samar second-guessed herself, yet again. “Maybe it was my fault for insisting she take a peek but come on,” she pleaded her cause, “the man is hung like–”

Ressler arose post-haste, “Shut it! No more please, for the love of God!”

Samar’s mouth snapped shut... for all of two seconds, “You’re just jealous.”

Ressler drew up short, narrowing his eyes, “Why should I be jealous.” he was beside himself. “How do you know I’m not hung like a... whatever it was you think he’s hung like?”

Samar cocked her head, checking him out, “...Are you?”

“I’m just saying... don’t assume.” Ressler turned on his heel, barking back the words.
Aram was biting his thumb anxiously, “Can’t we all just get along?”

Both combatants spared him a vexed glance.

A shoe pounding on the upstairs bedroom floor let them know, the discussion was getting a little loud.


Aram closed his eyes, dread filling his mind for such a callous statement.

“Is that the best you got?” Samar’s hackles rose. “I haven’t heard that before.”

Ressler immediately regretted his statement, “I’m sorry,” he quickly apologized, “I’m sorry, Navabi. That was...”

The woman read his sincerity, calming as well.

“I’m sorry,” Ressler couldn’t look her in the eye for a moment. He felt horrible to have stooped to the level of his contemporaries.

The silence was a reprieve for all concerned.

“...Look,” Ressler sought the dark eyes out finally, “I know you’re just defending your friend. I got that.”

Samar settled even more so, her look a rather sheepish one.

“My senses were telling me the same thing at first,” the agent reasoned, “but with all that’s gone down,” he gestured, “I guess we were wrong, right?”

Samar took a deep breath.

“Reddington knows all the pitfalls that relationship might entail.” Ressler continued. “He’s not stupid.”

“By any means.” Aram agreed.

“If he has Keen’s best interest at heart, wouldn’t it be better if they were not involved?” Ressler reasoned. “Really?”

“You didn’t see her face.” Samar sulked. “When she saw that... woman on the couch.”

“To involve herself with Reddington is wrong, on so many levels and you know it.” Donald reminded all present.

“We aren’t normal people.” Samar countered. “To have a ‘normal’ life is just not in the cards for us.”

“Yeah but you’re not talking about hooking Keen up with a prospective date off Tinder.” Ressler tried logic and reason.

“Like the men on Tinder are so much better,” Samar stated her opinion. “At least we know Reddington won’t kill her.” she changed her tactics. “It’s so hard to meet a good, decent person, Donald.”

“Are we still talking about Red Reddington here?” the man was flabbergasted.
“Grow the hell up.” Samar’s anger was returning. “For the most part, he is good and decent.”

“Unless you cross him.” Donald reminded.

“In my world,” Samar pointed out, “that would make him a revered leader of men.”

Donald spread his hands helplessly. He couldn’t argue with her logic. Samar came from a different world. Different values, different beliefs.

“Maybe Agent Keen isn’t aware of Mr. Reddington’s interest?” Aram offered a suggestion. “If... there is ‘interest’ involved here, I mean.”

Samar lowered the binoculars. She had been scrutinizing Lawford’s domain meticulously.

“Well, it’s true.” Ressler laughed hollowly. “Sometimes she’s not the sharpest tool in the shed.”

Samar opened her mouth to defend and criticize.

“Hear me out.” Ressler held up his hand in the universal ‘peace’ sign. “Take Tom Keen... how many times did she have to be hit over the head before finally kicking him to the curb?”

“She is young and hopeful for the world.” Samar reminded.

Aram nodded his agreement.

“Okay, every case we go on...” Ressler ticked off his reasons on his fingers, “Reddington forewarns of all the dangers and pitfalls...”

Samar waited patiently for once, binoculars dangling in idle hands.

“She rushes in, gung-ho to do her thing, thinking she knows more than a seasoned criminal on how to handle any given matter.” Donald pointed out.

“Like you, you mean?” Samar batter languid eyes at the man.

“All right yeah but... I’m a guy.”

Samar took no offense smart enough to know the statement actually held merit for some occasions.... she was loathe to admit.

She was a highly trained operative and several times a larger foe had landed her on her ass with a well-placed fist to the face.

Donald, on the other hand, could take a punch... he’d had so many delivered in his time as an agent, they seemed to bounce right off him. Or at the very least, he was used to his brain rattling about. She smiled to herself at the thought.

“No offense meant.” Donald was quick to point out.

“None taken.” Samar bowed her head in deference.

“My point is...” Ressler had almost forgotten his point, “Reddington may have been smacking her in the face with clues he was ‘into her’, metaphorically speaking...” the man powered his laptop up, “say our instincts were right, of course.”

“Which has not been proven,” Aram stated emphatically.
“...Just for argument’s sake,” Ressler wasn’t ready to concede either way on the sordid subject, in truth, “maybe everything he’s tried has zinged right past Liz’s face?”

“Then he would lay his cards on the table.” Samar disagreed. “Say it outright.”

“Okay,” Donald shrugged. “If that’s the case, the only thing we can assume is... Keen didn’t go for it.”

“Which would explain Mr. Reddington’s understandable dalliance with this young, ‘willing’ lady.”

All pondered the evidence set before them.

“Maybe he’s simply attempting to regain Agent Keen’s attention.”

“By fucking another woman?” Samar shifted a wary stare.

“Do you have to be so crude?” Aram’s shaft lengthened each and every time the lovely agent spoke so freely.

“I thought you liked it?” Samar smiled sweetly her eyes dropping meaningfully.

“God, don’t you two start.” Ressler groaned.

Aram flushed, fumbling with his headset. All thumbs suddenly.

“Reddington is a very persuasive man.” Samar sensed as much. “Liz wouldn’t stand a chance against him if he truly wanted to stake a claim.”

“Says you.” Donald disagreed entirely.

Samar shrugged.

“I think, whatever has gone down between them is over and done.” the man continued. “Reddington was riding...” he trailed off.

Aram looked innocently, waiting.

Samar was already calculating and sorting, “Was... what?”

“Nothing.” Donald abruptly changed subjects. “We have work to do.”

“Reddington was... what?” Samar insisted, stepping closer. “Why are you so certain everything is over and done?”

Ressler knew the woman would not let his slip pass by unchallenged. “It’s a personal thing Reddington would not like advertised, okay?”

Samar hesitated, fiddling with the straps of the spyglasses, “So, it’s your considered opinion Reddington has moved on.”

A weight settled in Ressler’s chest but he wasn’t sure why the prospect disagreed with him, “Yes.”

But after what he witnessed last night between the waitress and Reddington, he could draw no other conclusions.

“...Then he’s just as dumb as the rest of his gender.” Samar sighed heavily, returning to her busy
work. “Just as I originally thought.”

Ressler thankfully let the matter ebb.

Aram grimaced to be lumped into the general consensus but he too, went back to his task, grateful the episode hadn’t blossomed into out-and-out war.

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Liz had meant to vacate the cabin instantly but a phone call from home delayed the departure.

Nora had called to share an amusing incident between Keres, the cat, and Hudson.

A fight ensued when Hudson tried, unsuccessfully, to confiscate Keres’ favorite cat-nip toy.

General confusion and chaos ensued with hilarious results.

It was so good to hear Nora’s voice. Liz hadn’t realized how much she missed home and her friends there.

The guards had been very helpful in moving furniture and lugging boxes to the downstairs apartment allowing Nora to settle into her new domain.

Hastily finishing her toast and coffee, Liz hurried along, passing through the French doors.

It was such a lovely day, she walked outside while visiting on the phone.

Her footfalls hesitated.

The house was quiet.

How odd. It felt weird. Not bad weird just...

She had become so accustomed to Nora puttering in the kitchen. Sounds of laughter from passing guards. The gruff bitching of Silas’ deep timbre over any and all perceived grievances.

Comfort was found in those sounds. Liz loved those sounds.

To think, at one time, she found them intrusive, unbearable even. Resented what she thought they represented.

What a fool she had been.

Red never thought her incapable. He only supplied back up in rough, uncertain moments.

He surrounded her with capable, quality people whom she had grown to care for deeply.

For all Silas’ rough, sarcastic exterior... she felt so safe when he was about. Most of the guards held some quirky, amusing traits she found likable, endearing even.

And then there was Nora. Precious, patient Nora. The quintessential mother figure Liz secretly longed for her entire life.

Yes, the sounds that filled a house... a home, meant so much especially if they were absent.

Liz sat her cup and saucer in the sink, glancing fruitlessly about for her purse.
Where the hell had she dropped it last night? Odd, where once before, because it held her weapon and badge, the damned thing was attached to her hip.

Things which once permeated her life were almost second thoughts now.

Her eyes fell on the computer bag Red fetched earlier for her.

What the hell did it all mean? Was she losing herself in the world created for her and if so... it didn’t seem to matter all that much.

She was happy, clear and simple.

Her footfalls were light and carefree as she made her way to the master bedroom. Even the boot didn’t aggravate her as it usually did.

A male voice pulled her up short, her first instinct was to panic.

She was sans weapon... and–

“I didn’t tell you to stop.” the low, melodious murmur did not sound particularly menacing, however. In fact, it sounded... contented and ever so mellow.

“I can’t find it in me to... reprimand you.”

Liz stared at the half-cracked door facing, rapidly weighing her options.

Should she back off quickly, make a hasty retreat or–

“Oh, but... you so love to be reprimanded,” the gruff tone altered to a hoarse whisper, “...don’t you?”

A soulful moan accompanied the proclamation.

A very feminine whimper followed.

Elizabeth startled visibly, eyes widened with shock.

“You have been such a good little kitten, however...”

Liz finally recognized the insatiable way in which that word was stated.

That... word.

“You can do better than that.” Greg Forester’s tone was provocatively silky in nature. “Such a warm little mouth...”

Elizabeth’s mouth fell open for her senses were alerting her far before her brain, as to what was going on behind that half-closed door.

Liz’s first instinct was to sneak stealthily away, retrace her steps but something perverse held her stationary.

“You want my cream, kitten...” he coaxed.

A soft whispering moan met Liz’s ears.

“Then work harder...” Greg persuaded artfully.
Another contented sigh followed.

Liz hesitated, inching forward enough to peek through the crack in the frame.

Her hand came up instantly to her mouth, and she barely stifled a gasp.

She could see a shadow of a man, a very... naked one. His thighs were thick and muscular.

A woman was on all fours before him, attending to a very prominent erection.

Brown hair obscured the female’s face until gentle fingers moved the long curls aside.

Greg bunched the dark strands in his fist when she suckled the tip.

“...Yes.” the man chuckled hoarsely, hissing his delight. “Suckle me with that little tongue.”

Liz’s face flushed fully, and she drew back hastily, cheeks ablaze.

That’s what one got when one eavesdropped, she supposed.

She swallowed hard, fighting her blush determined to make a gracious retreat if only to salvage some of her dignity.

“You do me so well, little one.”

The husky statement stopped Liz in her tracks much to her chagrin.

“You love my cock in your mouth?”

Liz’s hand flew to her red cheeks.

“I know just how much, but I guess I can’t fault you.” Greg was literally petting his little playmate. “I very much enjoy licking my kitten’s pussy... it tastes so sweet.”

Liz’s hands went in the air. On that less than cryptic note... she was more than determined to vacate.

My God. She had been reduced to nothing more than a peeping Tom!

“Come here...”

Liz’s eyes flew to the door facing.

“Daddy will give you all the cream you want...” he soothed, “but... only my way.”

Liz covered her ears, her brain screaming...

Go... Leave... Do not stay here!

Greg growled his delight, “You want daddy’s cock inside your hot pussy, don’t you.”

The woman seemed more than eager for such an eventuality.

He pulled the woman upright, pulling her curvaceous frame flush against his muscled body, kissing the mouth that had given him so much pleasure.

“Let daddy get his favorite pussy all nice and wet for his cock,” he growled against the woman’s pouty mouth.
The hand cupping the woman’s bottom smartly popped the giving flesh.

Liz startled at the unexpected action and more so, the reaction.

The woman gasped even as she melted further into the man’s embrace. His large palm soothed the love tap, rubbing across her cheeks tenderly.

His thick fingers slid into the space between her thighs, kneading the soft skin before delivering another concentrated, yet oddly sensual spank to the lower curvature of her ass.

Liz grimaced, turning about, blindly searching for a way out of the predicament she had gotten herself into... running instead into—

*Red Reddington’s hard chest.*

Steady hands righted her, amused eyes staring down at Liz’s astonished ones.

He placed a cautionary finger to his lips.

Liz’s blush was back in full force. She pushed determinedly, trying to turn the man about that they could leave this horribly private place.

Red resisted, however, holding tightly to prevent her escape.

He craned his neck, watching the show taking place.

Liz refused to look, decorum suddenly a must.

“Oh...” Greg was beyond hearing or caring about any intrusions at this stage.

His large hands cupped the woman’s petite bottom, his fingers strategically placed to elicit a most appreciative groan of acquiescence.

“Look how anxious my kitten is... for her gift.”

Red grinned slowly watching Greg stroking his cock along the sodden folds of his lover’s vaginal area.

“But this time...” Greg’s tone hardened, “I want something in return, Alison.”

The young girl whimpered for the unexpected delay, “I’ll obey you, daddy. Please... please...”

The pleading sounded far too real to Liz’s ears. She pulled at her captured arm throwing Red a meaningful ‘look’.

“Give me your cock...” Alison was aching, it was clear, “I need it so much.”

“I’ll give it to you...” Greg was calm and firm, “but you must give me something I want.”

“Anything!” Alison wiggled about fretfully, “...Anything.”

The woman rolled her hips, pressing her center into the rigid flesh of his penis.

Red’s brow lifted, Greg was handling the matter well in his opinion.

Greg pulled the condom free, reinserting his cock into a more than willing receptacle.
“This time...” Greg was in total control, “when I give you my cream... you take it and keep it safe and warm.”

Alison’s head fell back, her back arching as Greg slid further into her willing body, “Daddy...” she moaned piteously.

“What’s it going to be, Alison?” Greg’s jaw pulsed, his palm running a searing path between the woman’s full breasts.

“...No...” she reached for the man, “Not now... later...”

Red held a hand when Liz would have responded to the urgent denial.

“Then...” Greg removed his shaft completely, “we can’t do this.” he took a deep breath, releasing it shakily. “Don’t think any other man can give you what I can... will play with you just how you want... you already tested that hypothesis. What did it get you?”

“B-But...”

“I want you to give me a little kitten of our very own, baby.” Greg rubbed enticingly up against the hot, ripe body awaiting his pleasure.

“I want that more than anything,” he stressed. “We’ll make a new... more binding contract but only this time, on my terms.”

Red’s brow arched with understanding, a smile pulling at the man’s lips.

“...No.” Alison pouted.

Greg crawled over the woman, his shaft laying perfectly against the swollen flesh.

The woman backed away only to be caught in his sure grasp. The man settled his weight into the small body, his hand cupping the small head in his large palm.

“Daddy does not like that word.” Greg husked.

Alison panted shakily, her mouth straining to touch his.

“Say, yes...” his lips grazed the plump mouth, teasing the heightened flesh.

His hand slid the length of her body, rolling them slightly. His wrist flicked, delivering another smart pop across Alison’s ass cheeks.

It was all Red could do to hold Liz back.

“Say it...” Greg rasped roughly, “say, yes, Alison.”

Tightening her arms about the man’s shoulders, Alison nodded against his neck furiously, “Yes, daddy...” she was more than a willing victim suddenly, “...Y-Yes, Greg...” she amended.

Liz stopped her struggles, her senses reeling for the more than hasty capitulation on Alison’s part, her mouth falling agape.

Red grinned down at her.

She jerked away indignantly, a mix of emotions flooding her.
“Baby...” Greg was just as suddenly all caring and warm and loving. “I love you so much. You drive me crazy at times,” he peppered her mouth with lingering kisses. “I want you so desperately.”

Red closed the door quietly, motioning.

Liz gladly made her escape from the incredibly claustrophobic area.

“I know how that looke–”

“Ressler called.” he halted the woman’s words. “There has been a development.”

“Fine, but I want to explain–”

“Nothing to explain.” he shrugged. “We should go.”

He had walked gathering her computer bag and... purse which hung unobtrusively on the back of a dining room chair.

“I don’t want you thinking...” she was becoming frustrated, “that I deliberately–”

“We’ll talk...”

His tone was much as Greg’s suddenly and the way his eyes looked at her, made Liz all weak and compliant inside.

“...Rest assured,” the man continued, “but... it’s a conversation that may take hours.”

Liz feebly accepted her bag, her thoughts swirling chaotically.

“I don’t want any interruptions...” he tilted his head, his eyes deepening considerably, “... none what-so-ever.”

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Liz fidgeted this way and that in her seat.

Red’s amusement over her supposed predicament increased.

She kept looking at the back of Dembe’s head, a concerned scowl tracing the pretty brow.

Did she think the man could read her guilty thoughts?

Red glanced out the window. The second cabin was easing up on his right.

“Dembe,” Red’s eyes met the other man’s in the rear-view mirror, “tell me again why I insist upon dealing with the Canadians?”

“One... they have easy access to Russian Vodka.” Dembe did not miss a beat. “Two... their hockey teams are the best in the world.”

Red’s idle talk eased Elizabeth’s mood, he noted. “Again...” he shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs, “this is incentive, why?”

“One, you have a great distaste for the swill other countries produce.” Dembe iterated verbatim, Red realized. “And secondly, when you place a bet on any given team your chances of winning are
highly increased.”

“Well, I do so love to win.”

“You are very competitive.” Dembe agreed.

“Still,” Red sighed heavily, “it doesn’t seem enough.”

“Did the meeting not go well this morning?” Liz was glad to stop the harried thought of her time spent, spying on Greg Forester and the man’s little kitten.

“Well enough.” Red shrugged. “I just detest stupidity in all its radiant forms.”

“And half rate hooch,” Dembe drawled.

Liz was stymied, “The shipment was bad?”

“Good booze,” Red corrected, “incredibly inept handlers. I’ll inform Greg of the issues...” he turned a lazy stare Liz’s way, “later... after he’s finished with his current project.”

Liz flushed, averting her eyes.

Red held his grin, “You are a constant delight to me, Elizabeth. Have I told you so?”

She sought him out, “You mean, you like poking fun at me.” she corrected moodily.

“I mean,” he leaned, kissing her temple lovingly, “It’s these little moments I live for these days.”

His tone and gaze was so tender, Liz’s annoyance slipped into oblivion.

“How the hell I survived without them before,” the man touched her ear, his fingers tracing the small shell. He watched his progress with rapt attention, “...escapes me.”

“Your moods have definitely improved for the better.” Dembe nodded regally.

“My moods were fine.” Red shifted a languid stare.

“They were not.” Dembe obviously disagreed.

“I love you, Elizabeth.” Red’s tone caressed her. “Not so sure about you, Dembe.”

“Is it my association with your head guard?” Dembe mused thoughtfully. “Which is to blame.”

“Then stop ‘associating’ with him.” Red suggested. He slapped his hands on his thighs.

Liz jumped slightly at the sound, so lost in her other more pressing thoughts.

Red ignored the action, “All right, let’s recap events to this stage.”

He wasn’t sure if Lizzy even heard most of the information he supplied on the first leg of their journey over.

“Michael Benton’s son, Scott and his wife, Sarah... have been clearly targeted by some, as yet, unknown assailant.”

“A sad state of affairs.” Dembe turned his head, listening intently. “One which must be rectified immediately.”
“We are on the same page.” Red approved. He appreciated the slow trek Dembe had taken to reach the other cabin.

These little moments with Elizabeth by his side often erased the vexations of his day.

“Alert Silas to be on standby,” Red asked more than told. “We may need assistance on this one.”

“What will you tell Agent Ressler?”

Liz was interested as well. Red’s priorities had shifted.

Scott Benton had made his own bed with his chosen career but the man’s son and wife were innocent parties in the debacle. That they had been targeted and were now in danger, trumped Lawford’s antics and anything which came with it.

Ressler had to understand, surely.

“Donald already knows.” Red supplied. “...You grab the bags, I’ll get the gimp.” he directed to Dembe.

Liz’s mouth tightened for the slight, then she giggled. She slid her hand into Red’s extended one. He vacated the car and stood now, eyes twinkling with her supposed annoyance.

Dembe came about the car, “No, I meant... will we take the time to wrap up the problem here before leaving for Chicago?”

“There is no time for that.” Red had already decided. “And Agent Ressler realizes as much. We will send assistance in the way of manpower and information.” Red had long since dreaded that course of action.

Moments later, they entered the house to find Samar and Aram at their posts.

Aram had looked better, but he was gamely hanging in, headphones snuggly in place.

Ressler nodded a silent greeting handing over the discussed photos.

Reddington’s brow furrowed as he perused the shots.

“Michael Benton received these early this morning.” the agent explained. “They were taken last night at a charity dinner attended by Scott and his wife.”

Red studied the pictures critically for a beat before handing them over to Dembe.

“If you will have Silas compare those with the ones taken at Elizabeth’s birthday dinner, I would be appreciative.”

Dembe immediately tackled the problem, turning aside.

“What has one to do with the other?” both Samar and Liz were puzzled.

Samar held one listening device to a free ear while listening to the ensuing conversation in the room, her eyes communicating with Liz.

Dembe held his phone aloft, “He wishes to speak with you.”

Red obediently took the phone, waiting patiently for once, “Did you receive the pictures?”
“You have my hopes up.” Silas replied. “Are they dirty, because if so... I’m there.”

“Sorry to disappoint.” Red’s mouth quirked with amusement. “Did they come through?”

“Do you even know the definition of patience?”

“I was under the impression this fantastical age of technology negated the need.”

“It hasn’t even been a minute.” Silas pointed out. “Liz is a bad influence on you... in that regard.”

“I want you to assemble a team and get them to Chicago post haste.”

“I hate flying coach.” Silas grumbled.

“I didn’t say you, I said ‘a team’.” Red reiterated. “They are to secure D.A Benton’s wife and her child.”

“Ah.” Silas nodded his dawning understanding.

“Then locate Hunter Gaines and secure him as well until I arrive.”

“Hunter Gaines.” Silas’ brow lifted, nothing more at the name mentioned but even that signified much to anyone who knew the guard well. “Hang ten, pictures are arriving.”

Red looked over the room absently. Lizzy had found a seat, earphones already attached to her head. Ressler was at the window binoculars lifted. Dembe sat quietly aside in a convenient chair, Sudoku book in hand.

“Oh, I pulled up the shots of Liz at the diner.” Silas had them displayed on another computer at his desk. “...Looks like Gaines’ signature trademark except—” he traced the targets which had been marked on Liz’s head with a careful finger.

Silas’ brow furrowed, “This third one...” he studied thoroughly, “is marked with an ‘X’.” the guard murmured. “Two shooters?”

“A protégé?” Red threw out the possibility.

“We won’t know until we have Gaines to ask him,” Silas stated quietly.

The silence was a static one. “Get the team to Chicago.” Red snapped. “I want Hunter found.”

“Going to Chicago will take—”

“Take Antonio’s jet.” he glanced fondly over a diligently concentrated Lizzy Keen. “Tell him I’ll owe him and... that it’s for his girl.”

“You mean your broad,” Silas grumbled.

“Same difference,” Red smirked.

“Understood.” Silas clicked off without further adieu.

“Hunter Gaines?” Ressler had been paying attention.

“I think he’s been hired to track Lizzy.” Red motioned to the woman who was blissfully unaware of the conversation.
“I’m taking it, this guy is a Blacklister?” Ressler had never heard of him, at least.

“A man who takes his given name far too seriously.” Red returned grimly. “He’s very, very good at his chosen profession.”

Ressler realized the importance of the statement.

“Why Lizzy hasn’t been—” Red trailed off. “He isn’t known for procrastination or failure to do his job.”

Ressler glanced at his partner as well, “He’s targeted Benton as well?”

“It appears so.” Red inclined his head.

“You should hear this.” Samar got everyone’s attention.

Liz swiveled in her seat, the phones pushed closer to her ears as her eyes caught Red’s.

“No... no.” Lawford’s voice filtered into the motionless air, loud and clear. Aram had clicked to ‘speakerphone’. “I already have someone on Benton. He is not your concern.”

Ressler’s brow darkened considerably.

Red held Lizzy’s eyes comfortingly.

“I have another... issue, I need you to handle.” Lawford was continuing, unaware his words were being heard and taped for posterity.

Red stepped closer to Elizabeth unaware of his action as yet. She stared up at him, wide blue eyes clear and smiling.

“Yes, it entails a very nice chunk of change.” Lawford sighed his growing disillusionment with those with which he must associate. “Enough of a cut, minus yours, of course, to even keep my lovely wife off my back for a goodly while.”

Red peered through the binoculars across the field strewn with wildflowers of vibrant hues and shapes.

Windows lined the entire length of the South side of Lawford’s domain. He was standing by one such portal, oblivious to the world around him. The man was lovingly stroking his mistresses uplifted cheek, staring adoringly down at the blonde beauty.

Red was suddenly pleased that soon, he would be sending ample evidence to Lawford’s wife to ensure the woman received a nice alimony settlement.

He could not stomach the callous, almost cheerful tone Lawford exuded when speaking of someone else’s demise.

Finally, the voice on the other end of the line spoke. Red could not immediately place or recognize the speaker.

“If this issue you’re talking about is Holbrook or Reddington...” The man was saying, his voice holding an ever so faint hint of an accent, “you can kiss my ass, I’m not interested.”

All eyes looked to Red, but the man kept his expression purposely unreadable.
“I’ll handle Holbrook.” Lawford’s tone held his disdain, turning moodily, headed for his bar.

“No, you won’t.” the voice on the phone clearly doubted the other’s abilities. “Others better than you have tried... and failed.”

“I’m not paying you for a God damned critique.” Lawford’s good mood was a thing of the past. “This is an easy score I’m handing you... a woman.”

The silence was eerie to Liz’s ears.

“Even you can handle that I suppose.” Lawford snapped.

Again silence spoke volumes to Red Reddington.

“I would move carefully were I you.” there was a quiet menace to the jab. “Do you forget to whom you are speaking?”

Lawford hesitated his complexion blanching. Red smiled ruefully. Even from this distance, he could smell the fear.

“Doesn’t matter to me who the target is...” the voice was continuing, “I’m sure someone out there would pay handsomely for your head... or... maybe I’ll just consider it a practice shot.”

Lawford gulped down his drink, “...Very funny. Are you going to help me with this or not?”

The man’s tone was definitely altered.

“Who is this target?” the voice ended the stalemate, the tone curt and no-nonsense.

Lawford relaxed visibly, “...Elizabeth Keen.”

Liz gasped, her eyes widening with shock.

Red threw the binoculars on the windowsill his steps purposeful.

Dembe exited directly behind the man.

Ressler cursed under his breath, realizing too late the implication of their departure.

He also realized the futility of going after them but in this instance, he had no choice.

Liz hobbled after the agent and Samar, who had run to catch up to her partner.

Ressler was already out the cabin door and into the driver’s seat before Samar slid into her side of the car.

Liz finally managed the space, flinging open the cabin door just in time to see the tail end of Ressler’s car fishtail about a curve in the road.

Ressler was gaining ground fast but there was no way he would catch up to Dembe’s expert handling of the other car.

“Aram–” Liz turned pleading eyes the other man’s way, “drive me.”

“I...I don’t think Mr. Reddington would want you–”

“Then I’ll drive myself.” she stubbornly set out for the Landrover Dembe had procured.
“Well, let me get your purse.”

“Fuck the purse,” Liz called out over her shoulder.

“Aren’t the keys in there?”

“This is your car.” she exasperated.

“Oh, oh, of course.” Aram still hesitated. “Should I wake Wilson and–”

“There’s no time for that.” Liz was beyond herself. “Just give me the damned keys.”

Aram responded to the urgency of her tone and her state, running back into the house.

It seemed ages before Aram was finally behind the wheel because his usual mode of transportation was a mountain bike.

He seemed momentarily lost and disoriented which made Liz want to scream.

“I hate when he does this shit.” Ressler wasn’t being shy about voicing his consternation, his hand gripped the steering wheel tightly as he maneuvered turn after harrowing turn at breakneck speed. “Why does he do this to me?”

“Aram is still recording,” Samar was a little more level-headed, “if Reddington does what we believe he will, it will be swept under the rug as usual.” she shrugged, gripping the handle provided as they hopped a dip in the road. “I don’t know why you’re complaining. If Lawford is out of the picture, your friend Benton is free and clear.”

Ressler screeched to a jolting halt just a few yards from Lawford’s cabin entrance.

Reddington’s car was already there. Both doors opened and gaping, the car sans driver and passenger.

Ressler’s weapon was drawn and at-the-ready as both agents approached the all-too-quiet structure.

The front door was opened, the large side panel hanging askew, off its hinges.

Ressler chanced a peek inside the large plate-glass windowcased along the wrap-around porch with its pergola overhang.

Samar approached for the other side, crouched low, moving cautiously closer.

She watched her partner for hints of directions to take.

Ressler could see most of the spacious living area.

Dembe held Lawford against the far wall just below the stairwell... his gloved hand pinched into Lawford’s throat tightly. Dembe’s gun was cocked and held securely to the other man’s head.

Reddington stood off to the center of the room, unusually quiet, not making any obvious threats.

But then again, why should he bother?

Ressler hurried forward, entering the foyer quickly, his weapon still poised to fire.

It only took milliseconds to survey the scene.
Slowly, he lowered his weapon somewhat, his eyes asking the rhetorical question.

The woman known to him as Lawford’s mistress, whimpered despondently, hidden partially behind the couch to Ressler’s right.

Her eyes said she was clearly in shock.

Samar positioned herself out of harm’s way, but close to the female, weapon trained, her features hard and uncompromising.

Another vehicle approached.

Red’s head whipped about...

“It’s only Ke—” Ressler broke off when Reddington sent a death glare his way.

“Benton is off limits.” Red drew Lawford’s attention.

Lawford’s eyes narrowed, “What has–”

Dembe cut off his air supply so he shut up for a beat, gasping for air his only real interest for a goodly while.

Reddington just stood, expression blank.

Ressler began to sweat. Something was wrong, but he couldn’t put his finger on it as yet.

Dembe caught an ever so subtle movement in Red’s face, his fingers loosening somewhat.

Lawford gasped drawing in air in huge gulps.

“Call off your dogs, Lawford.” Red finally spoke, his tone quiet, almost pleasant, “Benton is protected.”

“How did you–” realization dawned, “you got this place bugged.”

“You are so intelligent.” Red stated sarcastically. “I can see why Francis holds you in such high esteem.”

“Holbrook sent you?” the man spat. “Well, look at you, his little errand boy. Won’t do him any good,” Lawford laughed hollowly, “Benton’s as good as dead.”

Red inched forward, something in his manner quieting the other man’s bravado.

Red leaned ever so closer to state what had to be stated. He enjoyed the sheen of perspiration and stench of fear emanating from Lawford.

“So... are... you.” Red held the man’s eyes for a long beat.

Lawford looked away first, “I got no beef with you.” he stated almost meekly, “whatever is between Holbrook and me... What is your interest?”

Red remained silent, just staring at the guy. He sighed, his head tilting, “Benton is our interest.” he repeated.

Ressler caught his confused scowl before anyone saw it. Why was the attention suddenly focused on
Benton and not Keen?

Liz had accepted Aram’s assistance, hobbling up on the porch, cursing silently for her predicament.

She felt so useless, sensing the others already did what needed to be done.

On the ride over, she wondered what exactly she planned to do to assist them.

She only knew, she could still brandish a weapon if back-up was called for and she wasn’t about to let her friends... and especially Red and Dembe, risk their lives and not offer some sort of support.

She could see that Lawford was under Dembe’s gentle nurturing care already. Samar had secured the mistress.

She had arrived too late.

Too little... too late.

She inched toward the opened doorway. Aram hanging back, taking her old position by the plate-glass window.

Liz had no intention of causing her team any trouble.

She would hang back and listen for once.

There was no need for her even to enter the cabin now.

She would stay out of harm’s way, allowing those more capable to do their jobs.

She peeked about the corner of the doorframe, her eyes meeting Lawford’s for a brief beat.

A sudden coldness gripped her stomach. His eyes narrowed, full of contempt.

She didn’t even know the guy.

What had she done to him? Why did he want her dead?

Liz moved back slowly, her mind reeling. She searched her back cases, wondering if she had encountered the man before but was coming up empty at every turn.

Red had noted her arrival and for once, was proud of her discretion.

“You have what you need?” he questioned Ressler. “He as much confessed his part in a pay-for-hire hit.”

“My God, Reddington,” Lawford was astonished, “you’ve been reduced to nothing more than a common snitch for the FBI?”

“There is nothing common about me.” Red’s look spoke his disdain. “I assume,” he returned his interest to Donald Ressler, “you were still taping?”

Lawford shook his head, “You know the drill, Reddington.” he scoffed openly, “I give the FBI some info and they make me a deal. In a year, I’ll be living in Boca Raton under an alias, free and clear.”

Ressler’s face flushed heatedly.

“So what’s the deal here?” Lawford was still puzzled. “What’s in it for you?”
Red remained stoically quiet.

Liz wondered the same but maybe Red was involved because of Francis? Did this guy really present such a threat?

Dembe turned the criminal over to Ressler’s hands.

Donald shouldered his weapon, reaching for his cuffs.

At that moment, Lawford lurched unexpectedly shoving Dembe off-stride and knocking Ressler to the ground. He struggled frantically to withdraw Ressler’s weapon but the agent held a steady grip.

Lawford judged Liz’s position once again scrambling forward, clearly trying his best to reach his objective.

He rushed for the door, making a beeline for Elizabeth Keen who had stood back, against the outside wall.

Red had bounded over and past the combatants, his objective to put his body between Elizabeth and the impending danger, having sensed Lawford’s intent.

He blocked the small frame with his own larger one, pulling her into the sphere of protection he offered.

Liz thrust her weapon into his capable hands, hunkering low that he might have a better shot advantage if he could manage it.

Samar found an opening in the melee, her weapon firing. The bullet hit Lawford’s thigh, slowing the man considerably.

Donald grasped the same leg, jerking his entire weight on the wounded area.

Lawford screeched a blood-curdling yell, as Dembe righted himself, a beefy hand connecting with the side of Lawford’s head.

Aram kicked out, his booted foot landing soundly under Lawford’s chin.

The man fell back, moaning, all the fight gone out of him. He clutched his leg, blood seeping past his spread fingers.

Ressler stood over the man, his fist coming down with brute force.

Lawford fell into oblivion, the blow landing soundly.

“Police brutality.” Dembe grinned over at the younger agent. “I approve.”

Ressler’s face was grim. He was beyond embarrassed to be caught so off-guard especially before Reddington.

His eyes traveled the room falling on the woman huddled over by the fireplace, a stuffed pillow held precariously in shaking fingers, eyes large and vacant.

Ressler had other priorities, dismissing the mistress entirely. He roughly flipped Lawford over, securing his cuffs.

“Watch my damned leg.” Lawford cursed at the less than gentle handling, grimacing his pain.
“If I had my way,” Ressler growled, “I’d break it as well.”

Dembe grinned his camaraderie.

“Read him his fucking rights,” Ressler hauled Lawford up with Dembe’s assistance. “He makes me want to shoot him in the head.” the agent bitched to his partner.

Lawford threw Liz a glacial stare as he passed.

Red turned his head slightly, his eyes chips of ice, holding Lawford’s easily.

“That fucker will never see the inside of a courtroom,” he stated quietly, so much so, Liz had to strain to hear the words.

“Red,” such talk bothered her, “you don’t have to do that for me... if it’s the reason you–”

“I do have to do it... for you.” Red snapped his head back around. “If only to show others what will happen if they even think about harming you in any way, shape or form.”

Liz was troubled, “The Justice system–”

“Is a damn joke.” Red disdained. “People like Lawford only understand one thing. Are you understanding that?”

Liz was saved a reply with Ressler’s arrival beside them.

“I guess we have to take the asshole to the Emergency room.” he clearly wasn’t happy for the fact. He glanced grimly at the vehicle where Samar and Dembe and Aram waited for his presence. “Maybe he’ll bleed out before we get there.”

“Ress.” Liz scowled.

“Maybe he will now...” Red had fallen into his Irish accent out of the blue, his eyes twinkling almost mischievously, ‘God willin’.”

“Red!” Liz snapped at the questionable humor passing between the two men.

Ressler laughed shortly, “Some of these creeps get under my skin.” he admitted his failing freely. “...Maybe it’s time I thought about a change of careers?”

Red couldn’t imagine Donald Ressler as anything other than what he was.

“You got any openings on your payroll?”

“What a red-letter day, indeed.” Red lifted surprised brows. “Never thought to hear those words out of your mouth, Donald.” he nodded approvingly. “My regard of you has lifted somewhat.”

“Yeah...” Ressler was disgruntled, more so than Reddington imagined. “Well, times they are a changin’.”

He spared Liz a worried look, “We’ll pick up Wilson and Moore.” he motioned with his head. “Get our things and head out to the plane? After we get out of the E.R.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Red approved.

“You may secure your prisoner in the back of the plane.” Dembe offered as Red, Liz, and Ressler
approached the SUV. “There’s a small, rather uncomfortable bathroom. You will find a very strong unbreakable chain under the sink.”

Ressler’s brow furrowed more and more with each passing sentence.

“There are several hooks imbedded into the floor... and any number of locks available in the overhead compartment.”

“Why would you–” Ressler thought better of questioning such a set-up. “...Never mind.”

Turning back to Reddington, he spared Dembe one last quizzical glance before, “I have to contact Cooper, notify him of our status. What about the hit on Benton and–”

“One problem at a time, Donald,” Red suggested, reading the guy’s thoughts.

The agent turned his back, motioning Reddington further from the car and prying ears, ignoring Lawford’s entreaties for medical assistance. “Yeah, yeah, don’t get your panties in a bunch.”

“I’m reporting you to your superiors!”

“Get the name right.” Ressler snapped right back at the man.

“I could be dying. I need medical attention.” Lawford screamed out the partially closed window from the backseat of the car.

“You need a good swift kick which is about what I’m going to give you if you don’t shut the hell up.” Ressler had stalked to the car, confronting the man.

“One more interruption and I’ll leave your ass in a clump of trees somewhere and you can take your chances with the local wildlife... I hear bears smell blood from five miles away.”

Lawford fell silent, a morose look on his face.

“You aren’t in charge, asshole,” Ressler leaned menacingly close, “I am... got it?”

Red held his amusement.

Liz’s mouth was slightly agape. Samar’s look was one of admiration.

Dembe was scratching a bug bite on his neck, his opinion on the matter withheld.

Aram stepped quickly out of Donald’s path as the man stomped moodily back to where he had left Reddington.

“What is this shit about a hit being put out on...” Donald jerked his head to the woman beside Red. “I thought it was supposed to protect her... being associated with you. What was the whole purpose–”

“Let me worry about, Elizabeth.” Red cut the tirade short. “Do you doubt my ability to protect her under any given circumstances?”

Ressler fell silent for a beat, “That woman in there. She hasn’t really committed any crimes or broken any laws...”

“I’ll see to her,” Red assured.

“As in, you’ll get her home safely, _see to her_, or something more Red Reddingt–”
“How you paint me, Donald.” Red laughed such absurdity aside. “I’ll see to her plane fare and send her merrily on her way.”

“Oh, Ress!” Liz tsked sorrowfully, her disappointment made abundantly clear. She marched back to the car she and Aram arrived in.

“Wrong way.” Red reminded her before she had gotten but a few feet. “Dembe and I shall escort you back to the cabin.”

“I’m not sure I want to go with you.” she snapped petulantly.

“I have chocolate cremes in my car.”

“Are you implying I can be bought?” she narrowed her eyes.

“And fresh donuts Dembe purchased just this morning.” Red evaded an answer, sort of.

“...Chocolate or glazed?” Liz pondered for a goodly few seconds.

“Both... of course.”

She trudged back, “Well... all right but don’t even think you can bribe a member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Ressler sighed heavily, “You caved like an old ghost mine.”

Liz lifted a haughty brow, “Well, at least I don’t turn green at the mention of baby poop.”

Ressler, right on cue, swallowed bile which had rimmed his throat, hurrying away.

“Touché...” Red applauded the woman’s abilities. “All those sparing contests with Silas have served you well.”

“Yeah...” she shrugged carelessly, “where are the donuts.”

Red chuckled his mirth, heading her way.

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“You told that woman to pawn anything Lawford left behind.”

“I did, yes.” Red nodded amiably.

“That was still his property.”

“He won’t be needing it.” Red patted her hand comfortably.

“Stop saying things like that.” she pulled her hand aside. “It upsets me.”

“It upsets you that I am Red Reddington?” Red put it on the line. “Because, Elizabeth,” he had turned to face her in the seat, “it’s who I am.”

“It’s just wrong to kill people indiscriminately.” she was pretty sure. “Some, like the Blacklisters....” she trailed off.

She sounded so pious even to her own ears. Was she setting herself up as judge and jury for... Red Reddington?
“I have never killed indiscriminately, but I have killed and will very likely continue to do so,” Red stated grimly. “I cannot change the past or predict the future. The world I deal in, oft times, can be cruel and unforgiving.”

Dembe drove in silence. He knew, at some point, this conversation would have to take place.

He felt bad for his friends... both of them.

It was a crossroads.

He hoped some sort of understanding or compromise could be reached.

“To survive, I must be just as cruel... and unforgiving.”

Liz glanced out the window, her arms folded over her chest.

What had she expected, she wondered? That she could change what was? That she could change Red Reddington.

Did she even want to change him?

It was her problem, this aversion to taking human lives so... seemingly callously.

And yet, Lawford clearly had no qualms about taking her life.

And why... it was still a puzzle.

She looked at Red, feeling his stare.

“...It’s confusing,” she sighed heavily, “I’m confused.”

“Which is only human.” Red inclined his head. He sat back, pondering over his own thoughts. “Perhaps I have stopped seeing the gray areas in life.”

He shifted his eyes, “What about it, Dembe?” he went to a source he trusted. “Do I only see black and white now?”

“Elizabeth is young still,” Dembe stated. “She can not possibly be as jaded as you and I, concerning our world.”

Red drew in an even breath, exhaling slowly.

“And yes, you do see only in black and white...” Dembe met his friend’s eyes in the mirror, “when it concerns the ones you love.”

Elizabeth moved through the space separating them, her arms going about Red’s neckline. She held on tightly to his stability, glad to feel the strength of his arms in return.

“If it makes you both feel better,” Dembe continued, “Raymond does not kill everybody indiscriminately.” he reminded. “You have many Blacklisters in custody, yes?”

Liz nodded slowly after a moments thought.

“But some,” the large man returned his attention to the road, “Raymond must handle accordingly.”

Red’s jaw pulsed, his arms tightening about Lizzy.
“If Lawford were to discuss what was seen today,” Dembe stressed, “not only would you be in danger, Elizabeth. But Raymond himself.”

“If I could protect you from that part of me, Elizabeth,” Red closed his eyes to the feel of her, “I gladly would but like you... I seem to be at a loss as to how to coincide one part of what I am... with the other.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, “I don’t even know why I should be feeling such things about... that awful man.” she didn’t. “He wants me dead.”

“Stop saying things like that.” Red placed his cheek on the crown of her head. “It takes years off my life and I only have so many remaining.”

“Then you stop saying... that.” she lifted troubled eyes.

Red smiled, his mouth brushing her gently.

“Why don’t you both just stop speaking for a while,” Dembe stated.

Red chuckled and Liz sighed, returning to Red’s embrace.

“I imagine my picture is inundating the underground even as we speak.” Liz bemoaned fiddling with a button on Red’s vest.

“Dembe just asked us not to...” Red reminded tongue-in-cheek, “speak, that is. But... I will handle that aspect of the matter. Do not concern yourself.” he crooked his head. “Do you believe that?”

Dembe tapped a readout of the elaborate dashboard, “Communique for your head guard...”

“A communique...” Liz murmured, impressed, “how very James Bond of you.”

Dembe read rapidly, dividing his time between the road they traveled and the readout. “The plane is secure, and the team is headed out.”

“See?” Red waved his hand expressively. “Silas is on it.”

“Well, I trust the big ape to an extent.” Even now her muscles were easing of tension. “If only because he wouldn’t want to tarnish his reputation if one of his charges got whacked right under his superior nose.”

Red chuckled easily, and she giggled, “Yes,” he agreed wholeheartedly, “thank God for the man’s ego.”

The comfortable silence came. Dembe drove into the paved parking lot halting the car a few feet from the entrance of Greg Forester’s establishment.

As they approached the entrance to the restaurant, both men hooked their arms under Elizabeth’s on either side, lifting her effortlessly up the stairs, unto the spacious portico.

“Oh, stop!” she wiggled out of their grasps, ignoring their shared tittering. “I can get up those stairs faster than you two old farts, let’s all be honest.”

“How quickly they turn on you, eh, Dembe?” Red shook his head woefully.

Dembe grinned over the top of the shorter female’s head, nodding his agreement, “Try to be chivalrous in this day and age...”
Liz sighed heavily for her lot in life.

Entering the domain, all allowed their eyes to adjust to the difference in light.

“I’ll drop off the manifest,” Red got down to business, “and then we can be on our way.”

Elizabeth glanced about for something with which to occupy her time.

Dembe pulled out a deck of cards from his pocket.

Liz brightened, “I won five dollars off Francis last time we played.” she sat down her purse on a nearby table, ready to get down to business herself.

“I am not... Francis Holbrook.” Dembe assisted her to sit.

“I’ll say you’re not.” Liz was clearly impressed with his solicitude. “Francis would have tried to pull the seat out from under me... the dork.”

Dembe laughed, sitting.

Red watched for a moment, content to do so.

“Red...” Liz lifted entreating eyes, “you wouldn’t happen to have a few dollars? I’ll give you a cut.”

The man frowned slightly, digging into his wallet, “If I only had a nickel every time I’ve heard those words.”

He forked over three twenties, his brow lifted skeptically, “He cheats... very efficiently.” he nodded towards her playing rival.

“I do not.” Dembe corrected. “Well... not with, Elizabeth.”

Red left his woman happy and content, making his way to the back offices behind the bar.

Greg Forester greeted him cordially, looking refreshed and revived.

“I have to thank you again for this.” The man held the manifest aloft as they entered Greg’s conference room.

The area was large and rustic, a magnificent mahogany table holding center court, comfortable padded seating surrounded the long object.

Books lined shelves the entire left side of the room. Greg’s love of sailing was showcased by several Galley, Frigate, and Galleon sailing ships.

A couple of Majestic Man O’ War ships took center stage. All were impressive and incredibly intricate with their countless riggings, bowlines, tacks and gun decks.

Red appreciated the attention to detail.

The portals, allowing miniature cannons leeway were three decks high. The billowing half mast rolls of sails draped listlessly. Open, sun faded material, curved as though caught in the ocean winds as the ship sailed to its next port of calling.

Red’s eyes brightened as the largest of the ships took on the appearance it was sailing in the night. The dark tint of the sails looked almost midnight blue, its glowing edge shown brightly in stark
contrast as the moonlight overhead, reflected off the hearty fabric. The black hull shimmered from sea spray with the stars overhead tinkling against the glistening surface.

If he closed his eyes, he swore he could feel and smell the warm sun and salt-tinged air misting his face, hear the rolling waves lapping at the stern... the stirrings in his heart to explore, crested as impressively as a stormy sea.

He grinned at the familiar emotions.

This was quite an enviable collection.

It took a special eye to note that most were modeled after famous ships in history, many of them fittingly... Pirate ships.
Greg sat down his coffee mug, breaking Red from his pleasant adventure.

“...And for allowing me some downtime this morning,” the man continued, the lines of stress he carried earlier were absent. “I really appreciated the gesture.”

Taking one last look at the ships, Red turned away, setting aside his sense of adventure for more... current topics.

“Yes,” Red nodded his growing amusement, “I saw how you... regrouped.”

“.Pardon?”

“Totally by accident and rest assured, I made a hasty yet discrete exit.”

“...Oh,” Greg got the drift, “...listen, if I was out of line by taking advantage of your hospi–” the man trailed off. “I changed the sheets...” he offered the conciliatory gesture.

“I more than understand.” Red held up a silencing hand. “You did me a favor.” he could not wait to garner the rewards from Elizabeth Keen, as a matter of fact. “You schooled dear Elizabeth on a few of the baser points of a relationship you and...” he lifted his brows, “I don’t think you’ve properly introduced...” he let it hang.

“Alison.” Greg supplied readily his eyes softening instantly, “Alison Moran. Ally...”

Red had been unaware the girl took Big Jake’s name, “She’s very lovely.”

“She is.” Greg showed his pride. “And quite a handful at times.”

“But that’s what makes them so exciting, isn’t it?” Red’s own eyes softened at the thought of his own handful. “Besides, you expect anything less from Jake’s daughter?”

“I had no idea what to expect, to be honest,” Greg admitted. “But when Jake asks for a favor, you just don’t refuse.” he laughed good-naturedly. “I am ever so glad he did though... now.”

“I heard about the slight trouble his daughter had gotten herself into.” Red replayed. “Put her to work, did he?”

“Thought it would force her to grow up or at least, see how the other half has to live.” Greg shrugged. “No one could foresee how it’s turned out, least of all... me.”

Red nodded, “Life has a way of sneaking up on you when you least expect it.”

“Well anyway,” Greg’s brow furrowed, “I will extend my apologies to Elizabeth. I thought the
house was empty.” he looked at Red oddly. “I thought...”

Red waited patiently, his manner open, encouraging Greg to be honest... upfront.

“I thought you would have... approached the matter with Elizabeth already.” a puzzled scowl was present on the handsome face. “Concerning... the sexual aspect of what went down this morning, I mean.”

“I’m working on it.” Red mused. While he was open to discuss any sexual endeavor... some things were better-left private between him and Lizzy.

“I don’t know about you, but that session this morning netted me exactly what I hoped.” Greg was proud. “Congratulate me. I’m soon to be a married man.”

“Congratulations...” Red shook his hand gingerly, his smile a genuine one, “Did you already receive Big Jake’s blessings or will this be a shotgun wedding?” he asked in jest.

Greg blanched suddenly, “No...no, I haven’t yet. But that shotgun thing... it may very well be a real issue... now.”

Red was curious, “An issue for you or Jake?”

“Not me, no.” Greg was quick to reassure. “I want it very much... all that it entails.”

“You had better.” Big Jake held old-fashioned, family values. “Is there a... problem?” he sensed there was one.

Greg nervously pulled his tie, blowing out a shaky breath, “How much... did you uh, hear this morning?”

Red looked at the man who was suddenly blotting a sweaty brow with a shaking hand, understanding dawning on him.

Red’s mouth quirked slightly, “Enough to know you’re extremely worried about the illegitimate kitten your lady might now be carrying,” he laid the cards on the table. “And that Big Jake is very proficient at math.”

Greg’s shoulders slumped, “I planned this for weeks. What I said... did.”

“Planned for everything except Big Jake’s reaction...” Red shook his head woefully, musing on the problem.

Greg dropped his face wearily into his palms before pushing from his seat, restlessly pacing the spacious room. “What if he doesn’t go for a union between us?” was the real question in Greg’s mind.

Red opened his mouth only to close it a second later when the man continued rattling on.

“And if by some stroke of luck he gave his permission,” Greg tugged his ear absently, “Jake will expect a lavish wedding affair,” the man had run the numbers in his head all morning long, “she’ll be showing by then and Jake will kill–”

“Time is of the essence then.” Red interrupted, lifting commiserating brows. “Isn’t it?”

Greg halted in his steps, slumping dejectedly to a nearby stool, frowning, “...Not following.”
“Cut him off at the pass.” Red shrugged.

Greg arose from the stool, a hopeful expression on his face, his ear attuned to every word... though not comprehending them.

Red rolled his eyes, sighing, “If you’re already married, not much he can do about it.” he further explained.

“He can make Alison a very young, attractive widow.” Greg mused.

Red held his smile, “If I find nothing objectionable about you, neither can he, although he will likely put up a good show for not having been considered in the decision making.”

Red could see the wheels turning in Greg’s head.

He fretted, “The license and blood tests will–”

“Dembe can be very persuasive when necessary.” Red waved the issues aside. “He can cut through the red tape faster than anyone I know.”

“Are you... serious?” Greg’s mouth slackened. “You would...help?”

“If you want it.” Red shrugged. “...Truly.”

“I do.” Greg responded rapidly. “Yes... yes.” his excitement was building with each passing moment. “I really do.”

“You haven’t said how Alison would view the matter herself.”

Red chuckled quietly when Greg’s mouth instantly snapped shut.

His eyes gradually softened as Greg stood silent for moments on end, seriously taking the woman’s needs into consideration over his own.

“I think...” Greg stood straighter, his confidence returning, “she would wish the same.”

Red held up a finger, going to his phone.

He explained the pending situation to Dembe, asking that Elizabeth be brought to him.

“She is winning,” Dembe reported. “I will be only too happy to end the game.”

Red heard the woman’s protests over the phone, smiling, “Tell her the planned activity... what woman could resist assisting us woefully unprepared males to get it right.”

Red hung up, checking on Greg’s condition, “The classic signs.” he grinned, “Nerves kicking in?”

“It’s a big step.” the guy couldn’t sit still. “But, one I’ve been wanting to take, Red... I swear.”

The older man put a calming hand on Greg’s back, “I have to line up a doctor for the blood test.” Red’s gears were attuned and functioning. “And a Justice of the Peace? This place does have one, correct?”

Greg laughed nervously, “We’re not that backward.”

“Then all that’s lacking is...” Red spread his hands, “the bride.”
Greg hesitated as if any moment Red would make that appear by magic as well.

“That would be...” Red held his laughter, “your department.”

“Oh.” Greg snapped to. “...Oh! Yeah!” he started off instantly. “The bride. We need... a bride.”

The man halted his steps, a comical look on his stunned face, “...I need a... bride.”


“What about witnesses?” Greg’s panic sat in.

Red sighed mentally, “That would be me and Elizabeth.”

“Oh.” Greg breathed out a thankful breath. “Yes, of course. You and Elizabeth can be... witnesses.”

Elizabeth came in just as Greg was exiting, the man almost ran smack into her smaller frame in his haste.

“Sorry!” he sped past, a sincere grimace offered backward. “Sorry, Elizabeth. My fault entirely. I have to fetch the bride. I’ll b-be right back.”

Elizabeth, who had been happily counting her winnings, dropped her hands to her sides, staring after the guy listlessly.

She sought out Red, “Dembe said come on through, that you would explain everything?”

Red watched her approach.

“What was that all about?” she motioned, lifting a fist full of dollars in Greg’s general vicinity.

“Explain..”

Red did so in the most economical manner possible.

“A what?” Liz was flabbergasted. “Red, you just don’t...” she gestured again, wildly this time, “conjure up a wedding just like that!”

“You do if you’re afraid for your life.” Red reasoned further tacking on the Big Jake part.

“... Oh,” Liz’s sails deflated, “well, yeah. I see your point, I suppose.” she frowned, “He’s not just doing it to save his hide, is he?”

Red’s mouth lifted at the corner, shaking his head, “No, I think he’s been wishing for this occurrence for a long time.”

He held out his hand. “My share of the winnings if you please.” he motioned with his fingers.

Elizabeth’s face fell, “You aren’t really going to hold me to that, are you?” she put the money behind her back.

“You either pay me now in hard cash,” he smiled pleasantly, “or later tonight...” his eyes ran her body slowly.

Liz breathed in a sigh of relief, shoving her ill gotten gains into her back pockets. “Well, you drive a hard bargain but...”
Red was hard pressed to hold his smile.

Greg entered, Alison in tow. He gently urged the young girl forward.

Liz realized suddenly, that was exactly the term for the little brunette who stood quietly, large blue eyes devoid of any real emotion as yet.

Greg made the introductions.

Alison’s flush came and stayed, “I-I didn’t mean... anything last night. Really, I didn’t.”

She concentrated more on Liz.

“I was angry with Greg... Mr. Forester.” she corrected, stammering slightly.

“You can call me by my given name, angel.” Greg clearly found the unabashed sincerity charming. “Seeing as how we’ll be man and wife in an hour’s time.”

Alison’s mouth fell agape. She stared up at her future husband, a light shining in the suddenly misty eyes, “You... sure you want to?” she whispered wistfully. “Really and truly?”

Liz’s animosity and misconceptions melted into oblivion at that moment.

“I’ve dreamed of this day, Princess.” Greg gently kissed the trembling lips. “Your dad will expect something more fitting but... this one is just for us, okay?”

The girl’s face fell. She looked down at her waitress get-up, dismay filling her heart and soul.

“You guys are going to have to give us a few minutes.” Liz ‘got it’. “We women have some wardrobe issues to tackle.”

An hour later, Alison stood nervously aside, looking at her reflection in a handy mirror.

“...Does it look... all right?” blue eyes sought Elizabeth out.

“You look absolutely beautiful.” Liz looked over her handiwork, smiling happily.

She flicked the newly arranged curls with expert precision, placing a lovely sprig of baby’s breath and a tiny rose into the perfect spot, affixing the tiny bundle with a bobby pin.

The cute little white dress was of a simple design but the girl’s figure made it work.

Liz beamed her relief offering a ‘thumbs up’ to a suddenly ‘beaming’ bride-to-be.

“You think so?”

Liz reassured with her confident smile, “This is all I could conjure...” she pulled a hopeful face, producing a small bouquet of pretty but mismatched flowers.

“They’re perfect.” Alison’s eyes misted yet again.

“No, no!” Liz warned. “We’ll mess our make-up.”

Alison laughed, sniffling, exhaling shakily, “I guess... we’re ready?”

Liz noted the fingers holding that small bunch of flowers trembled.
Panic struck, “Oh, Lord!” Liz whispered under her breath. “No! Don’t you move yet.”

She rushed to the door. Dembe waited patiently on the other side.

“I need, Red.”

The large man lifted his brows.

“Oh, Dembe... it’s terrible!” Liz wailed. “We need something old, borrowed, blue and... that other thing! We don’t have any of it!”

Dembe nodded calmly, taking his leave.

Red approached minutes later holding up his hand having seen Lizzy’s frantic expression.

“I come bearing gifts,” he chuckled, holding aloft...

“Dembe’s tie clip.” he gestured to the blue crystal on the end. “What d’ya think, baby? Your bracelet for the borrowed?”

Liz fumbled with the clip, attaching it to Alison’s dress. It sparkled cheerfully. She hastily removed her bracelet, handing it over but Alison was shaking so badly, Red himself slipped it on the slim wrist.

Liz turned expectantly, hands held out, “Two more to go.” she breathed excitedly.

Greg himself shoved a small box through the door.

“Get out!” Liz ordered sharply. “You can’t come in here.”

“I’m not looking, I swear.” Greg held up the box, shaking it. “I got these for her a couple days ago.”

Liz grasped the offering handing it to Alison, “You better not be looking.”

“I’m outta here.” Greg laughed gleefully making a hasty retreat.

Red grinned as the man bolted before turning his attention back to an expectant face.

He had grappled with the ‘old’ portion of the tradition during their hasty search of the establishment until he happened upon perfection in Greg’s office.

He held his hand out, his eyes sparkling when Lizzy sighed her exasperation for his dramatic pause. He eased his fingers apart, allowing the delicate gold chain to fall freely from his palm before snapping straight as the heavy weight at the end failed gravities test.

The antique compass swung like a pendulum from his finger, the sun shining off the glass face before spinning like a top to show her a sailing ship on the other side.

“To guide the couple on their journey...” Red’s deep voice rumbled intimately.

Liz’s eyes misted at the romantic gesture. She took a breath, leaning forward to kiss that fabulous mouth, “You really do say the sweetest, most romantic things.” she whispered against his soft lips.

“How can I not?” he whispered right back, looking down at her little upturned face, “When I have been gifted the most wonderful inspiration ever.”
Turning the hand in his, he laid a gentle kiss on her scar, holding her eyes as he did so. Red’s heart beat heavily in his chest when Lizzy's long lashes fluttered and the sweet pink hue of her cheeks flushed.

The soft sound of a clearing throat and a presence beside him broke the spell.

“Raymond, the Justice of the Peace is here.” Dembe stated softly.

“Thank you.” Red inclined his head to his friend before easing Lizzy’s hand back to her side, “When you’re ready…”

She smiled warmly to the two men, holding up the last trinket with gratitude before slipping the door closed.

“Whew!” Liz settled. “That was close.”

“I’m going to cry.” Alison proclaimed.

“Don’t you dare,” Liz sniffled. “You just stop now.” she smoothed the curls back so the earrings shown brightly. “Those are to die for!”

Alison touched them gently, blowing out a controlled breath, “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Red’s smile was gentle on both women, “Alison, I have never seen a more lovely bride-to-be.”

His eyes fell on his Elizabeth, his heart swelling. The woman had made this into an event to remember.

When Dembe had escorted Alison to her blood test, Liz, and the staff had prepared a romantic and charming altar on the outside patio in record time.

Soft candles and twinkling lights surrounded the area. The majestic mountains provided a backdrop of epic proportions, setting the romantic aura so needed.

Liz had pulled it together and gone with the flow. Her eyes now shone with subdued excitement.

She was as caught up in the proceedings as if it were a dear friend’s wedding which she attended.

The woman looked as radiant as the bride-to-be. Liz preceded Alison down a makeshift aisle.

A bubbling exuberance flowed from her, the blue eyes shining with a tender affection as they met Red’s.

He stood solemnly beside Greg who was shaking in his boots but so obviously enamored, it was verging on pathetic.

Though... he probably suffered similar moments when it came to Lizzy.

Dembe played a melodic tune from his tablet as each took their place in the time-honored ceremony.

As the bride approached her groom, all fell contentedly silent, each to their own thoughts as the Justice of the Peace opened his bible to the appropriate page.

Simple but meaningful vows were exchanged. The Justice’s words were humble yet effective.

The depth of their meaning impressed even Red Reddington.
Spur of the moment though this had been, the look on Greg’s face as he hesitated before kissing his new bride, was worth every second of preparation and thought.

Red could only hope that one day, he and Lizzy could be afforded the same opportunity.

A small gathering followed where Red toasted the newlyweds. Cake and drinks were shared by all.

In lieu of a proper wedding gift, Red slapped Greg a couple grand in a plain white envelope, apologizing for the ungraciousness of it all.

Greg handed it back, “I think you’ve done more than enough to–”

“Nonsense.” Red refused to debate the subject. “A trip to the Big Island is in order. Bring me back a Mai Tai and I’ll be content.”

“I downloaded the pictures to Alison’s email.” Dembe had acted as photographer for the occasion. He showed the latest of his efforts to the two men.

A group shot of friends smiling and lifting a glass of cheer.

“You’ve missed your calling, Dembe.” Red approved. “I want an 8x10 of that... and a wallet size, when you get a chance, Greg.”

“After today, anything you want... anytime,” Greg clearly meant the statement, “all you have to do is pick up the phone.”

The men shook hands and Red took his leave with a still buzzed Lizzy in tow.

She finally sat back, cheeks aglow, kicking her shoe off, massaging her foot.

Red eased the boot off, massaging her free one.

“That was amazing wasn’t it?” she fell back, closing her eyes. “And it turned out just fine,” she sat up worried and fretful, “don’t you think?”

“I think it was fabulous.” Red consoled immediately. “What say you, Dembe?”

“A most auspicious affair.”

Liz beamed, falling back again, “Ohh, that feels so good.” she wriggled her toes happily. “I’m so stoked!” she giggled enthusiastically. “Did I drink too much?” she was worried again.

“It’s just the excitement, sweetheart.” Red chuckled. “It’s good to see you so... carefree.”

“That’s it.” she sighed happily. “I feel... carefree and luminous.”

Red loved her mood.

“I love weddings.” she frowned. “Although, I never used to.” she was puzzled a beat. “But I loved that one. I hope mine is....” she trailed off self-consciously, her eyes flying to Red’s.

“Hope yours is... what?” he encouraged.

She stared wide-eyed at him, “...I-I didn’t mean...” What? What had she meant or not meant, in this case? What did she mean, right now at this moment? “...I didn’t mean to imply... anything.”
“Too bad.” his eyes deepened. “But then again, you did catch the bouquet. This makes twice now, doesn’t it?”

“That’s just a silly superstition.”

“Is it?” he mused. “Well, if one believes in tradition...” he let it hang, “who can foretell the future, right?”

She sat back quietly bemused.

She lifted luminous eyes, the sight of repressed hope barely hidden within the sapphire depths.

She dropped her head quickly, hiding her flushed cheeks.

Red sat back, his thoughts just as private as the woman’s who sat next to him.

Who could foretell the future?

All he knew for certain was his future would contain Elizabeth Keen.

Come hell or high water, he would move heaven and earth to see his vision would come to pass.

Today’s events only cemented the determination he felt.

“We’ll figure it out, Elizabeth.” he murmured quietly, glancing at the passing scenery. “I promise you that.”
June 5

“...So,” Ressler approached Red Reddington in what he hoped was a casual enough manner, “we’re not heading back to D.C., I take it?”

Cooper, Red knew, ordered the agents back to home base, “I vetoed the notion.”

“Does Cooper know?”

Red nodded, “And he was no happier than your associates.” the Master Criminal nodded to the two sulking FBI agents in the back row of the plane. “Still a little miffed they missed out on all the fun?”

Ressler spared his contemporaries a glance, “You snooze, you lose.” he philosophized in his own fashion. “Maybe I should have taken the time to rouse them but you kinda took that option off the table.”

“One must take an opportunity when it presents itself.” Red said.

Ressler was referring to Red and Dembe’s unexpected exit back at the cabin, Red realized.

“Didn’t really want them in the way,” Red admitted.

Ressler knew Moore would have been a pain in everyone’s ass. He also knew, no one dictated procedure or demanded Reddington do anything the man did not wish to do.

Not even Cooper.

Ressler gave up the fight, sticking his hands in his pockets, “Do I inform Benton we’re on our way?” he had another dilemma on the horizon.

“No,” Red replied quietly. “Let’s get a feel for the situation first.” he once again eyed the two men sitting several rows behind them as they conversed.

Ressler remained silent, his brain ticking feverishly away at his options.

His instincts were to go by the book, follow procedure.

Which was to put a call into the Chicago Field Office, request a detail be assigned to Benton whose life was in imminent danger.

But that would take away precious minutes of time... time they might not have.

Red understood the man’s turmoil.

This was personal to Ressler...

“Benton made his bed when he became District Attorney.” Red reminded, which drew a disgruntled grunt from Ressler. “His wife and child are another kettle of fish.”

While Ressler held opposing objectives, he sensed Reddington’s methods might lead them to the
same results... faster.

“Tell the local office you’re in the area,” Red let the guy off the hook, “following a promising lead.” he arched a brow, conveying his own message. “Advise them it might be advantageous to have a team on standby should thing’s head south.”

The tension in Ressler’s shoulders eased.

Reddington provided an out... a paper trail, a feasible explanation he could sell if he had to.

“No not tell them about Benton,” Red warned. “Lawford might have ears on the inside.”

Ressler nodded his understanding, extracting his phone from the inside coat pocket he sported.

“And for God’s sake,” Red suggested sourly, “sit down.” he motioned to an empty seat by the window. “You’re giving my neck a kink staring up at you like this.” the man eased his muscles with his fingers. “And keep your voice low.” he lifted a lazy stare to the back of the plane.

Ressler sat beside Dembe, his sigh a heavy one, “You don’t trust them.” he indicated his fellow agents.

“I don’t trust anyone until they’ve proven they can be trusted.” Red propped his feet on the seat opposite him having removed them for Ressler to pass through the aisle. “You would be wise to emulate that belief.”

Ressler only shook his head, getting down to business.

Dembe handed over his projected list of people and equipment which might be useful on the excursion they already laid plans for.

Red looked it over with a perfunctory glance, “You’ve relayed this to Silas?” he asked absently.

“No without your consent.” Dembe managed straight-faced.

Red lifted a sarcastic smirk, “Yeah... right.” he laughed the statement aside. “Since when have you two ever needed that?”

“I was striving for professionalism.” Dembe sat back, his head turning slowly. “What with all these government officials on board.”

Ressler took the jesting in his stride, ignoring the large black man as best he could, “I’m on hold here...” he mentioned.

“Well, of course, you are;” Red stated brightly, “you’re dealing with a government official.”

Ressler shifted, turning his back on his two antagonists.

Red grinned over at Dembe, absently shifting his interest across the way after a fashion.

He was surprised to find Samar’s eyes on him.

He thought better of an amiable smile for the woman’s lovely face was laced with a very set frown of dissension.

Sensing something definitely amiss, he listened in on Elizabeth’s running commentary for a while, having made himself quite comfortable first.
He stretched out his arms, at length interlocking his fingers behind his head. His eyes locked with Dembe’s for a beat. He held his grin.

“This should be very enlightening.” Dembe confided sotto voce. He turned his head to check on his theory.

Samar sat across from Liz, studying the photos from the impromptu wedding at which Elizabeth had been the self-titled Maid-of-Honor, Red was to hear.

Dembe pulled an ‘impressed’ face at the news.

“I was lead photographer.” he made mention.

“You were the only photographer.” Red reminded.

“It was just enchanting Samar.” Liz was still caught up in the moment, her eyes bright and wistful. “You would have loved it.”

“It looks charming.” Samar nodded. “You did a remarkable job on such short notice, I must say.” Samar held Dembe’s tablet for Liz to see her meaning. “I see... you caught the bouquet.”

Liz flushed as she perused the photo, “There were only two other women present.” she raised a sheepish look. “I was just faster... it was instinct. It’s just a silly superstition, anyway.” she laughed.

“If you say so.” Samar cackled gleefully and Liz flushed more fully.

“Well, I do say so.” she snipped.

Red was the only one who could read the true meaning of that blush. His eyes softened for the fact.

In her haste to move matters along, Liz blurted the first thing to come to mind, “We were searching desperately to fulfill the superstition involving something new.” she continued her narrative. “Greg had bought lovely diamond earrings but if you ask me...” her tone altered expressively, “she already had something new.”

Samar lifted a lovely brow at Liz’s next proclamation.

“Oh!” Liz grimaced, “...Not that I meant anything derogatory.”

“She’s pregnant?” Samar’s brow furrowed two-fold at the new Liz related.

“What’s so special about that?” Liz wanted to know. “In this day and age?”

Samar shifted Red an annoyed, disapproving glare.

Red was taken aback by the animosity displayed.

Dembe leaned, his tone low, almost soothing. “I believe, Elizabeth has mistakenly led the lovely Agent Navabi to believe...” he smiled to ease the blow, “you have slept with Greg Forester’s new bride... before the actual nuptials.”

Red spread his hands helplessly.

“And that the child is... yours.”

“Mine?” Red was aghast for all of two seconds. “My God,” he leaned his head sideways, “this is
rapidly becoming an episode of *Young and the Restless*.”

Dembe inclined his head slightly.

Red cocked his head, a thoughtful expression on the man’s face, “I wonder, when my twin brother shows up... will he be the good or evil one?”

“I believe the latter position has already been filled.” Dembe muttered.

Red sat back embracing Samar’s disapproving glare, “This is simply too entertaining.”

“I agree.” Dembe sat back, crossing his arms over a well-muscled chest.

Dembe waved the issue aside. “It is a colossal series of exaggerated misunderstandings and perceived implications.”

“Well, I know,” Red was about to take affront, “but, really.” he decided it was more fun not to.

He winked flirtatiously at Samar Navabi instead, which caused the woman’s beautiful mouth to pull into an irritated straight line.

Well, that had been a little spiteful on his part, Red admitted.

But Samar urged Lizzy to take him as a lover only. Advising not to get emotionally attached and now, the agent was vexed because supposedly, Red slighted Liz for the young waitress.

Women...

He swirled the dark amber liquid in his glass, musing to himself, holding a chuckle.

To add injury to insult... Samar believed he would shirk his responsibility having left Alison in the family way. At which time, Red callously arranged a marriage to get out of the predicament. Pawnning off his illegitimate child to some poor unsuspecting fellow.

Emmy winning material that, he had to concede.

He shrugged mentally.

Liz moved on as well. She was excitedly conveying detail for detail how she and the wait staff transformed the once dismal setting into a fairytale backdrop for young Alison’s wedding.

Hearing the ‘happily ever after’ part pissed Red off royally.

Seemed everyone was allowed a way to be together except him and Elizabeth.

A well of frustration erupted in his gut.

It just wasn’t good enough. Nothing he envisioned prevented Lizzy’s future from being bleak at best... if she stayed involved with him.

His best offer was to spend their lives on the run, hiding out, waiting for the day they would be found by whatever agency tracked them down.

No...

He would not take Lizzy from the things she loved, her work, friends, home...
He refused to turn her life upside down simply because he had fallen in love with her.

His mind swirled about with concerns, awareness of escape, possible...

The man’s brain activity halted suddenly.

“...Marvin,” he muttered the name, a thought emerging above all else.

Red quickly drafted a memo to his attorney, outlining his concerns and requirements. He sent the message immediately.

With luck, the lawyer would respond soon.

Sitting back in his chair, he closed his eyes, clearing his mind of everything... for now.

He took the opportunity to recharge.

He did so by resting his mind certainly but more so, by listening contentedly to Lizzy.

That woman always saw the good in life, always seemed so hopeful and buoyant.

The very sound of her voice delighted him.

The way she would blurt out things before she truly thought matters through, amused him.

The warmth of her concern for Aram, who was still suffering a form of jet-lag and wasn’t averse to anyone knowing it... warmed his heart.

Red smiled absently, hearing Lizzy’s genuine concern and caring as she listened to the continual complaining.

He chuckled at Agent Navabi’s curt, “Suck it up... be a man.”

Agent Navabi was not one to suffer a man’s ailments easily, it appeared.

But his Lizzy was. She hastily soothed the ranks with sympathetic platitudes, ending any threat of strife quickly.

“Now Samar, remember when we were in New Mexico last year and you–”

“Don’t bring that up.” Samar held her stomach grimacing accordingly. “Please!”

“Okay but, traveling can be... adventuresome.” Liz reminded. “Aram isn’t used to gallivanting about the country willy-nilly.”

Samar let it go and soon, both women were trying valiantly to make Aram’s lot in life a little better.

Red kind of envied the guy.

Having two beautiful women hovering over you like mother hens? It was his idea of bliss. Well, one of his ideas, at least.

His phone disturbed the pleasant state he had drifted into. He sighed heavily, answering the call.

“We got him.”

Red sat up, opening his eyes, “So quickly?” he was pleased.
“Hunter didn’t take into account he could end up being,” Silas’ rich mellow tone filled Red’s ears, “...the hunted.

“They never do,” Red muttered his belief.

“Besides, we knew he would be relatively easy to find.” Silas continued, the usual boast infiltrating the words.

“I hear a ‘but’ coming.” Red sat his glass aside.

“We knew he would be on either Benton of his wife.” Silas side-skirted the issue. “But it was odd... it was almost like he expected us to show up.”

Red frowned at the news, lost in thought, “He couldn’t have known we saw the photos because they were delivered to the Blacksite, not to me.”

“Or that you were involved with Liz,” Silas had more time to process, “in whatever form.”

Red wasn’t involved romantically with the woman at that point.

It didn’t make sense... yet.

“Where are you holding him?”

“Francis’ office, Monroe and Wabash,” Silas replied. “The other one, we couldn’t trace. He was using a burner phone.”

“We’re nearing final approach.” Red looked down over the city as it loomed large in his window. “I’ll be there shortly.”

“Copy that.” Silas clicked communications shut.

“Dembe,” Red caught the man’s attention as he passed in the aisle, “would you be so kind as to inform Edward we will be landing at Chicago-Midway, please.”

A half hour later found the passengers deposited on the tarmac, luggage loaded in neutral vehicles, each individual wondering over their role in the upcoming hours.

“I’m assuming you will want to get on Benton.” Red surmised.

“And what will you be doing?” Ressler resented not being kept in the loop.

“My priority is elsewhere, as you know.”

“You’re going to, Sarah.” Ressler relaxed.

“We have her and the child safe.” Red was annoyed Ressler would think he would wait to do so. “While you’re standing here wrestling with protocol measures, Benton is a walking target, may I point out.”

“You’re trying to get rid of us.” Ressler sensed as much.

“My tactics don’t always meet with your superior’s approval.” Red reminded. “What you don’t see... you aren’t accountable for. Do you want this ended or not?”
Ressler resented being spoken to in such a manner, clear and simple.

Liz sensed as much, “It’s not you, he’s trying to get rid of.” she whispered. “Trust him, Ress.” she asked. “He knows what he’s doing. He knows how these guys operate. You know that.”

“We can deal with your ethics after,” Red said, “after we shut down whatever plan that’s in the works.”

Liz threw the man an impatient sigh, “Let’s just do what we have to.” she implored. “And pray that everything gels.”

Ressler nodded curtly, “I’ll text when we have Benton.” he turned on his heel, heading for the others.

Minutes later, Dembe drove through heavy rush hour traffic.

Liz sat quietly in the back seat.

Both men kept looking suspiciously at her for the fact.

“I had to piss him off.” Red explained his action. “He’ll be more alert. He functions much better in a ‘livid’ mood.”

“Who?” she questioned.

Red realized he had been on the wrong track, “Why so quiet?”

“Why didn’t you tell Ress you had Hunter Gaines?” she overheard Dembe’s report to Red.

“He needs to concentrate on Benton.” Red stated. “We don’t know how many hit-men were hired... or by whom.”

Dembe pulled down a long side-street.

The numerous skyrise buildings and bustling streets packed full with every kind of shopping you could want, caught Liz’s attention. It was a shock to the system after the quiet picturesque setting of Montana.

She craned her head, just barely able to see the tops of the towering structures. She closed her eyes a moment, envisioning mountains and open spaces in their place.

The smell of the downtown area shook her out of her imaginings. She crinkled her nose distastefully as the crisp, clean air she had become accustomed to was replaced by popcorn, chlorine, exhaust, and fish.

A train rambling overhead drowned out the delicate sounds of wind rustling leaves and birds chirping. A sharp horn blast a blaring reminder they were no longer in a quaint setting but in the bustling city.

She missed the quiet...

Dembe pulled down a thin alley, dodging lines of trash cans and crates, maneuvering the wide car expertly before pulling alongside out of the way.

Red looked at the woman, dreading the confrontation he sensed on the horizon.
“Let me guess,” she guessed, “I stay here and you go in.”

“Best case scenario,” he nodded.

The woman sighed heavily, settling back into the plush leather of her seat. “It would be kinda stupid of me,” she admitted. “If someone has paid this guy to whack me... there’s no reason to make it ridiculously easy for him, right?”

Red was taken aback.

“I mean, how do we know this isn’t part of the plan?” she waved a hand. “Get himself caught so you bring me right to his little waiting web.”

Red didn’t think that was the case but, “I am so very proud of you, Elizabeth,” he was, “for thinking like that.”

“I didn’t always.” she mused ruefully. “You guys are bad influences.”

Red conceded, she had a point.

“Dembe, are you hungry?” she asked amiably. “Should we go get a coffee? Assuming...” she scowled darkly at Red, “there are more good guys in there than bad and you are in no danger what-so-ever?”

“No more than normal,” he teased, kissing her gently. “You are being surprisingly rational,” the man eyed her suspiciously, “...vigilant.”

“Yeah, well.. Don’t get used to it, could be a passing phase.” she smiled prettily for him. “If I get bored, I’m going for a danish and your ass will be grass if the shit hits the fan because... Dembe is going with me.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” he chuckled, sliding to the door.

She caught his arm, “Silas sent men he trusted, right?”

“I gave him a bonus on his last check,” Red acknowledged, “so yes, he did.”

Liz rolled her eyes dramatically.

“I’ll be fine, and I’ll contact you as soon as we’re finished.”

Liz watched the man walk from the car, at length entering a side door that miraculously opened for his entrance.

Liz slid close to Dembe, watching whatever transpired outside the darkened windows of the car.

Red disappeared but Liz recognized Joe, who poked his head out, his fingers waving jauntily.

Liz waved back frantically but she couldn’t be seen through the dark tint of the windows.

Joe continued to wave, even as he secured the door.

His wide grin soured immediately as he sobered at Red’s carefully composed expression.

The guard straightened his posture, clearing his throat, “…They’re straight down the hall, boss.” he pointed, “On the left there.”
He self-consciously scratched at his nape, “We’ve been real polite.”

Red lifted a cool appraising stare, “Go have coffee with Lizzy. Take her down to the waterfront.”

Joe glanced about motioning another guard into position, “I can stay if—”

“I need to concentrate.” Red arched his brow. “Go...to...Lizzy.”

“I’m gone.” he made good on his word as he bounded for the door without a backward glance. “We’ll bring stuff back,” he yelled over his shoulder.

“Take your damn time,” Red warned. He wouldn’t have to worry Lizzy was losing patience as long as she was occupied.

A reluctant smile pulled at Red’s mouth but he stubbornly squelched it, his footfalls echoing down the ridiculously long hallway.

About ten feet from the opened portal, a large shadow blocked the light streaming from the room. It grew exponentially along the opposite wall.

Red pulled up short, scowling, “...What in the hell,” he grated, “are you doing here?”

Silas’ mammoth frame came into view, his handsome face creased with a wicked grin, “I was bored.”

“You were recouping, as I recall.”

“Quit bitchin’.” Silas grumped pushing from the framework of the door, unfolding his muscular arms.” I’m getting really hungry.”

Red’s jaw worked irritably, but he managed, “Has he said anything of import.”

“Said he wanted to wait for the Big Cheese.” Silas turned following Red down yet another long corridor.

“I’m disappointed in you,” Red threw back a look over his shoulder, “You didn’t try torturing him? Waterboarding him?”

“You said to be sweet.” Silas lied easily. “Besides, you were on approach. How much damage could I have done in such a measly span of time?”

“Consider it a challenge next time.” Red continued on. “I have no intention of using kid gloves at such a time or under any circumstances.”

“You’re bitching at me for wasting times.” Silas caught the fedora Red slapped into his chest, following on. “And here you stand... wasting time.” he waved a hand in the needed direction.

“I swear to God, Silas,” Red muttered his growing discontent, “one of these days–”

“Yeah, yeah,” the man opened a door, stepping aside for Red’s entrance, “you’re going to put a bullet in my head.”

“In the ass, more like it.” Red snapped indignantly.

“Friction among the troops?” a man sat, seemingly at ease, in a sturdy wooden chair. His expression was almost expectant, an air of amiability surrounding him.
Red stepped closer, coming to stand directly before the man in question, his eyes cool, devoid of any emotion suddenly.

The silence was brittle.

“My goodness,” the man winced, “the temperature has certainly dropped in here.”

“...Were you ordered to kill Elizabeth Keen?” Red’s tone was disturbingly quiet.

“No one orders me to do anything.” Hunter Gaines cleared up the misconception. “I was paid to observe and report back for further instructions.”

“How did you find her?” Red demanded.

“I was given a name... Amir... Amar?” the guy was totally forthcoming. “He’s some kind of computer specialist. Through him, I was able to track her.”

Red controlled his expression, careful not to react to anything said. He made a mental note, Aram needed to be shadowed in the future, along with Samar, and Ressler very likely.

He only thought of them in terms of FBI agents. Who, in their right mind, would be stupid enough to...

Or smart enough...

“Have you taken on a protégé?”

“I don’t need or especially want one.” Hunter’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Red threw the photos down on the tabletop next to the man.

Hunter perused them, “Yeah, I took these.” he admitted. “That’s my signature mark, which I’m sure you already knew.” his scowl increased. “What are you so bent out of shape for? This only shows I have the target in sight.”

The silence came yet again.

Hunter looked from Silas to Reddington, “Hey, I backed off the minute I saw your two guys here. See?” he motioned with his head.

Silas moved onto the opposite side of the table, fingerling the photos, “You got my best side, I see.”

He plopped his ass down on the tabletop, folding his arms leisurely.

“Thought you didn’t have a bad one.” Hunter quipped. “Look, I put an ‘X’ on the woman see? Which indicates, I would not complete the job.”

Hunter lifted confused eyes, “When I saw Mr. Fantastic here, I figured she was either on the payroll or... under your protection. Was I right?”

Red refused to answer.

“Which means, if I went ahead with the plan, you would hunt me down,” Hunter added two and two for them, since they seemed a little slow today, “...and kill my ass.”

Red remained silent, that possibility still very much in the works.
“Ergo... I politely backed off.” Hunter finished rather eloquently, Red thought.

“Did Lawford say why he wanted her dead?”

“Lawford?” Hunter was all confused. “He didn’t hire the hit, what’s he got to do with it?”

Red shared a look with his head guard at the unexpected news, “Who did you send the photos to?”

Hunter sighed, “You know how it works.” he disdained. “I left them at a designated drop off spot.”

Red hoped for more, but yes, he knew protocol in such matters.

“When I received the callback from the interested party, I warned them to back off.”

Red processed, rolling his hand slowly to indicate... continue.

“Needless to say, they were not impressed with my less than professional stance.” Hunter shrugged.

“I get another call, this time from Carver, warning me to back off.”

Red stiffened.

“Said he would shuck me like a corn husk if I didn’t.” Hunter pulled a face. “There is something terribly wrong with that bastard.”

He laughed, his expression almost benign, “One of these days, I’m going to pit my strengths against his...” his eyes held an odd light. “Wonder who will win?”

Red studied the man.

There was no fear in his eyes... none.

“Do you know who I am?” Red asked quietly, an odd light within his own eyes.

*Do you know exactly what I have become?*

The unasked question plagued Red’s conscience these days.

“Everyone knows who you are.” the younger man shrugged nonchalantly, his movement restricted by the tight bonds. “Everyone who matters at least. If he’s there,” his head jerked to Silas, “then you are not far away. It’s a given, as I said earlier.”

Red needed this guy to be afraid. How could he get answers if there was no fear of reprisals?

“I know you by... reputation.” Red shrugged. “And more.”

Hunter’s face remained passive, “Not much to know.”

“I disagree.” Red made himself comfortable. He hoped this wouldn’t take all that long but... he pulled out a chair, seating himself.

He searched his pocket, coming up with a few folded sheets of paper. Dembe was very efficient as well.

He perused the sheets absently for he had already memorized the data within.

“...Says here, Hunter Gaines, a young boy fresh off the farm... Minnesota,” Red lifted his brows, “lovely fall weather up there.”
Hunter was interested, Red could tell. The man eyed the papers speculatively.

“Entered the Corp, September 1991.” Red pretended to read on. “Discharged... honorably.” he lifted a stare. “We would expect no less but... look at this,” he showed Silas the paper, “A Silver and Bronze Star, four Purple Hearts.”

Hunter grinned, “Yeah I pawned them off the first year I was out.” he shifted Silas a smug look. “Gave the Hearts to a few women along the way... makes for easy marks, right Silas?”

“How would I know?” Silas didn’t want to play.

“Never earned any?” Hunter commiserated.

“Are you thirsty?” Silas countered. “That waterboarding activity is starting to sound so very appealing.”

Hunter chuckled, “I almost drowned over in Iraq in,” he thought back, “summer of ‘93. No way in hell I was going to drown in the middle of a fucking desert. I’d be a laughingstock. So I sucked it up. Still....” he grinned, “didn’t like to bathe for a long time after that little incident.”

“Shouldn’t have got captured.” was Silas’ point of view.

“I was young and green.”

“How did you find out about Elizabeth Keen?” Red got matters back on track.

“Usual manner. I have a contact site on the dark web. Sometimes word of mouth.” Hunter stated the obvious. “But in the case of Benton... Lawford was an idiot. Contacted me personally even gave his name like it would magically open doors or something.”

Red hoped for clarity but this info was only confusing him more. He didn’t allow it to show.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the flyers being passed around of course.” Hunter took for granted. “Those showed up after I turned down the job.” the man clarified. “But see, I did you a square. Everyone knows I passed on the job and the why of it all. Those more experienced will be smart enough to follow my lead.”

Red flexed his joints, his fingers cracking softly. Silas’ people’s reputation was working in his favor.

“Still, there is always some up-and-coming newbie that wants to take his place in history,” Hunter warned.

“This man who contacted you... concerning Elizabeth Keen...” Red said.

“The first guy,” Hunter held no special allegiance to anyone other than himself, “his voice was gravely... smoky like he had too many cigarettes.” Hunter perked up. “Like the guy on the X-Files.”

Silas shook his head, sighing heavily.

“But the second one,” Hunter surprised them all, “his voice was clear... sharp. Younger.”

Red tapped the tabletop with his fingers, “You aren’t giving me much, are you.”

Hunter studied his heavy boots thoughtfully for a long beat, racking his brain, “...I don’t know if it means anything,” he lifted clear eyes, “but, I heard a boat in the background when speaking to the second guy.”
Red’s eyes connected with Silas’, instant communication passing between...

Tom.

Silas shrugged sturdy shoulders, “We already assumed that loser was involved.” he stated the obvious.

Red nodded absently. If what Gaines was saying was on the up and up... some of the top snipers already begged off the invitation.

A small relief right now but Red would take what Fate could give.

If the price on Elizabeth’s head was raised, that status quo might shift.

Hunter remained silent, his fingers curled casually about the armrests of his seat.

The guy stared silently at the opposite wall, stoically awaiting his fate.

“We can handle this, Red.” Silas’ cocksure confidence somewhat reassured.

It wasn’t bragging if it was true.

“I wasn’t going to say,” Hunter wrestled with his conscience in the ensuing silence, “…I’m assuming you still have men on Benton... his family?”

The guy looked a little ill-at-ease like he was betraying something he would rather not, “…I saw the kid.”

Red allowed the moment as Gaines contemplated the inevitable.

“Lawford said, if he was out of contact over ten hours at a stretch,” he lifted a steady stare, “well, matters were to proceed in rapid succession, if you get my drift.”

Red checked his watch. The cut-off point was rapidly approaching.

“Son-of-a-bitch.” Silas snapped his pique. “We should have anticipated that little point.” his massive fist clenched, his anger at himself apparent.

“Was there an order to this...chain of events?” Red demanded.

“The wife goes first as leverage for Benton to back off.” Hunter relayed. “The kid was to be held in reserve if Benton got all high and mighty.”

“They want Benton alive?” Silas was surprised.

“A D.A in your pocket is worth two in the bush.” Red nodded his understanding. He shifted slate-blue eyes. “We’re sure the wife is contained?”

“Contained or not…” Hunter shrugged. “Better to ask, was she traced and is she near a window?”

“We’re not stupid.” Silas snapped.

“You guys forgot about the computer guy.” Gaines reminded. “Just saying. There is always a way, Reddington... if one is patient and vigilant.”

Red grasp his hat, setting it properly, fingerling the brim into place, “You have been most
forthcoming. I won’t forget it.”

Silas followed the man’s retreating footsteps.

“Hey...” Hunter called out, stopping Red in his tracks. He looked a little unsettled, almost embarrassed. “There’s no reason you should trust me but... I can help in this.”

Silas huffed suspiciously, “Why would you... there’s no money to be had now.”

Hunter’s expression went all askew, “Hey, I didn’t contract for the woman or the kid. I don’t do that shit...” finally the guy showed a weakness. “Besides, you guys... you don’t think like I do.”

“Point in our favor.” Silas turned to leave.

“No, it isn’t,” Hunter called out angrily. “I know how it will go down. The guy that picked up the gauntlet in Lawford’s absence is a major prick. He won’t hesitate to take the shot.”

“Or,” Red had another theory, “you get a clear shot at Benton... wasn’t that in your contract?”

“Does that paper there say anything true?” Gaines’ tone held disdain, referencing the report dangling from Red’s fingers. “The first guy I took out... what’s it say?”

Red exchanged glances with Silas wondering at the turn of events. “An Iranian big-wig... can’t remember the name.” Red lied. He knew the name. The guy had operated an international sex-slave ring.

The world was a better place without the bastard.

“That was my fifth takedown.” Hunter shook his head woefully. “The first guy was the one that turned me down...” the man’s jaw pulsed angrily, “I did how many tours of duty... risked my life, just to have some pencil pushing prick tells me I don’t qualify for any sort of benefit to help my wife and kids.”

The silence was tense all around as each man present contemplated the statement.

“Then I went up the ranks,” Hunter’s voice softened, his eyes flints of steel. “The Supervisor of Vet affairs... maybe you read about it?”

Silas turned his head, the story familiar.

“A couple of my old Commanding Officers,” Hunter remembered fondly, his eyes staring off into space. “You know the ones that sit behind their desks all safe from harm but send others out to die in useless, career-making excursions?”

Every man in that room knew... their faces said as much.

“Go into that town soldiers... Intel says it should be a relatively easy sweep.” Gaines laughed hollowly. “This mission is a breeze, a walk in the park. I wouldn’t send you in otherwise...”

Red shifted his gaze, his heart constricting for all those lost souls to which Gaines referred.

“Serial numbers on a sheet of paper... that’s all we were to them... it’s all we still are.” Hunter trailed away.

“I did what they trained me to do.” Hunter lifted cold eyes, “I killed those who caused harm... the enemy.”
The silence lasted for a long stretch. Red searched for something to say because he felt the man’s pain but really... there was nothing which could be said.

“My family is well taken care of now.” Hunter lifted an even stare. “I can’t be with them as much as I like, of course. I can sometimes feel when the demons will come but...” he smiled, “they don’t want for nothing and I don’t have to sit before a superior bastard and beg for something that rightfully should be given over. I earned... everything I asked for.”

Hunter’s brow furrowed deeply, “Benton’s kid... he’s my son’s age.”

Red’s report said Gaines had two children. A two-year-old little girl with blonde hair like her mom and a six-year-old boy... dark hair like his dad.

“I was planning on putting a bullet between his father’s eyes... just so my kid,” the scowl deepened, “could have the start of a college fund.”

Red shook his head. How did things get so complicated in life?

“What the hell does that say about me?” Hunter seemed totally confused... floundering for a beat.

Then his face hardened, “What the hell right do any of you have to judge me?”

Red conceded the fact mentally.

“Not judging you, asshole,” Silas walked, his knife slicing the ropes cleanly. They fell away from Gaines’ body in a heap on the floor beneath the chair. “You’ll be with me and one false move” Silas looked down at the guy, his features grim, “and I’ll put a bullet between your eyes.”

Red smiled wanly, “But rest assured if it does come to that eventuality, your family will be cared for...”

Silas’ face remained the same, dark brooding grimness.

“I’ll behave.” Hunter’s eyes twinkled. “Can’t say it doesn’t feel odd though... being on the right side again. You guys are the ‘right’ side, correct?”

“As close as you’re gonna get,” Silas stated.

“Depends on your definition of, ‘right’.” Red shrugged.

“Do you get the job done?” Hunter queried. “Would you face the same danger as your men here?”

“I would,” Red replied. Oddly, he didn’t feel a moment of hesitation for having revealed as much.

Hunter side glanced Silas, noting the man’s reaction to his boss’ word. The guard remained stoic as was his way. But it was enough for Hunter.

“Then you’re on the correct side.” Hunter sat straighter in his chair. “I do get my weapon back.” he was overly fond of that thing, he knew.

“At the appropriate moment.” Silas guided the man’s way.

“Say, I heard about that shot you took over in the Congo few years back.” Hunter made mention. He rubbed the blood back into his extremities as he walked. “Impressive... two thousand, two hundred and eighty-six meters, wasn’t it?”
Silas lifted his head as if recalling the incident.

“Too bad though.” Hunter smiled politely. “I bested it... last year. Ecuador. Two thousand, three hundred meters.”

Silas pulled up in his tracks, eyeing the guy appreciatively... before tsking his disdain, “Child’s play.”

“Oh, you’ve done better.” Hunter was clearly doubtful.

Silas smiled... politely, “Shall we go, we’re burning daylight.”

“Quoting John Wayne won’t get you out of this one.” Hunter took umbrage. “Really, I need confirmation... and proof.”

“Boy...” the term in this instance was definitely derogatory. “I could tell you stories...” Silas relaxed into ’story mode’.

Red followed the two men, half-ass listening to the ‘bragging right’s’ tournament.

He wasn’t sure about his decision to take this man along but Red learned early in life... few things were dead certain.

He trusted Silas’ gut oft-times more than his own and he knew Silas would watch Hunter Gaines like the proverbial hawk.

Things might just be taking a turn for the better.

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Cars were lined up outside the towering building, the alley full of inconspicuous vehicles.

Joe and Elizabeth were handing out coffee cups right and left from cardboard containers.

Red squinted as light refracted off a passing airplane into the building opposite the one they departed. Adjusting his glasses, he took in the scene.

Lizzy approached, handing him a Starbuck’s cup, “I got cream and sugar,” she motioned with her head.

Red assumed she meant the stuffed bags resting precariously on the hood of Dembe’s vehicle.

“...And some of those swivel stick thingies.” she rummaged in the bag she held, her tongue sticking out the side of her mouth.

He took the pre-offered coffee, “Sweetheart...”

“You have to go meet Ress and I have to sit with Joe.” she muttered sagely, before triumphantly producing a small straw like object.

He held his smile, “Stay with, Dembe.” he corrected.

“Dembe goes with you, it’s a rule.” she looked past the man, assuring herself the new guards Silas hired were in place as well.

“And who made this rule?” he tested the waters.
“I made this rule,” hands went to shapely hips, “Red Reddington.”

He held up his hands, coffee cup and all, “Just asking.”

She settled, “Is there something new going on?” she looked to Silas and the new guy beside him. “Is that who I think it is?” she frowned hard. “Is he going to try to cap my ass and if so, why did you allo–”

“He’s offered his services.” Red interrupted. “Might come in handy.”

“That didn’t really answer my question.” she realized.

“Same old story.” Red walked her towards the car, his hand on her back. “Take down the bad guy, save the sort-of good guy.”

Liz smiled, following his lead, stepping to the lead vehicle, “Heard anything about Benton yet, one way or other?”

Red shook his head, “No, but things are in the works and moving fast. That’s why we better get our asses in gear.”

She nodded her understanding.

Joe approached, his expression a puzzled one, “When I left, that guy was tied up like a hog on slaughter day... what happened?” he hooked a thumb Hunter Gaines’ way.

“He’s not your problem,” Red guided Liz over with a gentle nudge, “she’s being difficult today.” he teased if only to get a reaction.

“Hey!” Liz immediately took umbrage as Red knew she would. “I got coffee, that’s all I did!”

“Every Starbuck’s run dwindles my fortune down considerably.” Red quipped. “But yes... you did well this time. I was thinking of the incident with Lawford.”

“Oh, get over it. That was just... habit.” Liz had the grace to be bothered... a little. “I stayed out of the way and you know I did.”

The man leaned, kissing her forehead lovingly, “Yes, well,” he pulled back, lifting a brow, “habits are made to be broken. Keep working on it, hum?”

Liz took his coffee back, a smug look on her face.

She flounced off, disappearing into the back seat of the car in seconds.

Joe laughed, amused for her bravado... and theft.

Red gave the man a ‘look’, securing Joe’s coffee cup in the next instance.

Joe sighed heavily, going off to fetch another before securing his charge.

Liz ducked her head, donut in mouth as he slid into the driver’s seat, a ready smile of welcome on her pretty face.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Red quietly contemplated options as Dembe navigated through the busy streets of downtown.
Chicago.

The man wearily rubbed his face, closing his eyes hoping in that few seconds the caffeine would do its job and clear the cobwebs. He was inundated with the scent of coffee, aftershave and gun oil which permeated the inside of the vehicles cabin.

Which was a step up he supposed, from body odor, sweat and gun oil he and his constituents had been subjected to on past missions.

He swore, even as he felt the rich linen of his suit rub against his thigh, that if he opened his eyes, he would find Silas decked out in fatigues, camo face paint and the guards signature black bandana pulled tightly over that grey-streaked hair.

How things changed... yet always remained the same.

Thoughts came at break-neck speed. He contemplated his lot over the past decade or so...

When had Red’s life been reduced to nothing but the next mission? The next life or death situation?

He told Lizzy a short time back those long ago memories seemed as if someone else had lived them.

When the missions started to snuff out that life, he wasn’t sure. He knew the exact date he had last seen his family but exactly when his job started invading that life... he wasn’t entirely certain.

He only hoped in those dwindling moments with his daughter, he had stopped to cherish that precious time with her.

It was bad enough having lost his family. To think he may have neglected Jennifer...

He understood Hunter Gaines more than he wanted to admit. But Hunter still had a chance at his life... to be with his family. To be with the ones who needed him. To be with those he loved

To heal.

Hunter could not envision that possibility, very likely.

Red could get him counseling. He could set Gaines up with employment that would ensure a steady paycheck. Give him back his dignity and self-worth which, hopefully, would lead to a path back to the man’s wife and children.

There was hope for Hunter.

Unlike men like Red Reddington. His family split apart. The damage to his reputation irreversible. He was jaded...

Some would label him broken.

Men like Red Reddington did not have happy endin–

“You do know she’s tailing us, correct,” Silas muttered the obvious, sliding his full clip back in place, his expression one of slight annoyance.

But then again... Red’s mood lifted considerably. Maybe there was happiness to be found for men like him in the guise of a spirited and beautiful brunette whose tenacity often outweighed her good sense.
Red’s mouth curved into a reluctant smile. He controlled the urge to turnabout, knowing if he did... the woman in question would instinctively try to duck out of sight.

How that was possible in a moving vehicle was beyond him. He could clearly see the familiar car and very likely Joe, who would be staring at Elizabeth, an odd, puzzled look on his face.

Clearly visible to any and all onlookers for it would never ever occur to the seasoned Veteran to attempt to conceal his presence.

Elizabeth’s action were instinct even though she would sheepishly realize it too late.

Joe’s continued scowl would aid her in that realization.

The guard would have realized long since that Silas would have spotted the tail.

“I assumed she would.” Red’s eyes lit with merriment. “And she was doing so well too.”

Hunter noted the other car as well, “I thought you two had lost it.” he once again leisurely turned his head to check on the whereabouts of Elizabeth’s vehicle.

Red put a restraining hand on the man’s forearm, “Don’t rain on her parade.” he chuckled. “She probably truly believes she is being inconspicuous.”

Dembe watched the car weave in and out of the heavy traffic, “It would be relatively simple to lose them.”

“It would break her heart.” Red pooh-poohed such a notion. “Besides.. Joe knows where we’re going.”

“Wouldn’t it be wiser... not having her there?” Hunter was confused. “Do you want her in the midst of what’s surely to prove, a dangerous situation?”

“She lives for danger.” Silas studiously worked the greased slide of his weapon back and forth. “It’s her middle name, didn’t you know?”

“Joe has been given his instructions.” Red sent Silas an annoyed glance. “He will keep the sneaky little imp duly occupied.”

“Will he?” Silas doubted Joe’s abilities it seemed. “Keeping that woman diverted is a Herculean task on any given day. If she believes you are in imminent danger... it’s like trying to keep a lion from her babies.”

“I don’t like that analogy... at all.” Red scowled.

“That’s why he chose it.” Hunter assumed, checking with a smirking head guard.

“Lizzy can handle herself,” Red stated.

“My God,” Silas was aghast, “when did we decide that?”

“She can be our ‘go-to’ backup plan if anything goes awry.” Red decided that much.

“When... anything goes awry.” Silas corrected.

“It is what it is.” Red conceded.
“You’re protecting this woman, putting your lives on the line one second,” Hunter was still clearly processing, “and then next, trusting her to come through when the shit hits the fan.”

Red craned his neck glancing at the tall buildings along the boulevard they traveled. Too many vantage points from which to take aim, he mused.

Why hadn’t he picked a better spot for this rendezvous? Benton himself was the culprit.

The guy was making everyone’s life difficult. Instead of staying at his office or at the Court House, both which were heavily secured being state buildings... he decided it was a perfect time to give a lecture at DuPont University to up-and-coming law students.

Ressler and the team secured the guy’s safety for the moment but Red could have hoped for a more strategic place from which to extract the target.

Red’s team, or Silas’, stationed themselves outside the perimeter of the back exit of the University, all attempting to be as inconspicuous as humanly possible in their fully complemented tactical gear.

Red was pleasantly surprised as he gave the pre-arranged signal to Joe in the tail car. The guy immediately pulled over by the green awning covering the beginning of an adjoining alleyway.

He could hear Lizzy’s retorts already ringing in the poor guard’s ears but the car stayed stationary as Dembe moved further down the street.

Having made a left turn, Dembe brought them down a block over, at length making a right one into the same adjoining alleyway.

“How are the opposing teams getting along?” Red was curious.

“Moore is the only cog in the wheel,” Dembe reported. “He doesn’t understand the need for outsiders clogging up the works.”

“You’re quoting David, right?” Silas grinned. “He’ll understand better when a bullet whiz’s by his head, I imagine.” he grinned. “Or, one can hope anyway.”

“So you are expecting trouble.” Red sighed. Why couldn’t anything be simple?

“It’s in the air.” Hunter philosophized. “Can’t you smell it?”

Silas did a running check of the surrounding buildings in his head, “Those trash cans could hamper us... or provide much-needed cover.”

“Perhaps that is the noxious odor you speak of...” Dembe delivered straight-faced.

Whether they wanted to, the occupants of the car chuckled quietly.

“You know what the smell is like?” the head guard sought out his own kind.

Hunter listened attentively.

“When the scent of gun oil and sweat blankets you in the second before you take the shot...” the man murmured. “The stillness...”

Hunter contemplated, his stare almost dreamlike.

“When everything stops, the only sound is the wind and your own breath.”
Hunter nodded minutely.

Red watched the two men’s faces.

Both were devoid of emotion, both pair of eyes blank... seeing something even Red Reddington couldn’t see.

“Who’s David?” Hunter broke the spell first.

“David Russo... out of Beirut.” Silas supplied.

“He went off the grid a few years back.” Hunter was confused. “Thought he was dead.”

“Just changed employers.” Red smiled at nothing in particular. “Where the hell is everyone?”

“Well, if you see them, it would defeat the purpose.” Silas scowled. “More to the point, where’s the FBI when a guy needs them?”

As if on cue, Moore’s head popped out the glass door of the Colleges back exit.

He quickly disappeared having ascertained that their transport was in place.

Out of no-where David Russo appeared securing the unguarded door.

“That wasn’t obvious at all,” Silas grunted his dissension. “That stupid bastard caused my man to have to show his position needlessly.”

“David can explain the folly of Moore’s actions later, personally. But right now,” Red agreed. “our hand has been forced.”

Red flipped his phone open, making the necessary call, “Ressler,” his tone curt, “I thought we agreed you’d give my people ample time to secure the area.”

“What are you talking about?” Ressler was just as curt.

“Moore showed his hand.” Red snapped right back.

“Moore is a fucking idiot but I’m not his keeper.” Ressler defended himself.

Red heard the underlying tone. Ressler and Moore were butting heads about seniority... at the worst possible time.

“What the hell do we do now.” Ressler sighed irritably.

“Just move the package, we’ll be ready.” Red snapped the phone shut.

Hunter and Silas already exited the vehicle, Dembe retained his seat for the moment, all hoping for a smooth transfer.

Silas was kinking his neck though, never a good sign. His eyes scanning the windows of surrounding buildings.

Sun glistened off the multitude of mirrored plates.

“Too risky... too populated.” he decided, lowering his search to more accessible rooftops and entryways.
“Tempered glass fucks up trajectory...” Hunter mentioned, “two shots minimum.” he ran the scenario with Silas.

“We’re good on ammo,” Silas assured.

“There’s a fire escape behind us.” the sniper took in the layout.

“Saw it.” Silas searched the structure absently. “That’s where I would station a few men.”

“Did you?”

“David handled it.” Silas stepped to Red’s side of the car. The guy was already half-way out of the opened door. “How the hell can I protect you if you don’t wait for the all clear signal to emerge?”

“They aren’t here for me.”

“They will always be here for you.” Silas countered. “A measly grand or two. Upside the bounty on your head? Hell, I thought about taking your ass out myself from time to time.”

“That’s why I give you habitual raises... and a dental plan.” Red straightened his clothes absently, rising to his full height.

The hair on the back of his neck stood just as high, “You’re right,” he grimaced, his eyes darting from one alcove to the next, down the small confined area, “this is not going to be a walk in the park. I just felt a target fall on my back.”

Silas’ weapon was out, hanging by his side. Hunter retrieved a similar side-arm from the arsenal in the car but he kept continuously looking longingly at his rifle with its precision scope.

Red met David’s eyes from across the short expanse. The guy was standing, seemingly at ease, a tactical assault rifle resting lightly on his hip but something in those clear green eyes signaled an unease.

“We’ve searched the perimeter meticulously.” Red approached, his steps unhurried. “But something is off... it doesn’t feel right.” David reported.

Silas nodded, “Lawford hires the best.”

“Thank you.” Hunter absently, politely accepted the praise.

“They won’t be sloppy.” David finished Silas’ thought.

Ressler appeared at the top of the stairs leading to the exit, his footfalls purposeful as he made his way to the men.

Red entered the small alcove, meeting the man’s descent.

“Have to give it to your men, Reddington,” Donald spoke first. “They almost made us seem unnecessary.”

Red was proud of his men’s abilities, trying hard not to show it. A force of habit, not letting anyone know how important people were to you.

“With all this fuss, I have to wonder if Benton doesn’t mean more to you than you’re letting on.” Donald was the suspicious kind. “...You don’t have him in your pocket, do you?”
Red raised a brow, “You know your friend better than I do.” he said. “Do you think he could be bought?”

Ressler dropped his chin, looking at the wingtips on his shoes... silently.

Red shifted his eyes to David, gauging the guard’s assessment. The guard merely shook his head.

It didn’t matter. Really, no point wasting time on it.

“I only buy Judges, Donald.” Red grimaced distastefully. “Not lowly, D.A’s.”

For some reason, Ressler felt better, “How tactless of me.” he apologized for the faux pas.

Silas and Hunter had not relaxed one iota, Red noted the stiffness of each man’s body.

“There’s going to be trouble,” Red informed the agent.

“It looks clear. Your men are--”

“Looks can be deceiving and although we’ve only got two-three meters to traverse...” Red cursed the trash receptacles for being in the way, “for a professional... that’s enough.”

“I’ve told Benton, but he’s being stupid,” Ressler’s face was grim, “thinks this is all an over-dramatic display of stupidity on our part.”

“Has he been apprised of the danger to his wife and child?” Red was flabbergasted by such a cavalier outlook.

“Says Sarah is imagining things...” Ressler said, “the phone calls, the other shit. He says she got this way with the baby when it first arrived. Over-cautious, jumpy at every little sound.”

“First, tell that bastard to never underestimate a woman’s intuition.” Red’s temper flared.

Ressler brows lifted at the unexpected remark.

“Maybe we should walk away then.” Red fumed. “What the fuck am I risking my men’s life for?”

Ressler sighed, heavily, “I appreciate your help, but you’re right... something’s wrong here. I sense it too. I trust Samar’s abilities but Moore and Wilson...” he lowered his voice because the sound of footfalls could be heard approaching, “I don’t know them from Adam. I’d appreciate someone at my six I know will cover my ass when shit goes downhill.”

Red checked with Silas for the man’s approval. It would be his and his men’s neck on the line more than anyone.

Silas’ jaw clenched, wondering if the possible casualties were worth it.

“The guy’s a douche, but his kid...” Hunter murmured to the man beside him. “We can do this.” he counseled. “Four, five minutes tops.”

Silas jerked his head in approval.

“Can’t we get the show on the road all ready?” Moore’s face was impatience itself. “What’s the hold up?” he led the way, Wilson following, and Samar’s pretty legs just in view of the top stairs of the landing.
Red waved a nonchalant hand, “Be my guest.” he indicated the opening which awaited.

Moore’s expression slipped, his eyes falling on the suddenly very open and vulnerable breezeway.

“Come on, people.” a handsome man in an expensive suit pushed his way past Samar and Wilson’s protective circle. “Aren’t we being a little overly cautious here?”

Red sized the younger man up with shrewd eyes.

“Donny,” the guy jovially slapped the agent on the shoulder, “I love all this attention,” he playfully jabbed at Ressler to lighten everyone’s mood, “you’re overreacting, fella.”

“Could be,” Donald replied stonily. “But I’m not going to be the one to notify Sarah if our Intel proves to be correct.”

Benton sobered a bit, “Sarah is a reactionary, always has been and I’ve had threats on my life before, believe me.”

“Oh, I believe someone has threatened you before....” Red narrowed his eyes at the man. “Though, never has the threat been from someone of Lawford’s caliber,” he said. “Shocking, I know.”

Benton eyed the man, a puzzled scowl lacing the darkly tanned features, “Don’t I know you?”

The silence was palpable.


“Could be the end of yours.” Ressler grated. “You better start taking this shit seriously. You haven’t dealt with anyone like Lawford before. His reach isn’t limited by jail bars.”

“You need to take Donny here seriously,” Red’s patience was waning, “and shut the hell up. Every second you delay here puts my men in danger and quite frankly, I’m beginning to second guess my assumption your ass is worth it.”

Red turned on his heel, pushing out the glass partitions, stalking to the side of the breezeway cover.

Silas moved to a better position, across the bricked stepping path. Hunter Gaines was nowhere to be seen but Red wasn’t worried because he knew, Silas knew where the man was.

Ressler organized a quick order of accession with Aram taking lead.

The computer geek bravely ventured forth to the glass doors as directed by Samar.

He clutched his precious bag protectively to his chest, ducking his head, taking the plunge secure in Mr. Reddington’s assurances.

David grasped Aram’s arm, gingerly guiding, leading him into the specially reinforced safety of the spacious van which awaited.

Red noted a niche behind that van that could possibly provide extra cover if needed.

It was something in his nature. It was something he did. Something that kept him alive all these years.

“Surely this is only harassment, Donny.” Benton’s face lost its jovial mood, his eyes worried now. “These cases bring out the worst kind of people.”
Ressler ignored the byplay, sending Samar and Wilson through.

Samar sidled up to Red, tucking inside the man’s peripheral vision, just behind his shoulder.

He could feel her warmth, smell the crisp aroma of Shea.

Wilson made good time, but he did not enter the van, taking up a tactical spot on the very spot Red wanted to utilize himself.

Red’s brow furrowed darkly.

Samar smiled, sensing the interplay, “Did he steal your place in line?”

Red ran his hand around his nape, “Stay close, Samar.”

The woman fell silent, picking up on the tension.

“We can deliberate the issue later.” Ressler motioned Benton forward then stepped in front of his charge. “Let’s just get you to Sarah and the kid.”

“...They are safe though?”

“Oh, now it’s sinking in.” Ressler snapped then altered his stance, putting a firm hand on Benton’s shoulder. “Stay low out there.”

David hunched his body over the District Attorney, fingers tight about Benton’s upper arm as they moved in unison across the open space to the van.

Immediate gunfire erupted from a second-story window. Taking most by surprise even though everyone expected trouble.

Silas and Hunter lifted ready weapons at the sound of shattering glass milliseconds before the shots rang out.

Red’s arm went out instinctively, barring Samar’s intended run for cover.

David went down hard taking his charge with him. Blood splattered from David’s thigh but between Donald Ressler and Russo’s handling, Benton was shoved headlong into the opening of the van.

Aram pulled Benton into the recesses.

Red laid down cover fire while Wilson pulled David into the van.

Ressler rolled under the vehicle gauging his options.

Silas miraculously obtained a double-barreled shot-gun which he was using to his advantage for this close contact attack.

Two men emerged from the end of the alley after the first shots.

They were put out of action by Silas’ men who waited patiently for just such an advance.

Several shots reigned down from different rooftops, however.

One of Silas’ sharpshooters was systematically eliminating that threat however from the neighboring rooftop.
The enemy had a perfect line of vision to the van’s location and were causing havoc with Silas’ ground team.

Silas commanded men up the cleared stairwell, moving to join them, but Red waved him off.

Ressler rolled clear of the van, crawling forward on his forearms. He jerked, flinching as loud pings ricocheted off a nearby railing.

A man stepped out from an opposite doorway, coming out of nowhere.

He had Ressler in his sights.

Samar’s back was pressed against Red’s. He heard the repeated sound of her regulation weapon being put to good use and the occasional swaying as she was forced to change out clips.

Red lay his own weapon over the top of a electrical junction box to steady a shot.

Ressler tucked quickly, rolling aside as a bullet embedded itself close to his head.

Red took his shot and Ressler’s antagonist fell crumpled into the shadows of the doorway he exited from.

Ressler’s eyes flit quickly over the scene. He rose to his knees, firing off two quick shots.

Unfortunately, his second shot went wide, giving the new assailant ample opportunity.

Donald felt the molten fire tear through his body. The agent fell into an ungraceful heap about two, three meters from Red’s position.

Red could see into the opened van. Aram’s body was protecting Benton’s. The agent’s face was chalky but his eyes were clear and not panicked.

Moore was blocking the vehicle, still firing at some unseen perpetrator.

He was in the way of the van moving.

“Moore!” Samar yelled at her contemporary. “Get Ressler in the van! You’re blocking it! Move!”

A small window beside Red shattered, spraying him and the woman with bits of sharp, stinging glass.

He pushed Samar back into a corner, protecting her with his body. As he lowered his head, shards of glass fell from the rim of his fedora.

He checked his clip.

“That fucking idiot!” he gritted his teeth. “If he would move–”

Dembe had made his way to a nearby trash can.

Red felt better knowing the man was close by but then where else would he find Dembe?

The battle waged on...

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

“We have to do something!” Liz gripped the dashboard, her fingers white as she watched the
carnage taking place.

“If that fucking idiot would get out of the way of the van...” Joe yelled into his radio yet again but no one copied his request.

Liz bit her lip nervously, holding her breath, her instincts screaming as loudly as Joe’s orders.

She could not see Red or Samar. They were hidden from her sight.

She had seen Ressler go down. The man lay unnaturally still.

Out of nowhere, a large hulk of a man appeared from the van.

David Russo single-handedly man-handled Ressler’s unresponsive body into the van.

Out of a second-story window, a man fell with a shrill scream of surprise and horror.

Liz saw the body break through the shattered window pane but the surrounding buildings blocked the actual fall.

Silas recognized the sound of Hunter Gaines’ special-made weapon resounding overhead.

He watched the body fall and hit with a sickening thud.

He turned his attention upward for a millisecond.

There was no sight of Gaines but he wouldn’t expect there would be.

They had someone else on a higher-level now. The playing field was leveling out finally.

The driver backed the van ever so slowly down the long, endless alleyway.

Moore moved along with it, finally making a dash for the doorway as he was given no option but to do so.

Dembe’s position was now the one closer to the slowly creeping vehicle.

He rolled effortlessly into the opening, seeing to the wounded as he waited for an opportunity to get Red assistance.

Silas heard the distinct sound of sliding metal, swirling about.

A man was positioned on the fire escape. Red Reddington in his sites.

Red was unaware, too concentrated on protecting Samar Navabi’s sweet ass.

Silas fired.

The fire escape guy staggered back, hitting hard into the brick of the building. He lost his balance, leaning precariously over the thin railing.

Fumbling for a handhold and finding a convenient rung... he hung there in mid-air for a lifetime before his hold weakened.

Liz grimaced painfully at the sight of the man bouncing off the unforgiving concrete below.

Silas took the opportunity to make his way to Red and Samar for Hunter Gaines was giving their
foes a hell-of-a-fight upstairs.

Silas could hear the distinct pop-pop of his own unit’s weapons too.

They reached their objective.

The second-floor assault would be shut down shortly.

Hunter leaned over the parapet, grinning down at the trio of gawkers, “They don’t give up, do they?” he grinned.

“I don’t respect a quitter,” Silas yelled back. “Do you?”

“I wouldn’t hold it against them right now.” Hunter laughed, ducking back quickly as a bullet almost took his ear off. “Who! I heard that one!”

Silas rolled his eyes, a reluctant smile pulling at his mouth.

“You guys go on. We’ve got this covered for a while!”

“Not too long a while!” Silas glanced at his watch. “Your time’s almost up, cops are on the way!”

The van hit the bumper of Red’s car, shoving it back. Dembe dashed from the van, sliding over the hood of the car, taking his place behind the wheel.

Red knew the guy would not budge one iota until he was sure Red was safe and contained.

“Raymond!” Dembe yelled through the open passenger sides of the doorways he flung open.

“Take her!” Red barked the order.

“No!” Samar balked. “We all go!”

Silas’ eye ticked but did as Red bid. His strong forearm slid about Samar’s waist as he lifted effortlessly, falling into a hasty run.

The burn and strain of his broken ribs caused the guy to grunt loudly but he did not once break stride.

Red lay down cover fire.

Hunter Gaines more than did his part, the expert marksman hitting his target time after time.

Liz was on tenterhooks having to sit and watch and... do nothing.

She could see Samar now.

Silas moved too rapidly, Samar’s feet all but dangled at the guy’s side.

He tucked the woman against his body, falling into the open passenger seat. Their momentum throwing them towards Dembe.

Red breathed a sigh of relief, “Hunter!” he yelled over the constant barrage.

“Still here.”

“Silas will order his men out now, you go with them!”
Red could hear the distant scream of sirens approaching.

“Aye, sir!” the man snapped off a smart salute. “It’s been a hell of a ride!” laughter echoed down the alleyway.

Red caught Silas’ eyes. Dembe waited, one foot out the open doorway, ready should he be needed. Red gave a nod before both men lay down resounding blasts which echoed down the way, deafening those gathered.

Dembe took his place in front of his passenger who slipped effortlessly into the back seat.

In seconds, Red Reddington having been secured, the vehicle backed rapidly down the alleyway, making a path for the van to follow.

Dembe executed a sharp turn around the large, lumbering cargo transport whipping into the opposite alleyway.

Wilson followed the cars lead for he, himself, had no idea where the hell to go.

Shots were intermittent however and the only real worry seemed to be, would the thick glass hold up still under the constant bombardment of well-placed shots.

Wilson winced as a bullet shattered directly in front of his face. He watched the shards splinter in beautiful geometric shapes within the structure of the windshield glass.

He wasted no time in steering the van into the relative safety of the adjoining alley.

Dembe already exited onto the street. Another car pulled rapidly away from the curve.

Wilson acted on instinct, turning the van in the same direction of the second car.

Red and Dembe fell in behind the large vehicle as it screeched away, in seconds already half-way down the block, almost to the intersection.

The light was red but Joe floored the lead car through... Wilson ignored the approaching traffic, speeding behind.

Dembe laid down on the horn, managing to miss an overzealous Dodge truck, whose owner was too busy looking at road signs to note the ruckus taking place around him.

Red held on to the safety strap of the car implicitly trusting in Dembe’s reflexes, his attention on the caravan in front of him.

“David?” he asked grimly.

“I’ve got a tourniquet on the leg, his body armor protected anything vital.” Dembe kept pace with the van easily. “Agent Ressler... I had no time to assess.”

Red was silent. Cop sirens were louder... closer but behind them.

“We have to get off the grid,” he stated the obvious, he knew. “Head for the Emmisary Hotel.”

Dembe shot through yet another light mindless of the screeching and honks his actions received. “Chicago is a bustling town.”
Red couldn’t help but crack a smile, “I believe we have worn out our welcome.”

Dembe lay into the gas pressing the men into their seats with the motion.

Red made a few calls.

Kaplan’s team was put on alert, first and foremost. The second was to the lead car, giving Joe the directive on their escape route which now changed due to Ressler’s state... whatever that might be. And of course, David’s, who valiantly risked his own safety for that of a perfect stranger.

The Emmisary’s sharply etched roofline was rapidly approaching.

Red wanted desperately to speak to Lizzy, to hear her voice but there were matters of import to which he must first attend.

He waited impatiently for his third call to be connected.

“Where the hell are you?” Francis Holbrook’s voice broke the silence on the line.

Dembe pulled into the back of the impressive hotel having followed the lead cars.

“No time for pleasantries,” Red’s clipped tone interrupted, “get your men in Chicago to secure Lawford’s holdings... is it doable?”

“Ooh!” Francis perked up happily. “Is this a birthday gift?”

“Wrapped in a bow and everything.” Red evaded. “Can you do it?”

“Consider it done.” Francis was already tapping into files on his computer, his fingers flying quickly over the keyboard. “I sense trouble in Dodge City?”

“Whatever dirt you can dig up must be handed over to the proper authorities.”

“What the hell kind of present is that?” Francis’ disappointment was acute. “I wanted to keep it for myself.”

Dembe slid into place, putting the car in park. The man exited the driver’s side.

“That’s what your men are for, you twit!” Red grumbled. “You can keep the goods. I want the other charges you have on Lawford.”

“Oh, the boring shit.” Francis was pleased. “You want all of it? The tax evasion, racketeering and–”

“Anything to nail his ass, but good,” Red confirmed.

“What brought this about?” Francis was curious.

“Let’s just say, he overstepped.” Red twisted his mouth distastefully.

“So I take it,” Francis switched computer screens, correlating with another set of files, “Lawford is out of the scene?”

“If you do your job, yes.”

The sound of typing tapered off, a stilted silence filling the line. “I would like to think this was a surprise gift for me...” Francis said lightly, “but you wouldn’t have gone after Lawford for kicks.”
the young man sobered. “...Is he the one trying to hurt Lizzy?”

Red hesitated, unsure how to respond exactly, “...Indirectly. It’s a long story, Francis. One I can’t get into right now. I have to see to my people.”

“Understood.” Francis did. “One thing before you go. Is Lizzy all right? Is she with you? I can go to her if need—”

Red looked at Lizzy.

The woman waited patiently outside the van, throwing occasional looks his way.

Ressler was being unloaded with precision care.

David walked into the hotel on his own... well, limped in under his own power.

“She’s with me, she’s fine.” Red’s tone softened. “Blissfully unaware of my business for the day,” he stressed.

“And is to remain blissfully unaware.” Francis understood the tone well.

“I’m glad we understand one another,” Red replied shortly.

“I’ll get back to you. I have more on the slimy bastard coming out of New York.” Francis read the data rapidly. “How urgent is this?”

“Stay on it,” Red stated. “I’ll be held up here for a while. I’ll have more in an hour.”

“That’s sufficient time to secure Lawford’s holding’s there.” Francis relayed.

“I’ll be in touch.”

Both men signed off.

Red hauled ass, heading directly for his team and the waiting arms of... Elizabeth Keen.
Munificence

Chapter Notes

Get a snack...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JUNE 5

Red approached the gathered throng of people milling around the vacated cars.

He took a quick assessment of his people before his eyes fell on an apprehensive Elizabeth Keen.

He managed a smile for her alone, stepping close, his hand rubbing the woman’s back soothingly.

Ever mindful of the audience on hand, he refused to allow any more of a liberty.

“You’re all right?” he murmured for Lizzy’s ears alone.

The pout of a mouth pulled into a mischievous grin, “That defensive driving training really pays off, doesn’t it?” she hooked her thumb in her guard’s direction. “Did you see us weaving and bobbing out in that traffic?”

“Never took the course.” Joe admitted. “I learned to drive from my mom.”

“You had a mother?” Red was determined to lighten the gloom of the pall that had fallen over everyone present.

Samar watched Donald Ressler’s stretcher push through the back doors before disappearing out of sight.

Where they were taking the agent, she had no clue. This was a hotel not a hospital.

But the people who had taken Donald were dressed in the requisite hospital garb.

They seemed efficient and well able to handle emergencies.

She fought her instinct to follow the gurney to its final destination.

“Where are they taking him?” Aram whispered in her ear. “Who were those people?”

She sought the man out.

“Isn’t this a hotel?” the guy craned his neck up the many storied building.

“It’s okay.” she soothed, her own doubts far from arrested in truth, however.

Elizabeth was gently wiping blood from Red Reddington’s face. The brick exploding from a near hit had marred the area somewhat.
“You’re hurt.” Liz tsked, retrieving a handkerchief from her ever present carry all which she laughingly referred to as a ‘purse’.

But what Red called a ‘catch all’. He had a mind to take her on Let’s Make a Deal, knowing she would most likely be carrying whatever was required.

“If this is the worst that ever happens to me,” Red chuckled, privately enjoying her pampering, “I’ll be happy.”

Liz finished up her task, turning to the other of her group.

She rushed to hug Aram and Samar, embracing them briefly, expressing her relief they came out of the skirmish relatively unscathed.

She turned on the large man who had been looming at her side.

Silas’ expression slipped into a menacing scowl, “Don’t you even think—”

Liz’s face broke into a joyous grin of delight as she impulsively engulfed the man into a tight bear of a hug.

He grunted sharply, the sound breaking her action.

“Oh!” she eyed his slouched position regretfully. She had forgotten his injuries.

“What is it with you and this touchy feely shit?” he grumbled her concern away. “I have an image to uphold.” he motioned to his men who milled about aimlessly, trying to regroup.

“You think I won’t accost them next?” Liz laughed gaily, “Should I sing a few choruses of “Macho Man?” she teased. “Would that make you feel better?”

“You’re tone deaf, so no.” Silas checked the area again. “What would make me feel better is to get this lot organized and back on track.”

“Ever diligent.” Dembe approved.

“Are we expecting trouble?” Samar questioned Silas more than Red.

Aram and Samar had wandered over, hearing the last of the conversation.

Silas’ eyes met the dark beauty’s solemnly, “Lawford’s men don’t give up so easily.” his senses were telling him so. “So yeah, we are.”

At that exact moment, a large SUV turned into the parkway. It eased slowly down the long alleyway.

A few men to Samar’s right instantly took up defensive positions behind a large substation, semi-automatic rifles aimed and ready.

Silas waved them off, however, having recognized the driver of the vehicle, for it had pulled enough down the way for him to do so.

The dark-tinted windows on the driver’s side was down.

“It’s the rooftop team.” Joe explained the matter to the others. He peered closer into the interior of the car. “What the hell is that guy doing with them?”
Silas commiserated, “I would have thought he would have been the first one to pull out.”

Red asked the rhetorical question on everyone’s minds which lifted a few brows.

“It’s Hunter Gaines.” Silas explained.

Joe waved the car into an out-of-the-way spot.

Red pulled Silas aside for a moment, quietly discussing a matter of interest with the head guard. Silas nodded slowly before shrugging. Red inclined his head, the matter seemingly settled.

“Now go...” Red ended the discussion. “Get checked out. I don’t want to hang around here any longer than necessary.” he waved the large guard to the back entrance of the hotel. “After we unload Benton, we’ll get the hell out of here.”

“What’s to stop Lawford’s men from a repeat of what went down today,” Samar had thought about the problem, “once you’re off the grid again?”

“We will have given ourselves time.” Red explained the drill. “We still have our bargaining chip. Lawford will be given an offer he can’t refuse.”

Aram brightened, waving a hand towards Red, “The Godfather.” The computer geek prided himself on all the movies he had watched to catch up to the references Red often made.

“It will greatly reduce the threat level to Benton and his family.” Red said.

“Lawford doesn’t strike me as someone who frightens easily.” Samar had met men like him before.

“It’s all in how you present your side of the issue.” Red knew a man who could be ever so persuasive with all sorts of odd contraptions. “Until Lawford sees the light, we have him as a shield to use to our advantage.”

“Ergo...” Silas was still overly cautious and alert, “they will want him back and the reward for Benton’s head is still a go until Lawford rescinds the offer.”

“And you are sure he will be so magnanimous?” Samar clearly doubted the fact.

Both Red and Silas remained pointedly silent but something in their demeanor told the woman of their certainty.

The tension and the looks exchanged between the lovely agent and the mammoth guard was palpable.

Silas’ brooding stare burned brightly every time it chanced to land on the beautiful face.

Samar was female enough to pick up on the exchange, “I haven’t thanked you for earlier.” she stepped closer, her tone altered the dark eyes holding Silas’ easily. “For manhandling me out of dangers way.”

She looked him over consideringly, “I do so now.”

Silas’ gaze shifted to Aram.

The guy was checking the outside of his briefcase for damage.

The light grey stare shifted back to the exotic woman. He inclined his head sharply, his manner
totally professional.

Red shook his head minutely for such stupidity but he felt Silas’ sense of honor. He even understood it... to a degree.

Silas wasn’t going to make a move because Aram was so obviously enamored of Samar Navabi, it verged on the ridiculous.

Silas had picked up on the dynamics of the situation, refusing to cross the imaginary lines which had been drawn.

 Didn’t mean he had to like it... which explained his more than sour mood of late.

“Aram,” Red placed a hand on the hapless man’s shoulder, “if you will go through that door on the right,” he pointed just inside the entrance, “there is a fully equipped office two doors down.”

Aram looked about, totally lost.

“You can get in touch with Cooper,” Red gave a feasible excuse, “get him up to speed on our present situation.”

“Oh!” Aram’s face brightened. “Yes, yes, of course. That would be good.” he nodded rapidly, rushing up the ramp. In seconds he was out of sight.

Samar turned a lazy stare to a disgruntled guard. She waited patiently.

“...I don’t tread on another man’s property.”

Samar’s lovely brows shot up, “Excuse me?”

“What?” Liz looked about, her confusion apparent.

Red knew that tone well. He guided Lizzy out of the battle zone which was quickly escalating.

“What’s going on?” Liz whispered urgently, resisting his gentle urging. “I wanna hear.”

“Yes, I know you do.” he patronized, continuing on his intended path.

Lizzy’s sweet mouth tightened irritably, as she jerked from his grasp, suitably annoyed.

“You are a buzz killer, Red Reddington.” she seemed pretty sure of the facts.

He held his amusement, his eyes twinkling down at the set little features.

“I went through hell in my country just so I could get away from that antiquated thinking.” Samar’s pretty features were clouding over meanwhile, just out of earshot.

Liz watched anxiously, trying desperately to read lips. She craned her head about Red’s shoulders as he blocked such efforts where and if he could, much to her exasperation.

“I don’t belong ...” Samar's hands came to her shapely hips, “to any man. Until I say I do.”

Silas took it well, “Guys have a certain code, has nothing to do with you or your back water country’s views.”

She settled somewhat, “What are you saying?” she challenged. “Or aren’t you man enough to not
play stupid games?"

Silas took the intended insult well, again, “If he wasn’t in the picture... I would make my play.”

Samar’s temper eased considerably.

“Tell me... he’s not.” Silas could issue a challenge of his own.

Samar glanced after the absent Aram Mojtabai, her look a very controlled one, for she knew the guard watched her features carefully.

“That’s what I thought.” Silas read what any man would have.

Samar touched his forearm, holding firm when he shifted a cool stare to the contact which transfixed to the lovely face.

“...It’s complicated.” Samar’s brow furrowed, her eyes open and unreadable. “Can you do,” the dark eyes softened, “...complicated?”

Silas’ expression altered, the tenseness leaving his body the longer he held the captivating, troubled gaze.

Samar’s fingers slid from his forearm. She walked away, a sadness about the tall, statuesque frame.

Liz frowned, watching the interplay, “What? What just happened?” she looked helplessly at Red.

“Nothing,” Red had witnessed the short exchange as well. “Not yet...”

Liz pinched her lips irritably, wishing he would stop talking in riddles!

“Did you see something I didn’t?” she tossed her hands out to her side, growling her impatience.

Silas still looked after the dark beauty, his gaze rather mellow to Red’s way of thinking.

“What do you think about,” Red gestured, “those two,” Liz looked back at Silas and Samar questioningly, “...together.”

“You can’t mean...” Liz sputtered.

Red raised his brows, looking at her meaningfully.

Liz’s mouth gaped, her thoughts swirling. She looked at Samar... then Silas. It would be nice if Silas could find someone after Anya, her romantic tendencies took hold before common sense prevailed.

“They would kill each other within a week!”

“One way or other.” Red’s lips twitched for the reality of her words. “But it might be a death worthy of Valhalla.”

Liz hit his shoulder, taking her frustrations out, “You men are all alike... except you, Dembe.”

“Thank you, Elizabeth.”

Liz walked away, determined to put Samar in a better frame of mind after whatever happened between her and that big ass, Silas.

“What the hell was that?” Red’s expression skewed.
Dembe smiled, well pleased with himself, clearly, “Is it my fault she sees me as a more responsible, mature individual?”

“Yes!” Red snapped the nonsensical retort which only caused Dembe’s smile to grow. “I meant,” he grumbled, “you, my dearest friend, my confidant... left me floundering.” he bitched. “Why didn’t you concur with my observation? I know you do!”

“I enjoy watching Elizabeth give you a what-for.” Dembe shrugged.

Red cut dagger like eyes his friend’s way... holding a smile for the observation. He rather enjoyed Lizzy in a prickly mood... now that he was in a position to persuade that mood to alter for the better.

And if the beautiful glowering eyes pointed in his direction meant anything, he had his work cut out for him this evening.

A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth, furthering her ire.

He did so love a challenge.

Silas’ attention diverted hastily from his perusal of the two women who conversed meters away.

Both Red and Dembe moved instinctively closer to natural cover.

A couple police cruisers rolled down the block toward their location.

“And the logistical nightmare continues.” Red murmured, checking the position and actions of his people.

Silas had moved to Elizabeth and Samar, urging them to a place of safety, “Get inside... both of you.”

His clipped tone brought different results from both women.

Samar grinned, allowing herself to be manhandled. Liz bit back a retort. Well... she tried.

“You are such a nudge!” she snapped. “Can’t you ever be polite?”

“Get inside the damn building,” Silas grated, “...please.”

Two more cruisers were converging from the opposite end of the building.

Red’s senses went on high alert. He crossed rapidly, taking Liz from Silas’ hold.

Shoving his charge to the outcrop of the entrance of the hotel, he shielded her, his arm holding her behind his back.

“They could be friendlies.” Liz reminded, staying put.

“And pigs can fly.” Red murmured, his thoughts on the matter as the cars pulled to a halt.

“Why don’t we show them our badges?” Samar countered. Silas had maneuvered her to the solid mass of columns supporting the overhang of the loading dock. “This could be a pissing contest between agencies, you know.”

“One way to find out.” Liz hastily dialed her phone.
Assistance came quickly. The emergency operator was on the other end as Liz conveyed the urgency of the matter.

Red watched and waited.

All cars were communicating.

Silas’ men were ready and stoked.

“We are the FBI, we need your people to stand down.” Liz was explaining. “There is no cause to engage.”

It was just about then that the ‘engagement’ began...

The police had taken up position behind their doors, the only cover afforded them.

It was a plus for Red’s team. Their weapons could easily penetrate the thin metal.

Gunfire proved the point. The cops scrambled for more adequate protection.

Red’s men were very efficient at what they did. In seconds, the loud weapons fire halted.

Red surveyed the scene.

Four men were laying about the vehicles, all moving to some extent.

One lay half-sitting, close to a parked vehicle. Nursing his leg wound. He hadn’t been able to make the dash across the barrage of bullets.

Red had a standing order where cops were involved. *Wound only, clean shots.*

It was too much a hassle, coping with the stigma of ‘cop killer’.

Quite frankly, he never felt a desire to earn the label. They were simply people, doing their jobs to the best of their ability.

“Well, whether or not you are showing involvement,” Liz’s tone was sharp and angry, “Let me tell you firsthand, lady... something is going down! I take it you heard that volley of gunfire!”

Liz signed off, her eyes taking in the carnage rapidly, “They will be dispatching more patrols.”

Red had stepped out, clearing an empty clip, replacing it automatically.

She took it to mean the ‘all clear’ had been sounded.

Samar noted the cops’ hands lifted high. Silas’ men approached alert and cautious.

“You took that guy down.” Silas weapon hung loosely in his hand as he waved it in the needed direction.

“You know... I do this for a living.” Samar arched her brow. “I even enjoy it on occasion.”

Silas’ eyes raked her body with interest, “I enjoy a lot of things.” he kept his tone a scolding one for appearance’s sake. “Doesn’t mean I want to see anyone die when doing it.”

Samar’s expression grew thoughtful, “Well... that depends on what you’re doing, doesn’t it?”
Silas lifted his head, cocking it slightly. He trusted his men to wrap up the loose ends of what had transpired but he kept a watchful eye on their antics, anyway.

“You’re just this side of kinky... aren’t you?” he shifted a neutral look.

“Only one way to find out.” Samar shrugged delicate shoulders.

Silas removed a clip, cleaning his chamber. He caught the ejected bullet mid-flight, “You’re turning me the hell on.” his stare told Samar just how much so.

Again, the lovely brows arched, “Maybe that was my intent.” she smiled slowly. “But that was before I saw how quickly you cleared your... chamber of its load.”

Silas watched her hips as the woman swished saucily away, a slow grin overtaking his handsome features.

Red gave the man a meaningful, yet amusing look for the burn, “Ouch.”

Silas lowered his head, shaking it, a smile still in place before returning his interest to the matters at hand.

He had something to ponder over now. The fact brought the dark scowl back to his rugged face.

“Red, you can’t be here.” Liz had long realized as the sounds of yet more sirens met her ears. “Samar and I can clean this up, but you have to vacate.”

Still the man hesitated, fighting his instincts.

“Silas can handle it.” Liz urged. “Go!”

Dembe nodded slowly, “It is best.” he counseled. “You being here will only add to the... problem.”

Red’s jaw pulsed, his eyes locking on Lizzy before allowing Dembe to lead him away.

“Not far, Dembe.” he muttered tightly.

They disappeared into the confines of the building just as the real cops pulled up with a screech directly behind the other patrol cars.

Red worried the weapon in his hand as he stared out the window at Lizzy, and more importantly, Silas taking on a protective stance as the cops approached.

“She will be fine.” Dembe assured quietly.

Red grunted, damning his position either way.

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Liz felt better now that Red was safely ensconced inside the mass of rooms of the hotel.

His normal routine would be to exit the front before the area was shut down. She hoped he didn’t stop by the makeshift medical ward first.

Surely he had enough sense to not do that.

She sighed internally, knowing the man would most likely do it... because he could.
Liz smiled brightly as a formidable police officer approached. She instinctively reached for her back pocket, her stomach plummeting.

“Shit...” Red murmured watching her reactionary move, knowing her badge was not in place.

Samar sensed Liz’s hesitation. She stepped forward, smiling and extracting her badge, showing it hastily to thwart any misunderstanding, distracting the Officer.

Liz stepped in behind the woman, Silas coming alongside as a show of unity.

Samar gestured to the two, obviously introducing them as members of her team before directing the officer’s attention to the scene.

Red relaxed, breathing out a sigh of relief.

Dembe frowned, looking between Raymond and the scene unfolding outside, “There is no need to worry. They are legitimate officers.”

“Lizzy doesn’t have her badge.” Red explained. “She shouldn’t even be here, let alone out there.” he continued. “Samar just saved us a whole day of avoiding pointless red tape.”

“She is a very formidable woman.” Dembe said.

Red cocked his head, disbelief etching his features, “Not you too?”

Dembe grinned, “I am... involved.”

Red turned on his heel, “You better be.” he grumbled. “I can’t take another member of the Samar Navabi fan club.”

Liz kept glancing about half-expecting Red to pop back-up. She could feel his eyes on her.

Her nerves were on edge for the fact.

Hunter Gaines felt the same, “My instincts are telling me to bugger the fuck out of here.”

Silas pulled his eyes from Samar Navabi charming the cop, “You get used to it.” he watched the surrounding commotion.

He rolled exaggerated eyes, hooking Liz’s belt loop, keeping her close. Liz pinched irritated lips, swatting the man’s hand to no avail. Hunter watched the show, amused.

“Stop it, you freak.” Liz bitched.

Silas pulled her back, grumbling in her ear, “I’ve got your back, he’s,” he jerked his chin to the policeman, “got your front.”

Something was still nagging at Silas. He sensed danger for the woman... in what direction it would come, he was not certain.

Liz’s mouth gaped, her instinct to move a powerful one.

“He’s also wearing body armor.” Silas reminded. “You’re... not.” he snipped quietly. “Let him protect and serve...” he grumbled, turning back on Hunter when Liz settled. “You’re on the payroll so, stand down. I’ve got this covered.”
“What’d you mean...” the man’s surprise was evident, “on the pay–”

“If anyone asks, you’re part of my team,” Silas said, “you’re supposed to be here.”

“They can’t recognize me.” Hunter grasp his neck rubbing the tense muscle. “No one has ever seen my face–”

“And lived to tell the tale.” Silas made mention.

“It still feels hinky. Being among all this,” he waved at the mess before them, “and by the way...” something had been troubling him, “why were we shooting at cops, before?”

“Those were on Lawford’s payroll,” Silas stated, “bad, naughty cops.”

“Not too bright ones, coming to a gunfight where they are out-manned and out-gunned.”

“Didn’t say they were smart cops.” Silas amended.

The silence was a companionable one.

“How long will this take?”

“You got somewhere you gotta be?” Silas asked.

Hunter shrugged, “Got a long drive. Was gonna take my boy out in a couple days.”

“Yeah?” Silas nodded. “His birthday?”

“He’s uh...” the man smiled brightly, “He’s graduating kindergarten.”

“You’ll be there in time to see your boy on his big day.” Silas promised.

Hunter relaxed some, nodding, “What’s with you and the Fed?”

Silas shifted a cold stare.

“It’s just that you haven’t taken your eyes off her ass for... some time now.” Hunter teased.

“I have a question for you.” Silas countered.

“Okay, it’s none of my business–”

“You want to be on the official payroll?”

Hunter’s face showed his shock, “What are you–”

“Think it through before you answer, dumbass.” Silas warned. “Think of the benefits of a stable... gainful employment. No more hiding in the shadows.” the guard paused for breath. “Do it for your family while the opportunity is here.”

“Reddington?” Gaines was astounded.

“A couple condos on the same block come with the deal.” Silas added. “For when the demons plague you.”

Hunter was deeply touched... more than that.
“You can be close to your kids,” Silas faced the man, “there are a couple conditions.”

“Always is.”

“You’re probably gonna have to relocate.” Silas warned.

“Like we haven’t done that before.” Hunter shrugged. They were a military family after all.

“And you have to see a psychiatrist.” Silas said. “One Red uses himself and trusts implicitly.”

Gaines mused, “He thinks I’m a nutcase?”

“He thinks we all are,” Silas smiled, “and he’s right, isn’t he.”

“So you see a shrink?”

“Yeah, but I insisted mine be a female.” Silas told the truth. “Think about it... and don’t let stupid pride sway your reasoning.”

Hunter’s face gave away nothing.

“Hey, he’s only offering you what should have been yours from the beginning.”

Hunter fell silent.

Silas let it go. The guy had some tough decisions to make. He didn’t need any interference or unwanted advice.

He only hoped the man made a wise decision.

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Red had insisted... just as Liz had predicted, on stopping to check on his men’s condition.

A man in scrubs approached, “Mr. Reddington, we haven’t formally met but Mr. Kaplan has vetted me thoroughly. I’m Bond, Dr. James Bond.”

“Well, of course you are.” Red took the outstretched hand, exchanging enigmatical looks with Dembe.

“I’ve heard it a thousand times so thank you for not saying it.” Bond seemed relieved. “Agent Ressler is stable. He suffered a through and through, right upper shoulder. We have stayed the blood loss which was a major concern as you can surmise.”

Red liked the no-nonsense approach. He was very short on time, after all.

“Mr. Russo,” Bond shook his head, clearly annoyed, “he refused to stay. I advised him to remain under our care. His artery was nicked, but we closed the wound. Though, someone saved his life with an expertly applied tourniquet.”

Red clapped Dembe on the shoulder proudly, “Good man.” he smiled before returning to the problem at hand. “Someone will be on hand shortly to corral David more efficiently.”

“The rest of the men,” the doctor waved about the clear, sterile atmosphere, “well, two I ordered transported to our hospital. Precautionary only I hope, but I wished to perform X-Rays and deeper wound care. Hopefully they will be released shortly. The rest are able to be released momentarily.”
“The cops are here.” Red mentioned.

“Mr. Kaplan established this a legal clinic.” Dr. Bond took offense. “I am also a Board Certified–”

“Just a heads up.” Red calmed, understanding Kaplan had trained the staff in proper... procedure.

“Understood.” Bond ‘calmed’. “We were the nearest facility, after all.” he said, confirming Red’s hypothesis.

Red crossed to David Russo who stood by a window watching the commotion taking place. “I missed all that?”

He looked wounded in more ways than one.

“That’s the beauty of it all, David,” Red glanced out, watching Silas and Hunter shadowing Lizzy. The head guard gestured Joe over, talking to the man, “there will always be... another time.”

“Another place.” Dembe concurred.

Red was carefully examining the man.

“Don’t worry, boss.” David waved the concern away. “It’s just a minor flesh wound.”

“That’s Francis Holbrook’s claim to fame.” Dembe reminded.

“It certainly was not minor,” Dr. Bond took exception, “you should not be standing.” he gave up, sighing heavily, “Do you need these papers concerning wound care?”

“We are all well versed in such matters, Doctor.” Dembe took them politely, however.

“What the hell are you still doing here?” Silas was escorting a new patient into ‘intake’, his expression incredulous.

“What are you?” Red searched frantically for signs of injury.

Silas hooked a thumb, “The dumbass here neglected to tell anyone he’d been tagged.”

“Did you do it?” Dembe managed with a straight face.

“Nah, a cop... a good one!” Hunter laughed gaily, showing his torn shirt. “My favorite shirt too.”

“How can you tell?” Silas grumbled. “Just how many camo shirts do you own?”

“Well, I think this is my favorite.” Hunter hopped up on a table Bond offered.

Red was confused, “Why did a good cop–”

“It was a total accident.” Hunter managed straight-faced as well. “Or at least that’s what the guy said. He was really apologetic. Offered me his untouched Starbuck’s and donut to absolve his guilt.”

Dr. Bond sighed and worried over the new wound, “This one is stuck in there good and proper.”

“It stings a mite.” Hunter nodded as the doctor again cleansed the wound on his side.

“You take the other table.” Red motioned.

“I gotta get back down.” Silas vetoed the suggestion.
“Get on that damned table or I’ll put a bullet in you so you’ll have to stay put for a while.” Red snapped.

“Would that not defeat the purpose.” Dembe wanted to know.

“There’s nothing they can do for cracked ribs.” Silas snapped back, ignoring Dembe entirely.

“They can put your ass down for a week or two so they can heal naturally.” Red bitched.

“Or you two can stop stirring shit up for a couple days.” Silas rolled his eyes but begrudgingly sought out the table.

Dembe clamped his mouth shut, hiding his amusement, helping the guard ease the shirt from his body.

Even Red was shocked to see the deep bruises on Silas’ torso.

Shades of deep purple verging on black spread about the man’s side. The discoloration wrapped around, disappearing into the waistband of his black trousers.

“I am so sick of this macho shit!” Dr. Bond wasn’t happy with the color shown either, looking helplessly about his crowded sick ward. “Don’t any of your men know the meaning of the words... common sense?”

Silas and Hunter looked around sheepishly.

Red replaced his hat.

He and Dembe made for the nearest exit.

His men were well looked after. Joe was on Lizzy.

Red and Dembe stealthily made their way through a maze of hallways, stumbling on Moore and Wilson coming in from a side door.

Red pulled up short, his hands lifting at his side in question.

“They clammed up.” Wilson relayed. “Wouldn’t say a word without an attorney but it’s obvious they were on Lawford’s payroll.”

Red shrugged, “Are Samar and Elizabeth--”

“They were finishing off.” Moore clipped the reply. “Filling in the blanks.” he glared at Red.

Red held the man’s cold stare easily, “Since you couldn’t.”

Moore’s angry eyes narrowed further at the slight.

“Where’s Lawford.” Red continued on to more important matters.

“With the local field office.” Wilson frowned.

“Who came up with that moronic idea?” Red glanced at Dembe incredulously, before walking away from the pair without a backward glance, pulling his phone free.

“Francis...” Red snapped into the line, “we have a situation here.”
Red quickly wove a story of three warring sides consisting of Red’s team, Lawford’s team... and the very unwelcome FBI.

During the gunfight, Lawford had been secured by the Fed’s and placed in their custody.

Due to unfinished business with Lawford, Red wanted him back.

Francis had found great amusement in Lawford playing hot potato between the factions but even in the midst of laughing at Red’s ire, had dispatched his men to handle the issue with promises to call back with an update on their progress soon.

Secure that Francis would have Lawford back in their clutches soon, he slipped the phone in his pocket.

He and Dembe made their way across the street mingling into the rapidly growing crowd of curious onlookers.

From this vantage point, they could watch from a safe distance if any new menace reared its ugly head and yet be considered a mere annoyance by all the police that were now converging on the scene.

Red could afford to be patient now.

“Dembe, have the planes readied for take-off, please.” he looked to the future. “This farce shouldn’t take too long and then... we can be on our way, hopefully with no further delays.”

The gentle motion of the jet landing awoke Red from a short nap.

Lizzy’s warm body had lulled him into a light sleep. He glanced down at the top of the shining crown of her hair.

His eyes fell on the man across the aisle. Red’s guilt returned full force.

Silas grimaced, instantly straightening, which brought on another grimace.

Red knew how much pain his friend was in. Silas’ stoic act didn’t fool Red one bit.

The guy was in pain, pure and simple.

Red sat, watching Silas since they boarded. That the guard was sitting quietly, or giving the impression at least, while Samar Navabi was a few seats back... spoke volumes.

Red wished he could offer some constructive assistance.

Lizzy’s head slipped from his shoulder jarring the young woman awake.

“We’re here already?” she stifled a yawn, straightening her legs from their curled position against Red’s thighs.

“So it appears.” Red rubbed the ache from his neck.

The other occupants of the plane were stirring about, readying to disembark.

Red was surprised any of them rested given the flurry they left behind in Chicago.
Red sat up, working the kinks from his back watching Samar fussing over a very drowsy, drug induced Donald Ressler.

It had been rather unexpected when the medical team gave the go-ahead for the injured Agent to fly. Donald, in his lucid moments had insisted on doing so, however. Adamant about finishing the task at hand.

Benton was supposedly safe and secure having been foisted off to the local chapter of Chicago’s FBI.

Red didn’t trust that the game had as yet ended, especially from Lawford’s point-of-view. It appeared Ressler was aware of that fact.

Although protocol dictated Red was to turn Lawford over to the proper chain-of-command within the agencies, true to his word...Red kept possession of the high card in the playing deck for just a while longer.

Until he was certain Lawford called off the vendetta, he would remain within the sphere of Red’s influence for a while longer.

After adjourning to the Chicago airport, while hurrying Lizzy, Aram and Ressler into the safety of the plane... Red awaited word from Francis and the last team in transit.

It amused Red when all the Agents texts started blaring at once.

As did his with a message that simply read... Package en route ;)

There was a nasty rumor that some subversive faction rushed in out of the blue and took possession of the FBI’s prize criminal of the day.

Thanks to Red’s impeccable timing and... Francis Holbrook’s ability to hold a grudge.

Francis put together a small but effective group of elite people whose sole purpose in life became the acquisition of Samuel Lawford from the less than capable hands of those into which Lawford had been entrusted.

Francis said later, after Red was airborne, that it was ridiculously simple to secure the guy.

Not one shot was fired. A precision mix-up in an elevator served its purpose.

A rather dramatic, not to mention entertaining, staged fight between two very passionate lovers ensued... and Lawford was whisked away without even a bat of an eyelash.

It was incredibly easy to gauge human nature at times. Even FBI agents were not immune to a good, rousing argument.

When the smoke cleared, and the supposed lovers made up... Lawford was already in the back of a borrowed delivery van on his way to Antonio’s jet which waited patiently on the tarmac for their departure.

With Francis’ team a short distance off, Silas recommended they depart.

While Red had wanted to stay, assuring that Lawford was truly in his clutches... it would be better to free the runway, should the teams need to make a hasty departure.
Plus, his entourage looked rather... worn thin.

A short time later, Joe called, informing him they were in the air and Lawford was sleeping through the flight and hadn’t given them a minute’s trouble.

A healthy dose of chloroform would do that to a guy.

Everything had worked according to plan.

Red smiled as Dembe and Samar gently eased a loopy Ressler unto his unsteady feet.

“Was I that bad?” Liz’s face showed concern. “When I was in the hospital last year?”

“Let’s just say, I was forced to fight off several unwanted advances.” Red lied fluently. “It was a most embarrassing situation.”

“You are a big fat liar.” Liz dismissed, grasping her purse.

“Hand to God.” Red persisted in playing with the woman.

“God is going to chop off that hand one of these days.” she warned.

As Samar was assisting Ressler, Liz decided to be helpful herself, “Samar,” she called out over the back of the seat, “I’ll get your bag, don’t worry!”

The woman smiled her gratitude, assisting Dembe to guide Ressler out first. Red and Liz stayed out of the aisle allowing them a clear passage.

Silas struggled to his feet, following Samar. Neither had said a word since the exchange at the hotel, Red noted.

Neither looked any happier for the fact.

Red reached, beating Lizzy to Samar’s bag.

“What a gentleman.” Liz was impressed, showing as much.

Red remained stationary, blocking any avenue of egress.

“You’re in my way, fella.” she tried not to be amused at his stance but he was just so damned smug and self-confident, it tickled her.

“Pay the toll, baby,” Red murmured contentedly, “and you can pass.”

It felt so good to be alone with her finally. It had been a long, long day, and it wasn’t over yet.

Liz managed a stricken up and under look, patting her pockets superficially, coming up empty, “I don’t seem to have any cash on me.”

“I don’t take cash.” he tsked for her situation.

“Let me see... what do I have that might be of interest to you?” she inched closer to her antagonist. “What if I should let you make a.. direct deposit later on tonight?” she flicked some imaginary lint off his tie. “Would that suffice, do you think?”

Red’s eyes dropped and remained on her breasts, “Are you offering me a bribe?”
Liz scowled slightly, “I would never do such a thing.” she curled her fingers about the tie, pulling him closer. “It’s... illegal.”

Red cocked his head, intrigued by the turn of events, “Let me get this straight... this deposit of which you eluded I am to give you?”

“Simply an exchange of... liquid assets.” she explained, whispering seductively against the man’s mouth.

Red grunted deeply into the sweet mouth, his tongue flicking hers sensually. The visions conjured erotic and most welcome.

“...Damn.” he whispered, his growing erection lengthening, thickening.

“Do we have a deal?” she asked innocently feeling the evidence of his arousal for she had leaned provocatively to his straining frame.

Red mindlessly dropped Samar’s bag, his fingers curving involuntarily about Lizzy’s rounded derriere. He pushed her into the bulge in his pants, his mouth leisurely plundering the sweet nectar of her lips.

“Signed and sealed.” he growled softly. “I expect this transaction to take place... tonight.”

“Why not now?” she puzzled, pushing his limits. “I know you’re... up for it.”

“Perhaps discretion should be the better part of valor in this instance.” a male voice interrupted the couples playtime.

Red scowled darkly over at an amused Dembe who stood by the exit door, head inside.

He grinned at Raymond’s surly glare, “The other plane is approaching our locale.”

“Then handle the proceedings.” Raymond suggested... strongly.

“I could do that.” Dembe agreed jovially. “But the natives are restless. Silas was already grousing about your absence.”

Raymond was suitably forewarned, “When is that man not bitching?”

“There is nothing he would enjoy more than to interrupt you at a... crucial moment in time, if you get my drift.”

Liz tittered softly, enjoying Red’s reaction just as much as Dembe.

“I am very discrete.” Dembe spread his hand helplessly. “Can you sat the same of your head guard when he’s in a salty mood?”

Red glanced at Lizzy who was trying ever so hard to keep her pretty features straight.

He lifted a cool brow her way for the fact.

Which only caused the woman to giggle infectiously.

Red sighed heavily, knowing a lost cause when he saw one. A state which was a common occurrence for him these days...
Well, at least he would have this evening with which to console himself.

He waved Dembe away with a disgruntled gesture, “I’m coming...I’m coming.” he nodded his defeat.

“You will be...” Liz blinked nonchalantly, “later. I promise, honey.”

Dembe had not heard the actual exchange but he was man enough to sense the jest of the words the woman whispered for Raymond’s ears alone.

“I will,” Red adjusted his erection accordingly, his mind set, “extract the proper compensation for this, Elizabeth... you understand.” his eyes promised as much.

“God, I hope so.” she smiled happily.

Red’s stare dropped to that voluptuous ass as it swished hypnotically away, his cock jerking in his pants.

He glanced down at the throbbing appendage, “Our time is coming, my friend,” he eased his pain this way and that. “Later... you’ll be inside her tight little hole and you can stay as long as you wish.”

He took a moment to regroup then headed down the steps of the plane.

“What’s the plan?” Liz waited patiently on the tarmac for his arrival.

“I don’t know about you,” Red tossed Samar’s bag into Dembe’s capable hands, “but I’ve had enough circulated plane air for one day.” he looked down into the dark blue orbs.

She sighed, “That sounds good. We take a rest stop?”

“Ressler is a factor.” Red searched for another excuse, one his pride could accept. “He should have at least eight hours of uninterrupted rest.”

The real reason was, Red wanted at least eight hours of sack time with the woman standing next to him.

Resting or not.

“Speaking of which?” he didn’t see Donald anywhere

“He’s out again,” Samar approached, gesturing to a nearby vehicle, “I don’t think he fully roused. Those drugs your guys gave him... where can I get some?”

“I hate the sensation,” Red differed in his point of view, “not being in control of my faculties.” he constantly fought against it in the past, at least until he was in a secure location.

It meant a great deal to him that Ressler... didn’t.

Even if they were on the opposite sides of the law and were antagonists more often than not... Ressler apparently trusted him and his team enough to submit to the haze of the drugs, they had given him.

“Well, you would hate giving up control.” Samar stated. “You’re a major control freak.”

Red chuckled, “That was an awfully polite way of saying, anal retentive.”
“That is an apt description, if I ever heard one.” Silas ventured forth, his large frame swaggering with something verging on arrogance.

Samar’s eyes met the man’s for a brief moment, dropping in the next.

Liz frowned, “I thought the doctor said Ress’ head—”

“It’s better to err on the side of caution, yes?” Red was ever practical.

“I can stay with him.” Aram offered. “Share a room...”

Red smiled, inclining his head, “There’s the team spirit.” he dropped a beefy hand to the computer specialists, before glancing about.

Samar lifted her head glancing down the way, “Is that the jet we’re waiting for?”

The large jet eased into its landing with nothing more than a slight hop across the field, gliding smoothly into position very close to Red’s own jet.

The sound of several vehicles rumbling unto the stretch of road caught everyone’s attention before the convoy lined the outbuildings of the airport.

Liz tensed, her hand instinctively reaching for her weapon.

“It’s okay.” Red’s fingers squeezed the small ones gently. “It’s just Francis’ men making a grand entrance.”

“That’s a pretty impressive entrance.” Samar scowled as the vehicle numbers mounted.

“Subterfuge.” Red nodded sagely.

“Subterfuge?” Liz was stymied.

“Lawford’s men here,” Red explained, “will surely be present and accounted for.”

“With so many vehicles to follow,” Silas knew how Francis thought, which was a scary thing in itself, “they will have a hell of a time trailing or detecting the correct car.”

Samar shook her head at the antics displayed.

Silas was suddenly too close, she noted the fact, turning her eyes to seek his quiet gaze.

She cleared her throat gently, moving artfully away.

“Kind of like that sound.” Silas made mention.

Samar sought him out, her expression almost hurt, “Make up your mind.” she suggested smartly. “I don’t like indecision.”

“That makes two of us.” Silas arched his brow meaningfully.

Red glanced between the two curious to see how this round would play out. Silas obviously took time to think on the plane ride about revisiting the topic, seeing if anything had changed.

Samar narrowed her eyes dangerously then looked down at her feet sheepishly when the man looked pointedly at the computer specialist speaking with Liz.
“Like looking in a mirror,” Silas crooked his head slightly, “isn’t it.”

Red sighed, his head shaking imperceptibly. These two were going to be impossible.

“Silas,” Red got the man’s attention, “would you be so good as to escort Lawford to the designated vehicle.”

Silas watched a few of his men disembark, followed by Moore and Wilson, “If Moore gives me lip, I swear to God,” the chipped grey eyes were icy, “I’m gonna take him out. Fair warning.”

Liz’s mouth fell agape for the coldness of the tone. She truly thought Silas meant his threat this time.

“I’ve had it up to here!” Silas’ hand chopped crisply to his forehead.

“He thinks Cooper has ordered Lawford to the New York office.”

“Hasn’t he?” Samar was wary.

“In a manner of speaking.” Red continued with a reassuring smile for the woman.

“Moore is one whining mother fuc–”

“We are well aware of your views.” Red silenced the guard. “But I want a clear transition this time. I trust you to accomplish the fact.”

Silas fumed in silence.

“Agent Navabi,” Red took the woman’s hand, “I’m going to ask for your trust a while longer.” he gave his full attention, the dark eyes watched him closely. “We need Lawford for a very brief time then he will be turned over to your capable hands.”

Samar glanced at Elizabeth the back to the man, “I’m rather hungry, truth told.” she made her decision. “It would be nice to grab a bite to eat before returning to duty.”

Red smiled his pleasure, “Thank you.” he glanced over his shoulder. “Silas, after Lawford is secure, escort the lovely agent here to one of the better New York eateries.”

Liz noted Silas’ body stiffened rigidly, his expression masking hostility.

“I-I have been here alone many times,” Samar saved Silas the awkwardness suggested, “there is no need–”

“There is a great need.” Red contradicted, still holding the woman’s hand. “You are a most capable agent, don’t get me wrong but I could not, in all good conscience... chance that Lawford’s people might try to get an exchange of prisoner through you.”

Samar’s eyes flitted to the guard.

Silas snapped off a command to one of his nearby ‘agents’, “You’re with me, O’Neill. Secure the package then... you’ll be on me and Agent Navabi here for the remainder.”

“Remainder of what, boss?” Justin enjoyed Silas’ moods just like the rest of his constituents, taking every opportunity to needle the guy when possible.

“Did your mama drop you on your head as a child?” Silas groused, his temper flaring.
The man chuckled, “The FBI jerk is under the impression he will be escorting the package to a yet undisclosed destination, boss.”

“The FBI fuckwit is sadly mistaken isn’t he.” Silas replied.

“I guess he is.” the guy proceeded Silas to the plane, holding his amusement... just. “Should I take the lady with me?”

Silas’ mood was no better for the fact, “You do that.” he turned to Samar. “If you will accompany Justin here, I’ll join you momentarily.”

Samar was clearly of two minds for a second but in the end... she went peacefully.

When both were out of earshot, Silas turned on Red, “That was a dirty, fucking, rotten thing to do and you know it.”

“Make sure Navabi’s accommodations are secured for the night.” Red managed to hold his own mirth as well as Justin had, sensing Silas’ reluctance to be alone with the lovely agent. “She is in the same hotel as we are, of course.” he poked. “Perhaps you could show the woman safely to her room?”

“Kiss my ass.” Silas grumbled emphatically before spinning sharply on his heel, stomping off in the needed direction.

Red chuckled a low gravelly laugh.

“Red!” Elizabeth fretted. “Silas is in a horrible mood. I hate when he is!” she hit Red’s arm. “It’s not funny!”

“It is actually.” Red’s amusement grew, but he tampered it for the woman’s sake. “Don’t baby him. There isn’t anything really wrong.” he assured. “Silas is just... tense.”

“About what?” she demanded. “Can’t you fix it?”

“I’m trying, baby.” he spread his hands. “Hand to God.”

“Stop saying that.” Liz looked at her friend helplessly. “...Maybe Samar will get him out of his bad mood?” she wistfully hoped.

“Yeah,” Red nodded sagely, “maybe she will.”

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“I know I should be used to all this...” Elizabeth Keen shook her head, sighing lightly.

She looked over the city below, shielding her eyes from the sun’s rays which had already started their descent towards dusk.

She glanced about the luxurious surroundings behind her, the elegant rooms chocked full of charm and decadence.

Walking the wall of windows afforded the high-rise hotel room, she closed her eyes enjoying the warmth of the sun’s rays as they sliced along her body.

Liz rolled the tension from her shoulders, her eyes opening absently. A pall fell over the city below.
Twinkling street lights replaced the sunlight shimmering off the Hudson as the sun dipped further towards the horizon.

The city looked almost fit for a fairytale as surrounding buildings took on an orange glow, leaving them gold in appearance. The hazy skyline heavy with exhaust was shades of pinks, purples and deep blues.

It had quite a dreamlike feel to it.

She tracked a ferry shuttling tired passengers back from the last tour of the Statue of Liberty.

A Port Authority boat traveled in the opposite direction, cutting sharply over the water.

An ambulance below in the crowded streets caught her wandering attention. Its red and blue strobe lights flashed along glass storefronts like a Rave gone askew.

On their trip through the New York streets, a cacophony of grating sounds had inundated her senses. Horns honking, cop sirens blaring, brakes screeching, wheels squealing and the low, constant hum of a million plus voices gave the city its unique sound.

Up here, so high above the chaos, it seemed surreal to look down on the bustling, hectic pace below and hear... nothing but blessed silence.

A most welcome sound, were she honest with herself.

It had been a long, tedious day.

One filled with a plethora of emotion.

Disappointment, joy, love, fear, relief, worry... she had experienced it all this day.

Red had thankfully been at her side for the most part seeing she came through it all with a measure of sanity.

When their eyes met after that first fire-fight, she had felt his concern. That his thoughts had been with her even as her own had... the man.

His eyes said so much more than he could with others about.

His touch had been so gentle, so loving on her back, his fingers touching hers reverently.

She felt communication even though none could be properly expressed.

She smiled gently, smelling the warm aroma of his cologne near her before she heard him approach. Her eyes focused on the hazy apparition of the man’s reflection nearing in the window.

She welcomed his arms as they encompassed her slender frame from behind, her fingers covering the hair strewn tops of his hands lovingly.

“Am I interrupting?” he murmured against the shell of her ear.

She clasped his thumb in her hand, scowling from such a question, “Interrupting?”

“Your solitude.” he clarified quietly, unwilling to break the tranquility she established. “The quiet.”
She relaxed in his embrace, “It only makes it better... to share it with you.”

Red nuzzled the woman’s neck, kissing the fragrant flesh. He sighed lightly, “…I have to go attend to Lawford, speak to Francis’ people concerning a few ends which need tying up.”

She remained silent for a long beat, a question finally coming to mind, “Red, does Francis know anything about your involvement with us? The FBI?”

“No.” Red stated. “It must remain that way for the foreseeable future.”

“I don’t like lying to him.” she confessed, idly playing with his fingers.

“I know you don’t.” he nodded minutely.

“He’s my friend.” she lifted sorrowful eyes, craning her neck to meet his gentle ones. “By not being up-front with him... honest, I feel like I’m deceiving him.”

“There was a time,” he mused, “when you would have turned him over to the law.”

“At one point,” she turned in his arms, “but now, it’s different.”

“He has become your best friend.” Red was pleased. “You love him, Lizzy.”

“Not like I love you.” she urged quickly, “Not like that at–”

“I know that... now.” he soothed.

“I know it’s wrong, that I shouldn’t let my feelings cloud my judgement...” she worked it out in her own mind.

“Is it wrong to be human?” Red debated. “I’m proud and happy you feel what you feel, Elizabeth.”

She settled a little. She liked being close to the man, liked having the freedom to touch him whenever... wherever, she pleased.

She trailed her fingers along the collar of his shirt, a small frown on her full lips.

“He loves you too, you know.” Red made mention. “You may think that is the norm but I assure you, for Francis... it’s not.”

She lifted puzzled eyes.

“He doesn’t give his trust easily, which is an understatement in itself.” Red realized. “But to lower his walls the way he has with you? Unheard of.”

“He falls in love with every woman he meets.” she rolled her eyes.

“Superficially.” Red smiled down at the woman. “Except Lia, of course. She is the love of his life.”

Liz tittered softly under her breath, “And Nora.”

Red stroked his thumbs soothingly on the small of her back, smiling gently, “We’re not talking about that kind of love anyway, are we.”

She dropped her eyes, fiddling with his shirt-front, “No, I suppose not.”

“I should be concerned, perhaps.” he kept a straight face. “His bad habits seem to be rubbing off on
“W-What?” such a statement totally confused her.

“You think nothing of stealing people’s belongings for instance.” he teased.

“Does Francis steal people’s belongings? What do you mean?” she demanded indignantly.

“You steal my bacon, robe, socks, shirts...” he held his laughter.

“Oh, brother.” she turned aside, having the grace to be embarrassed. “You said...” she challenged, “what’s yours is mine. You said it repeatedly!”

“I knew that would come back to haunt me.” his mouth pulled into a grin.

The woman settled a tad, moving back into his sphere. She lifted a coy stare, “You know,” her mood altered considerably. Liz looked the man over speculatively, “that can go both ways.”

“Is that so.” Red’s eyes dared mischievously.

He enjoyed that look and playing the game lovers played. He couldn’t help do so with this woman. He was also fascinated how many times a day the woman could make his cock stir.

“For my part,” she admitted, wriggling further into his ready embrace, “there must be something I have which interests you, surely.”

He lowered his gaze to the delectable décolletage. He grunted appreciatively when her mound pushed seductively into his thigh.

“Yes,” he nodded, his tone a husky reply, “you have exactly what I want.”

Red’s hand cupped her cheek, his thumb stroking the soft skin delicately, “I want it... very much.”

Liz’s heart beat increased, the blood in her veins thrumming with passion, “…Which is?” she subtly flirted.

Red kissed her temple, his mouth moving enticingly across the sensually closed lids, Lizzy’s eyelashes tickled his lips.

He slowly, meticulously, worked his way to the rosebud mouth.

“Your love.” he whispered hoarsely, his mouth claiming hers passionately.

At the completion of the ardent caress, Liz’s eyes fluttered open, her breath stuttering, reading the quiet intenseness in him.

“You already have that.” she choked back the emotion his statement caused. “In abundance.”

“And you, mine.” he countered. “I hope you never tire of hearing the mundane because I intend to express my emotions... frequently.”

“You do that.” she lifted to her toes, her mouth parting his gently. The kiss deepened systematically, both participants losing themselves in the steamy depths.

The arrival of another person entering the room shattered the moment.
Red broke the kiss, his temper high, “For God’s sake, Dembe... I thought we had already settled this issue earlier.”

Dembe’s smile said he took no offense.

“Just once,” Red was beside himself, “could you just... having seen the obvious,” the man gestured wildly, “gone...away?”

“You asked me to remind you of important dates and times,” Dembe spread expressive hands, “and then berate me when I do as asked. I am understandably distressed.”

“You don’t look particularly distressed.” Red reminded, crossing to his ever present fedora, his movements choppy and... distressed.

“I have learned to conceal my true emotional state.”

Liz sensed Dembe was enjoying the exchange a little more than he should, amused for the fact.

She dutifully tried to commiserate with Red’s mood, but the twinkle in her eye gave her secret away.

“Learn to conceal a six-inch barrel cause that’s what I’m gonna stick up your ass next time you intrude on me and my woman when we are...” Red stopped for a breath, “sharing a private moment.”

“Which reminds me,” Dembe’s memory was suitably jogged, “you must call Brimley to meet us at the warehouse.”

Red hung his head dejectedly, all the fight gone from him.

Liz kissed his cheek consolingly, “Have a good day at the office, honey.” she smiled brightly for him.

Red offered her a disgruntled grunt, taking his leave, if reluctantly, “You’re as bad as he is.”

Liz stood, waving warmly as the two men exited.

Dembe shared a communal smile as he gently shut the door.

Red returned post-haste, sticking his head in the door.

Liz was startled, “Did you forget something?”

“Do you have a little black dress?”

Liz blinked, disoriented, “…Always.”

“Squeeze that sweet little ass into it. I would love to take you to dinner tonight.” Red mentioned. “In about an hour?”

Liz was elated, “Oh! Oh, yes... yes, I would love that.” She had thought she only rate room-service tonight.

“Dembe won’t be coming along.” Red threw a caustic look outside the door he held securely half-closed.

Liz dimpled accordingly.
“You are hurting my feelings, Raymond.” Dembe’s staid and muffled voice filtered in from the hallway, increasing Liz’s smile... and Red’s ire.

“Do you mind...” Red groused, “I’m trying to make a date here.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat, enjoying the moment more than she had been.
She loved the open, playful, relationship Red and Dembe had, always did. She even envied it. Now, she felt a part of it. Like she was a welcome addition to their special bond.

It meant more to her than she could say.

She also appreciated that Red constantly made an effort. Once in a relationship, date nights often tapered off. But Red continued to woo her.

And she liked that. It made her feel... special.

“My apologies...” Dembe inclined his head graciously, “I will be your wingman.” he assured Red.

“Please tell him yes, so we may go.”

“That’s it?” Red had to question that one. “That’s the extent?”

Liz dropped her eyes to the rich carpet, her lips quivering with amusement. She quickly straightened her features, lifting luminous eyes, “I would love to go on a date with you.”

Red’s eyes softened, a smile lighting his face. He rather enjoyed hearing her say those words, even now.

“This will be just for us, okay?” his eyes roamed her body possessively. “A special night.”

“Are we celebrating something?” she raked her memory for a date, coming up empty. She wasn’t positive she even knew what day it was, to be honest.

Red’s eyes held hers confidently, “You tell me.”

“Where are we going?” she stopped his intended exit.

“Brooklyn, René’s.” he replied before closing the door on a very perplexed, very intrigued... Elizabeth Keen.

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“You know, my friend,” Red was still chafing from Dembe’s actions, “paybacks are a bitch.”

“They are oft time... a bitch.” Dembe nodded absently, steering the vehicle about mounting New York traffic.

“Is Ressler happy and content?” Red moved on finally.

“He is coming around.” Dembe reported. “He had eaten finally and is more alert. He is refusing any further pain medication.”

“His call.” Red understood.

“I was pleasantly surprised by the efficiency of Brimley.” Dembe seemed in a relatively good humor. “It took less than half an hour for Lawford to break.”
“Brimley is...” Red shrugged, “Brimley.”

“Thank you for allowing Josef to assist him this time.”

Red’s mouth quirked, “Joe enjoyed it more than he should.”

“What surprised me was Hunter Gaines’ involvement.” Dembe brought up the fact.

“A multi-faceted man.” Red’s brows rose as well. “Perhaps it was a simple reprieve from the tediousness of the routines they have established.”

“Brimley’s antics are their version of cat videos.” Dembe had decided.

“Excuse me?” Red was all too afraid he had followed the statement, however.

Dembe let it pass, “It has been a rather eventful day considering.”

That was an understatement if ever there was one.

“Lawford can be turned over to the lovely Agent Navabi. Francis will be pleased when he hears Lawford is in FBI custody.”

Dembe’s head turned for a beat, meeting Red’s eyes, “More importantly, Elizabeth is safe.”

“For how long?” Red sighed heavily.

“This too, will end, Raymond.” Dembe consoled. “Have faith that everything will fall into place as it usually does.”

Red refused to ruin the night he had planned with morbid thoughts.

“Take a right up ahead, three blocks.” he ventured, motioning with his hand in the direction needed.

“Did you not tell Elizabeth you would inform her when you were finished with your business dealings?” Dembe reminded dutifully.

“Well, I’m not finished yet.” Red crooked a wry smile.

“You lied,” Dembe’s tone held his disapproval, “to Elizabeth.”

“A gentleman can relate a small falsehood,” Red defended himself, “if a surprise for his lady is involved.”

Dembe turned the needed direction.

Secure that his co-conspirator was on board, Red focused on his plan of action.

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“I will not wear that hideous thing!” Liz argued heatedly, staring at the cumbersome boot she had discarded while adding finishing touches to her make-up and hair. “It ruins the look of my beautiful dress.”

Red’s stare remained direct and fixed however...his mind set.

Having lost the battle put her in a rather dour mood but the excitement of the evening soon moved that mood into a light, expectant one.
As they crossed the bridge heading into Brooklyn, she took in the surrounding city.

It seemed to be a living, breathing entity all to itself.

Having access to some of the best five-star restaurants in the world only minutes away from their hotel, Red had instead chosen the off-beaten track for which he was famous.

Liz began to appreciate his choice.

The private sitting room offered by the establishment he picked charmed her.

Soft candlelight set the mood in the quaint, intimate atmosphere surrounding them.

Sequestered away from the noise and bustle of the main dining area, private staff attended them.

The dinner was superb, the wine Red selected, perfection.

As usual, the man fell into a jovial mood, telling tales which amused and oft-times mystified.

He had led such a diverse, interesting life.

After dinner, they swayed in each other’s arms to the melodic music which drifted in from a live orchestra in the main atrium of the building.

It was a lovely setting... even if she was forced to compensate for her recent injury by the stupid, hideous contraption on her foot.

Red had even switched the ringer off on his phone.

No talk of work reared its ugly head. No discussion about the odd, eclectic day they had suffered through... she adored the fact.

As they were finishing the last of their dessert, Liz was surprised to look up to see a pretty blonde heading their way.

“Red!” the smile beamed up a notch or two, lighting the room. “It’s so wonderful to see you!”

That the man held a great affinity for the new arrival, was apparent.

He had arisen, taking the small hands in his. A soft kiss planted on presented cheeks.

“René...” he rumbled his pleasure, offering the polite introductions immediately.

Liz smiled back, nodding her, hello.

“Let me look at her!” Red’s grin widened as he perused the well-rounded tummy which extended between their bodies. “Goodness! How precious is this!”

He appraised the baby bump with keen eyes.

Liz gasped softly as his large hands encompassed the sphere.

She knew most women disliked such familiarity during their pregnancy.

This woman seemed to love the attention, taking great delight in the man’s joyous attitude, “My husband and Red knew the baby was a her before I did.”
Liz was graciously included in the moment.

“And don’t think either has let me forget it!” René scolded Red with a look. “Oh!”

“Whoa!” Red smiled broadly, his face lit with amazement. “She’s gonna be a goal-kicker!”

A small foot pushed jerkily against the pressure of his palm.

He reached quickly, placing Lizzy’s hand beside his.

Elizabeth offered an apologetic grimace but the woman merely laughed quietly for Red’s awed expression.

The baby rolled away from the intrusive prodding, settling deep into a new, more comfortable position.

“I knew the minute I felt that little munchkin kick, it had to be a girl.” Red proudly proclaimed. “Only a girl has such a swift, punctuated kick.”

“Speaking from experience?” René teased.

“I’m no dummy.” Red pleaded off. “I’ve never given a woman just cause to kick me... there.”

“One or two has stabbed him.” Liz murmured, primly folding her napkin in her lap. She sought his amused eyes. “But not there... yet.”

Red beamed proudly, “Lizzy isn’t one to let an open shot pass by if she can help it.”

“Stick ‘em where it hurts,” Liz winked playfully, “that’s my motto.”

Red chuckled, pulling out a chair, gesturing for René to sit.

“I didn’t mean to intrude,” she begged off, “just wanted to say–”

“No, please.” Liz insisted. “You should get off your feet whenever possible.”

René eased awkwardly into the chair with Red’s assistance.

“How are you feeling?” Liz asked a generic question.

“Like a Sherman tank.” René cast Red a rueful glance. “But otherwise, I feel great.” she rubbed her hand along the slope of her stomach.

“All women are exquisite when with child.” Red stated his belief. “They emit an inner glow that no artist has been able to capture as yet.”

Both females gawked at him, expressions carefully neutral.

“Must be the gas.” René quipped. “This kid has given me the worst heartburn known to man.”

Liz chuckled.
“You’re following doctor’s orders?” Red asked warily. “I know how stubborn you can be.”

“Me!” the woman took umbrage. “Oh, don’t even get me started.” she cast a sympathetic look. “Am I right?”

Liz opened her mouth to agree but was rudely silenced.

“As you may have guessed, this unique establishment belongs to René.” Red waved a hand about the romantic atmosphere, continuing on, praising the woman’s accolades as a chef. “But when she gets something in that thick head...”

“Pot calling the kettle black.” René rolled her eyes.

Liz was beginning to like this woman.

“She was trying to continue to run this place, on her feet, twelve hours a day.”

Liz’s brows furrowed empathetically.

“So Mr. Big Shot here,” René hooked a thumb, “goes and hires three of the top chefs out of Culinary Institute for me.” tears misted the lovely eyes.

“Excuse me... damned hormones.” she sniffled, taking the handkerchief Red offered. “Anyway, they’re working out marvelously but I had to break them of old habits. They were brainwashed to do things the wrong way.”

“Meaning, not her way.” Red interrupted.

“The wrong way.” René snapped. “But now, everything is running like clockwork again.”

“So you met here... at the restaurant?” Liz was curious.

“René saved my life.” Red looked at the woman fondly.

“By feeding you properly?” Liz was puzzled. Red could be over dramatic when it came to food, she thought fondly.

“Before this, I was a nurse.” both Red and René shared a laugh.


“Someone had to keep your snarky ass in line.” René crossed her arms, resting them on her bump. “He’s a pain in the ass when he’s sick, let me warn you.”

René side-glanced the man with a look that would cower most stout-hearted men.

Liz nodded, side-glancing the man as well.

“That’s the look I’ve been working for.” the man chuckled happily. “Still puts me in my place.”

“I highly doubt that.” René was not impressed.

“René was with me in the early days.” Red confided. “Right after I met with Mr. Kaplan.”

“Speaking of drill instructors...” René sought out the man, clearly interested. “How is the old bulldog?”
Liz’s eyes widened. She had never heard anyone speak of Mr. Kaplan in such a way except Silas but... that was Silas.

“Still barking out orders right and left.” Red laughed.

“She bites on occasion as well.” Liz stated ruefully, joining in.

“Yeah, that’s Kaplan.” René nodded benignly.

“She’s still trying to fill the gaping hole you left behind.” Red informed his friend.

“Is she still harping on that?” René was appalled. “Seriously?”

“You know she can hold a grudge.” the man reminded.

“It was your fault, anyway.” René took umbrage.

“Oh, now I am interested.” Liz sat up closer, ready to hear the tale.

“Oh, you can’t want him to rehash ancient history.” René was positive.

“Oh, yes, I do.” Liz was crestfallen.

“She’s nosy.” Red explained.

Liz’s mouth fell open.

“Yes, that’s the way to win her heart.” René chided. “Men? Right?”

Liz cut the man a stern look, silencing him.

“Well...” the woman began the story herself, clearly warming to the incidents as she reminisced, “we were stuck on the outskirts of... Nowhereville, right?”

Again, she hooked a thumb, “He was wounded, recuperating. As usual.”

Liz checked with Red. His expressing was amused but quiet.

“We had the bare essentials on hand, that’s about it.” René put her hand on her side, pushing her back for support.

“Our circumstances were pretty desolate, truth told.” she continued. “So much so, Silas and Dembe... you’ve met them, right?”

Liz nodded quickly, already enraptured by the story.

“They took to hunting local game for our survival.”

“Squirrel meat is not that much a step-up from the MRE’s we had.” Red frowned. “We couldn’t use our weapons... it would alert the enemy to our position. I thought we were screwed.”

“And he had no compulsion stating his lack of faith in the boys tracking abilities.” René chuckled.

“Silas goes all Rambo on us... fashions a bow and some arrows.” René’s eyes were alight with humor. “Lo-and-behold, Dembe fells a deer.”

Liz clasped her hands together in delight. Then her face fell, “But Dembe loves all animals.” she
knew for certain.

“Yeah well, circumstances what they were,” Red philosophized, “Peter Cottontail didn’t stand a chance.”

The story enraptured Liz, she listened intently as the lurid tale progressed.

“What I did not know,” Red quipped, “was that, while Blondie over here was a trained survivalist, a given fact, she also knew her way around an herb garden.”

“Mama taught me all she knew.” René giggled.

“While I lay there, in a blissful haze of drugs,” Red mused, “the boys were out on the proverbial hunt and she,” the man shook his head, still impressed at the woman’s skill after all these years, “was out doing her own thing, gathering bounty off the land.”

“Roman soldiers were once paid in salt, did you know.” René recalled a bit of trivia. “That’s how important seasoning was... and is.”

“That’s gospel.” Red agreed wholeheartedly.

“If I had to eat one more vegetarian omelet...” René cringed visibly, “I was going to kill you, myself.”

“Put us both out of our misery,” Red nodded his agreement, “so I would have gladly allowed it.” he sat back, folding his arms. “The chili mac wasn’t bad though.”

René shrugged, nodding grudgingly.

Liz chuckled for the dramatics displayed, “Since that eventuality did not come about, how does the story actually end?”

“Imagine my delight, awakening at last, to the mouth-watering aroma of...” he waved his hand about the remains of their scrumptious meal, “well, this.”

René waved the lavish praise aside, “It was just a few simple meat and veggie meals.”

“That’s like saying Michelangelo was just a house painter.”

René flushed with pleasure, “It’s that Irish blarney that hooked me in.” she sighed.

“That last two weeks spent in hell were filled with the most amazing... and still to this day,” Red looked at the other woman fondly, “unmatched venison and rabbit feasts I ever had the privilege.”

“He swept me away,” René was resigned, “not for my medical expertise mind you, but his bottomless pit of a stomach.”

“How long were you with him?” Elizabeth wasn’t certain if she felt a twinge of jealousy or not.

“Too long.” René stated emphatically. “Thank God I met my future husband. He got me away from the spell this one can weave.”

Elizabeth understood all about spells Red Reddington could weave.

Though, unlike René, she had no wish to leave.
“I wanted to settle down. Stay in one place for a while.” René recalled fondly.

“And what does your husband do for a living?” Red could see the irony, amused for it. “He’s military, through and–”

“Retired... military.” René corrected.

“I’m stuck in the Indies, shortly thereafter,” Red threw the chef a look, “eating slop and I just knew she and her new boyfriend were off having braised ribs and succulent–”

“Oh, give it a rest.” René laughed gaily. “You’re just jealous.”

“Damned right.” Red feigned anger, making both women laugh at his expense. “I’ll never forgive you deserting me.”

“You already have,” the woman’s eyes were gentle on the man.

“Why does Mr. Kaplan blame Red for your having left?” Liz was pondering the issue.

“I concocted a brilliant plan to win her back.” Red was proud of the fact, clearly. “I offered her boyfriend–”

“My husband.”

“A lucrative spot on my ever-growing band of merry men.”

“A very lucrative spot.” René scolded, recalling the time well. “Damn you. My charms almost weren’t incentive enough.”

“...So?” Liz was on tenterhooks.

“My husband caved... not him.” René’s eyes sparkled mischievously. “I had something even Red couldn’t compete with.”

Red shrugged his shoulders, “I took a shot, anyway. You had put in your time.” he gave credit. “She wanted... deserved... this.” he waved a hand about the restaurant, before settling his hand on the swell of her stomach. “Who am I to argue.”

“You always argue.” René was flabbergasted by the statement.

Liz envied the woman to a degree.

While she appreciated the urge to live a normal life and Liz’s ambitions ran a different gauntlet, it wasn’t the same anymore.

Red had become part of Elizabeth’s vision of the future.

With Red came certain realities.

The idea of a normal life had become subdued. As busy as their day had been, she found enjoyment in the chaotic, frenzied pace.

Granted, Liz could have done without the firefight... but the rest of the day had been rather exciting.

She watched Red, sharing memories with his friend. Liz couldn’t imagine the man even sitting still for very long a time, not really.
She was shocked to realize, she was just fine with the notion.

An air of intrigue surrounded the man next to her. Something mysterious seemed to lurk just in the background, waiting to emerge when he was about.

Life with Red Reddington would never, ever be... boring or dull.

“When is that little pumpkin seed going to sprout?” Red’s eyes had returned to the rounded orb of René stomach countless time, Liz noted. As if staring long enough would make the baby emerge.

“A month and some change.” René eased her back yet again. “If it’s anything like my husband, she will be fashionably late, of course.”

“It must be hard... the waiting.” Liz commiserated.

“I expect a gift.” René perked up. “I open them immediately,” she confided in Liz. “At least I don’t have to wait for that.”

“What do you need?” Red had perked up as well. “A new house? A car?”

“How about a baby swing?” René was appalled. “Don’t you ever do anything halfway?”

“What the hell kind of gift is that?” Red was more than disappointed. “A fucking baby swin–”

“A practical one?” Liz asked, sighing her delight.

Red rolled his eyes, a little put out.

“...Oh my God.” René was aghast. “You didn’t.”

The man glanced about the room rather sheepishly.

“You...did...not.” René tried to stand, knocking away Red’s assistance.

Red sighed, holding his hands aloft, waiting.

René grumbled irritably, clutching the man’s forearms, helping her ease to a standing position.

“What?” Liz arose as well, sensing something in the wind.

“I bought all that practical stuff.” Red grimaced the thought aside. “But it wouldn’t fit in the house you had.”

René stared at the guy, amazement filling her eyes, “So... you bought another house?”

“Your family is growing.” Red defended his actions. “You need a bigger house.”

Liz’s mouth fell agape, “Red, you didn’t.”

“Sure he did.” René’s eyes lit with an inner glow. “That’s exactly what he did.” she threw her arms about Red’s neckline, hugging him dearly. “You crazy bastard.” she whispered lovingly. “What am I gonna do with you!”

“Name the baby after me.” Red was happy again.

“Not gonna happen.” René eyes filled with tears of joy, however, Liz noted.
“I can’t let you do this... it’s beyond generous.”

“That’s what you said last time.” Red feigned confusion.

“I was in shock last time.” René chuckled. “What person in his right mind just ups and gives an entire house for a wedding present?”

Liz knew the answer to that one.

“You’ll love it... good neighborhood, amazing schools.” Red’s excitement was returning by leaps and bounds.

“You can’t do these things.” René’s tone was a gentle reprimand. “We consider you our friend, Red. What kind of people would we be—”

“The kind that is having a baby and needs a new, bigger house.” Red supplied. “You’re my friends as well, stop all this nonsense. It’s something I delight in doing.”

“He really does.” Liz helped out. She sensed how important the issue was to the man.

After all, Red was not the type of person to call just anyone... his friend.

René was shaking her head, “Our house is perfectly fine, really.”

“And will bring a good value on the market... to set up the minion for college.”

“He already has her in college.” René threw up her hands, exasperated.

“Or you could use it as a rental property.” Red had thought it through.

“Red...” Liz tried a logical approach, “I don’t know... René’s husband, but maybe,” she wrinkled her nose, “he would resent the gesture?”

“Why would he?” Red was confused.

“Well, some men might. Is that the case, René?”

“It has a two-car garage, and a work shed... what’s to resent?”

“God, don’t tell Charles that!” René hastily advised. If her husband found out... he’d be hooked.

“See?” Red spread his hands.

“That is not the issue.” René sighed heavily.

“Then what is the issue?” Red wanted to know. “A guy can’t give his best friends a house or... a few cars?”

“W-What do you mean... cars?” Both René and Liz whipped their heads about, seeking out the man.

“Well,” Red hesitated but only briefly, “I bought you an SUV. Francis said,” he threw the young man under the bus, “Charles would feel left out if he didn’t get a Jeep or something cool to drive too...”

René sat, the wind taken from her sails.

“That SUV has the best safety record out there.” Red sweetened the pot. “It also comes with a top-
rated car seat for the podlet.”

René sought assistance but Liz only shrugged non-committed shoulders, “That has to be considered, right?”

René spread her hands helplessly.

“René,” Red used his paternal voice, “how many times did you risk life and limb for me? Coming into all those less than savory places at a minute’s notice, putting your life on hold?”

“You paid me to do that–”

“Don’t give me that shit.” Red disdained. “You can’t pay for that type of loyalty.”

René flushed prettily, “Oh, you are so full of s–”

“I love you, Dembe loves you, hell even Silas loves you.” Red said. “Lizzy loves you.” he topped the last statement, motioning to the woman.

“She doesn’t even know me.” René laughed, her eyes misting.

“No, he’s right.” Liz jumped on the bandwagon. “If it wasn’t for you... Red may not be here. And I...” she trailed away, swallowing at the lump in her throat.

Red’s eyes softened, squeezing Lizzy’s hand, “See... the only one I’m not sure of is your boyfriend.” he quipped to make René feel better.

“He’s my husband.” the woman wailed helplessly. “Husband!” she showed her ring.

“Why don’t you come back to work for me?” Red teased. “Where you know for certain you are loved and cherished.”

Liz rolled her eyes, “Now I know where Francis gets it from.” she muttered.

René sat back, mentally exhausted, “You wear me out.”

“As long as I’m wearing you down.” Red quietened. “Are you all right? Do you need to go rest? Put your feet up?”

René wasn’t tired in the least, she was elated beyond scope, “No... no, I’m not. Well, of course, I’m all right. I mean, I’m fine.” she chuckled. “More than fine. Shell-shocked, maybe but... just fine, Red.”

Her eyes shone with affection, “You are, without a doubt,” she choked up, “the finest man I have ever met.”

“If you put me up against your boyfriend,” he mused, “of course, I’m going to shine.”

The woman laughed raucously, hitting the man playfully.

“Speaking of which,” Red checked his watch superficially, “the old ball and chain will be here any minute to pick you up.”

“To take me to see my new house and cars?” René lifted a brow. “I should have known he would be in on this conspiracy.”
“He chose all the colors for the walls.”

“Oh my God, Red.” René sat up, alarmed. “You didn’t really let him–”

Red laughed heartily.

René sat back, her hand to her heart. “Oh, thank God.” she whispered sacredly, making Liz laugh as well.

“Everything would be khaki or battleship gray.” René swore which amused Liz all the more.

“Can you see the nursery?” René rolled her eyes. “Pink camouflage walls?”

“Dembe bought her a pink commando outfit.” Red lied.

“He did not.” René knew better. “Dembe will buy the only practical gift out of you lot.”

“What about Silas?” Liz was having a ball, the evening turning into a wonderful adventure shared through her companions’ eyes. “A big teddy bear?”

“An assault rifle... Nerf style.” Red differed.

René eased to the edge of her seat, seeking Red’s hand. He gallantly assisted her to rise.

“I kid these louts but I’ll tell you one thing,” she spoke to Liz directly this time, “I would walk to the ends of the Earth to help one of them out if he... when he, needs help.”

Liz’s eyes softened on the pretty a face.

“Even in my present condition.” it was ruefully promised. “And this one here,” she hugged Red dearly, “I would have my boyfriend lay down his life for...” she quipped.

Red chuckled appreciatively, “Awfully generous with his life.”

René shrugged any concern away, “He feels the same.” she reached for Liz’s hand. “You take good care of Red for me, okay?”

Liz nodded minutely, “I’ll do my best.”

“I’m gonna let you two get back to your evening.” René looked tired but happy. “And I will go find a chair that reclines, then get me the biggest piece of chocolate cake I can find.”

Both Red and Liz held their amusement.

“And if you say one thing about it, Red Reddington...” she narrowed her eyes playfully.

Red’s expression altered to a mock seriousness. He held his hands high.

René tiptoed to kiss the man’s cheek then clasped him tightly for a long beat.

She sniffled quietly seeking out Elizabeth, “It was such a pleasure to meet you.”

Liz smiled warmly, impulsively kissing the woman’s cheeks, returning the sentiment.

Red’s eyes softened as he watched the woman’s exit.

“She is such a nice person, Red.” Liz sought him out. “I like her very much.”
“I hoped you would.” the man was relieved. “She is a very dear person to me.”


A short time later, Red pulled out into traffic as they made their way back to Lower Manhattan, side glancing his passenger on several occasions.

He didn’t sense any particular emotion coming from Lizzy but she had been unusually quiet for some time now.

He took it as long as he could, “Something wrong?”

“What?” she pulled from her thoughts. “Oh... oh, nothing at all.” she smiled to prove as much. “I was just woolgathering.”

“Something you can share?” he was understandably curious.

“Just thinking about how kind you can be,” she glanced at his handsome profile, “how incredibly generous.”

“And loving.” he sent her a look which warmed the cockles of her heart. “Why don’t you slide over here and let me prove my boast.” he patted the seat next to him.

Liz smiled wider, sliding the space to the man, careful not to impede his driving motions.

“Get back in that seat belt.” he scowled.

“Well, make up your mind.” she chuckled, scooting back over good-naturedly. “I guess this rules out any chances of a blow job for you, right?”

She motioned, indicating the distance between them now.

Red sighed lightly, “For the present.” he concentrated on the road to take his mind from such a pleasant thought.

Liz chuckled, “You always have to have the last word.”

“If your mouth was full of junior,” he responded, “you wouldn’t be talking, anyway.”

Liz sent him a scolding glance, “Junior?”

“Big Red?” Red tried another nickname.

Liz laughed outright, “You are not normal.” she realized gleefully.

“You said normalcy was overrated.” he reminded.

She settled back thinking on the matter, “I’ve come to the conclusion,” she had, “that aside from the occasional firefight, I rather enjoy every aspect of our lifestyle.”

“There must be times,” he was certain, “it gets to be too much though.”

Liz’s eyes traced the staggered outline of the New York skyline absently, pondering his question.

“I did have a moment today,” she recalled, “when the sights and sounds... even the smells inundated my senses.” she confided. “You ever experience something like that?”
Red nodded. He understood perfectly what she was wishing to convey.

“It evened out quickly enough.” she shrugged. “We seemed to have found a certain... levelness in that regard, however.” was that the word she sought?

She looked at his profile, “You are what centers me.”

Red glanced over, “Do I, baby?”

“Yes.” she whispered quietly. “It’s like... a series of roller coaster rides filled with highs and lows but through it all, you are my constant.”

Red was quiet so long a time, Liz thought the conversation had ended.

“But... you are enjoying the ride,” his brow had furrowed deeply, “on this particular roller coaster?”

“As long as you are there to enjoy it with me.” she murmured quietly.

He lifted her hand to his lips, placing a soft kiss on the velvety flesh.

The man jerked free suddenly, cursing under his breath.

The car swerved sharply. Red’s arm was throw protectively across her breasts as he maneuvered the vehicle about an idiot driver who had darted in front of them from the opposite lane.

Red laid on the horn, his temper flaring incandescently, “You fucker!” he bitched out the moron.

The guy had the gall to slow down having whipped back into his original lane coming nose to nose with Red’s vehicle.

The bastard was gesturing wildly, clearly yelling obscenities, his face a mask of angry contortion.

Red flipped him off, looking for an opportunity to floor the car to get away from such a stupid predicament.

With Lizzy in the car, he wasn’t about to take any chances that the road rage might escalate into something even more unpleasant.

The guys countenance altered visibly, at one point, becoming slack-jawed, a look of sheer panic and disbelief crossing his face.

Red glanced hastily over, sensing the fuckers attention was now focused elsewhere.

Lizzy was leaning casually forward, her weapon aloft. She waved it leisurely about grabbing the idiots full attention.

She smiled prettily, the weapon coming to bear on the unsuspecting target.

Red eased back in his seat, giving her ample room.

The car quickly dropped back, the guys wheels screeching with his effort to get the hell away from the crazy woman with the gun.

Red chuckled lowly, the sound a very sensuous one which ran along Liz’s spine most pleasantly.

Liz quietly, unobtrusively replaced her weapon into her purse, settling back into the comfort of the
She sighed airily, rolling her head on the headrest, returning her interest to the towering buildings looming large before them.

“The city is so beautiful at night.” she made mention.

Red’s chuckle increased, “I don’t think the prick with the road rage shares your outlook.”

“I should have gotten his license.” she mused. “I could have made his life a living hell if I really set my mind to it.”

“That’s my girl...” Red was still very much amused at how she handled the situation. “Never piss off an agent of the Federal Government. That’s my motto. At least, in regards to you.”

“Good motto to live by.” she approved.

“I sincerely enjoy having my own pistol packin’ baby.” Red was smitten. He threw her an affectionate look. “Kind of got me hot back there.” he admitted. “If I pull off on a side street, will you give me that blow we were discussing?”

“And chance getting mugged?” she gasped playfully.

Red chuckled again.

“You know,” she met his gaze, “as soon as we get back, the interruptions will start.”

Red drew in an even breath, agreeing with her assessment.

“It’s all right though.” she touched his hand which lay idly on his upper thigh. “We’ve had a wonderful evening. A nice private dinner. Time alone... I met a lovely woman from your past. One I didn’t want to shoot in the face.”

Red’s mouth curved into a grin.

“And whatever form the interruption takes,” she continued, “you’ll handle it with the upmost expediency, I know.”

“And you know this, how?” he quipped. “Because I’m hot for a blow job?”

“That too.” she conceded. “But logically it only stands to reason...”

The man was interested to see how her mind worked, listening intently as she ticked off her thoughts.

“It’s late. By now the Bureau has taken possession of Lawford. Number one problem off the list.” she shifted her eyes his way, “Our respective teams have had time to settle into their rooms.”

Red nodded that he was still here, listening.

“Another example of your generosity by the way.” she made mention. “It’s not often an agent gets the chance to stay at a five-star hotel. Don’t think they aren’t gawking with awe at the accommodations you provided.”

“But for you,” he teased, “it’s just old hat now, right?”

“Are you kidding?” she pulled an adorable face. “I was stoked when I saw the gift basket full of
“goodies.”

Red chuckled.

She loved to make him laugh, “But that big ass complimentary robe... Red, I felt like I died and went to heaven.”

Red’s chuckle increased, “Are we going to steal it?” he queried lightly.

“Well, you’re just going to have to tell him about such things.” she was positive. “He’s making us all look bad.” she sighed. “Tell him, if he won’t steal it for himself... steal it for me.”

Liz’s face fell.

“It’s okay. It’s all compiled and ready.” he held up a staying hand.

She relaxed visibly, “There, you see...” she sat back, totally relaxed, “I told you, you were a good man, Red Reddington.”

“My people want the information Francis gathered on Lawford... and they want it by the morning.”

Liz’s face fell.

“Why don’t you inform the guy who put my face on all the post office walls.” he asked plaintively.

“Regardless,” she shrugged the issue aside, “think what you like, but others see it. René... Hunter Gaines.”

“I owed René, still do.”

“And Hunter Gaines?” she debated. “You saw a reflection of yourself in that man, admit it. I know it, you know it.”

At one point it would have bothered Red that Elizabeth could read him so well but in truth... now he rather cherished the idea.

She wasn’t relying on her profiling skills and he knew it.

Her observations were borne of an emotional connection that had grown between them.

That snuggle time in bed had produced a deeper, more in-depth understanding of his psyche, apparently.

For which he was grateful.

“I wasn’t in as difficult...” he checked over his shoulder before changing lanes, “or dire circumstances as Hunter.” he tried to explain the unexplainable to a layman, “but I do understand his frustration with government stupidity. The inept bureaucracy is unconscionable.” he confided.
“Where men like Gaines are concerned.”

He worried her fingers with his own, his mood transmitted through the contact.

“Hunter fought impossible odds on missions no one should have to endure.” Red’s eye ticked as similar missions resurfaced in his memory. “Survived torture that would break a normal man in seconds... lost time with his family. Didn’t get to see his little ones grow...”

Liz pondered the quiet words, her own fingers gripping Red’s hard now.

“For what?” the contempt could not be hidden, but she knew the man’s anger was not directed at her.

Red needed to voice... something. She sensed this as well.

“To be told all those sacrifices meant shit in the grand scheme of things?” Red’s tone was incredulous. “By someone who worked behind a desk all day? Who never saw a weapon let alone fired one... when you’re looking in the face of another human being?”

Liz swallowed hard. Red had crossed some kind of line. He wasn’t talking about Hunter Gaines any longer but perhaps he spoke for all those nameless men who had weathered similar situations.

Speaking for... himself.

She blinked back tears, feeling the desolate state those men... Red, must have felt.

“...It may not have mattered to that small-minded, unfeeling asshole, Red,” she stressed, her fingers tightening around his, “but it matters to Hunter’s wife.” she lifted luminous eyes, “it matters to every decent human being alive today, it matters,” she choked on the emotions, “…to me.”

Red glanced at the woman, the words penetrating the fury he felt. He swallowed hard against the knot in his throat.

And... it mattered to him.

Even twenty years later... the time he had taken from his family. The precious minutes he had missed with his daughter....

It meant... everything.

Did he need to believe it had not been in vain?

“We struggle with the words to tell you guys,” she had on numerous occasions, “we can’t find the right thing to say to express how deep our gratitude runs. All those things you did... the time you offered. You missed out on your lives so we...”

She shook her head, “So we could be with the ones we loved, could be safe. Untouched by the horrors you saw, you experienced day after day. Long, horrible days...”

Red looked stoically ahead, his features grim, the words touching his heart and mind.

“And what do you come home to?” she shook her head at the realization. “Do we take care of you like you did us? Do we give every last thing to see you are repaid for something that is priceless?”

Red glanced away, sensing the depth of emotions she tried to express, hurting for her.
“No... we turn a blind eye and trust a system that is beyond flawed. Do we hold those in charge accountable for how they treated you?”

The silence was beyond strained as Red sought vainly for away to alleviate her suffering.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if God has set a day aside for our reckoning.” Liz was positive. “He will judge our callousness... our insensitivity... our indifference.”

She looked at the man, “But you won’t be among us... you know why?”

Red’s face was expressionless.

“Because you,” her voice gained strength, “you... do something.”

“Elizabeth...” he ventured, words failing him. He gripped the steering wheel in a clenched manner.

“You make a difference, Red.”

The silence returned. Red cursed his inability to respond.

A soft horn honked alerting the man the light had changed. Red blinked, breaking his focus or lack thereof.

He moved along, his mind stagnant.

He pulled into the entrance of the hotel, his mind on auto-pilot.

Turning the car over to a valet, he guided Elizabeth through the ornate lobby, his hand gentle on the curve of her back, his thumb absently rubbing a soothing motion.

They slipped into the elevator which was thankfully, unoccupied.

“...Elizabeth–”

“I’m not done.” her warm, slim fingers fell over the curvature of his mouth, her eyes holding his hypnotically, “I want to say the words to you.”

She needed him to know.

“I also know what you give up for me.” her love washed over the man like a silken balm. “The sacrifices you make on a daily basis–”

He shook his head in swift denial.

“You’re always on alert, never able to let your guard down,” she didn’t know where to begin, “always thinking two steps beyond the rest of us, never allowing your mind to rest.”

“It’s not like tha–”

“You lose sleep,” she refused to allow his modesty to stop her, “you shoulder the burden, you protect me often... from my own folly, I realize.” she smiled swiftly. “I am free because of what you give of yourself... for me.”

The elevator bobbed slowly to a halt. They had reached the top of the hotel. The doors quietly slid apart with a gentle swoosh.
They trekked the corridor, Red swiping his key card, words thick in his throat.

Elizabeth clutched the man to her once they were inside the closed door. She held tightly to his stability.

“This...” she whispered huskily hoping he would get her meaning, her breath warm on his neckline, “this... when your arms are around me, when I can feel you close, where there is only you... and me.”

She lifted expressive eyes, “This is my... everything.”

She hugged him, closing those eyes to the reality that was Red Reddington, “I just needed you to know.”

Red’s face grimaced, his arms tightening almost painfully. He could not end the moment. He had no wish to do so.

Liz understood the vulnerability he was sharing, albeit, wordlessly.

He buried his face in the lusciousness of her hair, holding on with his whole soul.

One part of the man was afraid of such weakness. What he felt was so powerful an emotion, he instinctively guarded himself, building walls.

Elizabeth was slowly dissolving the very building blocks he had so meticulously cemented together.

Another part reveled in the need to give in...

She must have sensed as much for those eyes sought him out looking into him with a clarity which awed.

“Let me be to you,” she whispered, stressing the sentiment, “what you are... to me.”

Elizabeth wondered why he should trust to that extent, however.

Their relationship over the past year had been rocky to say the least.

Her inconsistencies astounded even the woman.

She couldn’t blame the man for being wary of sharing himself fully with her.

To trust his deepest thought to her.

Wondering when she would turn on him, as she had in the past... bolt to the nearest convenient scapegoat available.

She could only have faith that this obstacle could be overcome just as they had others in their relationship.

“You already are...” his eyes softened

She searched his face religiously for something which she had yet to find.

“Waking up in the night,” he began slowly, “finding you beside me...” the word search was a difficult one for the man. “Looking up to see you smiling at me across a table...”
He grew restless. It wasn’t coming out correctly, he sensed.

He brooded, tracing her pouty mouth with a dark scowl, “Being able to touch you, being allowed the freedom... anytime I please.”

Her eyes crinkled with gentle amusement.

“Hearing that infectious giggle.” he smiled too for a beat but then the scowl returned.

The man lifted a heady stare, “Seeing that certain look you give when I’ve done something just right...”

She blushed but couldn’t have said why.

Red stroked a gentle finger over those precious cheeks.

Liz dropped her gaze to his mouth to see the wondrous words form.

“There is nothing I wouldn’t do,” his tone was hoarse, rough, “to keep you by my side, Elizabeth. Nothing.”

Liz wondered at the words and their meaning when stated by such a man... such a glorious man.

“Nothing is more important to me.” he leaned brushing that beautiful mouth with a possessive caress. “I love you more than anything in this entire world. Never... ever doubt that fact.”

She snuggled close, lost in the moment and the strength of his arms, “You make me fall in love with you more and more each day... you know that, don’t you?”

The man hadn’t known, no. It still shocked him to the core that this woman seemed to accept him to the extent she did.

“...The sex ain’t bad either.” Liz wanted to lighten the man’s mood for her own had soared. “Don’t you think?”

“I’m fucking addicted to it.” he admitted freely, his tone holding a certain reverence she cherished.

“Yeah?” she pushed slightly away. “...Are you trying to tell me something or is that just your phone vibrating down there?”

He chuckled, the moment broken, “I don’t vibrate, more’s the pity.” he confessed, checking the screen absently. “But you have a few toys that make up for my inabilities, don’t you? Want to try a few out later on?”

“You’ll make me blush.” she feigned shock. “How do you know what toys I–”

“Bottom drawer, night stand.” he cocked his head. “I certainly hope you grabbed a few for the trip?”

“Haven’t needed any to date.” she mused. “But I’m open to suggestions.”

“When I return,” he held up the phone, “we’ll continue this little discussion, shall we... in minute detail.”

“I’ve always been a stickler for... details.” she confessed, her heart racing thunderously.

She wondered if she was affecting him as much as he was her.
“Fucking phone.” he grumbled dejectedly, taking a more than reluctant leave.

She watched him go, elation singing through her body, “You just better not be too long... I might start without you.”

“You do,” he hesitated, hand on the opened door, “and I’ll blister that sweet little ass with my opened palm.”

“Ohh.” she sighed happily, sending a kiss his way. “Is that a promise?” she perked up.

He scowled darkly but... took his leave.

Liz giggled, rushing off to ready herself for what surely would be a most interesting end to the evening indeed.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Liz tossed the towel to the basin, peering into the vanity mirror.

She tousled her wet hair with her fingers glancing her image over.

She was smiling. She chuckled. She had hummed a song the entire time while showering.

Her mood was high, and she felt fantastic.

Her skin seemed to glow.

A scowl appeared on the pretty brow.

Must be that new moisturizer.

The thought made her titter again.

Who was she kidding? It was Red Reddington that caused this mood that made her feel beautiful... inside and out.

She glanced at her watch which lay discarded on the basin beside her make-up kit.

The scowl returned post-haste. She noticed today’s date.

That could not be...

A man would not remember such an insignificant date.

One month...

She asked earlier if this night was a celebration of something important.

Such a small milestone but suddenly to her... it meant so much.

They had weathered so much in this short, eventful month.

They had grown so close. Which was evident after their discussion a short time ago.

Suddenly the short time span the man had been gone felt like ages!

“Oh...” she winced visibly.
Red had treated her to a wonderful evening full of romance and wine and music.

She felt horrible, “Dammit!”

She had nothing to give back, not even a damned card!

She was a terrible person!

“Shit!” she hissed. “Shit, sh**!”

She sought vainly about, her frustration mounting.

She rushed for the closet, hastily rummaging through her luggage.

Something sexy and slinky and...

“Damn!” she cursed her luck. “Damn, damn!”

Nothing would work. Nothing was special enough.

Just when she was about to give up hope, her eyes fell on an object.

Possibilities began to form in her fevered mind.

“...It could work.” she was fairly certain. “I could pull it off...”

Could she though? Could she really?

She flushed, the thought making her giggle nervously.

Quickly gathering what she needed, the woman rushed back to the sink. The image looking back was a woman she barely knew.

It was exciting and nerve-wracking, yet incredibly exhilarating.

“Well, it isn’t a new tie but,” she bit her lip anxiously, “maybe, just maybe... it might work.”

Chapter End Notes

Wanted to thank my mom for her input and assistance with the dialogue/reactions with Red and René.

And before you think of skinning me alive for the Sherman Tank remark Red made... that was a shout out to my Uncle when he said my mom looked like a bowling ball when she was pregnant.

A remark my Aunt overheard.

Guess who slept on the couch later that night :D
We've Only Just Begun...

Chapter Notes

Just wanted to give a quick thank you for reading, reviewing and leaving kudos since this started.

You have all made this last year truly unforgettable...

Have a safe and wonderful New Years!

Daniel

Watching her reflection in the mirror, Liz tried looping the tie once more. She stared morosely at her sullen expression.

This day was going so well earlier. When had it gone to the dark-side, she wondered?

Red’s blue pin-striped shirt hung open over her slender body, its tails gracing the bottom of her thighs.

Her bared breasts peaked out of the parted front, alluring any onlookers. The slope of her flat tummy resting against the soft fabric.

She pouted prettily, unaware of her charms.

“This sucks.” she mused fretfully. The only thing she could cook up to hopefully arouse and entertain Red was rapidly vanishing with all her carefully considered hopes for a sexy night in.

She tried once again with the uncooperative tie, stamping her foot angrily when her effort once again, literally, fell short.

She grasped her phone, dialing the needed number, “Come here,” her tony conveyed her mood, “quickly!”

The man grunted with pain, hastily pushing his reclined position to a fully upright one.

Silas favored his side, moving briskly down the needed corridor. He had traversed the yardage in record time despite his injuries, pushing the pain aside.

He did not hesitate at the closed bedroom door, charging through, weapon raised and trained.

The man’s penetrative eyes scanned the quiet room. He hurried forward hesitating at the slightly ajar door, listening with sharp ears.

He threw the obstacle aside, his senses on high alert.

The woman sat on the side of the sunken tub, alone and silent. Agitated.

The blue eyes lit with hope as she stood, her hands holding the shirt she wore tightly closed, rushing towards the new arrival.
“Oh, Silas!” her tone suggested little more than worried vexation. “What am I gonna do?”

The blue eyes beseeched him.

The man’s brow furrowed darkly. He re-scanned the area for any possible signs of trouble.

He checked the walk-in closet, then lifted a dark scowl her way, “Don’t see a problem here,” he made mention, “what the hell is going on?”

“Oh, Silas...” she wailed, her expression a rather forlorn one.

“You said that.” he put his weapon away, finally noting her state of dress...or undress.

He liked that shade of polish on those bare toes. He scowled harder for the fact.

“You’re not dead.” he stated the obvious.

“You’re so dramatic!” Liz griped.

“Me!” the man barked. “I thought someone was killing you dead.” he snapped his irritation. “Don’t do this shit!” he spread his arms plaintively, encompassing his annoyance. “What’s the matter with you?”

Liz glanced fretfully at the clock, watching the precious seconds tick by. A short time ago, it had been like waiting for water to boil, anticipating Red’s return. But now... time was slipping by in frantic slices of urgency.

“He’ll be back any minute now and look!” she tugged on the stupid tie angrily. “I can’t even make a simple knot work for me.”

Silas processed, seeing her state of duress.

She held the garment aloft, shaking it in his face, “I forgot what day it was so I didn’t even get a gift. What am I gonna do?”

“I thought,” the guard had issues of his own. He snatched the tie absently from unresisting fingers, “someone was murdering your ass!”

She sighed dramatically, “So they kindly allowed me to make a phone call?”

He looped the tie about her neck, roughly tugging her closer, “Chose your words carefully,” he suggested with an impatient snarl, “I’m in position to do great harm at the moment.”

“Stop bitching!” she snapped right back, holding her shirt front shut. “God, you’re so grumpy!”

Silas’ face registered his exasperation, “Now what are you rattling on about?”

“We were so busy, I didn’t realize the date and tonight Red–” she broke off her rapid speech when Silas held up a stilling hand.

“Cliff notes.” he grunted.

“We’ve been dating a month.” she worried her lip. “Two days ago.”

Silas nodded inwardly, understanding her panic. He had been out on a mission when he and Anya...it had only been a month, but it had been an amazing one. Upon his return, he only had time
to get flowers and candy. It hadn’t seemed like enough... he sighed, shaking off the regret.

“You were busy, he knows that.” he soothed her concern. He fed the tie through with practiced ease, easing the knot up the slick fabric. “You gonna do a tease?”

“What?” she worked the knot upwards only to have Silas bat her fingers away.

The man reset the knot between her breasts, “You’re giving him your kitty in lieu of a present, right?” he spoke slowly as if speaking to Francis. “Are you taking the shirt off or will that be his job?”

She stared at him, stunned into silence for a beat, “You make it sound so sordid.” she huffed indignantly, rethinking her options.

“Don’t be stupid. What man wouldn’t want pussy instead of a wallet?” he disdained. “Best damned gift ever, if you ask me.”

She settled, “…Really?”

Silas gauged her body analytically, “Make him take it off.” he decided the course of action to take, before glancing down. “…Where’s your honey pot stop exactly?”

“Stop looking at me like that?” she balked, gathering the shirt more securely in her hold.

“Yeah, in your dreams.” the guard rolled his eyes. “One, Red would cut off my dick and shove it up my ass and two…” he didn’t want to think about the other, “just don’t go there. I have to fix the end so it hides your… gift.”

“Oh…” Liz relaxed, glancing down even as the guard was. “About here.” She showed the exact spot.

The tie was placed approximately where it would do the most damage to Red’s psyche because it strategically hid the one thing a man would crave to see.

“This is all really dumb, isn’t it?” she was fast losing confidence.

“This is a big deal.” Silas shrugged. “It’s an important occasion, right?”

He lifted shrewd eyes, “You and Red... you’re beating the odds.”

Liz lifted trusting eyes.

“You guys got something special.” he knew as much. “Maybe it should be celebrated.” he shrugged his shoulders.

She bit her lip anxiously wanting desperately to believe the words.

“Keep the shirt open.” Silas advised. He walked the room, shutting down lights.

Liz traipsed after him, her ears attuned to what the man had to say.

“Bend over, shake your hair out.” the man nodded her way.

Liz hesitated then followed his instructions rapidly. She looked herself over in the mirror, enjoying the results.
“When you hear him...get on the bed.” he motioned walking back her way. “The tie should drape between your breasts, the tail hides what he will want most.” he held her gaze. “Show just enough skin to tantalize.”

“You sound like you’ve done this before.” she arched a knowing brow.

“One of my fondest memories, so don’t blow it for the guy.”

“How could I blow it?” she was suddenly desolate.

“By not following through.” Silas answered. “Don’t let modesty or that Catholic upbringing slow you down... enjoy yourself.” he spread his hands. “This will be a blast... if you let it be.”

Liz calmed, “I... I can do that.”

“Of course you can.” Silas had faith. “Your tits are small but they’re perfectly shaped. Get a little cold... show off those perky–”

“Stop, you perve!” she snapped.

He grinned at her returned spunk. He sat Red’s fedora on her head, “Tip it like this and give him a slow up and under look when he arrives.”

Liz’s eyes lifted to the brim of the hat.

“Get’s a man’s blood racing,” Silas nodded knowingly, “that look.”

He studied his handiwork, pleased by what he saw, “You look good.” he bolstered.

“Don’t psyche yourself out.” he sauntered across the room. “Think dirty thoughts until he gets here.”

Liz sighed, “Silas...”

The man halted, hand on the doorknob.

“Thank you.” she winced. “For not calling me stupid... for helping me.”

“You aren’t stupid, Elizabeth.” he scowled. “You are a warm, giving, loving woman.”

The woman blinked her shock.

“Red is lucky to have found you.” the handsome brow furrowed even more so. “But he knows that.” Silas waved a dismissive hand. “And don’t worry about not experiencing a hell of a lot more of these milestones. I think you guys are in it for the long haul, for what it’s worth.”

Liz’s eyes misted, “Stop being nice to me.” she snipped, annoyed for her lack of control. “I don’t know how to handle it. You’re freaking me out.”

He grinned once more, “Just handle ‘Big Red’ tonight. Get the old bastard in a good mood.” his grin widened. “Make everyone’s life easier.”

She gasped, “Did he tell you...” she frowned, suddenly wondering what else Red had shared of their private conversations.

“Tell me what?” Silas scowled.
“Big Re—” she broke off, grimacing.

Silas grinned, then outright laughed, “That’s what you named his coc—”

“I didn’t do it!” Liz shook her head vehemently, increasing the man’s laughter.

“Oh... he’ll never live that down.” Silas muttered to himself.

The phone rang on the table beside the man, his laughter trailing away. He handed it over.

Liz forced a brightness, “Oh, hey!” her voice and manner softened. She was unaware of the fact but Silas caught the change, his smile an approving one. “How did it go?”

She fiddled nervously with the tail of the shirt she sported, unaware of that fact either.

Silas shook his head, sighing lightly averting his eyes as any proper gentleman would do... or that’s how he supposed such a man might act.

His own instincts ran to ‘looking’ but this was Elizabeth.

So he waited patiently for once until she finished the call.

“Put it on vibrate.”

She blinked.

“The phone.” he chuckled, realizing her thoughts veered in another direction. “No interruptions tonight. I’ll see to it personally.”

“...Even Dembe?” she was stunned, pure and simple.

“Dembe can be bought.” Silas made his way once again to the door. “You just have to know his weaknesses.”

“He has weaknesses?”

Silas sent her a look, “Have a good time... happy anniversary.”

Liz smiled happily.

He closed the door on a very private world she had created.

Liz hurried about, lighting candles, putting last-minute touches on the fantasy in which she was about to embark.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

Red ducked his head inside the opened door, peering around the deserted area. Assured the coast was clear, he held the door ajar, shushing the waiter who pushed the rolling cart into the room.

The man smiled genially, easing the cart to a stop, “Do you need assistance, sir?” the man whispered, for Red’s actions seemed to deem it necessary.

Red shook his head, “You have done more than enough.” he whispered back quietly, holding a crisp bill out to the young man, “Everything looks amazing, thank you for your help.”

The waiter ducked out as silently as he arrived. Red went about examining the tray. Everything must
be perfect this night.

He glanced up at the sound of footfalls.

“Easy, Tonto.” Silas warned. “It’s just me.”

Red stepped forward, “Is Lizzy all right?” his voice was laced with concern.

Silas frowned, “I’m here, right? Why even ask?”

Red’s scowl deepened.

“Just making my rounds as I am paid to do.” the guard lied easily. He looked over the tray with all its bounty, nodding his approval. “Special occasion?”

Red nodded slowly, taking in the assortment laid before him, “You probably wouldn’t think so.” he muttered absently, sighing.


“No,” Red hesitated confiding in the man. Silas wasn’t the sentimental sort.

Silas waited, finally rolling his hand irritably indicating, ‘continue before I lose all interest together’.

“I obviously haven’t done this in a while,” Red gestured between himself and the empty room, “a relationship, I mean.”

He fingered a rosebud back into position, second guessing himself. This was an emotion he was not accustomed to experiencing.

“It’s too much.” he decided but sought out Silas. “Right?”

“Too much?” Silas scowled.

“Pressure.” Red added. “It’s stupid to expect she would remember...” he took his hat off, scraping his hand across the shorn head irritably.

“This is one juvenile idea to celebrate one month together?” Red looked around aimlessly. “Get rid of the damned cart.” he motioned curtly.

“And hold the snide remarks,” Red snapped, “I’m not in the mood.”

Silas leaned, resting his ass on the edge of the couch, crossing his arms. The man held his tongue for once, understanding Red’s dilemma more than he wanted to admit. He had felt the same with Anya and now...

He sighed, “No, snide remarks.” the guard replied. “It’s neither juvenile nor stupid.”

Red lifted stunned eyes. He had not expected that.

“Women like this shit.” Silas nodded to the cart. “What’s wrong with it?” he shrugged. “Maybe more of us should make the effort.”

Red traced the edge of the fine China holding the assorted treats, nodding.

“And hold the snide remarks,” Red snapped, “I’m not in the mood.”

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“Are you drunk?” Red checked on the guy.
“I don’t think so.” Silas told the truth. “I’m just saying,” he continued, “what I think is happening here... is just a method to officially observe the time you’ve spent together so far and to say how much you’ve enjoyed it.”

Red hadn’t looked at it that way.

“Quite frankly,” Silas dropped his arms beside his body, leaning into his fists, “it’s my considered opinion, Liz deserves the attention. She needs to know she’s loved... and that someone gives a damn.”

Red’s brows lifted superficially, his surprise genuine.

“And so do you.” Silas admitted.

Red’s brows furrowed. When did Silas start giving a shit about what he needed?

“You need to build something concrete with Liz...” Silas continued, “and she needs that something to be real... do you even know ‘real’ any longer? Not sure I do.”

Red sat his hat down, intrigued by Silas’ input.

“But then, we all need something,” Silas stated, albeit reluctantly, “whether we want to admit it or not.”

“That include you?” Red had to ask the question he thought perhaps he knew the answer to.

Silas was quiet so long, Red assumed he would not answer the obvious.

“Who the hell knows.” the man arose, a restlessness overtaking him. “We weren’t discussing me.” he said. “It’s past time you two had something to hold on to, to trust in and celebrate.”

Red remained quiet, listening.

“For people like us...” Silas looked down at his heavy boots, “moments like that are few and far between.” he said. “We actually appreciate them. Cherish the simplicity.” he glanced at the table again. “We know what’s important at the end of the day.”

Red’s mind’s eye filtered through a few of those important things he and Lizzy shared in this last month. And yes, he truly cherished their time. There seemed to be no trivial moments in his opinion. He had a lifetime of regrets. He had no wish to experience more.

Which was the point Silas was trying to make, he supposed?

Red Reddington was a risk taker. He grabbed life with both hands.

Why should this relationship with Lizzy be any different?

Regardless of how Lizzy may view this moment he wished to share with her, he needed her to know he truly loved having her in his life. That he was enjoying every minute of their allotted time.

“Who the hell knows,” Silas interrupted Red’s thoughts, “she may be just as insecure as you.”

Red followed the man’s slow trek across the room.

“Maybe she’s hoping you would say something to let her know what you’re feeling.” Silas checked
his tone, keeping it neutral. “If I were you, I’d come up with a plan that shows her how important you believe this milestone to be... that it was worthy of acknowledging.”

Red’s brow furrowed critically as he tried to read between the lines.

“Be inventive why don’t ya?” Silas lifted a lazy stare. “Improvise... adapt...”

“Overcome.” Red knew the motto well.

“Maybe.” Silas wasn’t sure how far Liz wanted to take her little charade tonight.

“You’re a lot more interesting to talk to when you’re not being a prick.” Red stated the facts as he knew them.

“I surprise even myself at times.” Silas replied in a droll tone. “Now, go tap your girl’s ass and leave me the fuck alone.” he said, grabbing a beer and nuts from the bar area. “My show’s coming on.”

Red shook his head wearily... hooking the cart with his fingers, dragging it along behind him as he took his leave.

“Oh,” the guard remembered, “Hunter needs to see his boy.”

“Get him a flight out in the morning.” Red replied. “My tab, Silas.” he stressed. In this case, he had no qualms about buying the man’s loyalty. “Are we sending David along for the ride?”

Silas nodded his acquiescence. David would get a feel for what the family needed housing wise, one and second, he could gage whether Hunter would stick to his word. The trip would also give David the chance to rest his leg, far away from his trouble making cronies.

“I’ll set it up.” Silas replied, lifting the remote as he parked his ass on the couch in the main living area.

Red hooked the cart once more, hesitating in his steps, “Just for the record,” he said, drawing Silas’ attention, “you’re the side-kick... Tonto.”

“You got it,” Silas smirked as he glanced cryptically at the back of Red’s head, “…Big Red.”

Red rolled his eyes downward, knowing hell on Earth had just arrived.

“Goodnight... asshole.” Red murmured before heading for the master bedroom without another word.

Turning back the bed and fluffing the pillows, Liz stepped back, admiring her handiwork. She narrowed her eyes critically, hastily putting the bed back to rights.

She viewed her handiwork once more... folding the blankets back at the foot of the bed, fluffing the pillows.

It wasn’t perfect, but it served its purpose, “I need to Google, ‘first months established requirements’ to see what is deemed acceptable.” she muttered to herself.

Climbing up on the bed she took a steadying breath, she glanced down hastily, unbuttoning the rest of Red’s shirt before draping it and the tie, how her guard suggested.
Hearing footsteps approaching, she quickly adjusted her stance, fluffing her hair as the footfall reached the door.

Her eyes widened in remembrance, her mouth forming a gasping, “Oh!”

She quickly raised her hand, tilting the hat forward.

Outside the door, Red patted his pocket. The square box thumped resoundingly against his hip. It was securely tucked in place.

He peered through the small slit Silas had left in his exit. The room was dim. He pondered the fact, pushing the cart aside for now. He quietly walked the last few feet, easing the door open.

He halted in his tracks at the vision which greeted him. He took in the visual, his senses momentarily stunned.

Soft candlelight flickered sensually in a rich, warm glow, casting alluring shadows on her face and body.

Those blue eyes had lifted with a sultry stare from under the brim of his fedora.

The look made his blood heat and cock stir to life.

*Son of a bitch*....

Red’s eyes swept the petite frame slowly, meticulously, gravitating to minute details.

She had donned his blue pinstriped shirt... which engulfed her small body making her appear tiny, somehow vulnerable.

He instinctively wanted to cross the room, take her in his arms... offer protection and warmth.

She knelt on the bed, her legs parted, tucked under. The tails of the shirt rode high, showing quite a bit of thigh.

The shirt was pushed off her shoulders, the lapels falling naturally against the swell of the perfectly formed breasts that were hidden beneath far too much fabric for his tastes.

A well formed knot hung seductively between the plump velvet allowing him to trace the path of his blue tie.

The tiny pearls of her nipples pushed stubbornly against the loose restraint.

He could warm those little peaks nicely with his tongue, he imagined.

His cock imagined it as well, swelling inside his boxers.

His gaze dropped ever so meaningfully until it rested on the spot between her thighs.

The damned tie end hid the treasure which lay beneath. It wasn’t wide enough to hide the entire surface, however.

He could make out a dark thatch of pubic hair on the right side... just giving him a small, whetting peek that was enough to send his imagination soaring.

Was this what Silas had meant?
Be inventive?

Suddenly, an entire list of ideas popped into his mind on how to respond to Elizabeth’s grand gesture.

God... this was the best anniversary ever.

Moving his cock into a more comfortable position, Red’s face twitched jerkily for a brief moment.

Elizabeth insides fluttered crazily at the sight of the well-defined bulge as it jostled about under Red’s trousers.

She must be doing something right, she surmised.

Her tiny tongue darted out, wetting her lips provocatively.

Red swallowed hard, deciding on a scenario he wished played out. He hoped beyond hope... Lizzy would pick up on the ‘game’.

“Miss Scott,” he forced his tone to be a little hard. It was all he could manage because his dick was... very hard at this moment, “you do realize, you have mistaken my room for yours?”

Liz was thrown for a moment, glancing about ‘the room’, but soon enough those blue eyes returned to his, that same, confident stare within.

Red’s heart skipped a beat, pleasured beyond belief to see the gears in her mind churning away as she decided which course of action to take.

“A room is a room, right?” she sat back more comfortably, the tie pulling up further.

A dark hollow filled the gap just below that tie’s end but he couldn’t make out any real detail.

He didn’t have to... he knew what was there, awaiting his exploration... if he played the game correctly.

“Are you still upset with me?” the beautiful face pouted just for him.

“We missed an important deadline because of you.” he improvised. “Lest you forget.”

Liz pulled an adorable face, “I tried to explain about that,” the blue eyes beseeched him from under the hat. “It’s just sometimes, I get these... urges and if I don’t do something about them... it gets worse, and I simply can’t concentrate.”

“Urges?” he stepped forward slowly. No need to frighten his prey so quickly after all. “You didn’t mention anything about... urges, before.”

“Others were about,” she too, improvised, “but, since we are alone here... I trust you to be non-judgmental, Mr. Reddington.”

Red’s gaze dropped to the end of that tie. Being this close, gave him a much better view of the shadowy hollow.

“I try not to judge other people’s proclivities, Miss Scott... back to these urges to which you referred.”

“I don’t really understand them,” she confessed. “I’ll be typing at my desk and suddenly, I find
myself squirming in my seat,” she grimaced adorably, “I feel pain... down there.”

The blue eyes lifted innocently, “Do you know what it could be?”

“I do actually, yes.” Red was feeling a very similar pain even as he spoke. “You should have confided in me...” he chastised, “I can help you with your problem.”

“Yes?” she smiled happily up at him.

Red zeroed in on her perky breasts and slightly hidden areola, “I am confident of the fact.” he leaned, placing a chaste kiss on her cheek, his eyes holding hers willfully. “Are you experiencing this... pain now, Miss Scott?”

She nodded soulfully, “How did you know, Mr. Reddington?”

“I am very intuitive about such things.” his eyes measured the flat of her tummy. “I’m no longer upset with you by the way. I totally concur with whatever action you had to take to relieve your horrible suffering.”

Red’s head cocked slightly, his eyes caressing the area behind the tie.

“I missed the meeting.” she reminded. She looked up at him slowly, her eyes startling under the charcoal lining highlighting the deep blue depths.

“I forgive you entirely,” his tone caressed her. “Tell me... can you show me from where exactly this pain originates?”

She moved, which pushed her breasts together, moving the tie aside, “...Here, Mr. Reddington.”

He traced the cleft where her thigh met her upper leg, the tempting sight of the neatly trimmed thatch of hair peeked from the edge of the tie.

“...Here?” he skimmed his finger ever so closer to the pouty lips which, while still hidden, called out to him. He kept his palm flat against the beloved thigh, his eyes lifting questioningly.

“Y-Yes.” Liz’s voice trembled, “...Almost.”

“Almost.” he repeated silkily, nodding thoughtfully.

“That pain is back again.” she put some feeling into the statement.

“Miss Scott...” his tone held a wealth of empathy, “what can I do to help?”

“I don’t think anyone can help.” she mused. “I just need to... be by myself for a time.”

“And that is why you missed the meeting.” he nodded sagely. “Well, we can’t have that though, can we. We must find a way to alleviate the problem before any important business arises.”

Speaking of arising... the man’s cock was throbbing with ‘urges’ along about now.

“You are mistaken in the assumption that I cannot be of assistance in such a time, however.” he assured. “Will you trust me to... demonstrate what I speak of?”

“But... how?” she allowed him to remove the jauntily placed hat.

He lay it aside absently, taking in the lovely mess of her wispy hair... those big blue eyes looking up
at him so invitingly.

“There is such a simple method which effectively relieves the particular type of tension you are experiencing.” he boldly traced a slow trek over the slope of her breast, the tip circling the cold little nipple with a light, feathering touch.

Liz gasped shakily.

“But for me to help you... you must put yourself completely in my hands.” he shifted a stern look.

Liz lifted into his touch, her movements easing much of the shirt material aside.

Red’s fingers hooked inside the front opening, touching bare flesh.

Liz drew in a startled breath as his forefinger and middle just captured her nipple, gently pinching the crinkled flesh in a rolling motion.

Red watched her face, reveling in the heady sound of the first pangs of awakening he caused.

“Oh, b-but, Mr. Reddington–” she feigned shock, feeling as if she should move away from such amazing stimulation at this early stage.

His fingers increased the pressure about her nipple bringing a tiny cry of startlement.

“If you don’t obey me... my instructions, Miss Scott,” he eased his fingers back into the sensual probing, taking the slight ache away entirely, “this will never work. You do feel badly about how remiss you were in your duties today, correct?”

She placed his other hand on her opposite breast, “I really, really do, Sir.”

“...Good, girl” he lavished sensual praise, leaning to gently kiss her lips before pulling back leisurely.

He watched his handiwork as he bared her breasts completely, “You are simply...” the beauty took his breath away, “stunning, Miss Scott. Has anyone ever told you?”

She shook her head woefully.

“I will remedy that sad fact.” he leaned, his lips brushing her nipples teasingly.

She raised to her knees, his hands lifting each mound as he partook of the sweet flesh to his hearts content. Favoring each straining nipple with his painstaking attention until he was satisfied the woman was primed for the next step in the plan he executed.

He ran his hand up the inside of her thigh, making sure to take added caution to not hurry the pace.

“Now, I surmise, most, if not all your suffering derives from...” his fingers had reached the edge of her swollen lips. He traced the line of one wet, glistening ridge, “this locale, am I correct.”

Liz was pulsating with need, “Y-Yes... right there, Sir.”

“Here?” he ran his thumb up the sodden slit, playing gently over her clit, “or... here.”

He pushed his index finger into her steamy core.

“Oh!” Liz felt wetness ooze from her vaginal area, the thick finger causing pangs of desire to pulsate within. “There, yes!”
“I thought as much.” Red eased his finger deeper into her opening.

She moved against the probing hand, rolling her hips erotically.

“You must have discipline.” he eased his finger out, enjoying her gasp of despair, the soft moan of loss. “Now lets try this again. You sit very quietly while I continue my instructions, all right?”

She nodded eagerly. He returned his gift and at its completion Lizzy was moaning her growing desire.

“You must offer incentive to anyone who assists you with your problem.” he kissed her voraciously “Are you willing to do that?”

She nodded.

“Such a beautiful mouth.” he teased the full mouth with the promise of a proper kiss. “Such a warm welcoming pussy.” he held his amusement for the soft intake of breath the vulgarity caused.

She had hit her cue perfectly.

“Does that word bother you, Miss Scott?” he held a slow predatory smile for he had felt the little tremor traverse her body which he held securely with one capable arm about the tiny waist.

He wanted desperately to take the time to rid himself of clothing to better feel the vibrant flesh but... that would have to wait, he supposed.

One task at a time.

“You will have to become accustomed to my rather filthy vocabulary before the evening is over,” he murmured soothingly, “you are bringing out the best in me.”

Elizabeth whimpered in his mouth, that little tongue flicking sensually against his own.

“Now, Miss Scott,” his free hand gently cupping and kneading her breast, fell to his side slowly, “show me that succulent little pussy.”

Liz moaned deep in her throat, her fingers grasping the offensive silk, brushing it to one side. Her hand slid the length slowly, revealing first, the alabaster breasts he worshiped.

He touched the ample cleavage reverently, feasting his eyes on her beauty, “No matter how you move, that tie points in all the right directions, doesn’t it?”

Liz basked in his approval, her hand moving down the silk cloth.

Red’s breath caught in his throat. The red puffy lips beckoned him.

“My God,” he sighed hoarsely, “what a captivating sight.”

He would never tire of gazing upon her nudity. His entire body responded to the spellbinding sight she allowed.

“You take my breath away,” he could hardly get the words through the tightness in his throat. “I could honestly stare at you all damned day... if you would but allow.”

“Mr. Reddington!” Liz played her part, feigning indignation. “That wouldn’t be proper.”
“No.” he readily agreed. “But I would pay good money to see you walk around my office all day, sans clothing.”

“You would be cross.” Liz moved closer, sinking his finger deeper into the recesses of her body. She sighed blissfully at the sensation. “We wouldn’t get much work done... would we?”

“Not on my part.” he once again caressed the adorable mound with loving eyes, “but man does not live by work alone, Miss Scott.”

The dark wispy triangle framed her tiny mons and labia to perfection, he found the sight alluring indeed.

“This feels heavenly...” he mused, his thumb drifting over her clit teasingly, “so incredibly... feminine.”

In Lizzy’s natural state, while rushing around getting ready for the days activities, she felt free enough now to simply walk about in the nude before him.

At such a time, her labia was delicate in appearance. Her lips a tight, healthy pink.

A man noticed things a woman took for granted.

It was all Red could do, lay there in his bed, pretending a reluctance to rise while in reality... he took the opportunity to watch and revel.

In the woman’s aroused state, her labia would plump, glistening with a welcoming sheen of wetness that pulled a man like a magnet to steel.

The pink hue took on the color of rosy red as the blood flow increased to her genitals, as though calling to him.

It was Red’s job to make that blood heat. He took his job very seriously.

No matter how tired or stressed the day had left him, all that was needed to perk him up was a quick glance of her arousal... of that captivating little bush.

When he mounted the woman, the rest of the world faded into oblivion. There was no better feeling in the universe than when he sank into the depths of Elizabeth’s snug cradle.

“Lie back,” he coaxed silkily, “spread your legs for me.”

She hesitated.

“Don’t be selfish, Miss Scott,” he asked politely, “I need to see fully... what you have to offer any interested party. And believe me when I say,” he smiled warmly down at her, “I am most interested.”

He was transfixed, focused as Lizzy eased back into the comfort of the bed. She held his eyes almost stubbornly, he thought, as those shapely legs were slowly, hypnotically... widened.

That pesky tie was giving him fits along about now. It had fallen once more over her mons.

He scowled, flicking it out of his way, “Now look at that.” he purred, his fingers played in the dark, fine pubic hair, “what man could resist such an inviting sight?”

Liz’s mouth parted sensually, shifting her legs even further apart.
Red shifted his thumb, allowing it to follow the fine hair dusting her opening, “This is going to feel amazing along some fortunate man’s cock.”

“I thought,” she halted his narrative hastily, interjecting at just the right moment. She bit her lip, holding the effort, her eyes managing doubt when in fact, she felt none.

“You thought... what, Miss Scott?”

Liz reveled at his ability to put her in her place but wasn’t out of the game just yet... meeting that confident stare boldly.

“Mr. Reddington, you said earlier,” she had caught his slip. He hadn’t intended to voice his needs so early on, she knew. “That I must offer incentive to anyone who assists me with... my problem.”

Red cursed his lack of control then, he feverishly welcomed the fact she had picked up on it now.

“It’s only polite, Miss Scott.”

“And I’ve noticed that you have been tense these past few days,” the innocence she conveyed in those eyes had even him convinced, “am I mistaken?”

“Are you offering to alleviate that stress?” he scowled imploringly. “However would you accomplish that feat?”

“I thought, Sir... you could instruct me.” she held her smile recalling his fascination with a certain activity they had discussed earlier.

Performing the act for Red Reddington brought a bounty of rewards. Watching the man melt by degrees as she exerted her imagination was most empowering. It was not often the man allowed himself to lose control but she was woman enough to know, at that particular time... she held all the cards.

She warmed to the turn of the conversation.

“You have always been so good to guide me through the process...” was she over playing the ingénue? “Oh, not that I haven’t... eh...”

Red waited patiently allowing her to stew in her own juices, curious to see how she would move the play forward.

“I mean...”she wished she could manage a blush but was having too much fun... this new role was too exciting. She was enjoying the challenge, “of course, I have... I’m not a young school girl, God knows.”

“Sitting there as you are,” Red’s eyes had softened considerably, “you look...” he rolled his tongue, his eyes darkening, “guileless and very appealing, Miss Scott.”

She smiled for him, “I’ve been concerned for you of late, Mr. Reddington. The business takes all your time and effort. Don’t you ever take any ‘me’ time?”

Red shifted his eyes. He wanted more than anything to take ‘me’ time along about now.

His cock jerked urgently in its constrictive space.

“Isn’t that important?” she blinked.
Red furrowed his brow, “I am no school boy either.” he wasn’t going to drop the game so easily for he sensed Lizzy was very much into it now. “Other women, well, they have offered their favors but in the end... they only wanted to step up the corporate ladder.”

He lifted a cool gaze, “Is that what you are suggesting here?” he hoped she understood the ploy.

The tactics he used would further the enticement of the game if all participants played their parts.

“Are you wanting to fuck the boss? That is what we are talking about, correct?”

“I hadn’t thought that far in advance.” Lizzy surprised him by the reply.

“...Excuse me?” he was thrown and loving every minute of his confusion. It wasn’t often anyone could top Red Reddington. Let alone a woman in the bedroom. He prided himself in the fact that he was the one to constantly surprise them.

“Well, goodness,” Liz tsked... politely, “I was just trying to show you how much I appreciate all you’ve done for me in the past.” she shrugged shoulders, a slight frown tugging at her brow. “You already have everything a man could want, I wasn’t thinking about... that though.”

She kept her eyes downcast, her manner simulating the proper sadness.

“Perhaps I’ve overstepped myself,” Red was quick to placate. “You know, I hired you because you weren’t like all the others and now... here I am accusing you of just that.”

Still Liz refused to lose the melancholy which had fallen over her. She fiddled with the tie absently.

Red’s eyes traveled her body hungrily, the teasing peaks of flesh were driving him crazy.

“I’m sorry, Miss Scott but,” he wanted desperately to move game along, “what exactly are we speaking of here if not...”

She refused to look at him.

Red’s eyes flicked the nudity anxiously now. Was he beginning to sweat?

“Miss Scott!” he hardened his tone. “When I put a question on the table I expect an answer be forthcoming.”

Those blue eyes lifted instantly, “I thought you might enjoy... a simple,” she crinkled her nose into a wince, “I mean, some men like it when a woman...”

Red relaxed, the tightness in his stomach easing instantly, “Miss Scott,” his tone had returned to a sensual caress, “are you offering what I hope you are?”

She raised to her knees, a tiny scowl on her pretty features, “It’s such a small gesture, Sir...” she moved very close to the man. “I hope you aren’t offended?”

“Offended? No.” he was quick to reassure. “God is my witness. No.”

She searched his face religiously.

“I am touched and heartened by such... generosity on your part.” he reached, steadying her. His hand settled against her rib cage, the heavy swell of her breast resting against his thumb.

“Really, Mr. Reddington?” she beamed up at him, because even on her knees, he was a good head above her.
Red reached between her legs, his large finger petting her clitoris teasingly. He enjoyed Lizzy’s soft moan and the way she leaned towards him.

“I rather enjoy when choices are left to my discretion, however.” his voice held the pent-up tightness of a man controlling himself, Liz thought.

“Do you, Sir?” her hands were braced against his jacket front. “I’m n-not sure what that means?”

“It means...” he readily supplied, “while I would dearly enjoy your... servicing me. I would never allow my own pleasure before a lady’s.”

She shifted him a heated stare, fully realizing his meaning now, “You wouldn’t?”

“What sort of man would I be if I were so remiss?” he continued sliding his finger over the silken depths of her vaginal area.

Liz was on edge, wanting that appendage inside her at this stage, “A normal enough one, I would imagine, Sir.”

Red glanced down. His hand was braced on the small mound, his thumb playing in the crispness of her pubic hair.

“I wonder if you taste as sweet as you feel, Miss Scott.”

Liz’s blood heated at the tantalizing suggestion, “You don’t have to do... that, Sir. I want to be accommodating to you, remember?”

Red loved the soft whisper of seduction. Lizzy had widened her legs for him as well. He was doing something right.

It was how he learned a woman’s likes and dislikes... he gauged her reaction.

So far, he was doing all right, he guessed... but he would never take anything for granted where Elizabeth was concerned.

“I want this to be about you, Mr. Reddington.” Liz reminded herself. This evening was supposed to be her gift to him but, the notion that Red wanted to go down on her... was not exactly one she wanted to refuse.

Still, it would be selfish on her part–

“You don’t understand,” Red wasn’t adverse to sharing a secret most women probably weren’t aware existed, “A man... well, a real man... derives his pleasure from knowing he has bestowed his woman with something no other man can offer.”

“That doesn’t apply to you though.” she was intrigued at the new direction the man was heading. “I’m just your--”

“You are invaluable to me, Miss Scott.” he told the truth, using the guise of his role-playing to unburden himself of things he wanted to say. “I could not do without you.”

Liz’s eyes softened, “Thank you, Mr. Reddington. That means a great deal to me.”

“As I was saying, however,” he digressed, idly petting the fluff between her legs, “a man’s pleasure in the act we are discussing, a great deal of it at least,” he smiled amiably at her, “involves the realization that he is man enough to give his partner just as much pleasure... as she gives him.”
He truly enjoyed the act.

The soft erotic moans he could elicit simply by the sweep of his tongue along the delicate curvature of her lips. The uncontrollable trembling in her thighs if he suckled that tiny pearl of a clit just right.

The way her hands gently pushed on the back of his head when he hit that special spot, holding him stationary that the feelings he elicited could continue.

And he found just as much excitement and fulfillment bringing her to a nerve-shattering climax as he did with his own release of the pent up emotions she caused within his own body.

“Men are base animals at heart.” his eyes scanned her nudity, what was revealed to him. “We love the taste of pussy, especially...” he canted his head, feasting his eyes, “one as delectable as this one appears to be.”

Liz flushed, caught up in the wonder of his words, “I’ve been told... I am sweet tasting.” she blurted, mortified in the next second.

The blue-grey eyes held a twinkle as they caught hers, “Have you, Miss Scott.” his tone was pure indulgence.

“Well...” the man moved smoothly aside, hooking a nearby chair with his hand, “what an titillating statement.”

He sat the chair beside the bed, straddling it with masculine ease, “Sit... just here, won’t you.” he patted the edge of the mattress.

Liz looked at the spot his hand patted. To do as he bid would leave her fully opened... vulnerable to his view.

“Uhm,” she weighted her options.

Did she want to give him the upper hand so early on? Was this little game progressing too fast for her liking?

The man’s movements were unexpected and achieved with rapid success.

Red brushed her legs aside causing the woman to fall back unceremoniously into the sheets of the bed.

He tugged those gorgeous legs with one purposeful action, spreading Lizzy wide on either side of his position.

“Oh!” the woman squealed her surprise, gasping for the breath that had been taken from her.

She studied the ornate molding above her head for a brief interval, wondering at her present position.

Red dragged her ass to the side of the bed, having enjoyed the small little yelp of surprise as he did so.

He sat perfectly at ease. Her ripe, succulent pussy was right in front of his face. Right there... for his viewing and tasting pleasure.

“Sweet tasting, you said?” he questioned again, his imagination taking flight as he perused the glorious vision before him.
Discretely adjusting the rod in his trousers, he squeezed it, soothing the throbbing ache. He had never wanted anything so damned much.

“That was not very nice.” Liz decided, her eyes closing, willing herself to relax under his penetrating gaze.

“I will make it up to you, Miss Scott,” he murmured heatedly, lowering his face to the tender flesh, “...rest assured.”

Gently laving her swollen slit, he smiled as the woman quivered under his tongue. Pushing lightly at the fragrant alcove, he worked the roughened muscle between her slit, parting the tiny folds hidden beneath her labia.

He truly enjoyed everything about this activity. How she responded, how she tasted, her heady aroma... the wet sound of his tongue slipping along this very intimate, private part of her anatomy.

A very private part only he was allowed to see, feel, taste... fuck.

Lowering his nose against her enlarged clitoris, he inhaled her rich scent, grunting his satisfaction. Rubbing his nose against her clit, his pink muscle poked at the small opening leaking with wetness.

Flattening his tongue, he pressed gently against the little pearl.

Liz startled under his mouth, pushing against the arousing touch. “Mr. Reddington?” she practically whispered her distress, so caught up in the emotion of the moment.

Red lifted his mouth away, casually flicking the tip against the soft skin of her thigh, “Yes, Miss Scott?” he replied dryly.

“Are y-you enjoying yourself?” she gasped sharply, trying to calm her trembling thighs.

“Immensely.” the man’s thick, silky voice sent shivers into her very center. He lowered his mouth against the delicacy he had been offered.

“You taste of warm honey and the sea... you are, quite delectable.” he lovingly kissed the ripe flesh, leisurely flicking his tongue through her sweet nectar.

Liz shook hard as the man’s hot breath brushed tantalizingly over her damp flesh.

As he drew on her center, she felt the delicious pull in her lips and clit as his tongue undulated along the same area.

It felt.... amazing.

“Mr. Reddington,” she mewled brokenly, “I... I really like that.”

Red’s dark eyes shifted, the hungry gaze traveling over the curves of her body, taking in the lovely glow on her face.

Reaching around her naked hip, Red palmed a firm breast, gently tugging at her distended nipple, drawing a long moan from the woman’s beautiful mouth.

He worked his free hand under his chin, his fingers erotically teasing her gateway.

“You’re so soft,” he husked, gently petting her lips with his tongue, “like the richest satin. So seductive... welcoming.”
Gradually sliding inside her molten depths, he grunted lasciviously in his throat when her body closed around his finger, pulling him deeper into its steamy recesses.

“Such a snug embrace,” he stroked the hot little hole deeply, his palm caressing her clitoris lovingly, “I would dearly love to be enfolded in this warm, wet cushion.”

Liz’s body shook, her mind painting the imagery he provided. His words made her truly feel she was the only one in existence that could pleasure him this fully.

His eyes softened on the beauty afforded him. She was so damned sensual...alluring. Her back arched up off the bed, presenting her breasts to his unwavering gaze. The already firm breasts plumped under his every touch.

The soft thatch of hair on her mons tickled his nose and mouth as he dined on the delicately sweet treat. His slick finger brushed against his lip, gifting him with a burst of her essence.

*What must this look like, from across the room?* He rather enjoyed the image conjured. The idea that his head was between her thighs was enough to make his cock throb with need.

Increasing his suction slightly and the movement of his tongue, he felt the first tell tale signs of her approaching orgasm around his finger...making his sack ache desperately.

“...Re–” she gasped, grappling for a stayhold of reality. She felt the game slipping away by degrees.

Red reached out, lacing his fingers through hers.

“Oh, God...” Liz squeezed his hand fiercely.

How could something so simply base in nature, feel so, intimate? In just seconds, the emotional connection... the love between them was off the scales. Was this love... or lust? He made it feel like the former.

Her heightened breathing hitched with anticipation. Red curled his finger upward, leisurely rubbing the hardened nub inside her in a gentle circular motion.

The woman trembled visibly, her tiny fingers curled tightly into the bedding and his hold.

“Please...” drawing in and holding her breath, Liz tensed further under his touch, hanging on a threshold only he could create, “oh, God... p-please.” she mewed tightly, pleading for his assistance.

Slowly increasing the pressure of his finger, Red felt a burst of wetness cover his knuckles seconds before the throbbing clitoris pulsed under his tongue.

The woman released a sharp cry of release, a cresting wave of shocking sensation running the length of her body.

The unrestrained exclamation of surrender excited him beyond measure. His pleasure soared as she crested, coming hard from *his* actions.

Her soft thighs brushed erotically against his face, lost in the intense pleasure she was experiencing.

Releasing the light suction, his tongue gentled her pulsing clit, easing her down from her high. She breathed out in short quivering gasps, her spent body collapsing into the plush bedding.

Lifting his face from his pastime, Red gently kissed the small fluttering labia, his eyes softening.
Standing, he leaned over the supine woman, his gaze a very masculine one.

“You are very sweet, Miss Scott.” the man’s warm breath brushed over her pouty mouth, the sweet scent of her arousal filling her nostrils. “I don’t believe I’ve ever had the pleasure of partaking of anything so... exquisite.”

She swallowed, gulping for air, “I hope so, Sir...” her eyes opened, trying to focus her emotional state, still ‘exquisitely’ relaxed and euphoric. “You are enjoying your down time?”

Red’s lips twitched with amusement for the double entendre. She was still very much in the game, he realized. “I am finding this very relaxing. Thank you for your solicitous remarks.”

He dipped his head, kissing between her heaving breasts, nuzzling the pliant flesh, allowing her a moment to catch her breath.

Peppering the flushed skin with open mouth kisses, he inhaled her natural scent, grunting under his breath.

“I do admit to a slight... tenseness which still plagues me somewhat.” his mouth grazed hers, catching her full lips in an eager embrace, “Is this wondrous mouth as perfect as your pussy?”

Curling his fingers around the tie, he gently tugged on the slick fabric, raising Lizzy from her reclined position on the bed.

“You will have to judge that, Sir.” she replied.

“No one has ever complimented your performance?” he seemed shocked.

“Only one man.” she lifted her eyes to his, letting him know without doubt the identity of that man.

“It only takes one...” he murmured, rubbing his thumb studiously over the full mouth.

He pulled at his belt, removing it from its loops before dropping it to the floor. She watched the large hands intent movements, her breathing quickening.

“I trust you are as excited as I to feel that gorgeous mouth wrapped around my cock, Miss Scott?” he asked, popping the top button on his trousers.

“You make my tummy feel... odd when you speak so freely, Sir.” she brushed the flat stomach with an absent swipe. She inched forward, catching her plump lip with her teeth, wetting the coral flesh.

Damn... he loved her eagerness.

“It isn’t your tummy, Miss Scott,” he lifted his brows, “it’s that insatiable little pussy wanting more.”

“And you, Sir? Do you want... more?” she enquired as the man’s large fingers grasped his zipper and pulled it down without ado.

“God, yes.” he hissed. Dropping his hand into the waist of his boxers, he pulled his burgeoning shaft free, presenting it to her. “You’ve made me very hard... as you can see.”

She curled her fingers into the waist of his pants, easing the dark slacks down his hips until his heavy sack was exposed to her view. His erection bobbed heavily, straining towards her.

Her heart beat rapidly seeing the tip all ready glistening. Red was the first man that allowed his emotional state to be shared without excuses or supposed vanity. She found the fact... very arousing.
Liz reached, letting her fingertips dance lightly over his thickened erection.

“That is definitely a move in the right direction,” he breathed out his growing excitement, “please continue.”

Recalling the first time she had done this for him, Lizzy flicked her tongue out experimentally, testing his taste, texture... response.

The large cock bounced at her teasing touch, before searching for her in earnest. The heavy weight lifted towards her, catching on her lip.

There was something almost sinful seeing his cock jutting out between the tails of his shirt. She almost felt like she was actually committing the scenario he had provided her... blowing her boss in his office, or his room, as it were. What a naughty little thought. And so very thrilling.

Inching forward, Liz let his crown slip between her rosebud lips, drawing a rumbling groan from the man.

Red’s eyes slid closed as she traced a searing path along the ridge of his glans. The pink muscle of her tongue widened, the agile organ cradling him, gently suckling the underside of his shaft.

He raptly watched the woman ease closer, the tip of his cock sliding smoothly into her hot, humid mouth. His lips parted allowing him the oxygen needed for she literally had taken his breath away.

Moving back and forth, she wet him in increments, taking a little more each time until she hit her limit. She drew back, allowing him to slide wetly past her pouty lips only to have his thickness caught in the sure grip of her tiny hand.

Slowly pumping the velvet hard flesh, she looked up at him, those powerful eyes making contact. The man’s breathing increased as Lizzy settled his cockhead far back in her mouth, joining the two forces together, stroking him in unison.

She held his eyes seductively, an invitation issued. One a man could not ever mistake for anything but what it was.

“My competition did not lie,” Red moaned eagerly, threading his fingers through her hair, “you give excellent head.”

Liz hummed her appreciation of his compliment. Cupping his ball sack, she pulled at him a little, directing the man to come closer. Red followed the gentle directive, his head falling back in ecstasy as he watched her cheeks hollow, enclosing his shaft in the slick cushion of her mouth.

“Yes, that is so very good,” he praised her work, “...suck me with that little mouth.”

Stroking him, she went as far as she could comfortably go, before withdrawing. Red’s brows furrowed, instantly missing the warmth, only to feel her tongue flickering against his frenulum seconds later.

“God...” he sighed blissfully, “stroke your tongue right there,” she did as asked, rubbing his pleasure spot, “...yes...”

She really loved Red Reddington. She especially loved the man for giving her guidance at such a crucial moment. It made this so much easier. She felt much more confident that she was pleasing the man, maybe as much as he pleased her.
“You’re so hard,” she lifted a sad little face.

Red’s cock pulsed, affected by the emphatic, forlorn features, “...Jesus.” he breathed shakily.

She kissed the fat tip, her lips soft against the hard surface, “I knew you needed me.”

“God, Elizabeth,” his body, his heart... ached with need, “I do...so damn much.”

Forcing his eyes open, Red focused on the pink muscle flitting about his cock head. She flattened it one second, rubbing against him so perfectly... only to flicker about the next second, almost mimicking a vibrator set against the sensitive flesh.

The sight of his cock setting in her open mouth and the agile tongue pleasuring him made his sack pull up tight in preparation to unload. He desperately wanted to see his cum shoot into that delicious little...

He pulled away abruptly, bending to kiss her swollen mouth hungrily which silenced any protest she harbored.

Grasping her thigh, Red tugged at her unexpectedly, once again felling the woman unto her back.

“Oh!” she startled as he pushed at her leg, opening her body to him.

Red’s hand encircled his shaft, squeezing the engorged tip until the need to come abated just enough.

Rubbing the large glistening head against Lizzy’s clit, he pushed against the warm skin urgently.

“I need this, Miss Scott.” he set his crown at her opening, further wetting his weeping cock.

She closed her legs about his hips, stilling him. “...Sir, I thought we decided–”

Red nuzzled his thickening against her, further opening the woman to his upcoming intrusion, “You wanted me to feel better, yes?” he questioned roughly.

“Well,” she pouted just enough to portray indecision, “...yes.”

“Then you just relax, sweetheart.” he urged, pushing past her tight hole. “I’ll make us feel better in no time.”

Liz gasped shakily as the man nudged his way in, opening her easily.

“It seems your body agrees with me.” he grunted. “Look how easily you’re accepting me.”

Liz found it difficult to keep her part in the act in play. All she really wanted was for the man to fuck her raw. But she managed to lift doubtful eyes.

“Are you on the pill?” Red played the game to perfection however.

She searched his face, wishing she knew which answer would turn him on the most, “...No, Sir.”

“Even better...” he grunted roughly. “How fortunate for me.”

Her heart rate increased. Her gamble had paid off. He had run with it, just as she hoped he would.

Liz feebly pushed at his chest, “You are so... large, Mr. Reddington.”

“I need to mount this amazing pussy of yours, Miss Scott.” Red muttered heatedly against her mouth,
pulling the tie from about her neck.

She felt the man grasp her wrists, the tie quickly wrapped about them in a make-shift cuff.

“Now you be a good girl...” he panted, easing his hips forward, “and get comfortable,” he suggested, sliding his erection inside her welcoming body, “because there is nothing more intoxicating or thrilling than fucking unprotected pussy and I plan to thoroughly enjoy myself.”

“But, sir...” Liz panted heavily, slightly resisting as Red pulled at the tie, raising her arms above her head.

Red leaned into the binding, holding the woman captive. He thrust slowly against her opening, his eyes lit with passion.

“Not to fret, Miss Scott.” he groaned, feeling her slick lips part for him, “...you have my word.”

Liz felt a surge of excitement in her tummy. She was thoroughly enjoying watching Red enjoy his gift.

She loved playing with Red because he got into his part so well. But tonight, it felt on the edge already, he was so lost in the fantasy.

“Miss Scott...” he moaned breathlessly, sliding out to the tip, before pushing his way ardently back in.

“You’re such a tiny thing,” he grunted his approval, “aren’t you?”

“Don’t go so deep, Sir...please,” she mewled her disappointment as he eased out. Damn him.

“Even as little as you are,” a tightness rumbled in his throat, “I bet you’ll accept my entire cock,” he crooned his encouragement, “won’t you.”

“I... I’m not sure, Mr. Reddington... if I can.” she pursed her lips, her brow furrowing at the intense sensation of the thick organ spreading her sensitive opening wide.

“Honey, I know you’re going to...” was his soundly stated assurance.

Her sex throbbed in response to his confident demands. Liz truly wished for nothing more than to fulfill those demands.

Red braced his arms, glancing down to where their bodies were connected. He truly would never tire of the sight of his cock spreading her open.

“Look at us, Miss Scott.” he directed her eyes to where his were fixated. Grasping the tie in his hand, he lifted her slightly, allowing the action.

Liz shivered at the visual of their union. How utterly erotic was that sight. She loved feeling him inside, deeply connected to her.

So much so, she felt her body open involuntarily, welcoming his invasion.

“Yes...” Red sighed contentedly, “relax for me, honey.” he murmured, feeling every nuance her body experienced.

Leaning, he eagerly caught her mouth, his tongue slipping sensually past her parted lips. Kissing her greedily, he increased the passion of their kiss moment by moment.
Their tongues mingled as one for a brief interval which filled the man with a glow of lustful thoughts.

Cupping her ass in his hand, he drew her up into his next thrust, sliding deep inside her moist cavern.

“Shit...” he groaned brokenly, enjoying the ride, shoving in further to better feel the sensations. “Yes, open wide for me.”

He nudged her cervix relentlessly. Lifting her leg against his side, Red slid even further, until Liz’s thighs shook at the extreme sensation the pressure provided.

Grasping her full bottom in hand, Red tilted her small body easily.

Liz slit her eyes lazily, looking at the man as he concentrated on his task, “What are you doing?” she questioned breathlessly.

Adjusting her slim hips, Red manipulated his cock in to the hilt, forcing a raw, quivering cry from her throat.

“Shh....” he soothed, his breathing heavy and labored. He had never taken her so deeply. Always holding back, mindful of her sensibilities and needs.

His erection throbbed joyfully, finally being fully encased in her dripping heat.

The meaty shaft flexed, leaving a searing ache in Liz’s core that was so fucking mind bending, she wanted the feeling to go on forever.

Even with her eyes closed, her vision wavered in and out with an excitement which built exponentially. Her mouth was parched from breathless pants.

Her senses reeled.

Her body desperately fought to adjust to his invasion. The heavy weight of his erection pushed against her, the fat shaft spreading her wide like never before.

Red barely controlled a rather animalistic urge to fuck the hell out of the minuscule little hole.

The woman’s face lit with the most torturous rapture he had ever seen grace her features.

Liz’s thighs trembled uncontrollably against his sides as he nudged his hips, keeping his cock firmly in place.

“Am I hurting you?” Red murmured tenderly, his nose brushing affectionately against the side of her face.

“Uhm...” she swallowed with difficulty, “...no.” her eyes fluttered open, looking up at the man. It was a type of pain he caused but certainly not the one he meant.

“Can you feel me?” he slowly swiveled his hips, driving his cock deeper, prodding the sensitive tissue.

A rush of air left his mouth as her body clenched when he moved the large helmet of his shaft across the rounded bump inside her. The hardened opening of her cervix teased his glans, drawing a stream of pre-cum from his slit, slicking the surface further.

“Oh!” she gasped sharply, pulling at the binding of the tie instinctively which chafed her delicate
wrists now. “Jesus...yes,” she fought for clarity, “I f-feel....” she was feeling so very much at this state of the game.

Red relaxed into her soft curves, his thick chest pressing into her breasts. He savored her condition knowing he was the cause.

Slowly pumping his hips, he nestled his face into her neck line nibbling the delicate skin. The incessant thrumming beat of her pulse point traveled the length of his tongue.

“That feels good... doesn’t it?” he nuzzled her jaw line, growling deeply as his crown snapped past that tight band he prodded so persistently.

“Mr. Reddin–” Liz mewed, raising her hips into the delicious assault. “P-Please...” she whimpered, her breath taken away for a long beat. She pushed her breasts into his chest as some sort of appeasement.

Red’s decision was cast. He released his grip on the binding, lifting his weight from her body, leaving her to feel the chill of the room.

Liz focused intently on the man who tugged at the knot of the tie around his neck until the silk unraveled in his large hands.

His darkened gaze swept her sinuous frame, heightening her senses. His thick fingers leisurely pulled at the buttons on his shirt.

She feasted her eyes on the wealth of hair covering his broad chest as it became exposed. There was something disturbingly masculine about that sight.

Red’s cock twitched at the satisfied sound she emitted. He wasn’t afraid to admit, he was pleased she found him attractive. She pleasured him in so many ways, it was a relief to know he returned the favor occasionally.

She licked her lips, wriggling in anticipation. She missed the heat of his body against hers.

“Does this meet with your approval?” he grasp her wrist, laying her palm against his chest. Did he need to actually hear her say it?

She nodded jerkily, threading her fingers through the fine hair, “...Yes.” she whispered, a rush of emotion washing over her.

Leaning, he lay the mat of hair on her soft skin. He sighed his satisfaction as her breasts pushed against his taut chest, the pliant flesh pillowing his weight.

Liz encircled his shoulders, curling her fingers into his nape, scratching him soothingly. She got lost in the amazing sensation of his downy pelt tickling her nipples and clit.

She wrapped him in a cocoon of her silky legs, urging him closer still.

Red obliged the silent request, sinking into the delectable body once again.

He allowed a couple inches of his shaft to remain free, increasing the tightness of her pleasurable hold around the ramrod flesh.

“I knew you’d love it deep.” slipping his erection deep back within the confines of her opening, causing beads of perspiration to appear on his brow. “Look how wet you are for me.” he praised.
Liz tightened her core to encourage the man to increase his depth and speed of his thrusts.

She tensed around and under him in preparation of what was to come, holding her breath the closer she got to climax.

“God, my cock is so fucking hard...” Red groaned the realization.

He was right, his cock was hard... and so thick. Even as wet as she was, the heavy drag of his erection spread her, manipulating every inch of her sensitive core. The rigid flesh rubbed against her lips and clit to perfection.

A sudden jolt of his head shoving past a tightness deep inside the recesses of her body, left her soaking wet.

The liquid sound of him sliding inside her body was so arousing, so intimate a sound. Her body gifted him with more lubrication, exciting them both.

Liz felt so completely full and content, yet so vulnerable, as the man took possession of her body.

Drawing him closer, she fixated on his hard body pressed against her. She absolutely adored everything about how the man felt.

His size seemed to dwarf her, which made her feel protected and cherished. That wealth of hair which tantalized her softer skin... and his smell. It was comforting and arousing at once.

Red’s powerful arms drew her as close as humanly possible. Allowing her to feel every inch of his body, increasing the intimacy of the act they shared.

The muscles in his arms bulged and flexed around her with his assertive thrusts. She had a slight fixation on that man’s arm that bordered on addictive.

“Harder....” she mewed desperately, “...sir.”

Wrapping an arm about her waist, he lifted her negligible weight, curving her back, allowing the full length of his textured shaft slide hard down her straining core. She quivered around him, striving towards the release she desperately sought.

There was nothing Red loved more in this world than watching Elizabeth treading the rapturous edge of orgasm... but listening to the woman getting off sent shivers down his spine every single time. The sharp short bursts of her excitement grew closer and more acute as she neared the vortex of bliss she craved.

He had never heard anything so fucking arousing.

“You make the most sensuous sounds when a man is fucking you.” the man’s husky voice lowered intimately. “Are you always like this, or is this just for me?”

“...Y-You.” she gasped shakily, her little face lit with ecstasy.

“This is just for me...” his deep voice resonated with pleasure.

She nodded quickly, catching those torturous sounds as best she could in her throat, knowing they signaled her weakness for the man. She quelled the trembling in her lips, biting down on the plump redness determinedly.

“No, no...” Red thumbed her chin, gently breaking her lip free of its confinement, “let me hear how
much you love my cock fucking you.”

Bunching his fingers in her hair, held her head stationary, drawing her into a deep kiss, sucking at her bottom lip teasingly, “Your tiny pussy is squeezing me so tight...it feels heavenly.”

The woman tensed under him, coiling rigidly. Stretching her bound arms above her head, Lizzy clutched at the bedding. Her breasts, free from confinement, bounced sensually with their frantic movements of... lovemaking.

“Let me feel you come, Miss Scott.” Red urged. “Which will... make me come...”

Planting her heels on the edge of the bed, she rolled her hips, expertly thrusting against his downstroke.

“Fuck...” he watched the show with heated eyes, “Miss Scott you follow direction so well,” he gritted his ever growing awareness of the woman’s abilities, “fucking come on my cock...”

Releasing an expulsion of air, she cried out, shaking violently. Her legs clutched as his sides, trembling with the explosive release.

Red pushed against her clitoris, rubbing along the swollen nub. Grasping her ass in his hands, he quickened his pace, thrusting into the quivering depths.

“So beautiful....” Red rasped, “you are so breathtaking... when you come.”

He lithe body arched gracefully as an unearthly glow lit the woman’s features, her body shimmering radiantly in the flickering candlelight. She appeared like some magical sprite basking in the warmth of dawn.

“Jesus Christ...” Red’s gasped his awe, running a large palm between her full breasts. The pounding rhythm of her heart beating erratically under his touch.

Red quickened his pace, driving the sound from Lizzy as he drew her orgasm out, making his quickly approach.

“Shit...” he panted harshly, reaching between them quickly, he made to grasp his cock but was blocked from doing so by Lizzy’s legs tightening around him.

“Lizzy...” he gritted, too close to the precipice to even try remaining in the game. “I need to come dammit!”

“...Stay.” she whispered urgently.

“I promis–”

“Please...” she moved into his thrust, keeping him in place, “stay.”

Red weighed his options, coming up most undecided.

Game or not, he had given his word. But Lizzy was damning the game, wanted him to do something that went against his grain.

But he promised...

Hooking her knee with his hand, he pulled, breaking her hold on him. Once free, he quickly eased his fingers inside her core, before taking his cock in hand.
Pumping his over sensitized flesh, he felt Lizzy clench around his fingers. His cum forcefully exploded from his slit, the thick strands landing over her tummy and mound.

Liz whimpered at the loss but made do with the substitute the man offered. She stubbornly raised her hips, directing the continuing thick streams to hit her labia, enjoying the warm bath.

Red exhaled shakily at the sight of his essence marking her, which left him feeling oddly fulfilled in a way he hadn’t expected.

Sliding back into her opening, he moaned deeply as the scorching heat of her core engulfed him.

He said he would pull out... true. But he had not promised anything more.

The head of his shaft pulsed, the heavy shaft constricting repeatedly, giving them both a sense of utter contentment.

Slowly pumping his hips, the tip dribbled the last of his orgasm as he watched her slowly trail her fingers over her tummy and through the thick cum.

“It’s all right, baby.” he soothed, sensing her mood had altered a tad.

“I said you coul–”

“I know what you said.” he could not pretend anything other than pure indulgence at this stage. “But I did promise.” he grasped her bound hands, easily tugging the knot free with a little jerk.

Liz smiled, realizing she could have broken free anytime she had wished.

Navy guys and their knots...

“Some promises are meant to be broken.” she reminded, pseudo-stern. The man wrapped himself about her body, warding off the sudden chill. She cuddled to him.

“In regards to you...” he kissed her softly, “it’s a very hard habit to break.”

Gathering her in his arms, he snuggled the woman close. His eyes grew heavy at the feeling of his cum wetting his abdomen.

“Besides, the visual was very stimulating.” Red sighed happily. “At least, for my part.”

“Silas said it meant, a man was pissing a circle around his woman.” she wrapped her arms about the man’s shoulders, rubbing her fingers into his scalp. She smiled when Red pushed into the contact, a rumbling moan vibrating through his chest.

“What the hell were you two discussing for such a topic to arise.” Red muttered, dropping a smoldering kiss to her swollen mouth.

“The Dow Jones Average.” she quipped. “There is something seriously wrong with that man.”

They lay snuggling against one another, exchanging small intimate kisses, quietly coming down from their former exertions. Lizzy shivered in his arms which signaled the end of a very wondrous event.

Sighing, Red rolled from the bed, disappearing into the bath for a time. Emerging, he flicked a low lamp on, a warm cloth in hand.

He took great care in cleaning his essence from her curvy frame. A quick wash set him to rights.
Covering her with a nearby plush throw, he slid into his robe. Holding up a hand to ward off any questions, he disappeared through the main door.

Liz snuggled into the warmth, the cushy blanket feeling luxurious against her sated flesh. She hoped against hope, the man was informing the guys he was staying in for the rest of the evening.

Red came back moments later with a rolling tray loaded down with some fancy treats, a small bouquet of fragrant roses and an ice bucket and two glasses.

“Champagne?” he asked, his mood a cheery one indeed. He sat the ice bucket aside, flipping the fragile glassware between his nimble fingers with a flourish.

She smiled brightly, nodding her acquiesce. Her fingers traced the delicate petals of the flowers, absentmely watching the man pour the bubbly liquid.

He sat beside her, tinkling his glass against the one he offered.

“Happy anniversary, baby.” he smiled gently at her, his eyes a loving caress.

Liz could not think of a more fitting end to their day.

“I can’t wait to celebrate many more with you.” Red replied seriously, before sipping the cooled beverage.

“Happy anniversary.” she responded in kind, partaking of the chilled, bubbly drink. Her heart filled with love and gratitude for the kind man Red Reddington had turned out to be.

She had always loved champagne during a celebratory moment. It was so effervescent and light, just like she felt inside.

Red smiled as the bubbly drink tickled her, making her nose wrinkle adorably.

He stretched his arm out, hooking his jacket. “I got you a gift to celebrate the wonderful occasion.”

“You didn’t have to...” Liz winced, her guilt returning. “I haven’t had a chance to get y–”

“You gave me exactly what I wanted.” the man silenced her worry with a gentle kiss, his look making her believe him. “You’re the best gift any man could have, Elizabeth.”

She smiled softly, a well of excitement knotting in her stomach as a gaily wrapped gift was handed over.

She tore into it, flipping the box open, her heart skipping a beat at the exquisite sight which greeted her.

“You do know, the way you buy me jewelry...” she chuckled, lifting the gift aloft, her eyes glittering with tears, “someone will suspect I’m a kept woman.”

She ran her finger over the diamonds, tracing the shape of the eternity symbol wrapped about a heart.

“Red... this is just too much... even for you.” she shook her head woefully but couldn’t take her eyes off her prize.

“I would very much like to keep you...” Red murmured quietly, “which is why I vetoed Google’s suggestion of only flowers and a freaking poem...”
In fact, he had searched for days for what to give her. He had planned to take them on a short stay at his Villa in Italy, and still would love to. But he had happened upon this bracelet and it seemed perfect for a month anniversary gift.

Red had gifted jewelry to Lizzy before. He was now aware of what sentimental value it held for the woman.

He hoped that this gift would be just as important due to it’s deeply personal meaning.

He happily watched her lovingly running her fingers over the pendant. “...For a more substantial gift, professing my commitment to you.” he continued. “Not too over-the-top?”

Liz lifted shimmering eyes, listening to him intently, “It’s absolute perfection.”

“I chose a visual reminder of what I wish for us,” his finger joined hers, tracing the looping figure, “...an eternity of love.”

Only Red Reddington could have taken such a simplistic milestone and made it so... wonderful and memorable.

It was only a month. But it had been such an amazing month they had weathered together. Through the ups and downs, they had been at each others side, been partners in every sense of the word.

“I don’t think I can ever top this.” she stared at the bracelet. “Words can’t express...” how much this gesture truly meant to her, she finished the thought to herself.

He was here. And would always be here, she sensed it now, her heart swelling with elation and love. A tear ran down her cheek as she looked down at the symbolism of their future journey, a surge of happiness overwhelming her.

She chuckled under her breath, looking adoringly up at the man.

“So, I don’t get a romantic quote or anything?” she sniffled, teasing him. “An Irish limerick?”

Red’s mouth twitched at the corner, his eyes lighting with joy. “Is there anyone in particular you wish me to quote?”

The man was somewhat proud of his ability to recite famous quotes.

“Why, Shakespeare of course.” she lifted her pert nose airily.

Red looked down at his champagne a moment, swirling the sparkling fluid before lifting intense eyes. He considered many, choosing an apt expression.

“I would not wish any companion in the world but you...” he said, his stare a fixed, earnest one.

“...Another.” she clasped his hand, touched by the intent behind the lovely words.

Red didn’t think he could top the last statement but he searched his mind, lifting his glass...

“Time is very slow for those you wait, very fast for those who are scared,” he ran a gentle thumb against the scar on her wrist...her worry stone, “very long for those who lament, very short for those who celebrate,” he paused, holding her gaze, “but for those who love... time is eternal.”

“How do you quote such beautiful things so effortlessly?” she questioned. “How can you remember
“When you love someone as deeply as I do you,” he began slowly, feeling his way, “the words are an outlet of the emotions I feel inside.”

“What else do you feel?” she asked, hypnotized by the man’s supposed passion for her. “I can’t get enough, it seems.” she was enthralled.

“You found parts of me that I didn’t know existed...” he glanced at their joined hands studiously for a long beat, “and in you,” he sought her out, “I found a love I no longer believed was real.”

Liz inhaled shakily, astounded that Red seemingly felt the same way as she was at this exact moment. She never thought she could love wholeheartedly after Tom... that she would ever find anything real and concrete in her life again...

And she certainly never expected Red would uncover unknown depths of emotions that were inside her... some so hidden away, she hadn’t been aware they even existed.

“By my soul, I can neither eat, drink, nor sleep;” he continued unprompted, “nor, what’s still worse,” he lifted her small hand, gently kissing each finger tenderly “love any woman in the world but her.”

He lifted his eyes, a light shining in the blue depths. “If you live to be a hundred, I hope I live to be a hundred minus one day, so I never have to live without you.”

Liz frowned, vaguely recalling the quote from somewhere... “I know that one.”

She dug into her memories, frustration rising when she couldn’t quite grasp hold of the elusive quote. She lifted questioning eyes, finding his lips twitching in open amusement.

“Winnie the Pooh.”

“Oh, bother!” she laughed softly, playfully swatting her hand at the man.

Red chuckled as he recaptured it, bring it to his mouth. “You are my heart, my life...” the man’s tongue flicked her palm sensually, his eyes holding hers willfully, “my one and only thought.”

Liz’s heart calmed. Scooting closer to the man, she wrapped an arm about his shoulder, her fingers gingerly dancing about the man’s shoulder blades.

Leaning, her breast brushed erotically against the mat of hair covering his chest, her lips grazing his.

“I ask you to pass through life at my side - to be my second self, and best earthly companion.” she murmured softly, offering her own outlet of emotion.

Closing in, she completed the kiss. Red pulled her closer into his warm embrace, deepening the powerful connection until all worldly thoughts faded away for a brief second in time.

Slowly parting, their returned breaths mingled as one, brushing against tender mouths and aroused flesh.

Without a word, Red removed the long stemmed flute from her hand and stood, taking his glass along with him to the bar. He shut down the far light, leaving them in the soft glow of the bedside lamp.

He tossed his robe casually across a nearby chair as he passed.
Turning towards her, the man’s cock jut out proudly. The long, thick flesh, framed by light lush hair, bobbed heavily as he walked slowly back to her.

Liz’s heart quickened at the sight. He was so impressive a specimen. So masculine.

As the man neared, the sight of his full scrotum bulging against the tightening skin increased the wetness between Liz’s thighs. She was shocked at how easily he could arouse her body.

And mind. She never had a lover speak to her like Red did. She loved it.

Red’s eyes closed rapturously as he scented the heady aroma of Lizzy’s arousal in the air, a bead of liquid collecting on the thick head of his shaft in response.

She unconsciously held her breath, sensing his emotional state. The heavy appendage twitched noticeably, affected by her attention.

Liz’s breath quickened, her breasts rising and falling rhythmically which enthralled Red’s senses, the beautiful sloping curves pulling his attention like a magnet.

The longer he stood, prolonging the ecstasy of their agony, the better the final release would be, he knew and yet, his impatience was rapidly nearing its end.

Lifting her chin, he broke her avid gaze to fixate on his impassioned one. Her open and eager expression warmed his heart with the most pleasant sensation.

He lowered his mouth to hers, the kiss a most reverent one.

“I love you,” he murmured against the pouty mouth, “...Miss Scott.”

He smiled softly as the woman exhaled shakily, her mouth ardently seeking his.

“...I love you, Mr. Reddington.” she replied breathlessly, feeling a ghost of his heat brush against her sensitive flesh.

Blindly taking the box from her hands, Red turned slightly, sitting it on the side table.

Liz impulsively reached out, her small hand enveloping the stiff rod. She leaned, bringing the glistening tip to the warm flick of her tongue, catching the droplet of arousal weeping from his stiff erection.

Red’s breath caught sharply as the warm impression of her touch swept his frame, the searing caress igniting him.

“Baby...” he sighed brokenly, “you have no idea how much I love how you suck cock,” he praised, even as he pulled back, “but this,” he ran his forefinger over her plush lips, his brow furrowed as he watched its trek, “is not where I envisioned coming.”

The woman scowled at him, not certain she liked the turn of events.

Red pulled her from the bed, kissing her mouth roughly for a long beat.

Searching his face, her mouth fell slowly, the pretty pink lips pouting invitingly. “I want to do this for you.”

She truly did. She felt bad still. Her gift certainly did not equal his in her mind. But she knew Red enjoyed oral sex. Why was he refusing to allow her this small thing?
Red eyes softened, knowing the woman’s thoughts.

“Being intimate with you,” he brushed back her wild hair, “is the best gift I could imagine receiving.” he told the truth. “And I’m not just talking about sex.” he stressed. “I am perfectly content to snuggle on the couch and talk.”

She idly traced his collarbone, her finger tracing a scar there, listening to the words, hearing the truth in them, but still...

She felt his large erect shaft poke against her stomach, before lifting playful eyes, “But you’re not going to turn down the sex either, right?” she felt better suddenly.

“Hell, no.” he husked, his large palm wrapping about her bottom. Lifting her effortlessly, she wrapped her legs about his waist, settling into his hold. She trusted him implicitly, casually draping her arms across his shoulders for the duration.

“Baby,” he took a few steps with his passenger, “we’ve only just begun our journey. I don’t know about you, but I intend to mark each occasion we achieve.” he said. “What’s important is sharing those milestones together, recognizing their importance.” he stressed. “Not stressing over whether we had time to go shopping for a gift.”

“You got me a gift.” she reminded peevishly.

“And I got mine...” he reminded post-haste. “All wrapped up in a pretty package.” his eyes traversed his gift lecherously. “It had a bow on it and everything.”

“It was a tie.” she corrected, finally smiling, truly understanding this private time was just what Red wanted. “You’re just so hard to shop for... that’s all.”

He tipped the nearby bottle, pouring the sparkling fluid in the tall glass, “You can never go wrong with what God himself gave.... and God knows I don’t need another damn wallet.”

Taking a mouthful, he offered the glass to her. He easily supported her weight, the freed hand reaching to heft her breast. He played contentedly while she drained the glass and sat it back on the bar.

Liz sighed delightedly when the man made his way back towards the bed, his shaft thumping soundly against her bottom as they moved.

“About that little promise you made,” she frowned, as Red sat her on her feet, looking down at her patiently, “don’t do it again.”

She reminded him of his previous withdrawal, apparently less than pleased with the action he had taken.

“I will do as I please, Miss Scott.” the man scowled right back, though his eyes were lit with an odd, enticing light as she pouted back at him. “Especially when it’s play time.”

“I missed you...” she countered, her mouth drooping, “your warmth.” she would use ‘what God gave her’ to get her way in this instance.

“You act as if I’m done with you.” he muttered against her neckline. He smiled when the woman opened to his attention. “We have all night, you know.”

“But the deadline, Mr. Reddington...” she fluttered her large blue eyes up at him, rejoining the game.
“Fuck the deadline,” he stated heatedly.

“Sir?” she fought the grin wanting to escape her sweet lips when Red eased effortlessly back into *his* role.

“Or better still, Miss Scott...” he whispered roughly. “Bend over the bed, so that I might fuck... *you.*”

“How crass, Mr. Reddington.” she mused thoughtfully.

He turned her about, butting his erection up against her cute little ass.

“Get use to it.” he husked, running a large palm over the small rump. “I have a feeling this...diversion will happen frequently.”

Wrapping his hands about her hips, he dragged her back against his pelvis, snarling quietly as his fingers touched along her abdomen. She was so tiny in comparison to him, a surge of protectiveness overcame the man for a fleeting second.

A deep seated need to fuck her overrode his common decency for once.

What he was experiencing was incredibly animalistic, he was sure. He realized, he had never wanted to rut anyone as badly as he did Elizabeth at this moment.

There was something deep inside him, a carnal lust growing, gnawing at his psyche...a need to mount and mate her. To come deep inside her... filling her womb with his seed.

Fuck... if she only knew how badly he wished for that eventuality... it might shake her idealistic view of him.

The soft damp curls of her sex teased his sack and shaft, driving his innate humanity aside. He allowed it.

“I want to see that luscious pussy open wide for me... again.”

Lifting the woman until her toes barely touched the floor, he took in the beautiful sight of body opening for his pleasure.

His cock fell perfectly against her slick labia, his large bulb parting her swollen flesh effortlessly, drawing a long, breathy moan from the woman’s mouth.

“Miss Scott...” the man’s voice roughened as he slid slowly into her heat.

She mewed as his girth spread her wide, “That feels so... wonderful, Mr. Reddington.”

“I can absolutely promise you,” he hissed as his sack pressed against her clit, “I will not be pulling out this time.”

Liz’s mouth curved sensually, “...Whatever you think best, sir.”

There were gifts, it seemed.

And then there was... the perfect gift.

Maybe she had hit upon it after all...
Saw this formatting somewhere before... thought I'd play with it. Not sure if I liked it though. Haha! You guys be the judge. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

June 6

Red lay quietly, his eyes hazily focused on the lights from the city reflecting overhead on the ceiling, his thoughts serene... contemplative.

It seemed only a short time ago he, too keyed up from his earlier exertions with Elizabeth, awoke from a short, refreshing nap.

He shifted his interest.

Silently watching the woman beside him sleep, Red’s sated gaze traveled the expanse of Lizzy’s lithe frame, hesitating on small slivers of flesh that had peeked out from under the rumpled sheets covering her body.

The man often found himself rendered speechless by her ethereal beauty.

How many times he found himself enraptured by the sight of that long hair laying against the curvature of her spine, just tickling the flaring curve of her waist and full bottom.

His heart quickened when the woman shifted beside him, baring the long line of leg to his appreciative gaze.

Slipping his hand under the luxurious sheet, his fingers danced idly over her stomach before curving about the woman’s waist.

His sack contracted when the woman sighed sleepily, moaning softly at his touch. The sound added to his heightened arousal.

He covertly eased his bulky frame over the woman’s recumbent form, bracing himself on threaded and rippling forearms.

The tension built when Lizzy shifted once more, relaxing under his intent, sensing his proximity.

As he bared Elizabeth’s body to his gaze, the ache in his groin became unbearable.

His cock stirred, brushing against the springy curls of her sex. A low unexpected snarl escaped from his throat.

His palm cupped her breast, the giving flesh conformed to his gentle and exploratory hold. The memory of tenderly laving that coral hued nipple into a crinkled whirl was imprinted on his tongue. He itched to take it in his mouth and suckle her once again.
Red found himself spellbound every time Elizabeth removed the silk or lace cradle which restrained those glorious breasts.

Once he had been in the phone, distracted, admittedly... annoyed with the inefficiency of the world in general when he had halted all speech or coherent thought, at Lizzy’s thoughtless actions.

The woman released her breasts from confinement innocently changing into a more relaxed outfit.

Those pert breasts bounced as they lost the battle to gravity, falling into their natural slope. The gentle sway of the soft, pliable flesh mesmerized him as did the way her nipples puckered in the cool air of the room.

Her breasts alone could inspire poetry.

The natural essence of the woman was most hypnotic.

In stealth like fashion, Red inched his way around her body, basking in the silky feel of her skin brushing tantalizingly against his.

Gently nudging his warm hand against her thigh, he coaxed her legs to open, allowing him a warm nest in which he settled comfortably.

The man’s eyes lit with repressed fire at the first sight of Elizabeth’s form.

Her little lips and adorable clitoris were so damned physically appealing. Even her grooming left him sexually stimulated.

Red often wondered if women were as excited by the sight of their lovers?

Inhaling deeply, his heart raced as he took in the rich scent along with the evocative musky aroma of their love making which tinged her delicate flesh.

His hot breath whispered sensually over Elizabeth’s still form. She stirred slightly.

Red nuzzled into the caressing touch of one silky thigh brushing against his cheek. He stilled, waiting patiently until she settled once more.

Leaning, he tenderly placed his mouth against the hot, inviting surface awaiting his exploration.

Red had always enjoyed going down on his partners. It was an activity he not only excelled... if he said so himself. It also made his cock ramrod hard.

The sensation of having such a private area in one’s mouth was... exhilarating. The texture, taste, response... all women varied.

He was lucky to have been on the receiving end of some beautiful and delicious variety in his day.

But never one like Lizzy’s.

Female genitalia, the vagina specifically had been described as many things in fiction. A flower budding or delicate petals shimmering with rain after a spring storm... among other things.

His Naval buddies, less than subtle in their attempt at prose, described it as an exclamation point. The long line punctuated by the little hole beneath it, certainly took on the appearance of one. And if they were all honest, nothing inspired exclamation more than seeing or feeling a woman’s God given gift.
If he were asked to describe the female form... Red would personally compare the stunning vision to an intricate, elusive, butterfly.

Elizabeth’s in particular entranced and amazed him.

If he had to be poetic about it; when aroused, the woman’s plump, wet labia... took the shape of bountiful dew covered wings spread open in flight.

If one were being technical, the woman’s labia mimicked a butterfly’s wings in appearance. Rounded at the top and tapering in the center, they drew attention to that delicious little center he so coveted.

Could one truly describe such a masterpiece? How many songs, poems and art were based on this marvel?

Adam himself disobeyed God for access to Eve’s... virtues.

Red never really saw himself as a religious man. But after first hearing the story, he had to question what the hell Adam had been thinking, disobeying God, of all beings.

He immediately had to rethink his stance after first having sex. It hadn’t been perfect, but God... had it been delectable. Kept him on an euphoric high for days.

Yes, God was all powerful and all knowing. But what had he been thinking by giving Adam access to Eve, arguably the most perfect woman in history... then making Adam chose between her and the established rules?

Simplistically put, granted. But Red himself would have failed miserably had the decision been left to him.

There was a reason men fought... and died throughout the ages for women.

Dueling was defined as a chivalrous act, defending a woman’s honor. And he wouldn’t argue with that honorable act.

But Red knew damn well knew the other reason behind the issue at hand.

Men were defending the one thing they wanted most in this world. And if killing off the competition was required, so be it.

If he were honest with himself, Red had gladly been an active participant in just such a contest. He had beat Brad within an inch of his life to defend Elizabeth’s honor, yes.

But also, to simply remind the other man of the established ‘rules’.

And any man present realized the battle was a clear indication Red was laying claim to what he considered marked territory.

Elizabeth belonged to him. It was so ridiculously simple.

However you wished to view it, and he often wondered what a woman’s perspective would be...

For a man that one little mound of ecstasy, was everything. The be-all, end-all.

Yes, Elizabeth had many virtues that captivated him any given moment of the day, but one stood out each time she came into view. Sooner or later, carnal lust would enter into the picture.
To be allowed the privilege of intimacy on that special level with a female... moved a man’s emotions like nothing else.

Red’s body shook with excitement and anticipation whenever the woman willingly parted her legs, allowing him a full view of the smattering of dark curls damp with her arousal.

He had a hell of a time controlling himself watching the woman writhe about, as eager for their joining as he, himself.

After he had finally been awarded the ability to feel her in the flesh... he almost lost all sense of himself in the wonder and awe of the emotional onslaught he experienced.

When he set his cockhead at the entrance of that steamy opening and felt the small flutterings as Elizabeth prepared to take him in, with the well of her arousal wetting his way... it was a fucking euphoric moment he cherished.

When her folds parted and collapsed back around his glans as his girth demanded entrance into that tight hold... he honestly wondered if this was what it felt like being allowed entrance to heaven.

When that center pulled at him, tugging him deeper into the secret recesses of her body, his mind exploded with rapture... he truly never experienced such ecstasy.

And that ‘special’ connection, the love that was present... was absolute bliss.

Even though they had not verbally expressed the words... Red felt the depth of that emotional connection he had been dreaming of building with Elizabeth.

They said so much in that simple act, even when nothing was said at all.

Men were stupid, Red realized a long time ago.

Men constantly searched out the wonders of the world when in reality, they had to look no further than between a woman’s thighs to find the most wondrous of all.

Gently kissing the still reddened flesh, his mouth curved when the small alcove responded to his attention, unlike its owner, who still slept peacefully.

The cradle that held him so lovingly filled with the heady aroma that was all Lizzy.

He very much enjoyed her sharp intake of breath when she roused from her slumber to find him gingerly licking her slit.

Only when he was positive he had Elizabeth’s undivided attention, did he take her still engorged and sensitive clitoris in his mouth.

Being this intimate, this close, this... connected, was the only thing which fulfilled that incessant need only she could provide.

Red groaned deeply, contentedly, when his taste buds were inundated with that one-of-a-kind potion.

Elizabeth’s soft moan stirred the man.

He made himself more comfortable, settling in for the long haul, looking forward to the up-coming hour... or so.

The woman shocked him in the next instant by wriggling out from under his planned attack.
“No, no...no,” the sleep-laden tone scolded him.

Red blinked his surprise, watching the woman situate her body out of his reach.

He instinctively followed, a dark scowl laced his brow. Had it pissed her off he awoke her out of a sound—

Red’s thoughts halted abruptly.

Tiny fingers grasped his shaft.

The man was wise enough to stop his natural inclination to question that action, at least.

He obeyed Elizabeth’s subtle urging as she moved closer, her warm mouth sliding over the crown of his dick in a gentle, teasing sweep.

“Payback’s are hell.” he murmured serenely, easing up to a convenient pillow. “Baby,” the man’s tone was raspy with involvement all ready, “if you think I’m going to apologize for...”

Liz explored his nether regions, mapping out his weaknesses.

“Good Lord...” Red sighed blissfully, his thought patterns taking flight.

Sighing, Red’s gaze drifted downward, watching Lizzy’s little head bob slowly with her actions. He thread his fingers through the dark locks tickling his thighs, unveiling her activity to his rapt attention.

He assumed this was the woman’s way of reprimanding him for his earlier transgressions....not that he was complaining in the least.

In this instance, he would gladly take the punishment. And love every moment.

The inquisitive little mouth was probing and exploring freely.

“Miss Scott...” Red gasped, bunching the thick strands in his hand, holding the woman to one particular pastime, “your skills at oral dic—” he hissed when her tongue curved about his shaft, stroking the rigid flesh with practiced ease “…dictation are superb.”

Red cursed quietly as her already pouty lips swelled, the pink mouth pulling against his girth. Her whole mouth seemed to conform to him, massaging the velvet hard flesh.

Her little tongue flit along the hard length, suckling him. The gentle tugging motion demanded he comply to her will.

“Are you enjoying yourself, honey?” Red eased the dark strands of her hair aside, fixated on Lizzy’s tongue which darted about the head of his cock.

She seemed intently focused on his slit.

“God knows, I am.” a whispered croak escaped his throat.

Liz caught the slick fluid oozing freely from the tip, her eyes closing, “You taste good...” she sighed blissfully when the man gifted her with more, “like warm mulled wine.”

He had read once that soul mates were attracted to their lovers natural pheromones, and he had to wonder... was there some truth to that?
Lizzy seemed to appreciate his natural flavor... and he more than returned the sentiment.

Everything about Elizabeth’s elixir thrilled him like no other, she quite literally drove him insane, she was so fucking intoxicating.

He found himself craving her at random parts of the day. His tongue begged to savor her essence. The urge to let her stir his palate left him salivating and aching with need.

He sucked in a stilted breath, his thoughts stagnating.

Red’s eyes closed rapturously when the slick, hot cushion of Lizzy’s mouth slid along his cock head, eagerly sucking him, desperately seeking more of that flavor she obviously adored.

The bumpy tissue reminded him very much of another opening he dearly loved.

A battle of wills ensued for the man, for she had brought him ever so close to release.

One part wished to waste himself inside this slippery bit of absolute bliss.

The other, wished to partake of the tight creamy hold which offered him a glimpse of heaven on earth.

He flashed back to visions of Lizzy’s eyes dreamily shifting to a crystalline blue as she slid along his cock and the look of awe on her face when he took her deep... the echo of her euphoric cries as he filled her with his thick cream, permeated his mind.

“I absolutely love your present activities, my precious... but you should really allow me to return–” Red gasped shakily. “Yes...just... there, baby. Just like that, yes.”

Red closed his eyes sinking into the lascivious stirrings she was eliciting, “That feels so...” his cock was ultra-sensitive, hardening further with each wave of Elizabeth’s heated tongue.

“I want to...” What? His mind was fragmented with slices of lucidity.

“I should be...” he zoned off into the wonderful sensation, before gathering his wits, “I wanted to do you, baby. Why did you stop me?”

At that moment, he really didn’t care about the reason though, if he were being truthful with himself.

He opened his eyes, fixated on that little ass waving in the air.

“Why don’t you come a little closer,” he suggested, his voice thick with suppressed need, “so I can finish giving you the rest of my... dictation.”

The woman let him go with a wet pop, which left him cold and bereft. Red’s eyes instantly took in the vision of her wet lips and seductive eyes.

“Come here, baby.” he rasped roughly.

Grasping himself in hand, he beckoned the woman closer. “Sit right here...”

Liz crawled her way over him, her breasts dragging along his stomach and chest.

“Yes, Mr. Reddington.” she whispered thickly.

The man’s eyes darkened with lust at the woman’s husky voice. She lifted to her knees, lining up
with his throbbing shaft.

Red’s blood surged though his veins, his entire system attuned and on high alert.

“Jesus Christ...” Red groaned his disdain for a discrete tap on the bedroom door shattered the mood and moment. “Go the fuck away!”

He turned all his pent-up frustration and ire on the intruder.

“Phone call.” Silas’ deep muffled voice came from the other side with a definite hint of amusement for Red’s predicament. As a man, Silas understood it completely.

“It’s important.” Liz rolled to Red’s side, covering herself with the sheet. “Silas wouldn’t interrupt tonight if it wasn’t.”

Red cocked his brow, a look of disbelief in his eyes.

“No, really, go ahead...” she smiled pleasantly, “I’m not going anywhere.”

“And neither is this.” Red gritted, waving a hand over his unyielding erection before Lizzy tossed the sheet over it. The man stewed, inwardly wincing at the need to squelch the emotional and physical state she brought him to.

“Come!” he barked, a mulish rasp to the command.

“You speaking to him,” Liz crooked a thumb to the intruder outside the door, “…or me?” she muttered aside, which drew a reluctant smile to Red’s face.

Silas pushed the door open, heading for the man, phone extended.

“Sorry,” the guard said, his eyes expressing regret more to Elizabeth than Red, “but this one really is important. It’s Michael Fairfax.”

Red was summarily informed.

Liz remembered Michael Fairfax was an integral part of Red’s organization. They had extracted him a couple days back from a rather tight situation where he was held hostage.

Red took the phone, bringing it to his ear. “What?” he griped snippily.

Sighing, he settled into the inevitable. He listened half-heartedly to what was being said on the other end of the line, nodding once or twice.

Liz realized just how vulnerable a state she was in, sinking further into the warm bed, tugging the sheets higher on her breasts.

Silas’ attention wasn’t for her, however. His brow was knitted, his gaze resting on Red’s darkly brooding features.

“How is this time any more critical than–” Red listened, finally focusing his interest.
Liz tugged at Silas’ dark cargo pants.

The man glanced down, his scowl deepening.

Liz smiled prettily, pointing her reasons for daring to touch his person without express permission.

The guard told her; he had killed men for lesser offenses, which tickled her greatly at the time.

If she were honest with herself, it was the reason she invaded the man’s space now.

He wasn’t the only one who could be annoying, after all.

Silas followed the direction of the woman’s well-manicured finger, grasping her meaning.

He sighed melodramatically but crossed obediently, grasping the champagne bucket and glasses in one hand.

Liz gasped, pointing diligently for Silas had forgotten something vital.

The guard’s patience was clearly waning, but he trudged back securing the plate of chocolate-covered fruits in capable hands.

Liz sat back into her pillows, waiting patiently for her goodies to arrive.

Dismissing her surly guard’s mood readily, Liz selected a plump, ripe berry from the selection offered. Smiling happily, she bit into the juicy treat.

She reached for her flute, pouting sullenly.

Silas’ expression did not bode well, but lifted the bottle, pouring the sparkling beverage until the woman beamed sweetly up at him around her strawberry.

Liz graciously offered him a sip... but it only darkened the man’s scowl more.

Silas sighed wearily turning his attention back to the ensuing conversation.

Red had witnessed the exchange, slightly amused by it but also wondered how a woman could turn off such heightened emotions so easily?

Was she not as involved as he in the proceedings in which they had frolicked?

Red scowled down at the outline of the still ‘very’ involved evidence on his part.

He watched Elizabeth bite into the delicious fruit; she felt his eyes, offering him some of her treat.

He couldn’t help the smile, the gesture so sincere, so ingenuous, it rather touched him. He shook his head vetoing the gift.

Liz settled back, pulling her treasure closer, merrily sipping her champagne.

Silas heaved a sigh indicating he was getting bored. The guard glanced about, heaved the bottle out of the ice bucket and finished the remaining liquid in a few gulps.

Liz giggled for Silas’ audacity and Red’s exaggerated lift of offended hand.

How funny the way things changed.
Liz realized she should feel embarrassed, mortified even to have someone present while she and Red were in such a state and a short while ago... that would have been the case.

But now... it seemed natural. Even relaxed.

She rather enjoyed the level of comfort she had found with the man. To her, Silas had quickly become her right hand. She felt she could confide anything to the man at it would remain confidential.

Sure, the man would rib her tomorrow about what he interrupted, but even that... she felt like there was a camaraderie between them. A bond.

She allowed him to see her during an unguarded moment... and in turn, he shared Anya with her.

They were finding their own balance. Their own trust.

Her heart warmed for her guard. Silas was to her... what Dembe was to Red.

She crossed her eyes at the man, tittering her amusement when Silas took her glass away, sipping the cooled liquid before shoving it back into her nimble fingers.

She playfully batted his hand away when he tried to swipe a sweet treat, only to lose the battle when she hastily grasped the sheet to her breast.

The man smirked knowingly, victoriously popping the stolen bite into his waiting mouth.

“You’re on the way?” Red questioned. He shifted his eyes, wincing inwardly. He certainly did not wish to interrupt such a time with Lizzy.

Liz frowned, her head tilting, “What?” she mouthed, halting her glass mid-sip.

“This has to be handled...” Red sighed wearily. “However, the timing is not exactly conducive to–”

Liz waved a hand to get his full attention, halting the man’s words, “Go...” she whispered, nodding her acquiescence, her eyes softening.

The indecision was clear in Red’s features. He didn’t want to go. He wanted to stay. It warmed Liz’s heart.


“I know what’s at stake, dammit!” Red snapped into the line.

While Michael Fairfax’s interest ran to the money and routes this would afford them...

Red’s only thought was for the lucrative opportunity which would allow him access to connections and merchandise that would aid in his endeavors.

Yes, he well knew the stakes involved on this particular mission.

Disappointment welled in his heart. He would have to make a difficult choice.

Liz smiled sympathetically, understanding his dilemma.

She caught his hand, bringing it to her cheek, nuzzling into it before kissing his palm in open affection.
She hoped the small gesture alerted him to the fact she didn’t feel one bit neglected or insignificant. He had long since taken such emotions away.

Side glancing her guard, Liz hoped the man would give a hint of some sort that would convince Red... in this instance, business must be first on the list.

Silas scratched his head, shifting to the other foot.

“How far out are you, when will you arrive?” Red asked.

Michael was in flight, on his way to Red’s location.

“I will meet you.” the decision was cast. Red’s mood fell.

Liz felt the man’s disappointment keenly, empathizing.

She instinctively lifted her hand to his shoulder, her eyes falling absently.

“...Oh.” the man’s still evident arousal burned an imprint under the sheet. She lifted a devastated glance Silas’ way.

Had he seen the....

Silas emitted a throaty chuckle which brought a vivid blush to Elizabeth’s cheeks, her question answered.

And why? She felt comfortable with this man. Why should she feel otherwise? So what he saw the evidence of a job well done! One of which he encouraged!

She fought the blush, proud of her achievement.

Silas knew the face well. He rolled his eyes, admirably hiding his pride in the woman.

Liz had approached the evening with a steady determination... she had listened and prevailed. That much was obvious if the... evidence at hand was any indication.

Red covered the phone in hand, “Don’t you have somewhere you have to fucking be?” he hissed his annoyance.

Silas’ chuckle continued as he sauntered his impressive bulk across the room.

Red’s expression was thunderous as he followed the cocky retreat.

“You two kids have fun now but remember...” the guard halted half in, half out the door, his look an insolent one, “practice safe sex.”

Red’s jaw worked irritably, instinctively reaching under his pillow, his hand curving about the stock of his weapon.

“Now, Red,” Liz tsked her concern, staying his intent, “he’s just being flippant. Ignore it.”

Red ‘flipped’ the guy off.

Silas’ chuckle returned as he shut the door, his mission in life, complete.

Red fumed in silence, staring daggers at the closed door, “I swear to God, one of these days...”
His interest fell away abruptly, another more pressing one taking form in the guise of Elizabeth’s small fingers wrapping securely about his erection which sprang to sudden life once again with the warm touch.

She moved... closer, innocent eyes meeting his inquiring ones.

“Almost finished?” she crinkled her nose. Her free hand trailed a soothing path up the inside of Red’s thigh.

She cupped his sack lovingly, leaning into his sphere. The blue eyes watching him intently.

“...Michael,” Red cleared his throat, trying again for his voice had lacked its usual power,

“Michael, oh...no,” he drew in a calming breath, parting his legs willingly when Elizabeth’s exploration of his nether regions continued undaunted.

Settling her lips against his neck, her mouth curved when his breathing increased at the slight, teasing touch.

“No, it was just Silas being... Silas.” he explained quickly. “Listen, normally any other time, I would offer over my complete and undivided attention but...” he caressed Lizzy’s brow gently with his lips.

The woman boldly encircled his cockhead with practiced ease, teasing the taut flesh, idly circling the large helmet.

Red closed his eyes to the feel, “You’ve caught me at an awkward moment, I fear.” he released pent-up emotions with an exhale, “I was in the middle of enjoying my...” he sought Lizzy out, his stare a heated one, “anniversary gift.”

He ignored the man’s knowing chuckle, more interested in Lizzy’s gentle fingertip as it traveled from his slit to the more than sensitive underside of his shaft.

“But we finish our business upon your arrival?” Red’s tone held a certain amount of strain, he realized. Considering however, he thought he was holding up remarkably well under the circumstances.

“Teterboro, nine a.m.? Got it.” he nodded absently. “I’ll meet your flight.”

Emboldened by his response, Liz grinned impishly at the man, straddling his thighs.

He grunted brokenly as Lizzy quickly situated his shaft against his belly, sliding her hot center evocatively along his strident length.

“Fuck...” he whispered hoarsely.

Liz nipped his lip, flicking a teasing tongue over the abused skin.

“What? Oh, yes.” he recovered quickly. “I will be sure to give her your best.” he closed the phone off, giving over his full attention.

His hands slid about the small hips, situating the woman where he needed her to be.

“Or rather,” he playfully teased, his mouth seeking the full, pouty lips in a searing kiss, “I will give her my best.”

Liz giggled for such audacity, “Oh, Mr. Reddington, you say the most risqué things.”
“What a little cock-tease you are, Miss Scott.” he managed a half-scowl. “I shall have to break you of such bothersome traits, I think.”

Liz smiled placatingly, “You can try, Mr. Reddington.”

“A challenge.” the man murmured, his blood heating. “I do so love one.”

Liz moved slowly, back and forth along his length, in truth, driving the man up the fucking wall.

“Why don’t you be a good little secretary,” he murmured, gently petting the dark fluff rubbing against him as incentive, “and sit on my lap, Miss Scott.”

“If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard that,” she mused, glancing down to her pastime.

“I will make it worth your while, I promise.” he enjoyed her spunk. The repartee amusing him. “There is a bonus in it for you... if you follow my directive.”

Wiggling her little ass, Liz re-centered the man’s shaft to drag along her clitoris, humming her delight.

“A big one.” Liz murmured, her eyes closing to the sensations his body elicited.

Red’s low chuckle sent a shiver along her spine.

“A very substantial one, yes... and in the process,” his eyes dropped to her activity, mesmerized by the sight of his cock head emerging from between her labia, “perhaps we can curb those pesky urges of yours.”

He growled deep in his chest when her clitoris slid along the sensitive underside of his cock, drawing a translucent bead of moisture from his slit.

Lifting to her knees, she bowed her bottom, gasping when the large erection bounced against her backside.

Reaching for the man’s shaft, she set it at her opening, easing the thick head inside, “That would be so nice, Sir.”

Elizabeth painstakingly slid down his length, mewing softly as the pleasure engulfed her senses.

Red pushed upward, the feminine gasp of gratitude pleasing him to no end.

His system went on high-alert. He held her hips firmly in place that she not take his delight away.

Bracing her hands on his broad chest, Liz settled him deep inside, sighing her contentment.

Red’s eyes closed rapturously when her warm bottom settled against his thighs and sack.

“That is the most... sublime sensation,” he whispered breathlessly.

Elizabeth writhed about anxiously, “If you don’t assist me, Mr. Reddington,” already the desire was building, “that may be the only sensation you will be afforded.”

“You can do it, Miss Scott.” his tone caressed silkily. “I have complete faith in your abilities.”

Liz wasn’t happy with his response, or lack of one... all ready the ache inside was causing great distress.
Red knew Lizzy preferred when he took command of the ship, though, he rather liked watching the woman perform when the opportunity presented itself.

He smiled warmly as she situated herself determinedly over his thick thighs. Bracing her small hands more securely, she settled more fully on his cock, slowly rocking her bottom at a measured pace.

“I knew that tight little sheath would fit me like a glove.”

And it did, the silken luxury held him so lovingly snug.

Red’s eyes fluttered closed, envisioning what this must look like from the foot of the bed. It was the most delightful image.

Her fingers curved into the mat of hair on his chest, squeezing the tense muscle beneath it. Her arms tightened, pushing her breasts together. The pert mounds bulged against their confinement, her nipples straining with her growing arousal.

Red’s breath caught as her thumb rubbed teasingly against his own nipple, drawing it into a tight pebble.

“It’s times like these,” he lifted once feeling her frustration through the small out-cry, “I remember why I hired you Miss. Scott.”

Red moaned weakly for the tight little cavern constricted powerfully as the woman struggled with her quest.

His heart raced as the slow, graceful roll of her slim hips found the rhythm that pleasured her most.

“Oh...yes,” she moaned shakily, bouncing with more determination.

“There you go...” he husked his encouragement.

His fingers curved loosely about her hips, the delicate flesh brushing erotically against his warm hands.

His fingers slid up her torso, cupping her soft mounds, her nipples sharp against the soft of his palm.

“M-More...” Liz leaned, her dark locks falling about them in a cascade, swishing hypnotically with their increased movement.

His crisp chest hair tickled her nipples, their breathing becoming more than labored suddenly.

Guiding his hand to her back side, she moaned her relief as the man took her cheek in his grasp, pushing her down as encouragement against his upward thrust.

“Yes...” she gasped her elation. “God, yes...Red...”

Red’s eyes darkened listening to the fucking erotic sounds of the woman getting off. His excitement soared as Lizzy’s unrestrained cursing and the shaky, breathless cries of her passion increased as she neared rapture.

“You feel so good...” he growled his exhilaration watching his cock rapidly disappear into her dark curls, “...Yes.” he hissed sharply.

Elizabeth’s wanton mouth silenced him for a goodly spell. He had no cause for complaint.
Soon enough, the two lovers sank deep into the erotic dance, moving in concert with one another. Their aroused cries intermingling as one...

Red realized, what a fool he had been.

It took this one moment to make him fully comprehend how truly blessed and fortunate he was to have her support and understanding.

He worried in the beginning she might grow to resent... even hate the constant strain his position might put on their relationship.

He need not have worried, obviously.

Lizzy just let him know, in her own subtle way, should she desire his undivided attention... she would, without doubt... get it.

Only, he never expected in a million years that should he be waylaid by business or any other distraction, that Lizzy would capture his attention using this very unique method.

It went without saying, he was very much enjoying the surprise and was more than ready to handle those demands when they should arise.

While she enjoyed, even basked in his attention... she was just as content emerging herself in work or simply enjoying some quiet downtime, alone.

A precious commodity to a male. And to a female, he imagined.

It calmed his heart realizing that she found her comfort in solitude. She finally found her balance.

What was the old adage? How can one make another happy if he is not content unto himself?

An apt question and one couples had struggled with down through the ages.

Red has his own struggle at present. He decided to put his whole heart and soul into resolving that.

Which is exactly what he did.

Elizabeth walked carefully, cautiously, her eyes constantly darting into the creepy, shapeless shadows of the endless alleyway.

The dirt and filth of the place permeated the air. Trash of every sort blew along the wet pavement at her feet. The pungent stench of decay wrinkling her nose.

Oily water lay in stagnant puddles and ran haphazardly into the numerous crack and crevices of concrete that had seen better days.

The oppressive heat, stale air and tall tenement buildings towering overhead, closed in around her, leaving it hard to breathe.

Large dark, cracked window panes stared back sightlessly. Her eyes darted from one to another... finding none held her reflection within.

She startled, spinning about quickly as a large rodent scurried unhurriedly across the dimly lit path she walked, its grotesque face making her shiver involuntarily...
Red awoke, some inner sense alerting him to a problem.

The woman beside him lay tense and coiled, the beautiful brow furrowed broodingly. She shivered visibly. He moved instinctively closer.

Elizabeth forced herself to move onward. She sensed she must... she had to keep going. She must reach him, she could not fail him.

He needed her.

Red raised to his elbow, watching the lovely face with a critical eye. Much of Lizzy’s features were shadowed in the darkness of the room but he sensed her distress, wondering at his options.

It was late. She was tired, surely.

Perhaps whatever disturbed her rest would pass on its own.

The wind picked up, the strength of it whipping Liz’s hair into her line of vision.

She raked the strands absently aside, swallowing hard.

A mammoth door had materialized. It stood, baring her path. The path she must tread... a deep-seated fear now gnawed at her mind.

She did not want to approach that door, let alone open it.

What lay behind?

She stepped back, recoiling from its vicinity for it moved closer and closer, looming menacingly over her, taunting her...

Terrifying her.

Red moved closer, soothing the woman’s brow, the soft murmurs of a nightmare alerting him to Elizabeth’s state finally.

“It’s okay, baby... I’m here.”

He conformed his body to hers, leaning over the troubled woman, his own brow furrowed with concern.

“Wake up now...”

“It’s okay, baby...”
The words reassured and suddenly the door didn’t seem such a fearsome thing. She knew that voice.

“I’m here...”

Elizabeth rushed forward, her hand gripping the ornate handle rapidly.

She threw wide the door...

Her smile of relief faded into oblivion.

They were standing over him... their faces holding a sadistic grimace of triumph... delight.

“No!” she knew their intent, just as she knew, nothing she could do would prevent it.

“D-Don’t!” her pleading fell on deaf ears. “Stop!”

She scrambled, reaching around... the fear... the hopelessness intensifying, when she found her weapon missing.

“No!” she screamed at the hands holding her back, struggling against their unmovable power.

Red tightened his embrace on the trembling form, closing his eyes to the terror present in Elizabeth’s frantic cries.

“Wake up, baby.” he whispered his own growing desperation. “It’s just a damned dream, that’s all...”

They looked at her... all three of them.

The faceless men looked at her with empty, soulless eyes.

She sought the man who lay at their feet... in the grime and dirt of the street.

Red’s eyes held such an infinite sadness... he shook his head minutely, those eyes softening for one brief second in time and she knew he was saying his last goodbye.

Everything moved in slow motion.

The weapons were lowered, pointing.

She screamed... pulling with all her strength on the sightless obstacle holding her back.

The fire spurt from the deadly barrels, lighting the darkness with each explosive burst.

Red’s body jerked upward as the bullets penetrated his torso...

Over and over... again and again...

Red started, surprised by the shrill screams. He pulled back slightly, reacting before he could prevent the action.
Joe burst into the darkness of the room, nearly taking the door from its hinges, weapon drawn and aimed with deadly accuracy.

Red’s own weapon lifted automatically as he shielded Liz’s body protectively.

Joe hastily averted the weapon, rushing to the far edge of the room, scanning the darkened interior for signs of trouble.

Red’s arm lowered as Silas’ bulk filled the doorway, as the guard too arrived, ready to assist in whatever crisis had arisen.

Dembe was not far behind, hovering outside the door, a formidable back-up to be reckoned with.

“It’s a fucking nightmare.” Red’s tone was a grave one. “I can’t get her to wake up...”

Silas flipped the light switch. All three men approached the center structure of the room, all having ascertained that no real problem presented itself this night.

Liz’s struggles were real, however. She frantically squirmed about, twisting and turning, this way and that.

Red was careful to preserve her modesty, but it was becoming more difficult to prevent the woman from harming herself, her strength surprised him.

Liz rushed to Red, kneeling beside him. The unforgiving concrete jabbing painfully into her knees. Her eyes anxiously scanning the blood-soaked area of his clothing.

Oozing red rivulets of life trickled out with each ragged breath the man took. One wound in particular caught her attention. She placed her hands over the gaping hole, physically attempting to hold back the flow of thick, sticky blood.

“My God.” she whispered brokenly, watching the red liquid seep through her fingers. “...My G-God.”

Red’s breathing was shallow, raspy, an odd wheeze escaping his blood spotted lips.

“It’s okay, Lizzy. You’re fine... safe.”

She looked at him, meeting those light blue orbs which stared back at her, the light fading second by second within.

“M-Me?” a terror filled her heart. “Red... don’t go!” she sensed it was out of his hands this time... that he had to leave. “Please, stay here!”

Silas knelt beside the bed, studying the woman diligently, “It’s a night terror.”

All those present witnessed such things with their men before and after combat situations. Hell, had even experienced the occurrence themselves.

“Move carefully, Raymond.” Dembe warned. “It is very real to her, whatever she is experiencing.”

Wrapping his arms about her, Red held the fighting woman stationary. Quickly rolling the woman
into the bedding, he forced his knee between Lizzy’s, settling into the gap provided. Leaning his weight into her small body.

Tucking her arms at her sides, Liz pressed at some imaginary wound in Red’s chest.

“Please!” she whimpered, still fighting Red’s hold for all she was worth. “Please...someone help him...”

Joe was troubled for the young woman. He’d grown fond of Elizabeth. He hated she was going through such a horrible ordeal.

When he heard the raw, uninhibited feminine sounds coming from Red and Liz’s bedroom, he’d been amused. Tonight had been no different from any other night.

The quiet ensued after a spell, however. He settled down to his routine. Minutes ago... that spine chilling scream jostled him from normalcy.

All he could do at the moment was wait, just like everyone else and hope Elizabeth came out of the nightmare soon.

Nightmare hardly described what the woman was experiencing. He knew how real... just how horrific the journey could feel.

“Don’t go...” Elizabeth sobbed faintly, all the fight and hope gone, “Red...please... don’t leave me here.”

Red’s brow pinched with strain, watching Lizzy in the throes of her terror.

“Elizabeth!” he snapped sternly, brusquely jolting the bed as he did so.

The woman’s face scrunched with distress, her balled fists pushing helplessly at Red’s weight, fighting the restraint weakly now.

“I can’t do this alone.” she whispered shakily. “I can’t.”

“Dammit...” Red hissed. He controlled his own distress, taking a calming breath.

“Lizzy...” Red murmured in the woman’s ear, “it’s nothing but a nightmare.” he soothed. “If you’ll open your beautiful eyes,” he kissed the delicate lashes before working his way back to her mouth, “...you’ll see.”

The man’s mood fell further when the woman’s lip quivered uncontrollably, tears falling from the corner of her eyes.

“We’re safe..” he continued softly, gently kissing the tears away, “it’s over, baby...”

Tightly squeezing his eyes shut, he fought against the urge to forcefully drag the woman upright and shake her into awareness... her despair was so acute.

The woman’s lips curved into a tight pout but she slowly turned towards the sound of his voice, easing her struggles even more so, he gratefully acknowledged.

“Yes...” Red tenderly kissed the concentrated frown, “you hear me, don’t you?” he crooned, peppering her mouth with gentle affection. “I’m here, sweetheart,” he assured.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~
Elizabeth sensed her life ebbing right along with Red Reddington’s.

She felt his breath lessen with each passing second. Steadily holding her hands over the heart area, but the strong vital beat had diminished.

She could not feel even the slightest tremor inside his chest cavity. She felt numb inside.

The red ooze halted its flow. Readjusting her hold, she added more pressure.

She was doing it wrong... something was wrong.

*Something was terribly wrong.*

“Hey...” Silas spoke in an even tone.

Elizabeth started... she knew that voice as well.

“Get out of the way.” Silas’ customary brusque tone filled the silence of the tense room.

The man gently moved Elizabeth’s hands aside.

“I got this... I can do it.” Silas stated.

Liz’s hand twitched under his hold, hesitating a moment, “He won’t... listen to me.” she replied tearfully.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Red stressed his tone, “I promise.”

“He will listen to me.” Silas promised as well.

The woman eased her hand from under the large palm, allowing the invasion.

Coming alongside Silas, Dembe crouched, “Raymond is fine...” he said in his calming manner.

Liz struggled, trying desperately to break the surface of the dark murky substance surrounding her.

“We are safe here...” Dembe continued.

Red tenderly petted the wild hair framing her face. He took the handkerchief Dembe offered, blotting away the beads of sweat on her small face.

Liz took a lungful of air, gasping for reality.

“Yes...” Red soothed, “open your eyes.”

Turning away from the bedside lamp, the woman squinted away from the light Silas had switched on. Red grasp her chin gently, making sure the first thing she saw, was his face.

Liz startled awake, her eyes flying open.

“We’re all right...” Red urged quickly.

Her eyes flew to Red’s torso, finding Silas’ hand on Red’s chest... just as he promised, for the man had hastily replaced the appendage knowing her senses would be fuzzy when she first came around.
Liz’s trembling hand gingerly reached for the imaginary wound that had caused her so much pain and despair. Silas removed his hand, showing her... Red’s unblemished flesh.

Red caught her fingers, pressing them against his warm, dry skin as further assurance.

Elizabeth stared transfixed.

It had seemed so real... so very... real.

She lifted a dazed stare.

Red engulfed her in his embrace, holding tightly to the shaking form, his stomach churning chaotically for her state of mind.

“Shh,” Red opened himself to the distraught woman, “it’s all right. It was just a bad dream.”

Liz scrunched herself closer into his tight hold, grasping at his stability.

“See,” he crooned softly, pulling the trembling woman closer, “we’re all here. Everyone is okay... everyone is fine.”

Liz shifted her eyes to her surroundings. They were not in a filthy alley at all.

Dembe and her guys stood beside the bed, armed and alert. She found solace in that. She glanced between them, wondering how it was possible for men wearing nothing but pants, to be so imposing.

“I’m sorry...” she wept her embarrassment and regret.

“Do not concern yourself, Elizabeth.” Dembe murmured solicitously.

“It’s been a long day.” Silas added, brushing off the unneeded apology.

Liz nodded jerkily against Red’s neck, tightening her arm about his shoulders.

Easing to his side, Red took her with him as he went. The woman inched closer into his hold, regardless.

Dembe grasped a throw blanket. Joe moved the blankets at the foot of the bed, closer to Red’s reach, both men sensing a small way to assist.

Once situated, Dembe billowed the throw specifically over Elizabeth.

“Thank you all,” Red rubbed the woman’s back in a methodical pattern. “I think the worst has passed.”

Lifting his eyes slowly, checking with Dembe and Silas who nodded minutely in agreement.

Dembe gestured for the other two to proceed him, “Call if assistance is needed.”

Red waved a hand, silently thanking each man for their timely response and concern, the door was closed behind them.

The room went back to its normal, complacent quietness.

Running his large palm against the naked expanse of Liz’s back, Red gently adjusted her even closer into his hold, allowing her body to become flush with his warm one.
Why now? He wondered. He thought they were working well towards erasing any doubts or fears she may carry.

“Lizzy? Talk to me.” Red muttered softly, rubbing her hip, warming her chilled frame.

The woman shook her head, keeping her face hidden in the crook of his neck. She wasn’t ready.

Sighing, Red ducked his face into her neckline, kissing the baby soft skin, allowing her a moment to gather her thoughts.

He learned quickly on, Lizzy would always need a few moments to find her center... her reality.

He would just have to wait it out.

He supposed, he couldn’t blame her.

It had been eons since the woman had a trusted confidante she could truly be vulnerable with.

He understood the premise of such a way of life.

It had been so long since someone had comforted him that when Lizzy offered her support as they stood over Jack’s grave at Arlington... he had needed a moment to let that reality sink in.

She administered to his fragile state so lovingly. He still reveled in the gentle nurturing embrace as he wept that day.

When the hell was it the last time he cried, and not just cried... but sobbed his heart out?

When he lost his daughter, he supposed. No other time came to mind. Red had learned how to channel his grief, how to bottle his emotions... how to shut them down completely if necessary.

The words Lizzy bestowed upon him that day had also been wholly unexpected. She didn’t just see the monster anymore, but the human inside.

There had been no censure that a man, who killed supposedly without conscience, could feel pain for someone he loved who had passed. He felt no form of judgement from Lizzy.

There were no empty phrases to appease the man either. Just quiet words of empathy. Liz had lost loved ones. She knew... she understood.

And if he were to admit it, Red had seen a glimpse of himself he thought long dead, at that grave.

In that split moment in time, Red had seen another side of Elizabeth Keen.

She had been steadfast in her comfort, the long minutes he grieved.

Such a private moment had arisen this night as well. And at this moment, Lizzy sought him out, needed his comfort.

She held him close, her arms embracing him tightly, allowing the pain to ebb in its own time.

Everything he lost in his life seemed magnified that fateful day. All of it pouring back like a downpour designed to bring the man to his knees. It would have been so easy to surrender to the overwhelming emotions.

But Red hadn’t been beaten because Elizabeth had been there. Her compassion filling the gaping
holes of his life which had been torn asunder.

Such a private, special moment... grievously intimate in nature, and yet made totally acceptable by the ready empathy from Elizabeth... that even Red Reddington was allowed a moment of weakness.

She was a port in the storm that day... a stay hold when he needed it most.

He tried so hard to be the same for her.

And so, he waited patiently now, feeling his inadequacies deeply. He wished he could do more.

Most of his contemporaries found such an emotional state uncomfortable, he knew. Consoling a distraught female was something they avoided like the plague.

Red didn’t feel like that at all.

That’s not how he saw it.

There were good times. There were bad times. One didn’t cancel out the other.

They just were. You handled them to the best of your ability and hopefully came out stronger on the other side.

Lizzy settled a bit, her tears subsiding. He waited for a better sign, however, that all was well.

Shifting to wrap his other arm about her, Red methodically rubbed what he could reach of her small body, hopefully soothing her further.

“Tell me...” he muttered encouragingly, his tone supportive, concerned.

Over time, Liz slowly repeated her dream to him in hesitant stages. She constantly sought to connect her hand, reaching, touching him, as if reassuring herself this was not a dream.

“You were down,” she sought his eyes, the pain within them undisguised, “… and they just kept shooting you.”

Red got lost in the slow rhythmic motion of his hand massaging small circles into her flesh, concentrated in the sordid, violent tale she related.

He could understand now where the trauma originated.

It had been a long couple days, weeks really. One tragedy after another seemed to plague them.

So much had transpired in their lives. A few incidents came to mind. He had been shot... twice. She and Silas made it through a car wreck, Carver approached her, Tom was stalking her...and today, she had watched her lover taking heavy fire.

It was no wonder the woman cracked under those conditions.

He should have anticipated this... especially after tonight.

Lizzy had been given a token glimpse of the life she and Red could experience if matters were different. If he was not who he was.

...If she were not who she was.
Their evening had been... wonderful.

Dinner, dancing, romance... followed by playful lovemaking and a gifted symbol of commitment and promises of so much more, all of which were given to her by a man who loved her deeply and without reservation.

But Lizzy, having a touch of fatalistic tendency, waited for that to be ripped away from her.

And who the hell could blame her?

Everything she loved had been stolen away her entire life.

But not this time, not if he had anything to say about it.

He couldn’t promise her nightmare would not eventually come to pass. That things like that would never happen. He couldn’t even assure her he would evade such a circumstance, especially considering the events that took place earlier.

He sighed mentally, “We take all the precautions we can, Lizzy,” he murmured. “All we can do is try to prevent such an occurrence. I do try my best. I assure you.”

She exhaled shakily, reaffirming her hold.

“Trust me on that.” he asked. “I will do everything in my power to come home to you every day.”

The silence engulfed them for a few moments. Liz’s hand gripped his tightly at one point, worrying his fingers with her own, a good sign her anxiety had not passed. She wrapped her arm around his waist, moving decidedly closer to him.

“What are you thinking?” he murmured, sensing she needed something he had not supplied as yet.

“It’s just...” she said, “it was such a great evening and–”

“And it still is.” Red assured. “We’re here, together, right?”

She nodded, settling more comfortably in his arms.

“But... that’s not what you were thinking.” he said. “Is it?”

Red smiled when the woman slumped dejectedly against him... knowing he wouldn’t let her off easy.

“If we don’t discuss it, it won’t get better, will it.”

“Is it...” she hesitated, “always like that? Today, I mean?” she asked, lifting trusting eyes. “I know you don’t tell me everything and--”

“Today was... an odd occurrence.” he replied readily. “We’re usually afforded more cover.” he admitted. “More man power.”

Having time to rethink the incident, she fretted, “Why didn’t Francis--”

“Francis was willing to send a whole battalion but,” Red captured her lips in a fleeting brush of intimacy, “that would have made things too confusing. I surround myself with capable men with each passing circumstance. They will adapt, regroup and manage.”
Liz knew that. There had to be a clear definition of who was who to limit the chances of friendly fire, as well.

“I saw...” she exhaled shakily, recalling the moment, “one of our guys, on the roof.”

Red remained quiet, allowing her to gather her thoughts. To express her fears aloud.

“He had a problem with his weapon or,” she shrugged minutely, “something, I don’t know.”

Red frowned slightly, wondering where she was going with this.

“He had to fight, hand to hand with a guy up there.” she said.

Red’s frown deepened. It was unlike his men to not carry a back-up. He would look into the matter.

“I think,” she lifted confused eyes, “he stabbed the other guy.” she shook her head. “All I know for certain is, the bad guy fell. It was horrible, Red. The reality.”

The man tempered his reaction to want to protect her from such a sight, even knowing what the woman did for a living.

Red would never understand the nature of humans, those that couldn’t look away from a car wreck or that would crowd around to see Carvers victim in a body bag. It was a knee jerk reaction he couldn’t tame. It disgusted him, such people. It disquieted the man.

He wanted desperately to spare Lizzy such things in life even though he knew such things were a reality of life.

He was fully aware she knew such things existed. Had even seen a few. But to think of her seeing it playing out in real time, was a totally different kettle of fish. He couldn’t help wishing to shield her from the horrors mankind inflicted on their brethren.

Red had lived a full life; he knew what happened out in the world. More than most. And if he was honest with himself, delivered the death blow himself more times than he wanted to count.

At one time he thought he may have lost his humanity, but if that were true, would he be wishing to cover Lizzy’s eyes, blocking sight from the horror of it all?

Maybe she had found a little piece he had left inside? A piece only she could bring out of him? A piece that had been there all this time, waiting in reserve, to be used for the right person?

Waiting for... her.

But as to the question itself, what about it had stuck in her mind?

“The method of one’s demise can be very disturbing,” he agreed. “But you know that. What exactly was the point of your observation?” he finally asked.

She swallowed hard, taking a breath, “Have you...” she hesitated, “ever... what was it like for you...”

Red became introverted, not certain this was the time or place. He placated.

“I was not always as I am, Lizzy.” he tried to recall those times but it was becoming increasingly difficult, for he suppressed that period diligently for so many years now.

“I’m just trying to,” she wasn’t certain what she was attempting in reality, “I guess I hope that, you
don’t feel, what I felt today. Seeing that man... fall.”

Red remained silent, his face grim.

“Does it hurt you? Did you feel...” the words she searched for, forming. “The first time...”

“I felt sick. It bothered me for a very long time.” his jaw tightened, recalling the emotions. “I didn’t want...” he sighed, pushing the misery aside, “he didn’t give me an option. I tried to push him away, to give him an out...” he explained, shaking his head.

“But I was the enemy and you kill the enemy.” he continued, reciting the mantra he had been taught. “It came down to him or me. And with a new baby at home, I was going to make sure it was me that walked away.”

“There must have been times...” she hesitated, unsure how to voice the question. “Was there a moment when you believed you wouldn’t...”

Red understood the question all too well.

“I’ve been in firefights so intense, you could sense Death looking over your shoulder, standing by... waiting,” he licked suddenly parched lips.

“The sound of a bullet tickling your ear drum made you numb for a moment, with the thought... what could have been.” he admitted. “A few close combat situations that got a little hairy.” he shrugged those away.

“Were you scared?”

“Sometimes, but sometimes I wasn’t.” he told the truth. “When I was younger, I was cocky.” he arched a brow, remembering his over-inflated ego. “As I got a little older, I realized I wasn’t so invincible. But then, I had experience and a lot of anger on my side.” he chuckled hollowly. “It really just depended on the situation.”

“Did you ever think you were going to die?”

“A few times, yes.” he nodded.

“How, what happened?” she was on edge. Coiled so tight, anxiousness and despair were the upmost emotions present.

“...Lizzy.” he sighed wearily.

“I need to know.” she whispered tightly. “I need to know what the worst has been so I know your chances of walking away.”

Red hesitated, unsure of his options here. He studied her face for a long moment. He read the fear.

In this instance, not knowing would cause more damage than the truth which he could spin any way he wished to protect her.

“There was one time,” he kept his tone calm and steady. He hadn’t been so calm and steady at the time, he remembered. Viciously pissed, was a more apt description.

“I had been taken prisoner. For some reason I can’t even fathom now, I was being most uncooperative.” he smiled but she couldn’t echo the gesture, those eyes troubled and fretful.
“So there I was... a prisoner, immobile. At the mercy of this guy who I was certain was relatively pissed off at me,” he sing-songed his head, telling the tale in his own inimitable fashion.

“And for no reason I could fathom, completely out of the blue,” Red halted the narrative, wondering if he should stop sharing so freely, “the son-of-a-bitch sticks a gun in my mouth.”

Liz stifled her gasp of horror for she needed the knowledge that was forthcoming. She needed it even more desperately now.

Red revisited that moment in his life, taking a few seconds, “I didn’t like the sensation of the damned thing at all... left a rather unpleasant metallic taste in your mouth for days.”

“Red...” she sighed wearily for his flippancy. The silence was strained for her, not so much for the man.

“You know, I just sat there... watching as he pulled that trigger back,” he flicked his tongue about his mouth, “it’s amazing the things one considers at such a time. I kept thinking of this old dog I once saw on the side of the road...”

Liz lay quietly, her head against his chest. She listened to the rolling timber of his voice. His heart beat.

“Dembe and I had taken a wine tour in the South of France. We were driving down this dirt road, our GPS having gone on the fritz, failing us dismally... and there he was,” Red waved a hand, “looking half-starved, large brown eyes staring up at me, tongue hanging out to the side... the dog, not Dembe mind you.”

Liz couldn’t get past the trigger being pulled back. The thought of how very close the man had come within...

“Dembe pulled over. I mean, what else could we do, right?” Red laughed shortly. “So there we were, out in the middle of nowhere, sharing our lunch of sorts. A bag of roasted peanuts we bought off some kids peddling them on a street corner and what was left of my breakfast...”

He nodded to himself in remembrance, “If we’re ever in that part of France, remind me to take you to this quaint little bistro. They make the most exquisite quiche...”

Liz held tight to his stability of the man, the soft, melodic voice calming her nerves like a soothing balm.

“We shared our water and wine with our canine friend, he seemed to have an affinity with Dembe’s Merlot... no accounting for taste, there.” the man stopped to breathe, “All in all, we spent a most pleasant hour. All three suitably bolstered by our respite.”

Red lowered his eyes taking in the woman quietly listening, “We took to our respective paths in life... the dog scampered off into the orchards and Dembe and I, our spirits renewed, were once again determined to persevere in our quest for the elusive winery that had eluded us thus far.”

The silence returned.

“Red,” Liz lifted a soulful stare, “what happened with the man?”

“My people rushed in at exactly the right moment to save my ass.” he shrugged nonchalantly. “Which is what I pay them handsomely to do, isn’t it?”
Liz processed, her voice steady enough now, “Did they kill him?”

Red briefly thought about lying. He thought very hard on the subject.

“...No.” he said, “he escaped, sadly.”

“The information he wanted. That you wouldn’t give him,” she had already figured it out, “it was about me, wasn’t it?”

Red could already surmise the outcome of this little tête-à-tête, “In a manner of speaking,” he hedged his bets.

“So, he is still out there... looking for me?” her tone sounded so normal, so mundane that the man crooked his head to catch a glimpse of her expression.

“If that is the case, he is wasting what little time he has remaining on the planet,” again, he evaded, “let’s just say, we have some unfinished business that needs attending.”

“What does he want from you?” Liz was at a loss.

Red tightened his arm around her, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. “...You.”

Liz was stunned, sudden realization dawning. While she had been living daily life; going to the grocery store, watching a movie, enjoying a meal. Doing all the normal trivial things a person did, day to day...

Red had been there, in the background... watching over her, protecting her.

Even to the extent of risking his own life to ensure hers continued on.

Not giving away her location, even when some maniac stuck a gun in Red’s mouth... he hadn’t sold her out... he’d protected her.

Liz shuddered visibly, “...Why?” She breathed her awe, her stricken eyes seeking an answer.

“Why does he want you?” Red queried quietly.

Liz shook her head, “Why would you give up your life... for mine?” the idea boggled her mind. “And why is this bastard necessitating that you do?!”

Red took his time formulating an answer. He could feel the nervous tension in Lizzy’s body.

“He thinks I facilitated Katarina’s disappearance.” he rubbed his fingers into his tired eyes. “He wants to get his hands on the Fulcrum, for his own benefit, reasons.” there were any number of reasons. “It’s complicated, Lizzy.”

The woman’s head was reeling with the reasons and possibilities and what-ifs.

She knew this was probably not the best time to get into a long complicated explanation, “You’re speaking about... my mother’s husband.”

“Yes.” Red drew in a breath. “But none of it matters because he will never, ever, get to you.” he lifted her face with a gentle hand.

“What kind of person is he?” she had to wonder. “This man who acted the part of my father in some capacity for at least four years,” Liz was getting upset again, anger boiling to the surface for the
injustice of it all, “four years for God’s sake... apparently he had no feelings for me at all. His only interest, his only concern is... the Fulcrum.”

“Consider the source and when you do... realize that in the larger scheme of things,” Red reminded, kissing her forehead gently, “these people have no importance in your life what-so-ever.”

“Never did, I guess.” she lay back against him, mentally exhausted.

If she had learned nothing else tonight though, Liz knew, without doubt, Red Reddington protected those important and close to him.

“Are you afraid?” he hated to think she might be experiencing such turbulent emotions.

“I’m more pissed,” she granted, “and worried for everyone around me. That they could end up hurt or worse because of me.”

“Well, don’t be. None of us are ready to check out, just yet. We’ll go when we’re damn well ready to and not one second before.” he assured. “Roll over.” he pushed gently on her hip.

She rolled to her other side, giving him space. Red moved forward, wrapping his body around hers. His evened breathing and warmth relaxed Lizzy, making her eyes heavy.

“We’re all safe.” he crooned quietly in her ear and continued to do so until she relaxed. “And you know damn well that wasn’t what I meant. I asked if you were afraid.”

Liz dropped her eyes, idly tracing the lines in the large hand laying against her stomach.

“I couldn’t help you today, I couldn’t do anything to–” she huffed her irritation. “I was useless to you and everyone there.”

Tom Keen... Carver. Her inability to assist them today. They had thrown Lizzy for a loop. She was feeling unsure again, unsure of herself.

Just like he had, even after facing great uncertainty.

She needed reassurance she would get through this... recover and persevere.

Red had felt these things countless times when he was her age. He understood. He knew how to fix the problem.

“You’ll be normal again, Lizzy.” he murmured quietly. “You’ll go on just as you did before.”

She was quiet a moment before turning her head slightly. “How do you know?”

She had been looking to him for the security she had been missing, but was slowly gaining back under his ever patient care. It scared her now though... this set-back.

When he had been taken down, it rocked her stability, her foundation.

She thought if there wasn’t hope he would be all right, then what chances did she have?

It hadn’t mattered that he ended up being fine. That it all seemed to muddle, fade into the background after tonight. To see someone she saw as larger than life, unshakable... go down with one shot. Lizzy kept replaying that horror in her mind’s eye.

Failure was a relative term to Red. That he was alive and breathing was a win, in his opinion. He had
changed his viewpoint a long way back..

“Everyone gets bruised and battered along the way,” he said, “it’s how you come out on the other side that matters.” he truly believed that axiom for he lived it most days.

But Lizzy hadn’t learned that yet.

With Carver, she fought against a large man and survived. That she hadn’t taken him down... that he was still out there, taunting her. She considered it a failure on her part she hadn’t ended the bastard.

After her accident with Silas... she held herself together. And twice today, she proved herself cool and calm under pressure.

Red remembered thinking these things to himself, but he never voiced them to her. He should have reminded her of the strength and fortitude she had within herself.

Hell, even Red needed to be reminded sometimes what his end goal was...especially when everything was going to hell. That’s what Dembe was there for, among a multitude of other reasons.

“You didn’t lose. You are not useless. And you sure as hell are not a failure.” he grumbled. “You survive where others don’t.”

She sighed her disgruntlement, shaking her head.

“Baby, survival is paramount.” he stressed. “Not winning.”

She fell quiet for a long moment, so long in fact, he thought perhaps she drifted back to sleep.

“How do you do it?” she whispered. “How do you push past the... fear?”

“Because I have something to live for.” he kissed the back of her head, enjoying the soft tickle of her hair. “Something to fight for.” he tightened his arm about her waist.

She moved back, letting him curve more of his body around her.

“When you have that...” he continued softly, “you can beat any odds they throw at you, didn’t you know?”

Liz turned her ear towards the soothing voice, focusing.

“No one can take that away from you...” he whispered urgently.

“Keep that in mind at all times, Lizzy. They don’t have it.” he explained. “They are at a disadvantage whether they know it or not. You always have the upper hand.”

Clasping his hand, she squeezed it... hard.

“And you will always,” he closed his eyes, his world suddenly serene and calm, “... have me.”
12/09/1954 - 1/21/2019

You are sorely missed, DLR.

You will forever hold a special place in our memories and hearts.
June 6

The next morning proved to be a bright and sunny one. Moods were very much improved by the promise of cheerful rays filtering down.

After a lingering lovemaking session, Red finally allowed Lizzy to leave the sanctuary of the shower.

Red smiled as the woman flittered about the bathroom, a flurry of activity... as usual.

He was certain there was a method to her madness but since becoming familiar with it, he often caught himself wondering how the woman ever completed the act of readying herself for the day. She wasn’t that organized but no one could dispute the end product.

Looping his tie about his neck, he chuckled quietly watching the woman flick undecidedly through her selection of make-up before deciding on one that suited her that specific day.

She did that everyday. He hesitated, realizing... he was now intimately acquainted with Lizzy’s morning routine. The thought warmed him.

She halted mid flick, her mascara wand held precariously to her lashes, sighing wearily when the low ringing of a phone invaded their space.

“I’ll get it.” Red smiled, patting her bottom as he passed by.

She leaned closer to the mirror even though one with a retractable arm was right beside her on the wall.

“Oh!” she tsked her discontent, “Red Reddington, you made me mess up...” she growled, yanking tissues from their holder, after a disparaging sound.

Chortling under his breath, Red found he enjoyed that part of their routine as well.

He craned his head as he neared the night stand, glancing down at the screen of his phone.

“It’s mine...” Red informed the woman. Pushing the button, he silenced the aggravation.

Looking in the mirror, he straightened the dark silk of his tie, running his fingers down the long strip before settling it in place behind his vest.

Reaching for his watch, he hesitated, something catching his eye. Staring down at the cart with the leftovers from their celebration, a smile covered his mouth. His twisted ties draped carelessly over the empty plates, the shredded paper that had held Lizzy’s gift lay in a crumpled ball beside her flowers...

His mood dropped slightly.

There never seemed to be enough time. There never seemed to be a respite long enough to allow them any real amount of intimacy. At least not on the level he required.

Red knew Lizzy felt more comfortable in Dembe’s presence now. She didn’t find her guards intrusion anything more than a slight interruption or breather between lovemaking moments but...
Dammit all to hell, _he_ wanted alone time with the woman _without_ the fucking world knocking at their door every available second.

“Who was it?” Liz asked as she walked into the room, absentmindedly flicking a wayward lock of hair from her eyes.

“Telemarketer.” Red replied in a droll tone, kissing the lips she presented for just such an occasion.

Liz’s mouth twitched, “If you can’t escape them, there’s no hope for the rest of us.”

“When AARP finds me, I’ll worry.” Red quipped, drawing a small chuckle from the woman.

Grasping his watch, he sighed, fastening it in place.

Liz frowned slightly at the sound, before noticing his attention was once again, focused on last nights frivolities.

“I forgot to tell you…” Liz began, she too, had glanced at the cart fondly, “I had a wonderful time last night.” she soothed his dispirited mood.

Red nodded slowly, still slightly put out with how the evening shaped up. She was so important to him. He still wished he had been able to do more.

“Did you…” he murmured dejectedly.

“I did, yes.” she reached for her new bracelet, holding it and her arm, out to the man.

Red took the charm, looping it about her delicate wrist, securing it.

“To be honest… with my team here and everything,” Liz foraged on, determined to make him understand how much last night meant, “I didn’t think we would get as much uninterrupted time as we did. Last night was a treat I hadn’t expected.”

Red tried to look at it from a different viewpoint. He was sure Ressler would have been calling them every ten minutes, or worst case scenario…camped out in their front room.

Turning her hand in his, he kissed her scar. He knew she was self-conscious about it. Personally, he always looked at it as a shared mark between the two, she had _her_ scar and he had his.

He was more than warmed by the thought Lizzy chose this wrist to display her new adornment.

“Well, we did have a little interruption, didn’t we?” he disgruntled.

“Who doesn’t.” she replied airily, watching his lips hover over their shared history. “If it’s not work calling, it’s family dropping by unannounced, the dog jumping on the bed or,” her cheeks flushed, “…kids.”

Red remembered his daughter had the uncanny knack of barging in at the most inopportune moments, but still...

“It’s part of life, Red.” Liz soothed, fastening her earring in place. “Don’t worry about it. I’m not.”

“Lizzy, you can’t tell me what happened last night didn’t embarrass you.”

“It might have at one time…” she admitted, “but…” she hesitated, canting her head, “may I ask you something?”
“Of course.” he leaned into the night stand, wrapping his hands about her hips, pulling her close.

“Has Dembe ever walked in on you making love?”

“Dembe has walked in on me having sex.” Red corrected. “I only make love to you.”

Liz’s eyes softened, wrapping her arms about his shoulders, “Were you embarrassed?”

“No, I’m a guy.” Red told the truth. “I admittedly covered my partner to maintain her modesty but… he sighed, “men look at sex differently than women, Lizzy.”

Liz inclined her head at his reasoning. Maybe that was a true statement.

“Were you trying to make a point?” Red asked.

“I wasn’t embarrassed because, Silas,” she smiled, “is to me, what Dembe is to you.”

Red’s brow lifted slightly as he digested the words. He had hoped Elizabeth and Silas would become comfortable with one another, even build a friendship. He never expected Lizzy to see in Silas, what he, himself did, in Dembe.

He was extremely pleased to know Lizzy found that level of comfort and trust in her guard.

“While it may not have played out exactly as you wished,” she trailed her hand down the lapels of his vest, her heart fluttering, remembering their evening, “last night meant a great deal to me.”

To date, Red Reddington was the only man to ever celebrate that milestone with her. It had meant so much that he had been so thoughtful and attentive.

Women dream about men like that and so seldom find one, she realized.

“I don’t know about you,” she lifted unguarded eyes, allowing him in, “but I celebrate being your partner, confidante and lover every single day.”

Red’s breath caught at the words, shocked to hear them delivered so openly, “And... I count every minute with you as a blessing.” he confided.

“Those little interruptions in between,” she said, “don’t make up a whole moment,” her eyes sparkled with tears, “but they do make us who we are, don’t they?”

A faint flush brightened her cheeks when the man turned their linked hands, tenderly kissing her fingers.

“They do...” he whispered roughly, his prospective altered entirely by her confessions.

She was right. This life, the things that occurred, happened because of who they were. If that didn’t exist; what they were, what they had... most likely wouldn’t exist.

Those minor interruptions changed them in ways neither expected.

Lizzy had found her confidence along with her right hand man. And Red, was realizing what was important in life. His priorities were changing.

“I had a wonderful time with you last night, Elizabeth.” he murmured intimately. “I truly hope we have many more of those... moments... together.”
Liz leaned catching his lips in a gentle kiss. It meant so much to hear Red say those words...to know he fully expected to continue their new found traditions.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

Breakfast that morning was a flurry of activity on Red’s part. Liz watched the man work effortlessly through a maze of phone calls while fielding questions from Dembe and his Head of Security. Dembe had given Red the itinerary for the day, indeed confirming that both men were leaving out at a little after nine, that day.

“Silas, did you make arrangements for Hunter?” Red asked, stuffing toast in his mouth.

“I figured since we were going to Teterboro anyway...” Silas shrugged.

He had the needed discussion with Hunter, confirming the man was very interested in the position Red had offered which would provide stability for Hunter’s family.

Silas lifted a hesitant glance, “Why? Did you change you mind?”

“No, I want him on payroll.” Red assured the guard. “I was just going to say, since I’m going to California,” he said, “I’ll take David and Hunter with me. It’s faster.”

“He’ll appreciate that.” Silas nodded amiably.

“What’s going on?” Liz questioned, sitting her coffee aside.

“Hunter’s boy is graduating kindergarten.” Silas filled her in. “Wants to be there for the big day.”

Liz smiled, before cocking her head slightly, a frown on her pretty features, “Should I find it charming that the man sent to kill me, wants to see his little boy graduate kindergarten?”

Red chuckled into his coffee, patting her hand, “You get used to it.”

She shrugged carelessly, smiling happily when Dembe passed the Blackberry jam.

“Speaking of personnel,” Red paused, watching Lizzy apply the jam to his toast, “get Security on the line.” he pointed to the phone beside Silas. “All of them.”

He had an executive decision he wished to share.

Liz frowned, wondering what Red was up to. She looked at Dembe, finding the man just as clueless as she.

The head guard shrugged, dialing the house. Amir answered immediately.

“The Lord and Master wishes to convey something, to all Security.” Silas informed.

Amir quickly assembled security, putting the line on speaker as did Silas.

Red refused to meet Lizzy’s questioning eyes, instead pouring himself another cup of coffee.

Liz sat straighter in her chair. She could feel a sudden tension rolling off Red in waves.

“When I hired you to protect Elizabeth,” he sat his cup aside, “what did I ask you give her?”

A beat of silence met the question. Silas sighed heavily, throwing his hands up in the air, glaring at
the phone. How often had he drilled the mantra into their wee little brains?

Dembe dropped his face against his hand, rubbing his eyes, wearily.

Joe’s head slumped as he rolled his eyes upward, “In their defense, boss, you would have been met with the same silence if you asked them to spell, potato.” he muttered aside.

“Even the Vice-President didn’t know that.” Liz was quick to defend her guys.

“Privacy, Boss.” Silas gritted. “You asked us for... privacy.”

Liz gasped, her mouth falling agape. Hadn’t they discussed that just this morning! She thought she had made herself perfectly clear on the subject?

She looked at the man sitting at the head of the table, those blue eyes showing their ire.

Red held up a stilling hand, silently asking her to give him a moment to finish.

Liz frowned, hoping Red didn’t reprimand anyone. He had better not!

Her people weren’t being purposefully intrusive, just doing what they had been hired to do. In their defense, Red often had just returned home in some instances, so they were not aware she was in his company. They quickly apologized for the interruption and backed off immediately.

She had grown accustom to it now. They were as much a part of her as Red was.

She smiled warmly at the thought. But not to Red Reddington. She fumed in silence.

“I would like to add an addendum to that request.” Red continued. “From this moment forward, unless it is of a dire emergency,” he looked between the men at the table and the phone, “no interruptions after we go to bed. No phone calls, specifically.”

Dembe lifted his cup, sipping the warmed beverage, his brow furrowed thoughtfully.

“There will be some significant changes coming soon.” Red stated emphatically. “Priorities have changed.”

Liz felt a little put out, truth told. She felt responsible for her guys being on the receiving end of this reprimand.

“I know you have to make your rounds, I know you have to see to her safety...” Red said, “but a simple radio check enquiring as to our well being will suffice from now on.”

A round of mumbled assurance followed.

“To state it bluntly,” Red laced his fingers, leaning into his elbows, “Lizzy and I are dating and we want time... alone. Without the threat of being stumbling over while we are being intimate.”

Silas dipped his head, pinching his mouth together... tightly. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his brow darkening as well.

“Unless there is an imminent threat to Elizabeth’s safety, some dastardly foe is threatening a takeover... or someone is near death or has died,” Red narrowed his eyes, “when the bedroom door is closed,” the man’s tone hardened, “I demand privacy... for us. Is that understood?”

A more pronounced round of, ‘Yes, Sir’s’, followed.
Red jerked his head once, content that his point was made. “Thank you for your understanding on this matter.”

He hung up the phone, leaving the room in silence.

“I am in no way negating your assistance during Lizzy’s... nightmare,” Red clarified to those sitting at the table, “I–”

“There was a standing order of ‘do not disturb’,” Silas interrupted, “seeing that it was an important occasion.” the man’s eyes softened on the woman across from him, much to Red’s surprise. “But with Dembe off the clock and Michael in flight...”

“I understand.” Red nodded. And he did. “I was not referencing your interruption, Silas. It only made me realize something had to change, however.”

Silas sat back, crossing his arms, waiting.

“I don’t expect any of my people to respond to business dealings if they are off duty, as you know.” Red continued. “That most of you do is testimony to how correct I was in my decision to add you to our little family.”

The men at the table shrugged off the praise nonchalantly, much to Liz’s vexation.

“I know you were between a rock and a hard place,” Red said, tapping his finger idly on the table top, his attention once again for Silas. “And my work with Michael, as you know, is usually time sensitive.”

Liz watched Red’s finger move rapidly on the surface of the wood. It was a sure indication Red’s brain was firing and active.

“Congratulations are in order.” he said suddenly, looking between the two guards. “You two,” he gestured accordingly, “have just been promoted.”

“What?” Silas questioned instantly, his brow furrowing.

“You know this job just as well as we do.” Red waved a hand between himself and Dembe. “You know my preferred associates and merchandise.” he continued. “There is no reason why you should wait to have my ‘go-ahead’ to move a damn shipment.”

Dembe nodded his approval and agreement, “You and Joseph are more than capable of moving things along.”

Silas brooded, “I don’t want that responsibi–”

“You have it.” Red interrupted Silas’ refusal. “Deal with it.”

Dembe nodded again, “Deal with it.”

Silas sulked, “And if we should fuck up?” he questioned seriously.

Red cut his eyes, the look contained within, an obvious one, “You won’t.” he was positive.

“But if we did.” Silas stressed.

“Raymond fucks up all the time.” Dembe shrugged. Raymond exchanged a disgruntled stare.
Liz's brows lifted with surprise, hearing the unexpected profanity pass Dembe's lips.

"Be that as it may." Red offered one meaningful glare to Dembe, "There isn’t anything we can’t fix." he assured still looking at Dembe.

"Oh, yeah," Silas remembered one incident in particular, "remember that time you screwed up that arms shipment deal--"

"That wasn’t me." Red snapped. "It was Francis."

"It was you." Dembe corrected.

"They were ‘bad ju-ju’ guns," Red air quoted irritably, "that’s why Francis changed his mind at the last minute and messed up the deal."

"That’s not how it was at all." Silas remembered another version of the story.

"Bad ju-ju guns?" Liz had picked up on the phrase instantly.

"The cache had been used in some questionable activities." Dembe explained the use of the odd descriptor. "It is considered bad luck to pass on such items."

"Questionable activities?" Liz was enraptured.

"You’re missing the point here." Silas argued. "We’re talking about Red screwing up."

"Now, wait a minute," Red took umbrage, "I said... it wasn’t m--"

"Francis saved the day, not you." Dembe purposely pushed his friends buttons if only to see Red’s reaction.

"What?!" Red barked. "If he hadn’t wanted the damned rifles we could have simply passed on the whole deal, but no."

"He’s not psychic, Red." Silas jumped on Dembe’s bandwagon sensing the game was afoot. "How could Francis know the guns were tainted?"

"And why not acquire the weapons, they sold for a good profit, didn’t they?" Dembe countered.

"Because," Red reminded, "I negotiated the new price."

"No harm, no foul." Dembe nodded regally.

Red’s expression was incredulous.

Liz held her amusement admirably knowing Dembe and Silas were just prodding the man.

"Can we get back on topic?" Red demanded.

"Do I get more money?" Silas enquired. "And a fancy new title?"

"I’ll think about the money and no, you get no fancy title." Red snapped.

Joe looked decidedly crestfallen, "I wanted a fancy title."

"Look, we’ll do a trial run." Red offered. "Six months, see how things go."
Silas nodded after a moment, agreeing to the terms, “I want to be addressed as Chief of Security and Defense.” he hooked a thumb at Joe. “He can be my Secretary.”

“Oh, hell no.” Joe protested strenuously. “He’ll want me to get his coffee.”

“Other than that,” Red managed to curtail his tendency to draw his weapon, “keep me the hell out of it. Making up an out and out lie to whomever is wanting my attention, is totally fine with me as long as I am not disturbed otherwise.”

The men looked to one another, shrugging.

“Look, we’ve been at this long enough, we know a real emergency when we hear one.” Red sighed.

“Replacing the inventory after a warehouse fire can be handled anytime.” Dembe agreed, adding his own thoughts to the matter at hand. “Francis getting shot at...”

“Is to be expected.” Silas muttered into his coffee cup.

Liz held her giggle admirably, but not her smile.

Red sighed, shrugging slightly himself. “The point of the matter is,” he turned his eyes to Lizzy, “we deserve some damn down time. Between the four of us, that shouldn’t be too hard to accomplish.”

The men digested the words, not disliking the intent behind them.

“On a personal note,” Red’s eyes softened on Elizabeth, “I need time, alone... with her.” he murmured. “Private time.”

That had been the whole reason behind the announcement today, after all.

All the men at the table more than understood that sentiment.

“It’s high time Elizabeth, and my private life, took priority.” Red rubbed his suddenly aching neck. “You people give me a headache.”

“You used to be able to multi-task.” Silas tsked. “You’re slipping, Red.” he remarked casually.

“I beg to differ.” Liz defended Red’s honor. “He’s more than efficient at multi-tasking.”

Scoffing quietly, Silas popped the last of his bacon in his mouth, pushing his seat back just as Dembe and Joe did.

“It’s good to know at least Big Red,” Silas managed tongue-in-cheek, trailing after Dembe, “isn’t falling down on the job.”

Dembe smiled his amusement as the men exited the room.

Red rolled slow eyes Lizzy’s way, his expression a scolding one. Liz ducked her head, quickly biting into her muffin, hiding her silent laughter.

“I’m going to get you for that, Lizzy.” Red mumbled his discord.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Red leaned against the car, his arms wrapped about Elizabeth’s hips, his wrists linked. The ground crew loaded luggage and fueled Michael’s jet.
He smiled indulgently as the woman looked about her surroundings with avid interest, watching all the scurrying about as a new flight crew arrived, relieving the others. Silas and Hunter assisted David up the steep staircase, all the while ribbing the guy for being such a nuisance.

“You haven’t said much since we left the penthouse.” Red remarked casually. “Are you angry with me?”

“Well, yeah, at first but not now,” Liz pulled back slightly, frowning, “Why? Should I be?”

“About a great many things.” Red replied. “I would imagine.”

“Your little meeting with the guys was impromptu, I’ll give you that.” Liz quirked her mouth derisively. “But no... I’m not angry. Not after I realized what was going on.”

Red’s expression roughened as did his tone, “I do need time alone with you.”

She smiled softly, “It was nice to hear it said aloud.”

He scowled irritably, “I’m not asking for too damn much in the grand scheme of things... am I?”

Liz frowned, hearing the man’s underlying guilt. “Red, whether I’m in the picture or not, any man under the constant strain and stress you are, needs downtime. As much as he can get, if you ask my humble opinion.”

Red rubbed his shoulder, working the tense muscle.

“Stop feeling guilty for being human.” she settled into his chest. “Even you need to sleep.”

Red looked tired today. She studied his face, “I’m sorry I disturbed your sleep last night.”

Red could not simply shut down his mind as she could. He was awake long after she had drifted off, she knew.

He had a habit of running scenarios and possible ways to handle such occurrences should they happen again.

It was just his way.

Red sighed, soothingly rubbing his palm against the small of her back, “I feel shitty, leaving you after what happened last night.”

Liz sighed, shaking her head at all this guilt the man was experiencing this morning.

“Stop it, please, I’m fine.” she assured, even as doubt edged his features. “I would tell you if I wasn’t.”

“Would you?” he shifted an edgy look her way.

“I confided in you last night,” she reminded, “didn’t I?”

Red nodded grudgingly, “And if it happens again tonight?”

Liz held his eyes, scratching her nails soothingly into his nape, a small smile curving her lips.

“You are definitely one of the good guys, Red Reddington. Why didn’t I see it sooner?”
He worried about a repeat of last nights performance, he obviously wished to be there for her... which touched her deeply.

“Then I will call you.” she leaned, kissing him softly. “I promise.”

Red pondered the woman’s mood, his own a little low.

She genuinely seemed all right now... and he did believe she would reach out in some form or other.

“What are you doing today?” he changed the subject in hopes she would be free and could possibly accompany him.

“With Ressler out of sorts,” she shrugged, “I guess I’ll be helping the team with paperwork.”

Samar said what was found so far would fill three warehouses. Lawford had an extensive racket going on.

Red sighed internally, disappointment welling in his chest.

“There’s a lot of inventory to categorize,” she stated casually, “from what I’m understanding?”

Red knew, Francis’ men had already cleared out the bounty they wanted before giving the locations to the Fed’s. But what was left on the preliminary lists was a lot to break down.

“Was there a reason you asked?” Liz questioned.

“Wishful thinking on my part.” Red confessed. “Thinking perhaps, you could fly out with me.”

“I could take the files with me...” Liz was quick to offer.

Red cricked his neck, popping it.

“I would love for you to go,” he hedged indecisively. “But you’re needed here to act as my go between should Francis’ men deliver more dirt on Lawford.”

He just didn’t trust anyone other than Lizzy to get the information to the correct sources. The end game mattered on this one.

“How long do you expect to be gone?” she frowned, trailing a finger over the knot in his tie.

“Could be a day or two.” he realized. “I really don’t know. There are going to be a lot of players on the field.”

“Oh...” she slid her hand down his chest, playing with his vest button, “well, we should be about two days here so... maybe we’ll get done at the same time?” she lifted hopeful eyes.

Red nodded solemnly, sighing his resignation. As much as he would love to spend every minute with Lizzy... they did have work and other outside interference to contend with. Such as life.

His eyes shifted over her shoulder when Dembe came into view in the jet’s doorway. The large man gave a simple wave indicating they were ready to depart.

“At least we’ll both be busy.” she tried for a brightness she didn’t feel. “The time will go by quickly, right?”

Red stood, kissing the mouth he adored, “I hope so, baby,” he got lost in those blue eyes for a long
Red reluctantly took his leave, boarding the plane. Liz smiled brightly when the man turned at the
top of the stairs, looking down at her... the indecision still clearly written in his features.

An unseen person distracted him to his left.

She chuckled to herself when Red instantly turned, bitching at whoever disturbed their last farewell.
He sighed heavily, offering one last wave before disappearing from view.

Standing beside her guard, Liz waved absently at the plane as it taxied past her.

As the jet roared down the runway becoming airborne in seconds, she was embarrassed to feel a rush
of heat fill her eyes. Blinking rapidly to hide the fact, she was mortified when she could not prevent
the hot tears wetting her cheeks.

She had not expected the depth of emotion at the man’s absence. She certainly didn’t anticipate this
reaction, especially not in front of her surly guard.

To her shock, Silas only smiled, handing over a handkerchief. He opened the back door of their car,
esthering her inside.

Liz quickly accepted the out, grateful to have the time and privacy to put herself to rights before
meeting with her team. She knew there was nothing that would alter her somber mood, but she
attempted the mind-set of a staid FBI agent.

“Where to?” Silas asked, sliding the SUV effortlessly into the heavy traffic flow of an early New
York morning.

“The hotel, I guess.” she ran the edge of the handkerchief along her eyes, blotting away the small
streaks beneath them. “Ressler, if not the team, should be there.”

Checking in the mirror, Silas crossed lanes easily, heading in the needed direction.

As they neared their location, Liz was surprised to realize she felt indifferent about meeting with her
team.

On second thought, maybe not so surprising. There was a new dynamic in play, one which she was
uncertain about as yet. Wilson seemed to gel well enough with everyone. But Moore...

She felt the muscles in her body start to tense, readying itself for conflict.

There was a possible bright side, she reminded herself. With Ressler on restricted duty; Moore,
Wilson, and poor unfortunate, Samar would be left to the off-site duty of securing Lawford’s bolt-
holes scattered about the city.

Working with Donald and Aram would be just fine with her.

Silas eased up towards the valet who guarded the grand hotel’s opulent threshold like a Sentinel of
old.

Liz gathered the last of her belongings as Silas came around the car, waving the young attendant
aside.
Silas reached for her door, hesitating in his movements as Joe approached, a pinched look on the other man’s handsome face.

Liz looked out at the two men as they conferred. Both sought a location around the back of the car.

She knocked restlessly at the window, waving impatiently for them to move so she could exit the vehicle.

Silas rolled his eyes at the impatient woman, opening the door, “Stay close.” he directed.

“What’s going on?” she frowned as Joe secured her satchel, offering a hand as she clamored out of the back door.

“Tom’s across the street.” she was informed, Silas’ surliness having returned in spades.

“God...” Liz groaned dismally, “doesn’t he have a life?”

As her guards guided her forward, Liz’s eyes swept the street, finally landing on the nuisance she was trying to locate.

“It’s like a sick game of, Where’s Waldo.” she huffed her annoyance, irritated by the smile Tom offered.

They stepped inside the safety of the hotel lobby, both men taking flanking positions about her as they steered her towards the elevator bank.

“He was between the nun and the hotdog stand.” Joe helpfully replied.

“A nun and a hotdog stand.” Silas snipped.

“The nun and the beach umbrella?” Joe tried again to appease Silas’ darkened mood.

Liz chuckled, picturing the scene. New York did resemble the chaotic and eclectic venue Waldo usually found himself in.

“Waldo was a snazzier dresser.” Silas muttered, jabbing the button for the correct floor.

Liz tittered, a thought occurring, however, “Did Tom just arrive?”

“Night-shift said they saw him arrive about seven this morning.” Joe replied.

“How did he find us here?” she frowned her concern. “How did he know we would come here?”

“Dipshit worked for Lawford a couple times.” Silas shrugged. “And we haven’t been at the house...”

Liz’s brows lifted with initial surprise only to quirk a moment later, the surprise gone. How many other things did she not know about her former husband?

“Lawford’s been in the news,” Joe added, “probably wasn’t difficult to figure shit out.”

“Knowing Red wasn’t a fan of the bastard,” Silas continued, “it probably wasn’t hard to guess how Lawford ended up in federal custody.”

“Say what you like, but Stalker boy isn’t stupid... for the most part.” Joe had to give props where they were due.
And of course, Tom would know Red had an advantage, being in cahoots with the FBI. If Red wanted Lawford out of the picture for whatever reason, Lawford didn’t really stand a chance.

Oh, well...

“But how did he find us here?” Liz still had to wonder.

“It’s close to the field office.” Silas replied. Tom would know any good agents expected movements.

“You think he followed one of the team?” Liz questioned.

“That,” Silas nodded, “or he knew this was really the only place that would house all the people in our entourage.”

Liz frowned hard at the thought. Was Red getting predictable? Had he been so distracted by her that he was allowing-

“Don’t worry.” Silas checked the floor before guiding her out of the elevator.

“When Red’s here,” Joe took the rear position as they walked the hall, “management locks this place up nice and tight. Fort Knox pales in comparison.”

“Red says it would be easy to break into Fort Knox.” Liz relaxed, pushing away her earlier concerns. Of course Red would stay where they were afforded the best security.

“But,” a sudden thought occurred, “it stands to reason security would resume normal operations with Red not in house.” she halted her steps, concern flooding back.

“No,” Silas said, “because you’re here.” he cut her a glance that said, she should know better. “Red... and your surrogate daddy, made it very clear if something happened to you, Ricco would be pushing up daisies.”

“Ricco,” Joe air-quoted,” is management.”

Liz gaped, her eyes widening, “What do you mean... surrogate dadd–”

“Ricco is an associate of Antonio Crocetti’s.” Silas shrugged, as if that explanation were enough.

Liz’s cheeks flushed. She was very fond of Antonio, probably more than she should be but it felt funny, the phrase Silas had used.

She wasn’t offended, certainly because she found Antonio’s presence very comforting. Something about him just... put her at ease. Should it be that way?

“They don’t really think I’m...”

“Antonio’s daughter?” Silas grinned. “If I didn’t know the man, I would assume you were, the way he’s taken to you. It’s logical to assume such a thing, isn’t it?”

“Not so much of an assumption,” Joe snickered behind them, “You should hear Ricco’s men gossiping about how Antonio’s illegitimate daughter is shacked up with Reddington.”

Silas chortled quietly, shaking his head at the news, “Look at you, keeping it in the family.” he approved.
Liz groaned, dropping her reddened cheeks into her hands, “How embarrassing.”

“Don’t knock it.” Silas shrugged. “Because of such beliefs, you have some of the best in the underground offering protection. People will think twice before treading into those dangerous waters.”

“Tom knows I’m not Antonio’s daughter though.” Liz reminded.

“Doesn’t matter what that prick knows.” Joe said. “All that matters is what Ricco and his men think.”

Liz drew in a cleansing breath, sighing it out, “I hope so.”

“And those men have been provided a photo of Stalker Boy.” Silas assured. “He’s not getting on the property.”

“Unless they want him to.” Joe remarked innocently.

Liz and Silas scowled at the man, until Liz shrugged carelessly. If Tom was dumb enough to try and breach the property and get caught while doing so... it was no skin off her back.

“If Tom does get on the property,” Silas added, “it was by design and it’s not going to be pretty, let’s just say that.” he shrugged carelessly. “He hasn’t made a move so far. Why rock the boat, especially here?”

“It still boggles the mind though.” Joe commented. “Why the guy just lurks about. What’s it proving? What’s his game?”

“He has an agenda, rest assured.” Silas knew. “He’s waiting for the right moment. Waiting for an in... which will never come.” he narrowed his eyes at the woman beside him. “Will it...”

“I hope not.” Liz murmured, lost in her private thoughts.

Liz felt a release of tension she hadn’t been aware she was carrying at the words. She would trust Red and Antonio’s reputation and continue to see Tom as nothing more than the pest he was.

Coming align with her teams door, she took a deep fortifying breath. Might as well get the show on the road.

The team hit their stride within a half hour and kept the pace well. The paperwork and data entry had been as expected. Cataloging inventory as it became available was a no-brainer.

But six hours in, Liz was ready to pull her hair out.

Things had not progressed as she had envisioned.

Though the suite was spacious, the entire team made the space feel suffocating. Trying to make headway while squeezing past each other for access to printers and other key systems, was aggravating.

That, along with the constant bickering and lack of a break and food, was slowly wearing her thin.

Liz’s only distraction was looking up every once in a while, finding her guards offering amusing
facial expressions, or interesting hand gestures behind Moore’s back every time the Agent opened his mouth to insert foot.

Liz arose, stretching her aching and cramped foot. She distracted herself by offering Silas and Joe each a cup of coffee.

She more than understood their boredom... and overwhelming annoyance which was clearly evident in their stances and frequent sighs. She offered them a commiserating glance of apology.

Taking a mouthful of the much needed caffeine, Liz turned her attention back to the ongoing conversation. There finally seemed an end in sight.

Ressler was stacking a file of discarded information already entered, “We have a handle on this end of things.” Ressler indicated Liz and Aram. “You can get out there now,” he gestured to Samar, “and get moving on this. Navabi, will take lead on the–”

Moore halted in his stride, his brow furrowing darkly, “What a minute,” he shot a disparaging scowl to an unsuspecting Samar Navabi, “are you naming her as team leader on this outing?”

Ressler’s expression altered at the veiled tone and intended insult, “You got a problem with my call, Moore?”

Navabi’s lovely features clouded over. It wasn’t as if she was not accustomed to such male posturing and tactics.

She had encountered them her entire life, even more so these past few years as an Agent.

It still royally pissed her off that her credentials were constantly being called into question.

“I got nothing against women out here on the front lines,” Moore lied through his teeth but was smart enough to have learned how to navigate the political minefields of his day, “but if we’re being honest here. I actually have seniority in this matter. If you’ve forgotten the fact, I would like it officially noted... I am reminding everyone present.”

Liz quickly took a drink, smothering her laughter when Joe released a low but continuous expulsion of air from below the belt... alerting Moore just what he thought of the man’s seniority.

Silas gave the man an approving nod.

Ressler’s body language was stiff and unyielding, “When I want or need a reminder on any point, I’ll let you know.”

Liz watched Silas carefully for the man had broke off his good-natured ribbing of Joe and had fallen uncomfortably quiet. The light blue-grey eyes watched the unfolding scene with veiled animosity.

It was adamantly clear, Moore had made a grievous mistake in questioning Ressler’s decision.

Liz wasn’t certain why her guard was suddenly so invested in the subject at hand but she did sense a problem was about to rear its ugly head.

“I neither want or need input in my decision making.” Ressler let it be known.

How anyone, male or female, could question Samar’s worth or believe the woman anything other than capable was a mystery to Elizabeth Keen.

“You got an issue with that, take it up with Cooper.” Ressler was in pain, his temper short today.
“I’m just saying,” Moore shrugged carelessly, “there are procedures in place. There is a lot of interest in this case. People high up on the food chain are watching how we handle this.”

“When are they not?” Aram mumbled, irritated for the entire conversation rankled his ire, truth told. He felt bad for the woman beside him who stood by so gravely quiet.

“Yeah well, Navabi has more training in the field than you do.” Ressler pointed out purposely, to Moore if nothing else.

The guy’s complexion reddened for Silas had chuckled lowly... not a particularly pleasant sound either.

“As a Mossad agent.” Moore scoffed his disdain.

Silas’ chuckled died an unnatural death. The man’s expression altered visibly. He slowly pushed himself from his slouched pose against a convenient wall, “What the fuck is that supposed to signify?”

Liz cut him a warning look which was promptly ignored to her chagrin.

Silas approached Moore, his features masked into rigid placidity, “You have something you want to air, spit it out.”

Moore looked the massive man over carefully, “Their training is not the same, is all I’m saying,” the Agent waved a dismissive hand, “we aren’t allowed the freedom they are. Such tactics get our cases blown out of the water in an American court of law. Is that what we want here?”

“You know what I want?” Silas leaned into Moore’s space, his tone almost pleasant. “It’s to throw your sorry, useless ass out the first available fucking window I find.”

Moore was taken aback by the hostility displayed, “What’s your problem? I’m raising a legitimate point here.”

“I don’t need you to take up for me.” Samar stepped between the two men, her pretty features off-putting to say the least.

She pushed Silas’ bulky chest with a slender finger.

The man glanced at the contact.

Liz chewed nervously on her swizzle stick, the taste of coffee somehow soothing her frayed nerves.

Silas refused to move one iota, his gaze a placid one of the pretty Agent’s face.

Samar turned about, her voice not once raising, “Mossad training far exceeds your rather inadequate American tactics.”

“Then I would say.” Moore felt on more comfortable ground facing down a female, “your loyalties might be called into question, if you truly believe that crap you’re spewing.”

Silas’ beefy fist lashed out around the tiny figure between him and his nemesis, his fingers curling tightly into a band of steel about Moore’s lapel and shirt.

“Silas!” Liz hastened forward, her coffee cup slammed down hard on a surface as she passed. “Stop! Don’t!”
But Silas wasn’t having any of it at present. He swiftly stepped around Samar, shoving Moore hard against the opposite wall before anyone could blink.

The momentum sent Moore stumbling back, his head hitting the surface with a sickening thud. A shelf beside them crashed to the floor, masking the sound of the air knocked from the man’s lungs.

Shaking his head, Moore was more stunned than anything at present. He tried to assimilate what had happened so rapidly, it took him by total surprise.

“Silas!” Samar snapped her growing anger.

Liz grasp the man’s burly bicep feeling the tendons pull and tug as the guard secured Moore securely in place.

Silas’ face was a mask of rage and discontent.

“Silas, you listen to me!” Liz commanded. “Stop this, this instant!”

Silas fiery eyes held Moore’s, “Gonna throw your disgusting ass out that window over there....” he jerked his head accordingly to the nearest ‘exit’ available.

“I figure it’s a ten story drop... think you’ll shit yourself before you hit the concrete below? I’m betting,” he seethed, sliding the puny individual closer to the window, “…you will.”

“Silas!” Liz was beside herself. “I said, no!”

Moore, having been taken by surprise, was floundering. Silas had moved his forearm directly over the man’s windpipe, holding any objections or struggles to a minimum.

The Agent’s attempts to free himself from his precarious predicament were greatly subdued by such actions.

“If anyone’s loyalties are in question here,” Silas’ tone was soft and menacing, the ice blue eyes darkening to a dangerous hue, “it would be yours.”

Moore’s fingers gripped frantically at the tight hold against his throat.

“You’ve done nothing but add stress and dissension to this operation the entire time you’ve been involved in it.” Silas jerked his free arm from Elizabeth’s constant attempts to dislodge his hold on Moore.

He leaned closer to his flailing victim, “I’ve taken enough of your shit and that’s why,” he smiled pleasantly, “I’m going to really enjoy tossing your ass out that fucking window.”

Liz’s mouth set stubbornly. She latched on to the burly man’s arm yet again.

“This is not the way.” Samar’s tight tone warned the guard, the dark eyes beseeching Silas.

“Red wants to speak with you.” Joe stepped forward, phone held out between the two sparring participants.

Silas glared at it angrily turning that stare to his counterpart.

Joe shrugged aimlessly holding the cell diligently, weathering the storm of his friend and superiors ire.
“I don’t know what the hell is going on.” Red’s clipped words permeated the suddenly silent room.

Ressler sat back, arms folded, merely watching the scene play out, seemingly content to do so without interference or objections on his part.

Liz threw frantic glances the guy’s way from time to time but it was clear she would get no help from that source.

“But I want it halted immediately.” Red’s words put a damper on the situation at hand.

Silas glanced at the phone, his expression benign now but he had not moved one iota from his intended purpose, Liz noted.

She held fast to her guard’s arm. She and Samar exchanged fretful glances from time to time.

“What the hell kind of situation do you think you’ve put Elizabeth into?” Red’s tone was frigid. “What consequences of your actions will she be left to clear up?”

Silas’ expression altered visibly.

“Why do you think I didn’t toss the bastard out the planes doors?” Red was beyond furious. “Is it really like me to not handle a nuisance in such a manner?”

Silas straightened a tad. Liz felt the tension ease in the man’s body.

“There was a reason I didn’t take care of the issue, personally.”

Silas’ eyes sought out Elizabeth’s stricken face.

“The FBI has cut us a lot of slack.” Red continued. “Throwing one of its representatives out a window will be looked upon dimly, I should imagine. And who will get the flack for such an action?”

“He deserves it!” Silas barked, his arm once again reestablishing its hold against Moore’s throat.

“Does Elizabeth?” Red grated.

Silas closed his eyes, a hard decision having been made.

He eased off Moore in a quick, efficient move.

The guy dropped to the ground, gasping for air.

Silas stood over his foe, his expression not exactly a friendly one.

“I hate this bastard.” he spat his disdain.

“...Yeah, we all get that.” Red let out a controlled breath, sensing the worst had passed. He straightened himself slowly easing the tension from his body. “I believe you have conveyed your feelings on the matter quite succinctly.”

Ressler grinned at nothing in particular. Elizabeth saw the man in a new light, not certain of her feelings on the matter in truth.

Donald went back to his paperwork.
Moore crawled a safe distance away, taking time to regain his lost equilibrium.

Silas’ eyes followed the man with a detached brooding.

“He’s been spewing his filth the entire morning. I’m sick of it!” Silas snapped, his temper, once aroused, difficult to dismiss. “If he opens his mouth one more time...”

“Close it with your fist.” Red suggested tightly. “And that is the extent of how you will manage the matter, do you understand me?”

“Or what?” Silas disdained.

Liz was crushed, having hoped Red could defuse the situation.

“You’ll fire my ass?” Silas scoffed his disgust.

“You know that will never come to pass.” Red shared the truth. “But you also know... if you cross me, there will be consequences.”

Silas’ eyes narrowed, “Are you threatening me?” the idea seemed ludicrous. Silas even managed a choked laugh of disbelief.

“I believe I am, yes.” Red warmed to his mission. “How does an unexpected and distinctly extended visit from your dear Aunt Gertrude sound to you?”

Silas’ face went blank.

Elizabeth sensed a change in the guy. Silas had clearly forgotten all about Richard Moore.

He sought an affiliation with one of his own kind. Joe shrugged helplessly, frantically waving his hands about, his eyes suddenly panicked.

The beefy guard grimaced his discord, dismissing Joe’s concerns gruffly.

Silas demanded details on this latest development, “What the hell are you talking abou–”

“Dear, precious, Gertie.” Red lifted his head, smirking wistfully, “I haven’t thought of her in years! Yes... yes, it’s high time I extended a heartfelt invitation to our... your... beloved, benevolent Aunt, don’t you think?”

Silas’ face was kind of chalky, Liz noted. Her heart thumped heavily in her chest. What the hell was going on between the most important men in her life.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful to see her angelic face again.” Red nodded amiably, knowing he had the guards undivided attention. He sat his tumbler aside, straightening the back of his vest.

“After so long an absence. I’m sure you miss her terribly.” the rolling timber of Red’s voice sent shivers down even Liz’s spine. If she didn’t know any better, she would believe Red was threatening her guard.

“...Look, Red,” Silas sing-singed his head, “maybe I was a little out of line with that ‘throw his ass out the window’ thing...”

Ressler jerked his head about, his interest immediately fixed and forthcoming.

“Besides, Aunt Gertie... she doesn’t travel so well these days, remember.” Silas reminded helpfully.
“Nonsense, she was the picture of health and vitality the last time we visited.” Red dismissed. “I’m sure she would welcome a change of scenery... of course, I will spare no expense to ensure she travels in the very lap of luxury.”

Red rubbed his hands together. Was he enjoying this a little too much?

“We owe her a great deal after all. She was so considerate and attentive to all our needs when we needed her most, I might add.” Red cheerfully recalled.

Silas’ complexion had gone from pale to ashen.

“She didn’t care to help out... it’s just her way.” Joe thought he better help out a floundering workmate.

“Yeah, she wouldn’t expect any type of repayment.” Silas was quick to add.

“All the more reason to offer it.” Red shrugged. “It is long overdue if you ask me.”

Silas wasn’t sure if that ‘long overdue’ thing referenced to himself needing an attitude adjustment... or Red really just wanted to repay his Aunt.

He kinda thought it was the former.

“What fun it was...” Red shuddered himself having to relive the couple of days... my God, had it only been forty-eight hours that he and his men had been forced to hole-up on Gertie’s estate?

“It was the Russians that time, right?” he checked his facts. “They were very determined to locate us, as I recall. And do they ever hold grudges...”

Silas’ head fell back, a pained expression crossing his face.

“It wasn’t fun, Red.” Joe cringed each and every time those days were called to mind. “I love your Aunt, Silas but... good Lord,” he grimaced accordingly, “by the time she finished with us, I was seriously considering giving myself over to certain painful death after even one day with that woman.”

Silas offered a disparaging glare, “She ain’t that bad.”

“Oh, I beg to differ.” Joe was pretty sure she was. “Those two old ladies in *Arsenic and Old Lace* got nothing on her, let me tell ya.”

Silas grumbled aside, “She’s just concerned for... people. She don’t mean anything by it.”

“She drove you crazy.” Joe argued. “You got so bad, Red took all your weapons, man.”

Silas shuddered visibly. He crooked his neck, “She harps on... things, that’s all. I should have better control.”

“She pushes your buttons.” Joe nodded sagely. “And you let her.”

“She’s my Aunt!” Silas snapped.

Joe held up the universal sign of peace.

“She is merely eccentric in her ways.” Red disagreed. “Capricious, as it were. Delightful character traits.”
Elizabeth noted Moore had managed to stumble to a nearby chair. The man nursed his bruises, having fallen silent.

“Yeah well, Aunt Abby and Aunt Martha murdered twelve lonely old men in the movie.” Joe stated. “And one could call them, eccentric I guess.”

“And don’t you think it odd,” Red made mention, “your Aunt Gertie kept foisting her homemade apricot wine on us... reminiscent of Aunt Abby and Martha’s ‘elderberry wine’ in the movie.”

Red laughed at the coincidence, “How utterly charming.”

“I was seriously thinking about accepting a glass or two there towards the end.” Joe said.

“That ain’t funny, dammit!” Silas barked.

“Did anyone think to check dear, angelic Gertie’s cellar for bodies?” Red quipped freely. “Just an after thought.”

“You guys are hilarious.” Silas’ temper was coming to the fore. “Ain’t nothing wrong with my Aunt.”

“Perish the thought, God no.” Red quickly diffused any ruffled feelings. “I still cherish the doilies she crocheted me... to this day. I dare anyone to say or even think a disparaging word about the woman.”

Silas’ expression said it all.

Elizabeth wanted to go over and console the man in reality. He looked so forlorn.

“So you agree then.” Red was happy and content once more. “We should definitely extend our invitation?”

“Maybe we can talk about it later, Red.” Liz stepped in, leaning to the cell Joe still held placed strategically on speaker phone. “It’s certainly a lovely thought though.” she sought a grateful Silas. “Can we call you a little later on the matter?”

“Of course, Elizabeth.” Red could afford to be magnanimous now. He had proven his point well, after all.

He was still top dog.

“Whatever you say but I think it’s a marvelous idea!” he finished enthusiastically.

The silence which met the last statement felt rather ominous to Liz’s way of thinking.

“Eh,” she smiled brightly, bolstering the troops, “it’s very kind of you to think of such a lovely gift for Silas.”

Silas cast her a dark, surly glance. Apparently, he saw the gesture in another light.

“Hey, boss,” Joe piped up, a thought occurring which tickled him, “don’t you think it’s funny? How Silas here is so much like that Jonathan Brewster guy.”

Silas whipped his head about, his expression incredulous.
“Well, you are.” Joe continued. “The maniacal killer nephew who is really bothered by the fact his spinster Aunts out did him in the body count for the family.”

Silas spread his hands curtly, his face allowed the disbelief he was experiencing.

Red chuckled his amusement, “Well you know how competitive Silas can be.”

“You are a little over the top on that subject.” Joe felt a little bad for the needless reminder now, having seen Silas’ reaction to his observation.

“I’m gonna throw your ass out the window.” Silas promised.

Joe scowled slightly, “You are in a mood today.” he observed again, before brightening. “And no you won’t, because I am the only one to take night shift tonight.”

Silas scowled, popping his neck irritably, disliking the truth when he heard it.

“Is the charming Agent Navabi preset?” Red asked as if he didn’t know better. He had another point to make to those listening in.

All eyes turned towards the charming woman. Navabi stepped up to the cell.

“Yes, I’m here.” her pretty brow showed her confusion to be the sudden center of attention.

“Francis tells me that your special qualifications might be required on this outing, my dear.” Red’s tone was more business like.

Samar’s shoulders lost some of their rigidity, “And what might those be?”

“Seems our old pal Lawford’s depravity exceeds even our expectations,” Red continued, propping his feet to a comfortable perch. “He’s been playing in the cesspool with our old adversaries, Al-Qaeda.” he allowed all to digest the news. “You are more than acquainted with their methods and ideology, as I recall.”

Samar lifted her chin a little higher, listening intently.

“You have viable contacts in Mossad who will be able to coordinate and advise us on the latest Intel, I hope?” Red put another nail in Moore’s coffin. It gave him great pleasure to do so. “What an invaluable asset you are turning out to be.”

Samar was grateful someone appreciated her input and expertise, “I don’t know how valuable I can be but I will certainly try my best to help out.”

Silas gave a sullen Moore a cryptic sneer, “Which is more than you’ve ever done.”

Moore chose to ignore the taunt completely.

“Silas...” Red intoned.

“I don’t like the douche bag.”

“So you’ve said.” Red nodded gingerly.

Liz glanced nervously at her guard. She wondered secretly if Silas would have made good on his threat before.
He was in the process of dragging Moore to the patio doors which opened onto a rather spacious deck overlooking the street below... when Red’s timely phone call materialized.

It was all she and Samar could do to place themselves between the area and the two combatants, hoping somewhere along the way Silas’ common sense would kick in.

Of course that common sense would have kicked in, she was almost one hundred percent certain... almost.

Moore sat dejectedly, staring morosely at a spot in the carpet. It was the only evidence the man was still present and accounted for.

She shuddered to think of the repercussions had Silas actually followed through on his intent in a room full of witnesses... all members of a very official... unofficial... Federal Government organization.

“Take me off speaker and hand the phone to the moron.” Red advised shortly.

Joe hesitated, checking with Elizabeth who looked between the man himself, Silas and Moore before shrugging her confusion.

Joe screwed up his face in a jeering sneer when Liz had included him in the mix, “Which moron?”

Silas’ mouth tightened as he grasp the phone, “Her moron... you moron!” he had indicated Elizabeth. “What?!”

“She’s got enough shit going on right now,” Red’s tone matched the guard’s, “without you fucking with her too.”

Silas’ eyes scanned Liz’s worried expression.

“Stop babying her. She’s a big girl and can well defend herself against the likes of me.” Silas retorted. “I’ve trained her just for such an eventuality.”

“She shouldn’t have to!” Red grated.

Silas fell silent for a beat, “...I’ll make it right.” he advised tightly.

“See that you do.” Red snapped.

“She’s nothing but a little tattle tail!” Silas hissed irritably, making a face at the woman knowing instinctively what would make Liz feel better.

“He did it!” she pointed out Joe, then hesitated. “No, Moore did it.”

She grimaced accordingly, looking at Joe worriedly, not having meant to rat him out.

Chuckling, Joe hooked a beefy arm about her shoulders, dragging her into a brusque hold, patting her arm comfortingly.

“Don’t worry ’bout it. I’ve been called worse...” Joe philosophized, “mostly by him.” he indicated Silas. “It’s not like he can kill you or anything.” he cheered her spirits.

“I know...” she whined to the man, “it’s just... now he’s going to be grumpy all damn day.”

“How many times have I told you to obey Elizabeth’s orders?” Red sighed woefully.
“She didn’t order me to do anything.” Silas countered. “What’s that got to do with what went down? It was a momentary lapse in judgement, that’s all. And it was clearly her fault.”

Liz gaped at the man, instinctively swinging for Silas but Joe caught her fist in mid-flight. His actions drew soft rumbling laughter from Silas as well as Joe.

“I know you are attempting damage control.” Red knew Lizzy felt better now because of Silas’ response.

Silas grumbled imperceptibly, alerting Red they were on the same wave length.

“I know your girlfriends honor was at stake but–” Red lifted resigned brows. Joe had quickly assessed the developing situation for him.

“She’s not my girlfriend.” Silas grumbled into the line.

Liz’s head jerked back, a frown curving her mouth, “Who are you walking about?” she was more than interested about the one-sided conversation.

Silas lifted a negligent hand, “Not you, so go cry in your pillow.”

“Yeah,” Liz rolled her eyes expressively, “I am heart-broken.”

“We have to be more circumvent in our actions for a while.” Red continued. “Our normal mode of operation has to be curbed in relation to... certain circumstances if we are to be involved with the FBI.” he warned.

“I wasn’t really gonna toss the guy.”

“Yeah, Silas,” Red snapped, “you were.”

Silas smirked slowly, “Nah, just dangle him for a little while.”

“Don’t put Lizzy in that spot again!” Red stated. “Do you understand me.”

“Not used to suffering idiots gladly.” Silas half-heartedly defended himself.

“Look,” Red nodded curtly, “I hate the restrictions as well but for the time being, that’s how we roll.”

Silas sighed, glancing at the woman who stood by pensively biting her thumb nail, “I’m sorry.” he stated, his tone rather lackluster.

Joe chuckled quietly when the woman’s face fell further, misunderstanding the man’s intent. Had the talk gone awry? Was Silas leaving?

“He’s apologizing.” Joe soothed quickly. “In his own twisted way, granted.”


Red knew Silas was going to fuck with Lizzy no matter what. It was their thing. How they were bonding. But there had to be limits set.

Silas did feel bad for his part in the melodrama that went down here today. He stressed last night that he would be there for Liz... then willfully disregarded that promise a moment ago because his anger
colored his judgement.

_He wasn’t about to admit the fact to Red Reddington._

Silas’ eyes softened on Liz’s face.

He reached, hooking the woman’s neck, dragging her closer, attempting to give her a noogie.

Joe shook his head, rubbing his eyes wearily at the less than suave attempt at affection but... it was just their way.

Liz screwed up her face like a kitten trying to get away from a overbearing mamma licking its face clean... but took the ‘cleaning’ grudgingly.

She rubbed her head gingerly, the spot raw from Silas’ less than gentle affection. She primly patted her hair back in place, glaring daggers at the man.

“Don’t you dare hang up before I talk to him.” Liz indicated the cell held so precariously in capable hands.

Silas grimaced a face, “Whatever.” he snapped right back.

Red relaxed. Things were back to normal.

“Oh...” the guard’s mind flitted forward to more interesting matters. “Tom showed up here, out of the blue.”

Red sat up, his brow furrowed.

Pinching her lips stubbornly, Liz elbowed her guard roughly, “I wanted to tell him that!” she hissed.

“Well I told him, what are you gonna do about it?” Silas wanted to know.

“Punch your lights out... that’s what!” Liz countered.

Red phased out the two bickering in the background, controlling the rush of trepidation he felt.

Francis tapped on the door of the private section of the jet, breaking his concentration, “Red, we’re landing in a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” he acknowledged the man, glancing down at his watch, “Dammit.” he sighed. “Who knew the little bastard watched CNN?”

He should have known Tom would hear of Lawford’s arrest and put two and two together.

“We got it covered.” Silas murmured, already knowing Red’s train of thought. “You know that.”

Red knew the hotel was swarming with security and FBI. Francis and Antonio’s men were also in surrounding properties... but still... he should be there.

“What do you think you could do, I won’t?” Silas purposely questioned. “You just gave me a promotion, let me earn it.”

“Besides,” the guard continued, giving the woman a stern look, for Liz had stepped on his toe, a look of proud defiance on her pretty face, “she’s really not going to be gallivanting off across Hell’s half acre.”
He lunged for the woman to retaliate, but she gleefully side-stepped the half-hearted attempt. Silas allowed her to triumph momentarily sensing she need the upper hand in this instance. He fumed at her smug features, pretending to be pissed.

Red knew all that could be done was being done. He also knew Lizzy was going to be confined to the hotel for the duration of their stay due to her physical status and that Silas would keep his word.

Liz’s attention was caught when Samar called her name, distracting Liz from the Tom-foolery with her guard. With a stern look of reprimand for Silas, Liz crossed to Samar eyeing the man belligerently the entire time.

Samar shared a confidence no one else was privy to.

“And you coming back,” Silas muttered for Red’s ears alone, watching the two women converse from his vantage point from across the room, “is what she wants, yes.” Red couldn’t help the smile. “But it’s not what she needs.”

Red knew that. As much as he wanted to be with Lizzy twenty-four/seven... he couldn’t be.

Logistically speaking, it was an impossibility. They both had work obligations that needed their attention.

As much as they both hated it, a little separation here and there was good for any relationship, in reality.

Individually speaking... Red couldn’t and shouldn’t step between Lizzy and Tom all the time. To do so would give her the impression he didn’t think she could handle the asshole on her own.

While Silas would protect Lizzy with his life, he would also give her the opportunity to confront Tom if she needed.

Red... didn’t think he could do that yet. Not that he didn’t think she was capable. It wasn’t that at all.

While he knew Lizzy’s relationship had changed, Tom could still push her buttons.

If Red’s father taught him one thing, it was to defend his lady. It was so ingrained in Red, especially when it came to Lizzy, to protect her... he couldn’t stand there and watch her be hurt in any way, shape or form and not try to put a stop to it.

He was trying to curb his natural tendency but... it was proving to be a grueling task.

He hired Silas to do a job and that was to keep her safe... without making her go stir crazy.

Red needed to allow Silas to do that job.

“Let me talk to her.” Red said.

He heard the line switching hands, his mouth pulled at the corner, listening to her bitching.

“He better still be on the line” Liz hissed at her guard.

“Well, he’s not,” Silas grumbled tauntingly, “I hung up.”

Red heard Lizzy’s indignant intake of breath before he heard her light breathing.

“Red...?” she questioned, her tone tight with annoyance for her guard.
Red smiled at the vexation before sobering, “You want me to come back?”

His heart thumped in his chest when she hesitated to answer. A couple months ago, there would have been an instant negative response.

Now...

“Just a second...” she whispered.

Red took his seat, belting himself in at Dembe’s incessant urging. The man had been trying to get Red’s full attention for some few minutes. They really must be close to landing.

He eavesdropped openly. Lizzy was telling Samar she was stepping out a moment. Red was in flight and had to hear, she explained the reason.

She was getting as adept at lying as he was.

A door closed behind her, followed by blessed silence.

“I do want you to come back.” she confessed. “But not because of Tom.”

Red’s eyes softened, his heart constricting, “I can be there whenever you need me.”

Liz smiled, gingerly running her finger along the bead board which ran the length of the hallway she now stood in.

Silas rolled his eyes at the girlish gesture. Red must have said something that had her stomach flipping somersaults. She might as well have curled her hair about her finger.

“I know...” she ducked her head, toeing the intricate carpet at her feet.

Joe grinned at Silas over his shoulder, both men shaking their respective heads at how quickly the FBI agent could fade away to be replaced by a woman... in love.

Joe snapped a picture of the moment, shooting it off to Dembe. Red would get a kick out of seeing his woman all flush cheeked over a simple phone call.

“Red, you didn’t fire Silas, did you?” she gripped her phone tighter.

“Wanted to.” he quipped. “I wouldn’t do that. I know he means a great deal to you, baby.”

“Well, he was justified in his actions.” she stated earnestly.

“Throwing someone out a window...” Red nodded slowly.

“He wouldn’t have done that.” she dismissed airily.

“Okay...” Red chuckled easily.

“Well, he wouldn’t have, not really.” she insisted. Her lips quivered slightly listening to Red scoff.

“But from the scuttle-butt going around,” Liz changed the tone of the conversation, wanting Red to forget about Silas’ follies, “I have nothing to worry about while I’m here.”

“Is that so?” Red’s eyes lit with amusement, wondering what form of gossip she had been supplied and by whom.
“Yes,” she nodded, “don’t need your paltry protection.” she teased, warming to her task. “I have a better source. A more powerful one.”

“Oh, really.” he clearly doubted any such person existed.

“Yeah, I got me a new sugar daddy.” Liz smiled, hearing Red’s throaty chuckle reverberate through the line.

The man leaned, for Dembe had motioned him forward.

Dembe turned the phone in his hand, handing it over for view. Red beamed, perusing the photo Joe sent. He so wished to be there to see Lizzy in person.

“You look beautiful today. Have I told you?” he asked gently, his eyes scanning the photo still.

“Well, how sweet.” she was delighted by the unexpected compliment, self-consciously touching the hair Silas had messed up.

“Does it bother you?” Red got back on track.

“Does what bother me?” she was confused.

“What is being said about Antonio and your budding relationship.”

“I’m more concerned about what his wife might be thinking.” she quipped.

“Maria would take to you just as quickly as Antonio.” Red assured. “I’m positive.”

“You think?” Liz was genuinely curious and for some odd reason, the thought warmed her, “I’ll be fine.” she suddenly felt as much, returning to the subject at hand.

Red ran a finger along the rim of his tumbler, “I know.” he encouraged, his tone dropping to a low caress. “Be careful, baby.”

Red had arrived at his destination and needed to depart the plane so they reluctantly ended their call.

Thankfully, Red’s intervention had eased tempers, for the most part and things had gotten underway after a rocky transition period. Though, after Moore’s departure, tensions had eased considerably.

Liz stared out over the street, drinking her coffee, having needed a short break. She waited for Samar and company to get to the next agenda on the list.

The cataloging of inventory was winding down, thank God. At least, on this particular site.

She glanced at the guards walking the perimeter of the hotel below. She noted they kept a belligerent eye on Tom.

The man sat on a low wall, eating what looked to be a donut, casually drinking a cup of coffee.

She realized suddenly she didn’t feel as suffocated, or even as annoyed by his presence, as she once did.

She had complete faith in herself and her guys to not let Tom hinder her movements.
She scowled slightly. Something about Tom’s body language changed. He started, his quiet moment disturbed.

The man leaned, removing a cell from his pocket, lifting it to his ear.

“I should have directed the team to tap into his calls,” Silas murmured as he came alongside her.

“I’m surprised you haven’t.” Liz was indeed surprised.

“I have at the house,” Silas replied, “I meant here... but he’s aware he’s being bugged.”

“So he’s careful about what he says.” she nodded her understanding. “What a snake.”

“He’s mainly been taking side jobs for quick cash.” he shrugged. “A couple calls coincide with him leaving the vicinity of the house, however. We haven’t been able to trace them which mildly concerns me.”

“Why do you think he’s wasting his time? He knows the house is secure.” she was dumbfounded over Tom’s actions.

“Unknown,” Silas replied. “He has an agenda, of course. Sooner or later, he will make a move.”

Tom slid off his perch, tossing his trash as he nodded amiably at a passing police officer.

The local police had stationed an officer about because they sensed Red’s people were not simply there for a carefree vacation but had no ‘probable cause’ to approach.

Red’s people... meaning the obvious military types who constantly walked the perimeter of the hotel. And who didn’t know Antonio Crocetti’s association with this hotel? The man was a legend. Cops knew and monitored his movements like hawks.

“He makes my skin crawl.” Liz disgusted, having watched the show. “Where do you think he’s going?” she frowned as Tom walked down the street then unexpectedly hailed a passing cab.

“Probably one of his side jobs.”

Liz sighed, Tom forgotten the second she turned back to the increased activity inside the hotel room.

Ressler was beckoning her over.

Joe slid through traffic like the other cars weren’t there as Silas scanned their surroundings.

“Some of Lawford’s men are in the wind so,” Silas looked back at the woman behind him, “you stay beside us.”

Joe pulled the car to a smooth halt outside a large warehouse. Several more such buildings filled a very spacious lot on either side as this was the industrial side of town.

Liz had sighed her dismay having arrived on site.

Several nondescript vehicles were parked inconspicuously about the area. It would be so much easier if someone slapped decals that read FBI on the side of the cars... but it would be a dead giveaway who they were.
“You think they’ll cause trouble with all the agents on site?” Liz questioned seriously.

“Depends what’s in that warehouse.” Joe shrugged.

While not pleased with their present situation, Silas had understood the need for it.

Samar’s team had secured the site a short time ago. Already she had uncovered damning evidence of Al-Qaeda involvement within Lawford’s organization.

All agencies had long since been aware than any average Joe could listen in on unsecured air-wave broadcasts, of course.

Samar had adamantly conveyed the ‘package’ was contained and the Intel discovered was time-sensitive and urgent.

With Ressler side-lined and Aram hopelessly inept out in the field, it left only one option on the table to get the information to the needed sources.

Elizabeth had graciously volunteered her services before Ressler could come up with a way to ask.

It was clear the guy was staying off his pain meds. And even though Elizabeth’s foot was in a boot, it was abundantly clear, she would be a better choice to act the part of courier than the red-headed Agent.

Liz was more than trained and capable of such an assignment, after all.

Red assumed she would stay safely on-site but she never actually promised as such.

It didn’t mean she would forget to mention she had two highly trained ex-soldiers on her flank, when Red called her on the decision later.

Samar had been excited, almost gleeful about the teams find.

Liz was anxious to do her part.

After Samar obtained copies of the information on encrypted flash drives Aram had supplied her, Liz was to meet an Agent on-site and secure the hard-drives into her custody.

Ergo, here they sat, both men staring hard up to the surrounding buildings.

“Are we actually going to get out of the car at some point?” Liz asked the needed question.

“Too many vantage points from which to take aim.” Silas muttered his concern.

“Any good marksman would have all ready riddled the car with enough fire to ensure anyone inside was–”

“Do you mind.” Silas halted the graphic observation if only for Elizabeth’s sake.

“They don’t know if the car is bullet proof.” she reasoned. “Better to save the ammo and select your shot.” she shrugged. Was she beginning to think like Red? She hoped so.

“...Besides a hail of bullets would have the Agents on site swarming this place like ants.” she said in a matter-of-fact tone. “A couple well placed shots might draw a little attention but it gives some leeway for a smooth getaway, hopefully.”
Both men swiveled in the front seat, one face impressed, Silas’... annoyed. “You realize just who the target of your little scenario is, right?”

“Me... but you guys wouldn’t be forgotten either,” she smiled sweetly.

Joe chuckled appreciatively. Silas... did not.

“You best start taking this shit more seriously,” he suggested strongly.

“I do take it seriously but I can’t let it paralyze me either, right?” she lifted enquiring brows. “You said so.”

Silas’ mood was no better, “I can run in and–”

“You aren’t an Agent. You aren’t on the official list.” Liz vetoed that route.

“Hey,” Joe had noted another entrance on the side of the building, his face breaking into a grin, “let me actively mediate here.” He eased the car alongside the side doors, turning the key off. “This is a little closer.”

Silas was out of the car, his hand on the handle of the back door. He leaned his bulk in having scanned the area meticulously once again.

“We get in, we get out.” his tone was no-nonsense. “Stay extra close to our cover.”

She nodded agreeably, “I’m starving. I want this to go as smoothly as you do.”

Silas sighed mentally.

Liz made a hasty exit ducking for the cover of her two guards bulk.

In seconds she was secured inside the unlocked door.

She glanced back urgently for she had felt the absence of those two men acutely once safely inside.

Silas and Joe had their weapons out. They stood, silently scanning and re-scanning the outside areas.

The very definition of ‘perfect targets’, in Liz’s humble opinion, “Get in here!” she whispered harshly, gesturing even more curtly.

“Too fucking quiet,” Silas muttered ignoring the frantic pleas.

Joe nodded solemnly but finally both men entered and Liz released the breath she had been holding.

“What the hell are you two standing out there like turkeys in the rain?” she was upset. “I thought we were going to get-in, get-out.”

Silas put his hand to his lips to shush the distraught whisperer.

Liz rolled her eyes but shut-up.

They stood for a long beat simply listening to the sounds of the expansive warehouse, getting their bearings.

“Why was this door not secured?” Silas shifted Joe a knowledgeable look.

Liz hadn’t even thought of it, she had been too worried about her guys safety.
Silas motioned her into a space between himself and Joe, who took point.

They moved silently through the stocked aisles of stolen merchandise.

Where was the Agent who were supposed to meet her?

The quiet was eerie.

Down at the end of a row of smaller, more elongated boxes, a door was wide open. The interior of an office was apparent.

Light from a sky-light slightly illuminated the area.

At first, Liz thought it was a fire but no smell of smoke or shimmer of red light shown from within the dark alcove.

Silas held out his hand, halting any further movement. About ten meters down, the outline of a man was sprawled out directly in front of the office.

Silas waved Joe to the left, while he himself, merged to the right of the office. He waved Elizabeth back into a safe niche.

Liz had to admire both men’s efficiency.

She waited on tenterhooks as they crept closer to their objective.

Out of nowhere, taking her completely by surprise, two corded arms came about her body, their strength pulling her back hard and swift against a rock solid surface.

Both Silas and Joe heard the sharp intake of the woman’s breath, each swirling about, weapons aimed with deadly intent.

Elizabeth stayed perfectly still, silently weighing her options. How many times had Silas run her through this very scenario?

But, somehow, in this instance, the tight hold across her throat was chillingly real.

*She knew that scent.*

Her assailant had said not a word and yet... yes, she knew that scent. She knew his touch. She knew the feel of his breath on her nape.

She swallowed the bile that rose in her throat with difficulty.

Her eyes locked with Silas’. She saw no sign of panic or indecision in that steady stare.

“Move carefully, boys.” Tom Keen’s tone was tight and edgy. “Let’s don’t do anything stupid here.”

“That boat has sailed.” Silas was moving steadily, widening the space between Joe and himself to divide Tom’s time between two possible enemies.

“When you made the choice to approach... her,” Silas inclined his head slowly, his eyes flashing something Elizabeth instinctively reacted to.

The woman elbowed hard into Tom’s ribs, bending forward hastily fighting with everything she had against his attempts to pull her back as a human shield.
Silas’ weapon discharged. He took a wide shot because of Elizabeth’s proximity but even so, the bullet embedded itself into a crate’s edge... splintering wood shards into Tom’s face.

He instinctively lifted a hand to protect his eyes, momentarily losing his hold on Elizabeth.

Joe fired two rounds simultaneously, one entering Tom’s upper thigh, the other hitting very close to the guy’s neckline as it too, sank deep into a nearby crate.

Liz stomped down hard with her foot into Tom’s instep, enjoying the man’s grunt of pain. Unfortunately, shifting her weight so rapidly to her injured foot, proved a mistake.

She went down hard. The woman scrambled rapidly for the weapon she had secured to her ankle. She could sense Joe coming up on her right. She managed to get one clean shot off before her friend was in harms way.

The bullet ricocheted off an exposed pipe sending a vaulting spray of steam directly into Tom’s face. The bastard ducked, shaking the pain off, continuing on his serpentine trek through the surrounding maze.

Silas was moving fast, covering the space separating him from the woman.

In seconds he was by her side, shielding her body with his own.

Joe pursued a fleeing Tom Keen.

The guy moved remarkably agile for someone who had just been shot with a large caliber weapon and the rows and stacks of crates and boxes were aiding Tom’s escape plan.

Silas ascertained Elizabeth’s condition, a concerned scowl on his face.

“Damned foot gave out.” she apologized, disappointed and upset with herself.

“You did fine.” the man’s tone was calming. “Just lay still.”

Elizabeth lay her head back onto the cool of the floor, obeying.

She could hear footsteps fading rapidly as Joe’s efforts escalated, “Go... I’m good.”

Silas shook his head negatively, “We’re not doing that at all.”

She sighed heavily, resuming the wait. Silently cataloging her injuries, if any existed.

Somewhere in the expansive warehouse, doors slammed open and shut.

“...I should have–”

“We don’t do ‘should-haves’,” Silas silenced any second thoughts, “but you ‘should have’ seen that bastard’s face when you did what you did.” he chuckled lowly. “He thought it was all over but the fat lady kept on singing. You showed him, woman and I’m damned proud of you.”

Elizabeth felt tears prick at her eyes for the lob-sided compliment but coming from Silas? Her heart swelled two-fold.

She stubbornly refused to allow such a feminine display, swallowing hard.

She took time for herself. When her voice was strong enough again, she spoke, “He’s a jerk and I...
don’t do jerks anymore.”

“Yeah, you don’t.” Silas’ grin said it all.

Liz crooked her head back, “Is he dead?” she indicated the Agent by the office.

“Nah, just conked on the head.” Silas allayed her fears.

To their left, a door far down the side of the building burst open.

Silas’ grin vanished post-haste as his weapon came around to the sound. He bodily lifted Elizabeth, placing her more snugly secure behind an alcove of stacked heat and air units... or at least, that was what the labels read.

His concern was for naught, however.

Samar’s pretty head popped briefly around a convenient hiding spot.

Recognition was instant and complete. She rushed forward, several Agents following close behind.

“We were lured away, should have suspected something,” she too, being affected by the should haves. She holstered her weapon, kneeling beside Elizabeth. “What happened?” she scanned the other woman for signs of wounds or trouble.

“...She’s good.” Silas motioned to Elizabeth but Samar noted the man was still very much on ‘high-alert’ status. “Called away?” he scowled.

Silas’ eyes scanned the area meticulously watching for any sigh of renewed problems.

“I’m good.” Liz pushed herself into a seated position. “Damned leg went out from under me again. I hate this useless thing.” she hit her thigh angrily.

“Whoever called us had access to our official operation code.” Samar continued her version of Intel. “We thought the other unit was about to be under fire... it was a diversion.”

Moore approached cautiously having seen Silas’ weapon, “... Someone did a number on the room.” he jerked his head to the office behind him. “Agent Adams is okay, we got medical en route.”

Samar held up the flash drive, smiling happily, “Don’t worry, I took what they really wanted with me.”

Liz breathed easier sitting back against the crate, smiling as well.

Agents swarmed the place, Liz noted.

“Whatever they used burned like acid though the hard drives.” Moore’s face was grim. “There isn’t one computer left intact in there.”

“It’s fortunate we found what we needed before their attempts then,” Samar’s profile was turned to the guy, “which doesn’t mean they won’t try again.”

Silas’ eyes softened on the woman, Liz noted.

“We have to get this,” she held the valuable information aloft yet again, “to a secure holding area.”

“What do you need?” Wilson had come alongside his contemporary.
“Let’s try a diversion as well,” Samar arose, “take three units, separate routes... head back to the
Bureau. I will stay behind with the Intel until we are certain no tails are out there.”

“That leaves you vulnerable.” Moore disliked the plan but his tone was almost respectful.

Samar sought Silas out, “I can’t officially ask you to risk your–”

“We’ll get you home, little lady.” Silas followed her plan easily.

“Call me that again, I’ll shoot you.” Samar smiled sweetly.

Silas was intrigued as he watched her gaze hesitate over certain areas of his body, “Just make sure
you don’t hit anything vital.”

“Be serious!” Liz hit at her guard, offering him an almost pout.

“But thank you,” Samar finally continued, “we need the edge.”

Joe came sauntering up, a disgruntled look on his face, “Do you believe that little rat got away?” he
grimaced, “…Had some driver waiting for him out back by the fence. I got a partial.”

Liz’s head fell back against the crate, “I really loathe that freak.”

“I tagged his ass.” Joe stated optimistically. “He lost a hell of a lot of blood.”

“He’s down one at least.” Liz grinned wryly. “How many more of his nine lives do we have to
take?” she asked pseudo-seriously.

Joe calculated, silently ticking off the possibilities.

“The plates will be stolen or fakes.” Silas allowed his weapon to swing down to his side. “Keen’s
good at what he does... don’t knock yourself out. We’ll get the asshole. Only a matter of time.”

“Tom?” Samar was flabbergasted. “What is he doing involved in this or... is he? Is it about you,
Liz?”

“Red can sort it out.” Liz waved a dismissive hand. “Someone help me up. I’m beyond starved here.
And my butt’s going to sleep.”

Silas chuckled, offering over a hand.

He righted her effortlessly.

“The sooner we get the package to its destination, the sooner I can go back to the hotel and my fully
stocked fridge and room service.”

“My question is, why did Stalker Boy head straight for this location, one...” Silas questioned, “and
B, how did he even know of its existence.”

“We know he worked for Lawford in the past.” Joe reminded. “So something they did was
important enough for someone to get rid of the evidence.”

“Tom gets a phone call,” Silas nodded, “and all of a sudden, but for Agent Navabi’s quick thinking...
that important enough thing would have been destroyed along with God knows what, in that room.”
he jerked his head to the office.
“I hate puzzles.” Joe groused.

“Red is very good at solving difficult equations.” Liz smiled at nothing in particular. “Why don’t we turn it over to him?”

“Let’s get this show on the road.” Samar agreed. She assigned drivers to units. “We’ll know when it’s clear to head out. Be careful... we don’t know how many we are up against or how powerful a force they are as yet.”

A short time later both women were safely ensconced in the back seat of the car.

Joe pulled out at an unhurried pace as if they had all the time in the world.

“If we make it to the freeway without incident, we’re home free.” Silas was alert and functioning perfectly. “If they’re gonna hit us, it will be on this lonely stretch just ahead. It’s what I would do.”

“Do you have criminal inclinations as a general rule?” Samar pulled her attention from her perusal of their surroundings.

“Occasionally.” Silas held his smile.

Joe threw him a look but concentrated on the road after a second.

“Good to know.” Samar murmured, a smile playing about her lips.

Liz looked from one to the other, sensing some sort of excitement in the air.

“Anything else you want to know about me,” Silas spared the woman a glance in the mirror clipped to his sun visor, “just ask.”

Liz cut her own eyes to Samar’s pretty profile. Silas’ tone held a definite challenge to her way of thinking. She waited with baited breath.

But Samar took time to reply because that’s just how she rolled, “...How do you feel about commitment?”

Joe expelled a masculine groan, “And the lady goes straight for the throat.” he laughed good-naturedly.

Liz gasped her shock, grinning widely at a rather somber Samar Navabi.

It was Silas’ turn to take time out. He ignored Joe’s knowledgeable glance of camaraderie.

“Yeah, Silas,” his friend needled deliberately for Joe knew the answer, “where do you stand on that issue?”

“Depends on who I’m committing to,” Silas replied so quietly, Liz had to strain to hear the reply.

Samar’s lovely brow furrowed thoughtfully. She stared at Silas’ handsome profile holding those thoughts privately.

Liz shifted wide eyes from the back of Silas’ head to a suddenly introverted woman to her right.

The ride was finished in relative silence and with no further incidents.

The tension in the vehicle was palpable, however. Liz was never so glad when Joe pulled the car
into an unloading spot outside the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Silas glanced over, “You got her,” he jerked his head towards Liz, “for a minute?”

Joe’s face showed his shock for a split second, “Of course.” he kept his tone professional but even he was wondering at Silas’ unconventional behavior. It was not like the man to leave Liz’s side for one second.

Silas slid his frame out of the car, watching the traffic as he made his way to Samar’s door. The man gallantly accompanied Samar, both alert to their surroundings.

Liz watched the striking couple cross to the stairs leading to the tall skyscraper.

“What the hell was that?” Joe turned about, his mouth slack-jawed.

Liz sat up hastily, gripping the back of the head rest, eager to discuss the issue looming large in the now vacated car, “What do you mean?” she feigned innocence. “I mean, it’s only right that he accompanies her because she’s got Intel on Al-Qaeda... that’s all it is, right?”

“Yeah, okay.” the guy looked at her like she was crazy. “What I’m thinking is going on can’t be going on, because we guys... we have a rule.” Joe nodded scooting closer, lowering his voice. “Silas would never, ever overstep that rule. I know the guy. I’ve known him for decades and not once has he broken the rule.”

“What’s the rule?” Liz demanded to know.

“There are certain types of women you just don’t,” Joe thought hard how to put it delicately, “fuck then go on your merry way.”

Liz sat back appalled... for all of two seconds, “And Samar is one of those women of course.” she scooted back up.

“Yeah, but Silas... it’s all he’s ever done. ”Joe shrugged. “Well, I mean... after Anya.”

Both Liz and Joe considered the implications.

“Something is amiss.” Joe decided, nodding sagely.

Liz nodded sagely too but she wasn’t sure exactly why.

Both individuals sat back, each ruminating on the ‘something’, each in their own unique way.

They were still ruminating upon Silas’ return.

The man buckled his seat belt, sensing a change in the atmosphere around him.

“What?” he demanded.

“Nothing.” Liz was too quick to answer.

Silas scowled darkly at her, crooking his head about. He checked with Joe.

“Nothing.” the guy was totally too nonchalant.

Silas sighed heavily, shaking his head, “Whatever, let’s get back. I need a break from you two loons.”
He sat back, deflating into his seat, remembering he had to check in with Red, “From one loon to another...”

“You’re talking about Tom, right?” Liz leaned to the guys profile.

“Yeah, sure,” Silas muttered absently, “okay.”
As promised, I started ripping the following chapters apart and piecing scenes together to move the story along plot wise.

So you might start seeing time jumps over the next couple chapters. I’ve tried to keep the Red and Liz scenes that were important though. :)

This one was a little harder to piece together because I had to condense chapters to explain a little of what is coming up. I hope it came together okay and isn’t too cruddy :) I promise to do a better job in the next one though. :D

June 6

Silas watched his men do their jobs, content in the fact they were doing so, competently and most efficiently.

He wanted to make sure the grounds of the hotel were doubly secure. His thoughts were more concentrated on the previous hours events, however.

He stood slightly apart having exited the vehicle, a fixed scowl on the handsome face.

Silas had insisted Elizabeth take a breather to assess any and all damages their previous encounter with Tom Keen had caused. She was now safely secure in the back of the SUV.

The trip to the hotel had given her time to regroup.

Silas glanced at the sour little face staring back at him from the car window.

She had picked up Red Reddington’s propensity for impatience.

Tom Keen was first and foremost in Silas’ thoughts this moment. The last person he expected to encounter inside that warehouse today was the little creep of a man.

What Keen was up to in there, besides the obvious, was of upmost interest. The guard was certain Red Reddington would feel the same on the matter.

Stalker Boy had deliberately went out of his way to destroy something in that place which undoubtedly was a primary clue to exactly why or who was behind the greater conspiracy which was being orchestrated.

A conspiracy against who was anyone’s guess. If Keen was involved, Silas highly suspected Elizabeth was involved as well.

But how?

His scowl darkened, and he moved forward absently.
“What are you doing?” he prevented the woman in question from exiting the car, his expression a stern one.

“What am I... under house arrest?” Elizabeth pushed against the hold he had on the door facing. “I want to take a bath!”

“When I say the perimeter is secure,” Silas motioned Justin over, “and not one second before.”

“We’ve been sitting here over two hours,” Liz exaggerated, “how secure does it have to be to satisfy your morbid sense of—”

“As secure as I say!” the man interrupted, “so you... stay put.”

“I’ve got a good mind to tell Red to send for Aunt Gertie!” Liz snapped.

Justin, who stood idly by waiting on his orders... blatantly listening in on the exchange... suddenly stiffened, his face masking into what could only be described as abject terror.

“What does she mean?” Justin snapped the rapid fire question. “Did she say... Aunt Gertie?”

“Calm the hell down.” Silas snapped. “You’re a damned professional! Act the part!”

“Yeah but...” Justin swallowed hard, his eyes wide, his expression panicked, “but I heard... Aunt Gerti–”

“Never mind!” Silas’ voice raised. “Secure the scene here!” he groused, piqued that just the mention of his beloved Aunt’s name could instill such a reaction from his seasoned, hardened crew. “You and Joe... damned pussies!”

Justin’s fears were not allayed, the insult rolling off the guy’s sturdy shoulders, “She’s one scary broad.”

“Excuse the hell out of me?” Silas dared the guy to repeat the words.

“What I meant to say,” Justin backtracked hastily, “is that while your Aunt is a very nice lady, I’m sure. Deep down, man...” he shook his head grimacing slightly, “I think she’s a little bit psycho.”

“What!” Silas started around the car, his expression thunderous.

Justin ran the opposite way, keeping the length of the vehicle between them, “Not psycho, no! Did I say psycho?” the younger man waved his hands frantically about, “No, no, no.”

“Silas!” Liz’s mouth tightened irritably. “Will you stop fooling around. Leave Justin alone!”

Silas spared her a jerky glare. He cast Justin a look but settled down eventually.

“You’re in a mood today.” Justin murmured.

“Shut up.” Silas exasperated. He took a moment to compose himself before continuing.

“We don’t know what went down here today or why...” Silas hated explaining his actions, his tone conveying as much. “My instincts are telling me something it off-kilter.” he glanced back at his men milling around. “I’m just double checking.”

The man’s grey eyes traveled the countless windows and rooftops surrounding them. He noted several of his men were doing the same. Something was in the wind, they could feel it too.
“Why are they wasting their time?” Liz grumbled belligerently. “You’re just showing off now, admit it.”

Elizabeth glanced at the windows absently as she had seen the others do, a slight tingling traversing her neck. She rubbed the area, wiping the sensation away.

“Am I?” Silas noticed Liz’s subtle tell. “Just ride it out.” he grumbled and not so surprisingly, the woman fell silent for a goodly beat.

“Well, I feel stupid just sitting here waiting for some weirdo to make his move.”

“Red’s gonna have my ass as is.” Silas motioned and Joe, who was still sitting inside the driver’s seat... locked Liz’s door.

The woman’s mouth fell open for the audacity. She unlocked the handle instantly, sending Silas a death glare for he had shut the door in her face.

Joe re-locked the door smiling amiably back at her as the sound of the locks engaging sounded.

Liz gasped, “Stop locking that!” she pinched her lips, rolling the window down triumphantly. “I’m not a child.”

“Then stop acting the part.” Silas dismissed airily. “She needs medical attention.” he changed the subject, nodding to Justin curtly.

The younger man was off and running to the unspoken command.

“What?” Liz was astounded. “You call him back right now! You know very well there is nothing wrong with me what-so-ever.”

“There are a myriad of things wrong with you.” Silas scoffed. “But in this instance, if you sit back like a good little girl, and stop making my life miserable, you’ll have that boot off.”

Elizabeth’s mouth snapped shut for a blink of an eye, “My boot?” she sat up anxiously, her interest caught. “I can take it off?”

“The doctor has to look and confirm,” Silas shrugged, his eyes constantly surveying their surroundings, a worried scowl on his face, “but I watched you fall. It was a natural progression... your momentum took you down. Not your ankle.”

Liz glanced down at her ankle, “It doesn’t hurt at all.”

“We will alert the doctor.” Silas sweetened the pot. “Stalker Boy’s action made your body go off-kilter. But the fall you took,” he shrugged aimlessly, “anybody would have gone down.”

Liz smiled brightly. The thought of losing the cumbersome attachment sent joyous anticipation throughout her brain.

“Now, sit back and... shut up.” Silas’ scowl deepened considerably. “I have to think.”

Elizabeth scooted back, wriggling happily in her seat, “And we all know how taxing that process can be for you.” she mused.

Joe chuckled his appreciation for her wit then straightened slightly at Silas’ sour glare.

Liz sat silently, her thoughts happy ones. She hated this damned boot and wanted it gone.
“I’ll call, Red.” she decided to share her state of well-being. She reached for the phone, bubbling with excitement.

“Don’t do that.” Silas advised. “He’ll be all pissy over the... incident.”

Liz’s hand hesitated, poised over the object she sought.

“Better to let him vent with me.” her guard stated. “Tuning him out is second nature for me now.”

Liz pulled her hand back, leaving the phone in her lap, “Yeah, let him vent on you.”

Silas scowled down at her. He took one last sweep of the buildings.

It would be so ridiculously easy to take a kill shot from any of the hundred vantage points.

Some days he hated his job.

Receiving an ‘all clear’ nod from the head of security to proceed, Silas blocked the entire space between the door facing and the inside of the car.

“This is how it’s gonna go down–”

“Then it must be gospel,” Liz chided, “the word according to–”

“You talk too much,” Silas grated, “anyone ever tell you?”

“Nobody but you.” Liz stated sweetly.

“I’m going to shield your body with mine... why is anyone’s guess,” Silas crooked his brow meaningfully, “once inside the hotel, go directly to the elevators.”

“I wanted to get you something at the gift shop.” Liz batted her blue eyes up at the guy.

Silas’ mouth tightened, “If either Joe or I go down,” he continued undaunted, “you’re on your own.”

Liz laughed at the rather droll tone, “I’ll make sure Aunt Gertie has the suite... right next to yours.”

Silas’ eyes closed wearily, “Once in our room, I will close the drapes in the suite. Do not reopen them.”

“It’s such a pretty day.” she wrinkled her nose.

“You better take this seriously.” he snapped.

“You’re serious enough for the both of us.” she relented. “But okay, Guardian of the Galaxy... whatever you say.”

Silas was mollified.

“I’m going to talk to Red after my bath,” she prepared herself, holding her purse protectively as she slid over the leather seat, “so you had better get him in a good mood by the time we talk.”

“When is he not in a good mood with you?” Silas wanted to know.

“Jealous?” Liz cooed, a warm feeling settling in her tummy for Silas’ observation, however.

“Of all that lovey dovey talk?” the guard grimaced, guiding the woman swiftly into the protection of
the building. “Please, after that chili I had for lunch... it would make me puke.”

“You’re such a romantic.” Liz giggled as they made for the elevators. She noted an older man and woman passing, giving her and her guards peculiar looks. “God only knows why you are still single.”

“Because deep down,” Silas jabbed the button, “God likes me.”

She smiled pleasantly at the couple, straightening her hair primly before stepping into the open elevator.

Silas lifted a stilling arm, blocking the couples intended entrance into their ride, “Take the next one.”

Liz grimaced apologetically as the door slid closed on the couple’s astonished faces.

“He’s sorry!” she yelled through the closing panels.

The woman’s muscles loosened in the quiet, solitary space, however. She peered through the minuscule crack between the mammoth shoulders of her guards who stepped to the front, acting as a shield.

“You are so rude.” she tsked up at the taller man.

“Be glad I didn’t tell them you get frisky in elevators.” Silas countered as they lifted quickly to their floor.

“I do not!” she snapped. She gave the man a good shove. He barely moved an inch, much to his amusement. “You guys are so paranoid.” she attempted to move them aside to no avail.

“What is with you two?” she grumbled as they came to a gliding stop. “Did you not get enough bran today or something?”

Both men had their weapons concealed beneath their light over-shirts she knew, ready-at-hand.

Entering the suite, she felt a rush of release of tension but it returned instantly a minute later as a knock on the door sent both men moving with stealth like grace across the room. They were so quiet, if she hadn’t watched, she would have never known they moved.

Joe moved swiftly, taking position along the oppose side of the door, weapon up and ready.

Silas stood with his back to the other side of the portal, same manner.

“Blue.” he barked out threateningly.

“Vase.” came the cheerful rejoinder from outside the locked door. “I got the... sawbones.”

Silas cracked the door before opening it wide, content with what he observed. Justin ushered the on-site doctor in with a grand sweep of his arm.

The doctor stared at the men quizzically.

Liz couldn’t blame him, she was as stumped as he was.

“It’s just their way.” Liz emerged from behind her barrier. “Where should I sit?” she welcomed him with a smile to put the man at ease.
A short time later, as promised, she traipsed cheerfully off to enjoy a long, leisurely soak. Minus the irritating weight she had been lugging around for what seemed ages.

The doctor okayed she lose the boot just as Silas promised.

It was a good day after all. She was sad Red had left and couldn’t enjoy it with her.

Silas took his usual shift, allowing Joe to take a much-needed rest period. Both men had been on high alert all damned day not that Silas was letting his guard down.

But the eerie feeling had abated. Things were calming down.

Silas plopped carelessly onto the lounge, rolling the phone absently in his hand.

He hated making these calls to Red... especially when the man was almost three-thousand miles away.

No matter that all turned out well in the end, Red would invariably bitch and moan, his mood would turn black. Silas suspected the guy was border-line manic anal retentive. But then, who wasn’t in this outfit?

They were all perfectionists. Though, when it came to Elizabeth, Red took it to a whole new level.

Sighing, Silas flipped the phone open. He cricked his neck, easing his rising tension. Red answered on the first ring.

Of course he did. Other people allowed three, four rings, giving a person time to gather their thoughts.

But no, not Reddington.

“You alone?” Silas got to it. No need to beat around the bush.

“Hang on.” came the immediate reply.

Silas listened as Red stood without hesitation, making his apologies to whomever was present.

Elizabeth always took top priority, Silas knew.

“Francis could you?” Red asked, excusing himself from the meeting. “Only a moment, gentlemen. My fiancé.” he explained, easing any undue tension.

A phone call in their line of business wasn’t just a simple call. Sure, it could be family who remained unaware of their spouses real business. It was just proper etiquette to not out the guy to his family, so all talk came to an abrupt halt.

Though, the majority of the time the interruption was simply a confirmation a delivery was en route or... worse case scenario, a warning sign to vacate the premises due to a wholesale massacre heading their way.

One could never tell.

As Red left the room, Silas could vaguely hear Francis instantly wax poetic about Red’s woman, further easing any remaining doubt those left behind might be experiencing.

“What’s wrong?” Red stressed as the door shut behind him.
“Liz is fine, so,” Silas assured, “...relax.”

Quickly relating the events that had taken place in Red’s absence, Silas was surprised the man held off any questions as long as he did.

“She’s all right though?” Red asked of Lizzy’s tumble.

“Yeah,” Silas nodded, “she’s taking a bath and gonna ice her ankle later as a precaution.”

He said nothing about the now missing boot. Liz would want to surprise Red, herself.

Red fell silent, so long in fact, Silas moved the phone away checking the screen, assuring himself the time stamp was still ticking away.

“I should be there.” Red sighed.

“We’ve had this discussion.” Silas disagreed. “You coming back without her asking for it implies you think she can’t handle this.” he stressed.

Red’s shoulders slumped dejectedly. He understood what the guard was saying, but it didn’t lessen the urge to be there with the woman.

“Besides,” Silas continued, “I don’t think the prick was there for her specifically.”

Red hesitated, thinking back over what Silas had told him, “I’m listening.”

“At the time, I only saw one objective,” the guard confessed, “and that was securing Liz’s safety and getting her back within my custody.”

Red nodded, listening intently.

“It wasn’t until the drive back I thought, Tom used Liz how we expected him to,” Silas said, “as a convenient shield.”

“A diversion to distract from what he was really doing.” Red was following along. “Could he have followed you from the hotel?”

“Tom left before we did.” Silas shook his head negatively. “He had to have arrived long before we did to do the damage he caused.”

“He had already known of the warehouse’s existence.” Red agreed.

Even with the underground at Tom’s disposal to feed him information, the odds of the guy happening upon that particular destination in a city of millions was astronomical.

“So either Lawford tipped him, alerting Tom he needed to destroy the damning evidence... that those two were in cahoots together,” Red thought the problem through, “or there’s a leak somewhere.”

“It can’t be Lawford,” Silas vetoed that avenue, “Samar said he’s still in solitary.”

Red nodded his understanding. “Lawford’s man in New York is still in the wind though,” he said, “it’s not inconceivable that he’s calling all associates to assist in burning the operation.”

“That’s a possibility.” Silas shrugged. “I can tell you, it’s not on our end.” he said. “Aside from me and Joe, no one knew of our destination, except Samar.”
“The thought never once crossed my mind.” Red told the truth. “Lizzy’s team?”

“If they did, they used some sort of telepathy.” Silas sighed. “Joe and I were on them all damn day.”

“Even for piss breaks?” Red prodded the guard.

“Moore did relay the West warehouse location as their next stop.” Silas remembered. “But he did not give out the full address. Even he isn’t that stupid.” he regretfully conceded.

“And where was Tom while Samar and her team were gallivanting about the city?”

“Tom was stationed outside the hotel the entire time so... I doubt he got the info from them.”

Red pushed the heel of his palm across his forehead, easing the growing tightness, “Nothing could be salvaged from the office?”

“No,” Silas said, “not that they know, anyway. But Samar saved the day on that end, saving that shit before they had been diverted.”

“What the hell could he have been destroying?” Red thought out loud. “I seriously doubt Tom is so loyal he would burn files just to save Lawford. Did Samar relate any info about what was on the flash drives?”

“No mistake about it.” Silas grinned. “She could have easily shot him in the leg. The trajectory was better.” the man recalled the woman’s position at the time. “She aimed high, on purpose.”

Red blinked, repeating the words in his head, “At who? Tom?”

He didn’t know if he had voiced that as a statement, question or what? All he knew for certain was, disbelief etched his tone.

“No mistake about it.” Silas grinned. “She could have easily shot him in the leg. The trajectory was better.” the man recalled the woman’s position at the time. “She aimed high, on purpose.”

Red scratched absently at his head, honestly at a loss.

In all the time he had wanted Tom dead, it never once occurred to him that Lizzy would be the one to take the kill shot.

He always assumed...hoped... he would have the honor.
He chuckled inwardly as he realized his other foremost thought was... “What the hell kind of person have I become?” he pondered.

“What d’you mean?” Silas asked.

“I was upset that someone else might take Tom out... should it matter?”

What a strange and unique couple they were... possibly arguing over who got to kill her fake ex-husband.

“If you two are going to come to blows about this,” Silas obviously had read Red’s mind, “I’m gonna have to choose sides. I’m warning you now, I’m Team Liz.”

Red’s lips reluctantly tugged at the corner, “What the hell?” he feigned discord. “Do you know the definition of loyalty?”

“Yeah...vaguely.” Silas shrugged, “Tom’s death to you is a notch on your gun grip.”

Red brows lifted, his expression blasé, not arguing the fact.

“It would mean more to her... she can find absolute closure.”

“And that is the extent of your involvement?” Red scoffed, the reactionary expulsion a real one. “Your loyalty to her extends beyond a damn paycheck, and you know it.”

“Maybe,” Silas didn’t exactly deny it, “but don’t tell her that. She might think she’s special or something...” the man twisted his mouth distastefully, “she’ll get uppity.”

Red chuckled quietly, “Yes, because being at the top of your list is of great importance to her.”

Silas could live with the pseudo-insult, he decided.

Red never thought he would see the day Silas offered affection to a woman he had no intention of bedding. But there it was... Silas held an affinity for Lizzy, and the sentiment was more than returned in kind, Red knew.

Red got things back on track. “Well, I must inform our little firecracker there, I called dibs on Tom’s demise a long time ago.”

“Things change,” Silas countered. “Liz deserves the kill shot. Tom fucked her--”

A most disgruntled snarl interrupted Silas’ train of thought.

“Let me rephrase that,” the guard backtracked, “Tom fucked with her more than he did you. You should at least give her the option.” he stood up for the woman in question.

“If it comes down to it then,” Red grumbled, “maybe we’ll draw straws.”

“Actually,” Silas shrugged after a moment’s consideration, “that would be fair.”

“You aren’t helping.” it was pointed out. “You are supposed to dissuade me from abnormal behavior where Lizzy is concerned.” Red rubbed his forehead roughly. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

“Why?” Silas brought it out. “We are not normal people. None of us... why bother acting as if we are?”
Truer words were never spoken.

“I will keep that under advisement.” Red said, a thought occurring. “Even, Lizzy?”

“Proudly... yes.” Silas turned his head as the sound of Liz’s singing drifted down the hall.

“Are there any plans for this evening of which I should be made aware?”

“No.” Silas said. “From what I understood, the Agents will be looking over files they collected and cataloging the inventory from earlier.” the man held his smile. “Don’t be surprised if they report seeing some of Francis’ manifest on those lists.”

“What did that fool do?”

“Remember back in 2012 when his guys got the warehouses mixed up in Canada...”

“You mean the mix-up in communications which led his men to mistakenly heist not the proposed shipment of munitions we ordered but instead.” Red rolled his eyes heavenward, vividly remembering the fiasco, “.... fifteen thousand barrels of syrup?”

Silas’ deep throaty laughter rumbled through the line.

“That little mishap?” Red finished curtly.

“Your memory is sharp as a tack.” Silas nodded knowingly. “Still haven’t forgiven that one, huh?” he grinned. “Hey, that shit was worth over thirty million dollars.”

“It was fifteen... thousand... barrels,” Red barked, “of syrup!”

It boggled the mind.

The snafu was so out of character for Francis’ men, Red had truly been at a loss when it came time for him to comment on the matter.

After they secured the proper shipment, and the dust settled, all he could do when he opened his mouth to reply was... laugh out loud at the boy’s predicament.

His amusement only grew the next morning as news anchors stoically related that not only had roughly a quarter of the national reserve of maple syrup been absconded with, but authorities feared it would be sold on the black market.

They had been wrong on that count. Francis couldn’t give that shit away.

He unloaded what he could as gifts on any given occasion. Birthdays, anniversaries, christenings... funerals. And still, it barely made a dent in the ample supply.

To this day, Red’s associates still offered snarky remarks about Francis’ ‘sticky situation’.

But now it seemed, through a chain of rather bizarre events, Francis managed to turn the tables about.

Suddenly most of those fifteen thousand barrels of contraband was ‘stuck’ on Lawford.

How Francis pulled such an astonishing feat off, not only amused Red, it mystified the man.

“How much did he unload?” Red asked.
“Looked to be all of it to me.” Silas laughed throatily.

“How the hell did they move all that so quickly?” Red was amazed.

“Well, Francis’ warehouse is just a couple doors down from Lawford’s.” Silas reminded. “A couple forklifts and...”

“It was over fifteen thousand barrels.” Red reminded in kind.

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.” Silas shrugged. “Bright side for us, we won’t get that shit at Christmas anymore.”

Red shook his head, a small smile twitching at his mouth. Francis had the worst luck but also the most optimistic attitude when faced with adversity.

Red admired that trait in any individual but knowing of Francis’ background, it was even more remarkable the young man was so resilient.

“What do you want me to do when Tom shows back up?” Silas took the conversation full loop. “Because we all know he will.”

“I know what I’d like to do.” Red stated the obvious. “Thoughts?”

“We can’t allow him to sit out front, laughing at us.” Silas dipped a toe in the water, feeling things out with his boss. “It would be an affront to our sensibilities.”

“Your sensibilities,” Red countered, “you mean.”

“The collective, our.” Silas granted that he wasn’t the most sensitive guy in the world. “It’s bad for moral.” he continued. “The guys get restless, they want him gone.” he stated. “I understand the sentiment.”

“Agreed.” Red had come to the same conclusion but... he was too close to keep a clear perspective.

“Are the men running out of ideas on how to make Tom’s life miserable?” Red knew how to muster the troops. “Besides, the way I see it, you guys are one up. Joe’s mark hit the spot, didn’t it?”

Silas smiled happily at the reminder, “Just doesn’t seem enough where Stalker Boy is concerned.”

“The truth is, with Tom across the street, it works out better for us.” Red had to continuously remind himself of that fact. “He’s good at what he does, regardless of our feelings towards the little...”

“Cockroach?” Silas supplied. “The want to squish him under my boot is a growing need.”

“I like the way you think.” Red relented. “But for the time being, we return to standard operating procedures.”

Silas sighed heavily but accepted his lot in life.

“If there are any weaknesses in our defenses, he will find them, agreed?”

“Yeah.” the guard reluctantly did so.

“We’ve always known Tom was tangled up in something that involves Lizzy,” Red said. “We’ve been waiting for movement on that end... now we have it.”
“Have I mentioned patience in not my strongest virtue?” Silas mentioned.

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Red recalled an incident. “Need I remind you,” he began, “you lay in your own filth for two days waiting to take a sniper shot at that drug lord down in Ecuador a few years back?”

The fucker had taken an associate’s little girl in retaliation for late shipment, of all fucking things. Silas tracked the bastard for two hellish weeks in scorching heat and humidity until he found the estate where they kept the child. The wait had been well worth it.

“You got her back.” Red couldn’t keep the pride from his voice.

“That’s my job.” Silas stated quietly.

“Too bad you missed your shot.” Red provoked the man. “And you call yourself a professional.”

“Like I said, the wind shifted at the last second.” Silas’ face turned bleak. He was not proud his professionalism had lapsed.

“You only winged the guy in the throat.” Red commiserated. “Bastard drowned in his own blood, as I recall.”

“Yeah, that was a sad thing.” Silas stared at the opposite wall. “I should have had better control.”

The silence came for a beat as each man pondered the reasons behind such actions.

“Don’t tell me there’s not a part of you that wouldn’t enjoy hunting that prick, Tom.” Silas broke the silence, his irritation coming to a head. “Terrorize him like he has her.”

“You’re being awfully dramatic.” Red sighed, knowing very well where this melancholy was coming from. “Stop feeling guilty. You can protect Elizabeth only so much. You know that. I know that.”

The sound of discontent rumbled over the line. “You make choices in life.” Silas brooded. “I wish I could revisit some.”

“You told Lizzy you would give her a fighting chance,” Red recalled discussing this very topic with Lizzy, “you gave her that earlier.” he stressed. “It’s your support and training that allowed her to act as she did today.”

“Is Francis spiking your drinks again?” Silas questioned seriously. “You should be reaming my ass but—”

“Trust me, if I had my way, I’d string Tom up and let the asshole hang until he rotted.” Red let the threat roll from his tongue easily, the sentiment behind the statement a heartfelt one. “Don’t ever think I’m not with you on that one.”

Silas crossed his thick arms over his chest, his mind calming over the imagery provided.

“I’m fucking livid knowing that scum even dared to touch her.” Red seethed. “I patiently await the day I can put him down, for good.”

Silas sat straighter in his seat, hearing the quiet rage seething inside Red Reddington. It made Silas’ heart happy to know the man he had known for years was still there somewhere, just waiting for the opportunity to strike.
“Until that time,” Red continued, controlling his rising temper, “I intend to keep my wits about me, find out what Tom is up to... and stop the threat so none of it will ever touch Elizabeth.”

“I prefer when you think with your dick.” Silas muttered his approval. “You tend to be more vicious.”

Red dropped his face into his palm, sighing lightly, “I do so enjoy these boorish, not to mention, uncivilized discussions with you.”

“I’m here for you, Red.” Silas held his amusement.

Red wasn’t necessarily thinking with his dick, as it was so vulgarly stated, but more so, his heart.

At least, he hoped that was the gist of it. Sometimes lines blurred. But he was also aware of the fact that his love for the woman was a guiding force.

It was his love for her that demanded he protect her at all cost. Even if it meant killing for her.

“You are crude,” Red confirmed the man’s hypothesis, “...but accurate.”

Red truly did understand Silas’ restlessness. Neither was known for their patience. Especially with a man like, Tom Keen.

Tapping a rhythm less beat on the tabletop, Red lost himself in his thoughts. There had to be a way to provoke Tom... and amuse his men. Restless security led to itchy trigger fingers.

“Tom won’t back down under interrogation but there’s no reason that theory can’t be tested to its limits.” Red thought out loud. “There’s no way the Cabal would associate itself with a lowlife like Lawford unless it somehow lead them to the Fulcrum.”

“Lawford isn’t that intelligent.” Silas shook his head. “Five will get ya ten, he has no clue that such a thing even exists.”

“No, but whoever is pulling Tom’s strings is higher up on the food chain.” Red surmised. “That person is our end goal... it’s a stroke of good fortune we stumbled onto this connection.”

Silas grunted a noncommittal sound.

“Tell the men to step up their efforts to annoy and dissuade.” Red made an executive decision.

Silas perked up.

Red sat back, lacing his fingers over his stomach, “You tell the men I’ll allow them to hunt Tom, but they are ordered to not kill him as yet.”

Silas groaned his discontent.

“Chase him through the streets of New York.” Red laid out a game plan. “A grown-up version of hide and seek, if you will.”

Silas had to admit, the idea was an intriguing one, “I have been on the men about perfecting their tailing techniques.” he felt better. “The young ones don’t use all their senses as they should.”

“Well, there you go.”

“And if one of the boys should,” Silas hedged, questioning the rules of the game, “tag Tom?”
Red’s mouth pulled into a reluctant smile, the guard warming more to the prospect, “They may rough him up... a bit.” he allowed. “But they must also allow him the chance to escape.”

“Oh, what the fuck!” Silas snapped. “That’s not fair play!”

“It is, if the hunt continues on, you imbecile.” Red grumbled. “Tail the son-of-a-bitch. See where he goes to ground, who he meets...”

“All right...” Silas calmed, agreeing to the negotiated terms, “but if he comes at Liz aga–”

“Your orders in that regard, have not altered.” Red’s tone chilled. “You have the shot, you take it.”

Silas’ shoulders relaxed from their tense position... finally.

“When we reconvene in D.C.,” Red said, “we will revisit the discussion we had before your little... accident. Maybe something will come of it.”

Silas frowned, suddenly recalling the reference. “The letters?”

Red sat his tumbler down, a finality to the movement. “Yes, the letters.”

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**June 9**

Liz sighed as she sat her bag on the bureau, watching the clock roll past midnight. It seemed a nightly ritual these days.

She listened to the sounds of the hotel room. Familiar sounds now but oddly different from when she was in her own home.

How did Red... or anyone for that matter, stand the constant strain of travel? Was it even a strain?

Was that what she was experiencing? No... not strain. That wasn’t it.

Something was off-balance. Uneven. Things were not... symmetrical. Not like at home.

*Home.*

She missed her home. It hadn’t been that long an absence, surely.

Then it dawned on the woman.

She hadn’t felt any of the strangeness when Red was here.

It wasn’t her home she missed.

It was Red Reddington.

Four days now. She hadn’t seen him in four days time.

His business dealings turned out more complicated than expected.

And on her end, Lawford’s holdings were more extensive and time consuming to catalog and inventory than anyone anticipated.
Liz found herself resentful of the intrusions into their life. She knew it was petty and childish even to resent such things. Four days had changed her perspective entirely.

Life interruptus...

Who didn’t face such challenges?

While she had appreciated the work and even being reconnected with her team, it was two days past the expected reunion with Red.

To celebrate another case closed, Silas had suggested a night out for dinner and drinks, her team included.

Relishing the idea of leaving the confines of the hotel and glare of computer screens... she had quickly invited her team to join them.

Only Moore had declined the invitation. The man was much more inclined to spend time with Agents from the field office.

No one seemed particularly upset by his refusal. Samar actually did a little happy dance when informed.

They had a wonderful, relaxed dinner. Followed by drinks and entertainment at a bar down the way.

The night ended in everyone gathering around the piano guy singing Billy Joel’s infamous song of the same name.

She had fun making bets, most of which she lost. She could never pick a winning horse. She played darts and pool with her team... it was a good time.

But she missed Red.

The first night of his absence had been... okay. His scent in the sheets and cuddling with his shirt had lulled her easily to sleep.

Of course, she and Red kept in contact by phone but nothing could replace the reality of him being there.

They connected nightly, sharing their day, their stress, complaints and commiserations.

It was wonderful just to hear his voice. She hoped he felt the same.

His laughter would make or break her day. She was slowly beginning to realize; she was constantly searching for some tidbit of interest to relay which might amuse or distract him.

She thought she had hit upon an item which everyone at work had found rather bemusing.

She wished she had waited to see his expression when describing the bizarre inventory found in Lawford’s last warehouse. She had been in the middle of relating the oddity when Red broke, laughing with abandon.

“Oh, Lizzy,” the sound of amusement, automatically bringing a smile to her face, “if you could only hear the baffled and confused tone of your voice.” he continued the infectious chuckle which delighted her.

Red provided the true back story on how Francis came to be in possession of Canada’s stockpile of
maple syrup reserves.

“You’ve been waiting all day for me to bring up this subject haven’t you?” Liz joined in his good-natured laughter.

He told the tale in such an amusing way, his embellishments adding to the rather whimsical occurrence.

Her expression had run the gauntlet from startled disbelief to resigned amusement.

A time or two during the unfolding of the story, she found herself covering her face, totally embarrassed to be found an associate of a loon like Francis Holbrook.

But another part of her reveled in the fact, she could list the man among her very dearest friends, if not, the most cherished.

“Only Francis could carry off something that weird and have it turn out in his favor...” Liz realized.

It was in spite of his antics most times but sometimes... because of them, she loved his so dearly.

“...It also explains why we have a case of syrup in the pantry.” she continued, a reluctant smile pulling at her mouth upon hearing Red’s scoffed groan of despair.

“How the hell did such a mistake happen?” she was befuddled. “They were supposed to pick up crates of ammunition... but went ahead and carted thousands of barrels of what clearly was liquid out of the warehouse.”

“Bizarre is synonymous with Francis,” Red nodded he understood her confusion and dismay. “Either way, they managed in record time from all accounts.... I think, correct me if I’m wrong. Security at a syrup factory is rather on the nonexistent side.”

“Well, not anymore.” she started laughing again.

Red relaxed back in his chair, having found his happy place. “This is much better than last night’s chat, isn’t it?”

She flushed a little, “Weren’t we silly, snipping at each other like that.” she had thought about it all day.

“I have unearthed a theory about what happened.” he confided.

“You Googled it...” she teased.

“Elizabeth,” Red exasperated, “how many times do I have to tell you and Francis, Google does not hold the answers to all humankinds woes?”

Liz grinned at his honest vexation.

“I didn’t Google it,” Red, having his say, settled admirably. “I went to a source reliable and infallible... I asked Dembe.”

She giggled, “He reads Reader’s Digest, so then it must be true.”

“Damn right.” Red agreed. “And while I am sure psychologists have any number of superior sounding words which might apply to why we were at odds with each other last evening,” he stopped for a much needed breath, “Dembe put it into laymen’s terms. Something with which we
both can identify, I’m sure.”

“What did he say?” Liz was genuinely interested. “I was looking forward to your call all day but when we connected, we both became very surly in a remarkably short period of time.”

“We did.” he nodded succinctly. “Dembe reminded me that human’s often display one emotion when it is actually another they are experiencing.”

“Not following.” she admitted. “We weren’t upset?”

“We were, but for totally opposite reasons than we believed.”

“Well, I thought,” Liz had, “that your tone put me off a little. It felt as if you didn’t really want to be on the phone with–”

“Which was exactly the opposite of what I wanted.” he stated emphatically. “I too, had wished to speak to you all day and it was a long, taxing day... for both of us, correct?”

Liz thought back over the previous day, “I was grumpy all day.” she recalled. “I thought it was working in close proximity to Moore. It had nothing to do with you.”

“And I,” Red shared, “had to deal with similar people in the organization. But, all I could think... this will be worth it when finally, I hear Lizzy’s voice.”

“Oh...” she was sincerely touched, “... did you really think that?”

“I did.” he confessed. “Were you aware, the entire time I was speaking to you, Francis was in the back ground feeding me Intel concerning the meetings I purposely left to be with you.”

“Well...” Liz sat up from her slouched position on her pillows, flushing, “my phone kept constantly dinging with text messages from the team...well, Samar and Ress, anyway.”

“I highly suspected.” Red nodded. “We weren’t angry with each other... we were angry because the outside world kept intruding on our time.”

The silence was completely comfortable on both sides.

“Is that what it was?” Liz was astonished because it made perfect sense... now.

“We resented the hell out of them.”

“Why did we take it out on each other?” she wasn’t clear on that one as yet.

“Human nature.” Red shrugged. “According to Dembe we weren’t even aware we were transferring those emotions.”

“Until it was too late.” Liz sighed.

“A guy comes home from a bad day at work. He’s so glad to be home but inwardly,” Red explained, “he and his significant other will have an argument because he neglected to vent those negative emotions elsewhere.”

Liz pondered the concept.

“Instead of expressing genuine anger at those who pissed us off. I, for one,” Red had time to analyze Dembe’s hypothesis, “ignored them completely, dismissing the irritation in the hope that it would all
be over as soon as I could speak to you.”

“Red...” Liz’s heart was touched.

“They affected us more than we liked to admit,” he sighed heavily. “Of course we are going to end up resenting it.”

Liz nodded silently, her fingers twirling the ends of one of his ties absently. She kept it hanging on the head of the bed. It was one she liked tremendously when he wore it.

“...There is a bright side to what happened,” Red smiled.

Liz’s brows lifted high, “Arguing with you isn’t high on my list.”

“There is, when you take into account,” his eyes softened, “we felt comfortable enough to do so, without repercussion.”

She did have to admit, even with the tension, she had felt at ease unloading on Red. She supposed, he felt the same way.

She harbored no ill will towards him today at all. In fact, she was anticipating his call.

“Thank you for calling and making it all better.” she needed to say the words. “I was miserable the whole time... were you?”

“You know I was, baby.” he rubbed his eyes, kinking his neck. “I hate being at odds with you... for any reason.”

“Same here.” her voice softened. “I wanted to call.” she confessed. “And I would have, really.”

He chuckled, “I caved first, huh?”

“I don’t think so.” she wrinkled her nose. “I was going to call before you but Samar actually got to me first.”

“You kinda like me.” Red’s ego inflated, her words enchanting him.

“Not as much as I like Dembe, but yeah,” she teased, “you’re somewhere on the list.”

“Liar.” Red’s tone washed over her like a seductive sweep of his hand. She missed his touch so much.

“Every woman falls under Dembe’s spell.” she defended herself, trying to shake the very pleasant sensation that tone had caused. “You know that. We can’t help ourselves.”

“I think he releases some kind of hormone.” was Red’s theory. “Which explains Dembe... Silas defies scientific logic.”

Liz chuckled, “It’s pure animal attraction. He’s explained it in minute detail, several times.”

“You actually asked him?” Red’s brows rose.

“No.” Liz stated flatly. “He gifts me with those daily gems of wisdom so if the opportunity presents itself, I’ll be better prepared for Jeopardy.” her droll tone made him smile.

Red chuckled quietly, “After my discussion with Dembe, I realized I had not informed Francis or
anyone else of my new rules.” she inclined her head, knowing he was referencing the chat he had with security. “I will correct that error as soon as possible.”

“I don’t mind Francis calling.” Liz was quick to ease the man’s ire.

“I do.” Red grumbled. “Unless he’d dying,” his rubbed aching eyes, “he can wait until morning.”

“Can’t handle it after a long day?” Liz snickered.

“I can barely handle him during the day.” Red quipped. “Probably because he has awakened me from a sound sleep to engage in some of the most inane conversation I’ve had in my entire life.”

Liz tittered, rather enjoying that the two most important men in her life got on so well.

“Listen, are you in for the night?” she glanced at the clock on the beside table, her hopes sinking. It was only a little past nine his time.

“There is a gala or some such frivolity going on in a couple hours.” he waved a dismissive hand. “I’m supposed to show up and mingle.” he ran his hand along the back of his neck. “It’s where the real business of the day is accomplished. I suppose I should attend.”

“When do you people sleep?”

“We... people?” was he being lumped into that category.

“You know what I would absolutely love?” she confided.

“Tell me.” he encouraged.

“To fall asleep in your arms.” her tone softened to a gentle caress.

“I know this is hard, baby.” he ached poignantly to be with her. “I want you in my arms” he concurred, “so damned badly.”

“It did feel kinda normal though,” she commented, having settled down, hugging a pillow to her slender frame, “when we were bickering... like a couple who are comfortable enough to express themselves with each other... didn’t it?”

“Let’s get back to, I want you in my arms.” he suggested.

“I mean, we were grumpy with each other and that was okay, right?”

“We will have disagreements,” he sighed. “It’s how we address the issues between us that will make or break us... you know that, baby.”

“Do I?” she wondered. “With Tom, I always just gave in. It seemed easier.”

“Tom was a master manipulator.” Red reminded. “You give in enough and you start to lose your own identity.” he knew the feeling well.

She nodded, thinking over all the lost years of her life, “I wish my aim had been better at that warehouse. I know Silas ratted me out.” she took for granted. “And don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about.”

“You don’t mean that.” Red scolded superficially.
Liz’s brow furrowed, “Afraid of a little competition?”

“Are we going to argue about this?” Red queried lightly, allowing her the knowledge... he too wished her aim had been more on the mark. “If so, Silas is on your side.”

“Rightfully so.” Liz lifted her chin snootily. “Silas is my...” she searched for a proper description.

“Partner in crime.” Red shook his head woefully.

“I thought that was you?” she held her amusement, before forging on. “I will not argue about this.” she staunchly replied.

Liz was not the least bit put out about the subject they discussed. While most of it was said in jest... a sick truth to it crept around the edges.

“May the best man... or woman, win.”

“I agree to those terms.” Red’s lips curved into a shark like grin. “Though, just for the record... I am not Tom, I like a spirited partner who doesn’t back down from a fight without just cause.”

“You do, huh?”

“You know I love challenges.” Red smiled when he heard the challenge all ready in her tone. “And you, are the best challenge I’ve had in my life to date.”

Lizzy was quiet for so long, he thought his words had troubled her, “Elizabeth?” he sat up.

“I miss you so much.” her voice broke.

Red closed his eyes to the pain within, “Don’t, baby. It tears me up inside when you are unhappy, for any reason.”

She smiled gently, blinking back tears.

They missed each other terribly and being unable to relax together at the end of the day as they had become accustom... was a weight they carried between them.

It felt nice to be missed. Even more so, to be Red’s outlet. To be that which made him forget his day. Liz’s soul was a little lighter for the fact.

“Guess that’s why I love you so much, do you think?”

Red’s mouth pulled into a reluctant smile, “Do you, Lizzy?”

“With everything that I am.” she confessed openly.

“If I were there right now,” he mused, “I would make sure you would never want to leave my arms.”

The woman thrilled to the confidence exuded.

“Do you believe those words, Elizabeth.”

“I believe you can make me believe them.” she smiled secretly.

“I would like to think I can.” Red wished. He hoped that was the case at this point in their relationship.
“You know...” Liz was more than hesitant, feeling her way, “I have a rather silly confession to make.”

“Let me be your priest.” he quipped.

“Red!” she was shocked, sitting half way up for a beat.

“Don’t tell me women don’t fantasize about that scenario.” he scoffed. “Want me to bring a white collar and Nehru jacket home?”

Liz shook her head, giggling, sitting back into the bed, “Do you men fantasize about nuns?”

“Absolutely not.” he stated emphatically. “We’re too afraid to do so.”

She chuckled, “Hell and damnation?”

“No... the sisters themselves put the fear of God into us quite efficiently all on their own. A sturdy ruler and agile wrist go a long way.” he confided. “They don’t need any help from the Big Guy.”

“Dembe?”

“God.” Red practically snapped. “I see I’m going to have to start watching that man more closely.” he made himself more comfortable. “Maybe I can pick up a few tips on how to mesmerize women.”

“It’s almost mystical, isn’t it?” Liz teased.

“If you say so. Now...” he got things back on track, “let’s discuss the confession, shall we?”

Liz had forgotten her train of thought.

“Does it involve lace panties and whip cream?”

Liz laughed outright, “That makes my real confession seem pointless by comparison.”

“A man has his dreams...” he sighed, then sobered. “Seriously,” he quietened, “tell me.”

The woman quietened as well, “It’s just that,” she hoped he wouldn’t think it sounded trite, “when you’re away... I have pillows.” she blurted before she lost the nerve.

“What?” Red half-chuckled.

“I...” she flushed, “I lay them beside me.” it was explained. “I... pretend.” she trailed off, embarrassed.

The man was quiet so long, she started to squirm. “I take one of your t-shirts.” it was his turn to confess.

The man had been fingering the ultra soft material the entire time they spoke.

“It retains your scent.” he finished, his voice soft and gentle for her.

Liz was taken aback, “What?”

“The one you lounge around in...” he explained, “I always take something of yours with me.”

Her heart was touched, “I couldn’t find it. I searched all over the hotel. I thought housekeeping or the laundry service misplaced it.” It didn’t once occur to her that Red might have been the one to take
the sea-green shirt she so cherished.

“Turn the lights out. Lay down and get comfortable.” he suggested low and soothing. “Close your eyes.”

“Is it going to be one of those nights?”

“No.” he half-smiled. “No, tonight, I just want to be close to you. I need that, don’t you?”

Tears pricked her eyes. The man sounded so forlorn, so affected, “I... I feel exactly the same.”

Red side glanced the pillows beside him, shaking his head. Nothing would ever be a good enough substitute for Lizzy’s soft curves molding to his.

“I’ll be home soon, baby.” Red vowed. “I promise you that. But right now...let’s pretend for a while, huh?”

Liz nodded her agreement, her throat tight with emotion.

“Are you nodding?” his eyes softened.

“Oh!” the woman shook free of the moment. “Yes... yes, I would like that, very much.”

Red situated himself more comfortably, “Tell me about your day.”

Elizabeth cuddled to her pillows, happy to hear his hypnotic voice in her ear.

They spoke of inconsequential things in hushed tones, just as when they lay side by side together at night when at home.

And the silences were just as comforting. Red realized just how deeply he was becoming attached to the woman and their routine.

He reveled in the fact, the mere sound of her breathing could put him in such a mellow, wondrous mood.

He pulled a pillow into his arms, resting his chin where the crown of Lizzy’s head would be.

He closed his eyes as both desperately tried to grasp hold of the illusion they sought to create.

Red knew the hour was drifting by far too quickly for his liking. Soon he would be called away.

He was hoping, at least the woman might drift off before that eventuality.

“Did you fall asleep, sweetheart?”

“No,” she mumbled sleepily, “I was listening to you.”

“Why don’t you put me on speaker and let me lull you to sleep.” he replied quietly.

Lizzy had fallen asleep on the phone with him before. Once after her Brownstone had been breached, then later after she experienced a panic attack.

Red stayed on the line, wide awake... listening for any hint of danger or offering a soothing tone, easing any further panic.

To do the opposite of that now... to succumb to more pleasant circumstances... to take comfort in
each others presence was exceedingly nice for a change.

“The phone bill will be excruciating.” she murmured in her half dream state.

Red stilled in his movements a moment, before chuckling at the off-hand remark, “What year are you in?” he teased.

He couldn’t remember the last time they had to pay for minutes? Not that it would have mattered in any case. He’d pay any damn price more than happily, if the last sounds he heard tonight was the soft breathing of Lizzy beside him.

“Like we can’t afford it.” he teased quietly.

Red shared some juicy gossip floating among the elite of his associates that amused Lizzy.

He related some antics Francis and Ben perpetrated over the past few days. They could always be counted on to liven up any meeting. No matter how staid and mundane the premise.

Lizzy’s breathy laughter fell gentle on the man’s ears.

He reached for her, his disappointment acute when he realized his faux pas. His hand fell on the empty space beside him, the coldness of the sheets piercing his warm hand.

The moment was achingly poignant for the man.

“Is something wrong?” she sensed a subtle change.

He didn’t answer, unable to shake the disquieting sensation so quickly.

“I love you.” she murmured softly, instinctively wanting to ease the sudden strain he was emitting although, silently. “Have I told you today?”

Red chuckled involuntarily, “I love you too, baby.” his darkness dissipating as quickly as it came.

Liz shook the cobwebs, sharing tidbits as well. She sensed he needed the mundane himself for a while.

An hour later, both individuals found themselves surrendering to the heavy weight of sleep which pulled at them.

Dembe found Red slumbering away, his phone propped on his pillow.

The sound of Elizabeth’s deep, evened breathing filled the restful silence of the room.

Dembe smiled warmly down at his friend, flicking off the bathroom light, bathing the room in darkness.

He would inform Francis and Ben to mingle in Raymond’s stead, as he was in tense negotiations and unable to get away.

Taking one last look at his friend, Dembe closed the door, shutting out the world that made so many demands of them.
Come Monday...

Chapter Notes

The ink is still wet on this one, we literally just finished adding in some things a few minutes ago. I would be surprised if there weren't any typos. If there are any, point them out :) 

I added a couple reader suggestions again but one in particular has been in the works over a couple chapters... we finally bring it full circle in this one. I hope she enjoys it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

JUNE 9 -

Elizabeth Keen was restless.

Yes, that was the word. Restless and bored.

She fidgeted the entire elevator ride. Her guards were stoically quiet, about their jobs. She hated when they were in that mode.

She felt disconnected with them. She was no longer ‘Liz’... she become the person they were paid to watch over. To risk their lives for.

While intellectually, she totally understood the need to separate the two realities, emotionally the fact irritated her.

She had even hit Silas’ broad shoulder as she passed in the hall, giving him an annoyed glare.

The man halted his steps instantly, sparing her a ‘what the hell’ look, his hands spreading wide.

She studiously ignored the unasked question that look implied, waiting impatiently for him to unlock the hotel suite’s entrance.

Liz sighed, laying her laptop bag on the counter as Silas closed and secured the door behind them.

Normally, she loved her time spent in New York but today; she was relieved this jaunt was almost over.

With her team in the final stages of closing out their side of things, Liz was in a sort of limbo of her own making.

Red had left the jet here for her use and she could leave anytime she wished.

However, it felt tacky to strand her team, leaving them to find their own way home. Since she was going in that direction herself, she offered them a lift.

Now, there wasn’t much for her to do but wait for their return.

Considering she, herself, was here in an unofficial capacity, Ressler suggested she make herself scarce to avoid censure.
Liz shrugged off the thought but then did as suggested, if only for Ressler’s sake. He too, could face disciplinary action should it come to light she worked before being cleared by the Bureau.

She could probably skirt the rule because Red required her presence, but for Ressler’s sake... she took a back seat.

Besides, she just didn’t feel like bothering with the tedious formalities.

While her team dealt with the last of the red tape, securing pertinent files with the local field office, that would allow them to prosecute Samuel Lawford... she returned to the hotel.

Lawford would get jail time for the usual crimes the mob dabbled in. Racketeering, tax evasion, extortion... possession of stolen goods.

Liz glanced around the spacious suite, looking for something positive to do.

She plopped a pod in the coffeemaker, going through the second nature motions on automatic pilot, her mind recalling her earlier conversation with Samar.

It didn’t matter how long Samar had done the job, it still twisted her gut when men like Lawford, while listening to all the charges laid against them, murder included... remained aloof and blasé.

As if someone were simply reading a newspaper aloud to them.

The Agent confided, the display, or rather, lack of one disturbed her.

What was even more bothersome, when the man finally showed emotion, it had been completely out of the blue and for the oddest reason.

Lawford had gone completely ballistic when his possession of vast quantities of syrup had been called into question.

If it wasn’t so utterly disturbing, Liz would have laughed.

Either way, she made mental note to inform Red, Lawford knew he was being labeled the fall guy. Francis should watch his back for a while just on the off chance Lawford had any faithful followers who might enact revenge for their boss.

The team would handle the rest of the documents at the Blacksite, particularly those pertaining to Lawford’s involvement with certain terrorist factions.

The Bureau had enough with the minor infractions alone to get life in prison. Only when Lawford came up for parole, would the rest of the information come to light, if the need arose.

It seemed like an injustice to not nail Lawford with everything they could.

After speaking to Silas about it though, Liz changed her tune.

Her guard reminded her, if they kept the Intel on hand under wraps, it would allow the Special Op’s teams handling the situation the element of surprise when they moved in on the terrorists to take them into custody.

Considering the men on her security detail, men she knew and loved like family, were all ex-military who had performed such operations in the past... Liz was more than supportive of them having the upper hand when it came to such dangerous missions.
Grasping her laptop, she fell heavily onto the sofa, gratefully enjoying the silence afforded her.

Silas had gone about his routine, securing the massive rooms they occupied.

Justin breezed past her having opened the door, entering without preamble. Liz noted a guard just outside that door.

Justin spared her a wave, heading to the back rooms, a spring in his step, a grin on his face. Silas emerged from the same area, saving the young man a trip.

“You need me?” Justin bounced excitedly in place.

“No,” Silas waved the guy off, “go... play.”

Justin clapped his hands together excitedly, bolting for the door with a backwards wave goodbye before disappearing from view.

“What d’you do?” Liz chuckled as Silas approached. “Get him laid?”

“Even I am not that good.” Silas snarked.

Rolling her eyes, Liz pulled her laptop closer. “No, seriously. What’s up with the guys?” she frowned at the coffee stain on her lid, wiping it clean. “They were all grumpy bastards, now they’re like the Stepford Wives... with their creepy smiles.”

Silas glanced up, shrugging, “They’re just enjoying their new assignment.”

Liz scowled, her cup held aloft in mid-air, “Since when?”

“I encouraged them to hone their skills while here,” Silas murmured, marking a couple items off his daily checklist, “for the next few days, they will be employing concealment and camouflage techniques to evade pursuing enemies.”

Liz listened to the man, a frown furrowing her brow the more he prattled on, “You told them in essence...to go play hide and seek?”

Silas lifted expressionless grey eyes, “In laymen’s terms.”

His full lips pulled into a disgruntled resentment for such a jejune phraseology.

She tittered softly at the man’s seriousness, “You did tell them not to play in the street?”

“They have to be aware of all forms of danger.” Silas grinned wickedly.

“And they’re doing this... why?” she questioned the purpose of the activity.

Silas leaned forward, intent on informing the woman of the game, then hesitated.

While he personally had no issue informing Liz of the impromptu war game security was implementing with Tom... Red might.

Not that Silas believed Red would hide their activities from Liz, but he knew well enough, the man would rather discuss it with Liz himself should she have questions... or objection.

Liz narrowed her eyes at the man, “Is Red hiding something from me?”
“No.” Silas answered without hesitation. “I think he would prefer to discuss this with you himself.”

Liz nodded slowly. “You don’t think it’s your place to elaborate?”

“No, I don’t.” the man nodded in return. “I don’t think he would mind if I told you, I just think...”

“No,” Liz lifted a staying hand, “I respect what you’re saying.” she did. “Just so I know... he’s not in any danger or—”

“No, no...” Silas assured quickly, “has nothing to do with Red.” he sat forward, linking his fingers between parted knees. “I would inform you if there were issues with his security.”

Liz studied the man’s face, finding truth in the slate eyes.

“Nor is he hiding this from you either,” Silas clarified. “He doesn’t do that, Elizabeth.”

Liz felt slightly rebuked. Silas so rarely called her by name, after all.

She was reading between the lines well enough. Red and Silas had discussed the events that took place and security measures... then Red wanted to hear for himself that she was okay with whatever tactics arrived at, straight from the source.

In the midst of reconnecting with her, he simply forgotten to bring up the subject. She couldn’t really fault the man either. She too, had forgotten to mention key points of her day to Red last night... in between all they discussed.

“The subject of letting me in the loop wasn’t brought up.” Liz clarified.

“Exactly.” Silas confirmed.

“Okay...” she inclined her head gracefully. She would talk to Red soon enough and would broach the subject then.

“It’s all right, Silas.” she smiled kindly at her now brooding guard. “It was a simple communication error,” she shrugged. “I believe, if it were truly important, you would tell me.”

And Liz did. Silas, himself, assisted her in finding personal security for Red, so if Red were in danger, she believed her guard would inform her of any issues.

So whatever security was involved with, Red would explain things in finer detail when he could.

When they could discuss those finer details... would remain to be seen. There were so many things for them to talk about, and not all were work related.

Liz mused on the gradual development in her and Red’s relationship.

They discussed so many aspects of their lives now on a daily, oft times, hourly basis.

She no longer felt an outsider in any sense of the word.

She was ashamed to admit, she never looked at Red as a colleague, let alone a friend until he saw to her well-being after her run-in with Carver.

Even then, it had taken a couple weeks to warm up to the man. Let alone, see him as a human being.

Her thoughts drifted to an instance where she began looking at Red in a different light.
It happened days before her birthday. It was such an innocuous little thing, but his actions had endeared the man to her psyche.

Before he hired on Nora, Red had secured a cook to handle breakfast in case he was called away.

By chance, Red’s meeting ended earlier than planned. He returned home just as the cook was setting plates of standard breakfast fare, along with... pancakes, before her.

Red stepped in before anyone could blink, removing the offending plate. He apologized for the grievous error, explaining he had neglected to inform the cook of her aversion to pancakes, then promptly requested French Toast be prepared instead, just how she liked it.

At first, the woman had felt rather silly for such an insignificant mistake. She would have simply made a pretense of tasting the food then lie to cover the tiny oversight.

And then it occurred to her... Red knew her preferences almost as well, if not more so... than she.

It was at that moment, Liz realized she had never taken the time to know him on a personal level.

It wasn’t until recently that she learned how Red Reddington liked his coffee or that he had a weakness for jelly biscuits in the morning.

On the other hand, if asked of her teammates, she could have told you that Ressler liked sausage biscuits with coffee. Samar enjoyed a hard-boiled egg, English muffin and chamomile tea. And Aram, pancakes with milk.

She grimaced remembering one morning when Red handed her a cup of coffee prepared how she liked from her favorite coffee shop. She had snapped at him, demanding if he was having her followed.

She had felt rather embarrassed when the man gestured to the coffee mug from the previous day emblazoned with the shop’s name along with the ingredients listed on the side, in plain view.

He had simply observed a preference, just as she had with her own team.

It saddened her that Red knew so much about her likes and dislikes, and she knew very little of his.

Slowly but surely, she was correcting that. But finding time to squeeze twenty questions in between the other issues of the day, was sometimes difficult.

In hindsight, aside from the fact Red did need more sleep, she was glad Red demanded they be given uninterrupted time alone.

She was determined to adopt the same attitude. When they were alone, the phone and laptop would be turned off.

Everyone else had off-time... a romantic life. So could they, dammit. And it was something she desperately needed, wanted... right now with Red.

“What’s wrong with you?” Silas’ deep baritone jarred the woman from her musings.

Liz looked up, finding her guard frowning in her direction.

“You’ve been,” he gave her a once over, “sullen, all day.”

Liz broke the intense gaze, fiddling with the buttons on her keyboard, just then realizing she was
pouting. Not frowning, but pouting.

“No, I haven’t.” the pout deepened much to her vexation.

“Yes,” he disagreed, “you have.”

“I just...” she sighed, “I miss, Red.”

“Uh huh...” Silas grunted the response, knowing better.

Liz tsked, huffing, “You know...” she pinched her lips irritably, “not everything is your business.”

“I have my secrets,” the man’s droll tone drawled, “you have yours.”

“You tell me yours,” Liz lifted meaningful brows, “I’ll tell you mine.”

“I can guess most of yours.” Silas dismissed. “You want to go see the guy.”

Liz instantly brightened at the suggestion. Four days apart was weighing on her nerves, she admitted it only to herself.

“How... could I do that?” then sanity prevailed, “No... no wait,” her mood dropped, “that would be pushing it, right?”

Silas wisely let her work it out in her own way.

“I mean... it’s not like I’m stuck in the boondocks, for goodness sake,” she reminded herself, “there are a billion and three things to do in this city. I should find a few thousand and go for it, right?”

Silas cocked his head to the right, listening politely for once.

“I could go shopping!” she brightened but even then, the thought held no real interest. “Is there something you guys want to do?” she grasped at straws. “A strip joint or something?”

“Our tastes run to museums and galleries.” Silas quipped.

Liz had a good laugh over that one, “Yeah, for the nudes.” she arched a knowing brow. “No, seriously though...” she waited hopefully.

“Red doesn’t want a new fedora or tie,” the guard assisted, “he wants to know that you are missing him as much as he is you.”

“You think?” she turned to a gooey mush inside.

“There’s no accounting for taste.” Silas didn’t want things to get maudlin. “Let’s just get on the damn jet and go.”

Liz sat the laptop aside absently, “I think something like that might be a little... too much too soon in our...” she trailed off, “don’t you? Me showing up out of the blue, unannounced?”

Silas stared at her moodily, nothing more.

“He has meetings to worry about.” she fidgeted. “I would be an intrusion to his work.”

Still, her ‘mentor’ remained silent.

“Silas, help me out.” she pleaded. “I’m floundering here. I don’t know him as well as you do yet.”
“You know him, Elizabeth.” it was sternly corrected. “He’s allowed you in deeper than anyone before. Trust your instinct.”

Still, the woman’s indecision stifled those instincts, he could see.

“If it were me...” it was hard for the man to be open with any emotion let alone, personal ones. But he made the effort. “A man wants tangible evidence that someone gives a damn.”

Elizabeth waited anxiously for the narrative to continue, unaware she was holding her breath.

“Being able to touch that evidence, to hold it in your arms,” Silas’ brow furrowed darkly, forced to consider his own needs and desires, “shuts out all the shit the day has brought.”

Those slate eyes lifted, staring intensely, “I know the shit Red is dealing with. I’ve seen it firsthand.” he shifted those all-knowing eyes. “...He wants you there. So... go.”

Liz’s heart leapt with joy.

“Do you think?” she rubbed her hands together nervously.

“What did I just say?” Silas snapped, unhappy with the fact he allowed too much emotion to cloud his judgement.

Liz opened her mouth just as her phone rang, saving her from replying.

“Oh, hi,” the woman grinned infectiously, “I didn’t expect you to call so early.”

“I had a few moments between meetings.” Red sighed. “If I had to spend one more second with those idiots without a break,” he told the truth, “I would have pulled my weapon.”

“Are you talking about Francis?” Liz took exception for her friend.

“Believe it or not, Francis and Ben are the only ones keeping me sane and if you repeat those words...” Red felt better already despite his mood.

“You’ll pull your weapon on me?” Liz quipped.

Silas sat straighter, a little more interested now that guns were involved.

“No,” Red drawled. “But if we don’t have some time together, I may snap and kill everyone.”

“I should warn you,” The woman waved the guard’s sudden interest aside, “Silas is in the room, so you better watch it fella, my guard doesn’t take kindly to veiled threats.”

“Yeah, whatever. He’ll try and fail.” Red grumbled. “...Talk.”

Liz couldn’t help it, she giggled at the brusque demand, “is there anything in particular you wished for me to say, oh Great One?” she questioned, smiling at her guard who pulled a disgusted grimace.

Silas made himself comfortable, his arm draping along the back of the divan. He crossed his ankle over his knee, grasping the area.

“And let’s keep it clean,” she suggested, exchanging a playful glance with Silas, “big ears are listening.”

“When the hell did he start giving a damn about propriety?” Red stated peevishly.
When the hell did I start giving a damn about propriety?” Silas stated just as peevishly.

Liz’s mouth fell slightly agape. The two men had no idea just how in sync they were. Their thought patterns often overlapped, she had come to realize.

“Tell Dumbo to take a hike.” Red had other plans.

Red enjoyed the quiet of the room he had slipped into which had been booked for several of the meetings he would be holding this session.

“I needed to hear your voice…”

The man propped his bottom on a convenient table, the highly glossed mahogany allowing his thigh to slide effortlessly along the smooth, rich grain.

“I want you to talk to dirty to me,” he clarified, “without that jackass listening in.”

“You’re in a grumpy mood.” Liz’s eyes softened more so when the man huffed... grumpily.

“Not exactly the dirty talk I anticipated.” Red frowned his discontent, his tone betraying his light-hearted words.

Taking pity on the man, Liz settled more comfortably on the couch, tucking her legs under her.

“I miss you…” she pouted, a coyness entering her voice.

“That’s better.” Red drawled after a moment’s consideration, his temper warming to her persuasive charm. “…Keep doing that.”

“Do you miss me?” Liz played her role, sticking her tongue out at her guard for he had made a gagging face.

“Of course I do,” Red grumbled, feeling the effect of her presence even over the line, “you know I do.”

Oh, he was in a dour mood today. Liz’s tummy flipped in response. She liked when he was like this because... she was the only one who could really get him perked up.

“I’m so lonely in that big old bed,” she held the pout, “I’m cold without you there, sharing it with me.”

Silas tilted his head, his expression not exactly an impressed one. Liz tried harder.

“The sheets don’t warm against me like they do when you’re here.” she ventured boldly

“Maybe if you weren’t naked…” Silas muttered his belief.

Liz clamped her mouth shut, staving off a fit of laughter. She took a deep breath hoping to compose herself.

“I’ll warm you when I get home.” Red husked.


She suddenly wanted to prolong this conversation. She loved his voice and the way he ‘sold’ a
paragraph he read.

“That...” Red nodded, “among other things.”

The deep sensual tone filled her with all sorts of pleasant emotions.

“Other things?” Liz whispered hopefully.

“Well, if you don’t know...” Silas remarked sotto voce, his brow crooking with his growing amusement.

“Oh...” she ignored her guard, sending him an annoyed glance focusing on Red instead, “... you mean like, cuddling?” she asked innocently.

Red grunted, admittedly enjoying the innocent image painted in his head.

“Do you like to do that?” Liz questioned anxiously, feeling her inadequacies. She was just learning this new form of foreplay. She sensed she needed improvement.

“I like cuddling you.” Red admitted. To be honest, he rarely, if ever, had the chance with other lovers to pursue such an intimate level.

Sex was sex. But the man could not say if he had ever taken the time to promote deeper emotions with others. Surely, he would not have been so remiss.

“And I like when you lay against me,” Liz hedged purposely, “and settle your weight between my legs and your chest presses against my breasts.”

Red blinked, his mind shifting to an unexpected place.

“That warms me right up...” Liz purred, whispering for Red alone. She threw Silas a ‘go away’ glare.

Silas sat back comfortably, his brows raised at the unexpected turn of events. He gave her a thumbs up for her effort.

“Do you like that as well?” she asked tightly, sharply shooing the other man away.

Silas’ mouth pulled into a grin as he leisurely pushed off the couch, benignly heading for a snack... allowing them a moment’s privacy.

Red’s shoulders eased from their tense perch. He closed his eyes, allowing the pleasant images to come.

“...Yes.” he admitted anxiously, another type of tension forming in his body.

Clothed or not, he savored the visions of him surrounding Lizzy’s warm, soft body with his thicker bulk.

He adored when the woman wriggled beneath him, as his weight bore down on her.

At first, he thought his weight too heavy for her but quickly learned... she would exhale her contentment once he settled in place, burrowing closer into his hold.

He had chuckled the first time she had done that, amused by such eager acceptance. Lizzy nuzzled her nose into his chest and neckline, softly purring her contentment.
Lizzy was a snuggler... which was more than fine with him. Though, he would have never expected it in a million years by her everyday demeanor.

But then, that was Lizzy. The gift that kept on giving.

Liz shifted gears sensing phone sex was not behind the reason Red called today. That was not what would ease his mood. Their discussion last night consisted of subject matter deeper in nature.

“When you surround me in your warmth,” she sighed airily, sharing her own emotions freely, “your love... that’s where I find the most peace.”

Liz listened to the man’s breathing and could tell his tension was diminishing by degrees.

“What do you enjoy, Red?” she murmured. “What brings you peace?”

“Being with you.” the man replied without hesitation. “...Speaking to you... with you.”

Her cheeks plumped with delight.

“I enjoy our dinner conversations, just talking about... nothing.” he cricked his neck, relieved when it finally loosened enough to pop. “When we read together, that gives me a certain... calmness of soul.”

She had not known that.

She always assumed he might be a little annoyed by her sudden conversations when they read in the evenings. She was constantly interrupting him, discussing an interesting subject his words brought to mind.

“I...” his eye ticked at the juvenile thought but what the hell, “...I even like holding your hand.”

The smile on her face widened to extreme proportions, her heart skipping a beat, “...I like that too.”

And she did. There was something about his large hand dwarfing hers that excited, yet calmed her.

“There is a... connection.” Liz felt it each and every time. “Something passes between us.”

Red’s eyes softened when the woman sighed happily, “At night, when we’re in bed,” his voice lowered intimately, “laying against one another,” why they were sharing seemingly frivolous things, he didn’t know, but it was making him feel whole again, “content in each other’s presence...” he exhaled slowly, “it’s as if everything is right in the world.”

Liz’s eyes pricked suddenly with wet heat, “... I love you,” she choked around the knot in her throat, “you know that.”

“I’m beginning to.” he murmured, a peace settling into his soul, “...I love you, Elizabeth... you must know that.”

She inhaled shakily, gripping the phone in her hand, listening to the man breathe.

“Now...what’s wrong.” Red asked softly. “And don’t say nothing... I know you by now.”

“I wish I could say the same about you.” her lip quivered, realizing she didn’t know hardly anything that mattered.

The statement threw Red. He sensed this had nothing to do with their normal routine of him ‘keeping things from her’.
This was entirely personal.

He waited for a sign of what to say... how to respond.

“How do I like my eggs?” Liz asked. “My favorite cheese?”


Of all the gourmet choices he brought home for her to try... the woman was still addicted to Velveeta cheese.

“What’s this about?” he asked.

“Are there things about me you don’t know,” Liz asked, “but would like to?” she put it badly.

“There are a great many things I would like to know, yes.” Red admitted, wondering where it all would lead.

“I guess I’m saying, you know so much about me. You know the littlest things,” she frowned hard at her clumsy attempt to explain, “like how I prefer my coffee and that clowns annoy me.”

Red held his amusement, knowing such a reaction wouldn’t be appreciated at this time. Lizzy seemed truly despondent about this issue that had arisen. He couldn’t help the warm smile that curved his lips, however.

“I know so little about you... which is by no means, your fault.” she murmured.

Red hadn’t expected this... at all. It was a delightful turn of events.

“How do you like your eggs? It’s a small thing, I know... but I don’t know the answer.” she was frustrated with herself. “Do you like sweet over unsweetened tea?” she questioned. “Hell, I don’t even know how you prefer your steak cooked!”

Red lifted his head, digesting the moment. She was finally wishing details about his personal preferences. He waited forever to get to this point.

“Over medium,” the man answered readily, his mood suddenly high, “sweet tea and I like my steaks... medium.”

Liz lay back into the couch, her entire body relaxing. She hugged a throw pillow, falling into the spirit of the moment, happy now. “What’s your favorite season?”

“I prefer the fall.” he said. “Winter can be beautiful in the mountains. Spring is lovely because it renews the spirit. And summer at the beaches are superb.”

That was her favorite as well.

“Though,” Red grinned, “Summer may take precedence with your little ass traipsing around in a bathing suit.”

Liz snickered quietly all the while making note to go shopping for some new, more daring bathing suits this year.

“Do you prefer making love with the lights on or off?” she checked on Silas’ whereabouts. The man vacated, when... she hadn’t noticed to be honest.
“With you,” the man’s rumbling timber lowered, “...on.”

Liz’s cheeks flushed, a heat pooling between her legs. She took a deep breath, controlling her urge to ease the sudden ache.

“A-And in general?” she cleared her throat, needing to continue this fact finding mission. “Before me?”

“Nothing matters before you.” Red replied honestly. After his reactionary confession, he thought about it a moment.

For the life of him, he couldn’t remember making note of the atmosphere he had created with the other women in his life.

“...Red,” Liz tsked.

“Lizzy, I truly can’t recall if it ever came to mind.” he confessed. “I’m sure I provided the proper ambiance, I’m not a complete cad,” he said, “I romanced my partners if given the opportunity.”

Few required it though. He remembered that. There was one goal in mind on both parts and that was the sexual release.

Red had explained a little of how his world worked.

One-night stands were the norm. One could ‘sleep’ with an associate but it was wholeheartedly unadvisable to actually close one’s eyes around them.

There could be no real formed attachments because loyalties shifted, changed... in the blink of an eye.

So she assumed that a romantic setting wasn’t a must-have.

“Before us, I had no real preference that I can recall.” he didn’t lie.

Elizabeth eclipsed them all, making the memories fuzzy, “With you... I prefer the lights on.”

Images of their time together flashed in his mind’s eye of Lizzy’s pink skin glowing under the soft light of the bedside lamp. The warm illumination highlighting the woman in a dusky hue that was most alluring.

“Which isn’t to say... there aren’t benefits to the opposite situation as well.” the man mused.

Liz frowned. What the hell did that mean? If anyone else had said it, she would have taken it as an insult. Did she look better in the dark?

“Your silence is telling, sweetheart.” Red’s eyes twinkled, knowing by second nature what the woman was thinking. “How can a man chose between watching or feeling you climax.” his tone deepened. “Both are my most prized and cherished rewards.”

“Oh...” she gasped her understanding, the flush of her skin covered her chest in a rosy tint.

With the lights on, Red could watch as the pleasure he gave her encompassed her body. With the lights off, he only had the sensation of her coming around his shaft to alert him of a job well done.

“And your preference?” Red enquired, although he already suspected.
“...Both.” she confessed. She too loved watching the man lose himself in her body. But it was equally addictive, the heightened state her flesh achieved by the simple touch of his hand. Or the sudden rush of heat which filled her as he climaxed in the quiet darkness of the room.

This was unproductive. It was bad enough she had been without Red’s company for four days. It wouldn’t do either of them any good should they become aroused when no form of outlet was available.

She squared her shoulders, determined to change the path of this conversation to a safer subject.

“Jam or Jelly?” her blatant attempt amused Red. He laughed softly.

Red’s eyes sparkled at her sudden veiled attempt, understanding the reasons. He missed her as well.

“Jam.” he replied. “I’m partial to blackberry, as you know.” he reminded her, she did in fact, know something about him.

Red released a heavy sigh of exasperation, indicating their time was over... for now. Liz sensed someone had intruded into his world on the other end of the line.

She was disappointed their time had ended so soon, hundreds of probing questions popping into her mind.

“Dammit...” he cursed under his breath. “Baby, I–”

“I know...” she smiled warmly, riding the tide of disappointment. “You’ll call me later?”

“I will.” he promised himself another episode of Elizabeth Keen, if nothing else.

He watched the men approach.

Dressed in a variety of expensive suits, the group could pass for everyday businessmen going about their daily fare.

The dour expressions only hinted at a pressing problem to which they must attend.

Red geared himself up. Pressing problems in his line of business meant much more trouble on the horizon than most.

Something came to mind which staved off his rising depression. He grasped hold of the lifeline, his tone almost mellow when he spoke.

“...Come Monday, Lizzy.”

The woman’s stylish brows furrowed, “...What?”

“...Come Monday.” he stressed tightly. “I’ll call you soon. I love you, Lizzy.”

“I love you...” she replied hastily, though knew Red would wait for her to hang up first. He loathed severing the connection, always allowing her to do so in her own time.

Knowing he had urgent business, Liz quickly severed the connection. She stared at the phone, her puzzlement growing more as the seconds ticked by.

What had he been trying to tell her? She sensed no danger, on the contrary, a rather sweet melancholy was in Red’s tone. Left to her last resort, she booted her computer and brought up Red’s
nemesis... Google.

In this instance, it’s all she had. She studied the subjects which her search garnered, even more
disenchanted.

Silas came out from the back rooms, apple in hand. Considering the direction her call with Red was
heading when he departed, he expected to find the woman flushed and slightly disheveled.

All women should be flushed and slightly disheveled in his humble opinion, on a regular basis.

Not confused.

“Something wrong?” Silas asked, sitting across from her, biting into the crispness of the fruit.

“If someone were to say to you,” Liz lifted her eyes above the computer screen, her brow etched
attractively, “come Monday... what would that phrase imply to y–”

“Jimmy Buffett, “Come Monday?” Silas took another bite of the apple he held. “Red likes that
song.”

Another thing she knew nothing about. In the grand scheme, it was such a minuscule thing but Red
always said; it was the small details which truly mattered.

Shrugging, Liz searched for the song. Finding it, she hit play. And in just a few notes, she felt closer
to Red. She always liked it... who didn’t like Jimmy Buffett? Now, she liked the song more,
knowing she and Red shared a common enjoyment of it.

She vaguely listened, wondering if he meant that he wouldn’t be home until next Monday.

“You better not be gone seven days.” she grumbled irritably.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, her mind wandering. She pulled up the lyrics, peering over
the lines inquisitively.

Silas shook his head, watching the woman slip into profiler mode. Her focus intent and determined to
unlock the mysterious puzzle.

Perhaps that was why Red had been so cryptic? He knew the woman enjoyed the hunt, the piecing
together of all the puzzle pieces.

Liz scanned the words, studying them carefully. If Red was trying to remain on the down-low,
maybe he was hinting a secret clue was hidden within the seemingly transparent words that sat
before her so enigmatically.

Moving the cursor, she took the song back to the beginning, listening attentively for any sort of hint.

Was he headed to San Francisco? What was there of any real interest? Labor Day? No, that was
months away.

Tapping her foot along with the melodic tune, she lay her head back into the sofa only to snap
upright moments later, a thought surfacing.

Red had been in California four days, just as the singer mentioned. Was this a message about...

“Oh...” Liz turned up the volume. “Ohh...”
Was he telling her... *he missed her*? That he wanted her by his side?

Raising a hand to her mouth, she cast watery eyes to Silas.

The man sat, a wry grin overtaking his handsome face, “Houston, we have contact.”

“Did he... is he...?” Liz gestured to the laptop. “Does he mean...”

“Red does love Jimmy Buffett.” Silas repeated, as though that was all the answer she needed. “Not as much as he loves you... but damn near close.”

The song continued, its message taking on an entirely new meaning. Tears dotted Liz’s lashes, chuckling at what Red must have been thinking when he passed his words on to her.

It had indeed been an eventful spring, especially as they moved into summer, she had to agree with him on that. The song reminded her so many wonderful things had happened.

They had traveled extensively, spent a wonderful holiday together... they found themselves falling in love.

She startled when the melodic lyrics mentioned Montana.

She vividly recalled her conversation with Red in Montana about growing old together. Red said he harbored no doubt it would happen.

Liz looked out the windows of the high-rise, taking in the spectacular scenery. It *was* pretty... up here. But something was lacking. The magnificent scenery left her empty without Red beside her.

Goosebumps covered her arms in response, leaving her very melancholy and aching to see the man. Was this how he felt without her?

While she loved the idea that Red missed her, Liz also couldn’t help but wonder... was he being *worn thin* by what was going on out there? Was he telling her, in a roundabout way he needed her?

An urgency over-took the woman. She turned from New York’s fabulous skyline; her face animated, a thought having struck her fancy.

“Silas...” she hesitated, logistics boggling her over sensitized system, “I mean... would it be possible to...”

The guard was up and moving before Liz said his name, “I already called the private service.”

Silas sensed the situation long before the woman. Especially after their earlier conversation. He had simply been waiting for her to catch up.

“Oh, no! It’s too expensive. We couldn’t.” Liz wrung her hands, “Could we?” she bit her nail pensively.

“He left it here for you.” Silas said.

“To return to D.C, not fly willy-nilly across the damn country on a flight of fancy—”

“He won’t mind.” Silas grinned, already dialing the number needed to confirm the flight time. “Trust me.”

“This is insane.” she muttered, dashing about, quickly gathering her laptop and other items scattered
about. “I shouldn’t do th–”

She rushed for the hall, pulling up short, “What about...”

“I will handle your team.” Silas waved her off, phone to his ear. “This isn’t my first rodeo, you know.”

Liz nodded shortly, continuing onto her rooms.

Rapidly pulling clothes off the rack, she threw her things haphazardly into a bag. It took less than ten minutes to gather the last of their things which she stuffed into larger luggage.

Hitting replay on the song, she darted off to the bathroom, her excitement mounting. Rinsing quickly off in the shower, she dressed in fresh clothing. She’d worry about her hair and makeup later. She had time, once in flight.

Silas knocked on the door, “Liz, we can head out in forty-five minutes. Can you do it?”

“I’ll be out in ten!” Liz yelled back, excitedly.

“This time...” she could hear Silas chuckling as he walked away, “you might actually be on time.”

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

The first flight had been quick, but long. But only due to Liz’s eagerness to see Red.

After their arrival at the airport, Silas had cheekily waved their goodbyes to Tom before shutting the door to the jet.

At least they would be without Tom’s presence, as he would assume they were all headed back to DC.

As Liz and her team settled into their seats, everyone seemed in good spirits and ready to be on their way.

A collective groan filled the cabin when she was overheard quietly asking Silas about what to expect on Red’s end of things before her arrival in California.

Liz quickly explained that due to her role in Red’s life, he required her presence and she had to meet him after dropping them off.

It was only after assuring the team their services definitely were not required, did all really begin to... relax.

She couldn’t blame Ressler for being the most vocal. The man looked haggard. She fretted when the agent graciously accepted the offered drink the flight attendant, Laura, provided.

Should he be partaking, was he on pain meds? Ressler had reassured her, however.

All had happily accepted a refreshment, aside from Moore. Liz grinned when the svelte woman Laura, turned away from the moody Agent, downing the drink herself.

Flight attendants were people too, apparently, affected by surly individuals like anyone else.

Laura grimaced, pulling up short. Two sets of eyes rested on her.
The flight attendant breathed a sigh of relief, finding Elizabeth giggling quietly behind her hand. The head guard, on the other hand, remained expressionless.

Laura was grateful when the young woman hit the guard’s thigh playfully, sending him a ‘loosen up’ look.

Liz waved Silas off, smiling her sympathy at Laura. Letting her know without doubt, neither would say a cross word about her actions to Red.

Shortly after, they offloaded Liz’s team, much to the relief of her guards... and herself, if she were honest. Goodbyes were said. She watched the SUV’s drive off, eager to be on her way.

All breathed a collective sigh when the plane became airborne once again.

Listening to her guards bitch about her team sucking the atmosphere from the plane... though Samar was never once lumped into the fray, Liz shook her head at the antics. Other than that note of dissension they had a relatively decent flight.

She rested the first leg of the journey, but as they grew closer to their destination, she started putting herself to rights.

Red had once commented that he would find her just as attractive in a burlap sack, sans makeup... but that did not stop Liz from applying the warm shades, striving for a natural look that looked fresh and glowing.

She also took time to work curls into the heavy strands of her hair, giving the dark beauty shine, volume and bounce.

She looked herself over in the mirror, her confidence fairly radiating back at her.

Alerted to their approaching descent, Liz packed her battle gear before returning to her seat.

Silas gave her a once over, giving the woman an appreciative nod, “You’re passable.”

“And you are a god.” she muttered, stowing her bag, taking a seat.

“Don’t I know it.” Silas was happy with the response.

After their arrival, the guys had quickly loaded the car. They set off towards their destination. Liz’s spirits rising one second, sinking the next.

She stared vacantly at the passing scenery, her thoughts bouncing from problem to problem.

“It’s Tom, isn’t it?” Liz muttered from the back.

“What?” Silas glowered, searching instantly over his shoulders for the little prick.

“No,” Liz waved aside the man’s attempts, “the guys. They’re playing hide and seek with Tom... that’s what’s going on.”

“Very astute reasoning.” Silas grinned, settling back in his seat. “You should be like, a profiler, or something.”

Liz rolled her eyes expressively, “And when they catch him?”

Silas explained the rules of engagement to a point, concluding, “They must allow him the chance to
escape.” he ended sourly.

“What the hell?” Liz grumbled. “They have him, why not–”

“Kill him?” Silas filled in sardonically, his brows lifting innocently.

“Well, yeah. It’s only fair play.” Liz shrugged, then questioned the easily stated words.

“If you kill it,” Joe explained helpfully, “you catch, you skin it and mount it on your wall.”

Liz piped up eagerly pointing excitedly at her comrade in arms, “Yeah, yeah... exactly!”

“You’ve become bloodthirsty.” Silas stated. “It's a good look for you.”

Liz found herself nodding her head graciously, accepting the praise, before catching herself yet again.

“Surely this conversation is wrong... on so many levels.” she shrugged after a moment, getting lost in her thoughts once more.

They entered heavier traffic, but Joe expertly navigated his way through it, throwing out an occasional curse at drivers as he passed.

“Am I doing the right thing?” Liz asked herself, so confused and befuddled suddenly. She thought seriously of turning around and heading back to the airport.

“I think you are.” Silas replied from the front, his tone mellow and confident

“I said that out loud?” Liz said, looking about her surroundings totally bemused.

“He will be very pleased to see you.” Silas assured. “If I thought otherwise...”

Liz took a cleansing breath to settle her nerves, “He doesn’t know I’m here though, right?” she still had a chance to bolt.

“I assumed you wanted it to be a surprise.”

She nodded, “Okay. Yeah... I guess. Wait, we don’t even know where he’s stay...” she stopped when Silas glanced over his shoulder, his expression saying it all. “Right. Of course you do.”

“We’ll be there in a few minutes.” he looked out his window, taking in the neighboring vehicles. “Just relax.”

Settling back into the leather, she tried to follow that suggestion.

Pulling up to the hotel, Liz couldn’t help but be impressed. Each new place they visited left her in awe, some more than others. But still awed, none the less. When would she become blasé about the magnificent structures, she wondered?

Silas walked to the front desk, as were per custom, leaving her in Joe’s company. She stood, looking around the plush setting.

It was rather, homey. Something she did not expect from the outside exterior.

The entire length of the large lobby was aglow with warm light reflecting from simple, yet intricate chandeliers. Rich earth tones and raw stone made her feel instantly at ease.
It charmed her to see comfortable sitting areas unobtrusively placed strategically throughout the large room.

The soothing atmosphere had nice flow but was also extremely functional.

Silas walked back to her a few minutes later, carrying a set of key cards. He handed one to Joe as he gestured to the elevator banks.

“How did you get his room key?” Liz asked accepting the card he handed her.

“This is my key.” he said, flipping the plastic about in nimble fingers. “He always leaves one in case of emergencies, no matter if we’re traveling together or not.” they stepped into the available lift.

“You gonna call him?”

“No, I don’t think he’s there.”

“How did you get his room key?” she asked, the woman was instantly concerned for a moment that Silas might be warning her it might not be wise to simply appear on scene unannounced.

What did he think they might happen upon? A business meeting? A party? Another woman...

“I think he will enjoy the surprise more if you don’t.” the guard’s words took her by surprise.

So Silas didn’t think there was anything to worry about. She felt her stomach flip. If she only felt the same way.

The elevator stopped its climb at the top floor. Again with the penthouse. Red loved his high rise.

He often said, in the past, money is for spending. Purchasing the good things in life, otherwise... what was it good for?

Silas walked down the hallway, Joe at his back. The large guard proceeded Liz, knocking on the door in a rather peculiar rhythm.

The guy exchanged glances with his side-kick before venturing boldly forth. He swiped the card as he opened the door very slowly.

“Knock, knock...” he called out cautiously peering about the door facing.

This seemed to be taking an inordinate amount of time. And now, knocking on Red’s door as if she were a stranger visiting.

“I didn’t want my head to get blown off.” Silas muttered, reading her expression well. He pushed the door open, proceeding her as a precaution. Though, they were met by silence. “He must still be in the meeting.”

She should not have come. Suddenly the excitement of her decision in New York faded, melting into indecision and regret.

Silas grabbed their bags, ushering her through the luxurious rooms. They arrived at the master suite in no time.

“If you want to settle in...” he sat her bag on the large king bed, heading for the door, “I’m going to stow my bag.” he studied her for a long beat. “Give Joe a chance to get his bearings.”

She stood in the middle of the room, glancing about aimlessly.

“You all have rooms here?” she gestured to the rest of the unseen suite.
“No, Joe and the other guards have their own quarters on this floor.” Silas informed. “It’s specifically for security.” he said. “I’m down the hall here, beside Dembe.” he jerked his thumb. “You okay?”

Liz closed her mouth, forcing a smile, “I’m great!”

“Uh huh...” Silas hesitated knowing something was amiss, but then took his leave, allowing her to adapt to her surroundings in private.

Liz stood, taking in the quiet of the room. Which was meticulously clean.

Red was not a normal kind of guy in any respect. He said it was his years of Naval training... and his ex-wife. And Liz assumed, in case he had to leave on a whim, no trace of himself would be left behind.

He picked up after himself.

There were no signs of his clothing or luggage anywhere.

He would have ‘stowed’ it all ready.


She made a mental note to ask.

A tie clip lay on the side table by the bed.

Red’s side.

Change lay neatly in a silver tray next to the clip.

Red never carried change on his person. He said it spoiled the cut of his suit to have change in his pockets.

Liz smiled.

Realizing she was just standing, she absently crossed to her luggage, opening the valise more to have something with which to occupy her troubled mind.

Maybe this was a bad idea.

She wanted desperately to see Red. But what if he thought of this time apart as a welcomed respite?

Maybe she had misread the cryptic, “Come Monday”, message.

Maybe he needed a small break from...

Liz sighed heavily, chastising herself. She was being silly. Of course Red would want to see her. Her surprise visit would delight him.

She shook free of such annoying thoughts.

She pulled her things free, stowing them in their proper place. She never bothered unpacking before. Living out of a suitcase was unsettling however.

Red always made a home where ever he lay his head.

Since she picked up on the habit, Liz realized, she felt more attuned to her surroundings. Which is
why Red adopted the practice himself, she supposed?

She took several blouses, heading for the walk-in closet. She stopped slowly, her mouth pulling into a soft smile. Red’s things were lined neatly on one side.

*His side.*

The wash basin had been the same. Red’s articles placed fastidiously on one side.

It was as if he were waiting for her.

She felt infinitely better, a definite spring back in her step finally as she moved on.

After getting her things situated, Liz did a once over, applying fresh make-up and giving a quick bounce to her hair when she heard movement in the front. She halted, comb lifted when a distinctive click alerted her to someone entering the suite.

*Red was here!*

She scurried to the hall, her excitement barely contained. Her steps halted abruptly when a woman’s voice filtered down the corridor in which she now stood.

She inhaled sharply, before catching the sound physically with a hand over her mouth.

Tentatively peeking around the corner, she watched Red being trailed slowly by a gorgeous blonde traipsing the outer room.

He glanced around aimlessly, sighing his discontent. “Where the hell did that idiot...” he grumbled, “ah, here it is.” he picked up a folder off a nearby table. “Francis had it earlier, it’s a wonder I found it at all.”

Liz fell silent, easing back into the dark shadows, uncertain of her next move. She fluctuated in her decision making. This was not at all how she envisioned their reunion.

“Look over the terms and conditions,” Red said, holding out the manila folder to the woman, “and if it works for you, we’ll discuss a price we can hopefully agree upon.”

The blonde smiled, tapping the stiff paper against her palm before laying it aside.

“Better yet...” Liz could not resist a peak. The curvaceous woman walk seductively towards Red, smiling, “why don’t we cut to the chase here.” she was saying. “I’ll agree to the terms, you ship for me, then we can spend the rest of the evening negotiating a set of terms that works best for both of us... in the bedroom.”

She reached out, pulling at the knot of his tie... Liz’s mouth fell agape for such audacity.

Red reached, halting her intent.

Unnoticed by Liz, her guard had suddenly emerged from his room.

Silas read the scene immediately, instinct telling him to hang back until he assessed the situation.

His little brunette charge stared nervously out at whatever was taking place. He could hear voices quiet clearly, deciding to wait it out.

He could discern from the conversation taking place that the female was making a move on
Reddington... not an unheard of occurrence.

“I’m very flattered by the generous offer, but I will have to decline.” Red’s tone was both respectful yet firm.

“If you think there is an issue with stepping on Luca’s toes,” the blonde said, “don’t worry, we are over...gone our separate ways, as it were.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Red replied genuinely, “but my refusal is of a personal nature.” he stepped back, heading for the bar. “Would you like a drink while you look over the contract?”

The woman laughed quietly, following slowly after him. Liz narrowed her eyes as the woman stealthily stalked Red, her curves swaying suggestively in the skintight dress.

“I never thought I’d see the day Red Reddington would play hard to get.” She smirked, leaning her shapely hip against the bar. “It’s unexpectedly... charming.”

Silas hoped Red kept his head about him. That his boss would make him proud. Because... in similar situations pre-Liz... Red would fuck the blonde, no questions asked.

Red poured their drinks, sliding one across the granite to the woman.

“You flatter me.” Red was determined to be polite. “But no, that is not the case at all. I’m engaged, you see. To a most lovely, ador–”

“If you’re worried about my being discrete...” the woman cut the explanation short, “Honey, I’m not interested in anything long term. You should know me better than that by now.”

Red shifted noncommittal eyes.

Silas was pretty sure Red was going to get a couple good whacks out of this one if Liz’s expression was any criteria by which to judge.

“I’m happy for you and your little... plaything, truly, I am.” blondie sounded sincere, but her eyes were measuring the man in a most interested manner. “We are both seasoned individuals, surely.” she shrugged. “...My interests lie more in all the sordid tales of that amazing cock I’ve heard so much about.”

“All of which are greatly exaggerated, I’m sure.” Red hefted his glass, sipping a small drink. “Greatly...I emphasize.” he modestly added.

“And while you and I may be... seasoned about such things. My fiancée is delightfully... not.” he sat the drink aside. “She would see any breach of trust as just that... a breach... of trust.”

“How utterly... quaint.” the woman sensed the man’s decision was final. “Can’t blame a girl for trying.” she shrugged carelessly.

“You are a beautiful, desirable woman and in the past...” Red shrugged as well. “I’ve found something... unique. I have every intention of keeping it intact.”

The woman studied him for a long beat, “I had that once.” she scoffed. “Or thought I did.” she lifted her glass. “Here’s to hoping your Camelot never loses its shiny exterior... but if it ever does,” she laughed hollowly, “you know where to find me.”

Red nodded minutely, “And your King Arthur... Luca?”
“Hardly.” she chuckled, appreciating good wit when she heard it. “It was a lifetime ago and trust me, Salvador could never be mistaken for the great King, although....” she turned melancholy for a brief second, “... to me... he was.”

Red felt her sadness acutely, but business was business.

“My cock and its fucking activities have been reserved for my Guinevere.” Red tipped his glass, emptying it before sitting it on the bar. “Sad, but true.” he said in a droll tone, a smile tugging at his mouth.

The woman laughed, “From what I hear, she’s a lucky girl.”

Red shook his head, “I am the fortunate one.”

“No.” the woman sat her drink aside. “Believe me... she is.” she tapped the folder with well-manicured nails. “I’ll look this over and have an answer by tomorrow.”

Red smiled pleasantly, “Nothing is written in stone. I’m flexible on my terms.” he could be magnanimous.

The woman had taken the rejection with a modicum of grace and style which he admired.

“That rejection alone should net me another...” she mused, “five percent?”

Red mused, “...Two percent.”

She chuckled, “Better than nothing. I’ll take it.”

Liz stood hard against the coolness of the wall, her eyes blinking back tears of joy.

The blonde lady was beautiful and built like a work of art. She had amazing breasts, a fantastic ass... and she had laid her charms on thick. Most men would have fallen hook, line and sinker.

Three months ago, he might have. But tonight, Red wasn’t biting.

Silas emerged out of nowhere, startling the girl. She blinked wide eyes his way.

How long had he been standing there?

She flushed, embarrassed.

He offered a shit-eating grin but let her off the hook, turning his attention to the occupants of the massive living area.

The woman was walking to the door, Red trailing behind.

Liz blotted her eyes hastily, wondering if her carefully made-up face was still half-way presentable.

Silas watched Red guide his associate out the door, exchanging inane pleasantry.

The large guard spared Elizabeth a glance.

She was more composed now, taking in deep breaths.

Red headed back to the bar, grasping the heavy tumbler in his hand, tapping it idly on the thick granite.
He sighed heavily, pouring another drink, downing it quickly.

He leaned into his arms, hanging his head dejectedly.

Snagging the remote in hand, he pointed it out into the room, rolling his tense shoulders as the sound of Jimmy Buffett filled the room.

Liz shared a bright smile with her guard as the sound of the music drifted down the hall. She sniffled quietly, a rush of relief washing over her.

Peeking around the corner, she wavered a bit in her stance. She was unsure what Red’s mood might be at this point.

Had he been tempted by the seductress? Had he been aroused?

Silas urged her out, gesturing curtly... twice.

Liz reluctantly moved out into the brightness of the room.

“Hey...” she called out softly.

Red jerked his head to the right, watching the woman step down into the living room.

“Lizzy?” his expression was incredulous. “...What the...

“I hope you don’t mind, but...” she smiled warmly at the man who sat his drink down quickly, “I couldn’t wait until Monday.”

Red beamed happily, the tension in his frame vanishing in the blink of an eye, “God no, I don’t mind.”

Stepping out from behind the bar, he made a beeline for her.

Liz chuckled quietly as the man swept her up in a crushing bear hug, squeezing the air from her body.

“My God... I can’t believe you’re here!” he whispered, his eyes drinking in the sight seconds before he kissed her... deeply...ardently.

Liz returned the kiss passionately.

Finally, allowing the woman a breath, Red opened his eyes, staring contentedly at her upturned face, waiting patiently now.

Liz guessed the rhetorical question on his mind, wincing slightly having to confront her literal flight of fancy, “I guess you’re wondering–”

“We took the jet.” Silas saved her from answering, sauntering into the area, hands in proverbial pockets.

“Did you have a good flight?” Red asked, guiding her to the bar, helping her hop up on the stool. “Was the crew accommodating?” he held up a beer, offering it to Silas, then pulled down a wine glass.

“Yes, it was very smooth, fast...” she smiled. “Everyone was fantastic.”
Red’s eyes swept her frame, taking her in. He was incredibly pleased she was here.

“Where’s your boot?” he frowned, pointing to the bare leg.

“The doctor at the hotel gave me the go ahead to remove it.” she smiled happily, lifting her leg high to prove all was well.

Red instantly shifted questioning eyes to Silas, needing the guard’s input.

Silas chuckled quietly when Liz gasped indignantly at the slight, “Everything checked out fine.” he assured his boss and friend. “Don’t be such a nudge.”

“Dembe and the others are playing poker, if you’re interested.” Red jerked his head, gesturing to the guards’ quarters’ next door.

Silas looked between the two, catching a hint when he heard one. “And on that subtle note....” he gulped his beer, headed to the nearest exit, a swing to his step.

Red smiled, his mood very much improved now that Lizzy was here. “We’re staying in.” he chose to ignore the guard.

“Wow... what a shocker of a statement.” Silas muttered sarcastically.

“I’m starving.” Liz shrugged apologetically. Odd, her appetite had been nonexistent all morning. Now, she was famished.

“Room service?” Red offered, pleased when she nodded eagerly.

Sliding her a menu, “Not that I’m not inordinately pleased that you are here...” Red stepped between Lizzy’s open legs, the outside world falling away, “but I didn’t think you’d fly a couple thousand miles for–”

“It sounded like you needed to see a friendly face.” she looked pointedly at the radio and the song it was playing.

“I missed you,” he pulled her close, dipping his nose into her neckline, breathing in her fragrance, “...so very much.”

Liz smiled into his shoulder hugging him dearly. They swayed gently, and she wondered if the man was even aware he was doing so.

The song came to an end, leaving the couple in comfortable silence.

The moment stretched into infinity before Red gathered his wits. “I’m sorry, sweetheart.” he pulled back, looking down at her apologetically. “You said you were hungry, didn’t you?”

He hung up the phone, both having made their selections from the menu.

“It’ll be here in about fifteen... twenty minutes.” he said, lifting his hand, stroking her cheek line.

She smiled up at the man, before snuggling into him again. “It’s really okay...” she questioned quietly, “that I’m here?”

“Of course. I’ve never been so...” Red sighed, leaning his forehead into hers, “I’m thrilled you’re here, Lizzy.”
“Is something wrong, Red?” she frowned a little, the man’s tired demeanor worrying her a tad.

“It’s just been a long couple days. Negotiations have been complicated,” he murmured, “and as I’m sure you witnessed,” he quirked his brow meaningfully, “…tedious.”

Liz shrugged slightly, “I didn’t mean to..” she didn’t realize he had guessed she had listened to his chat with the blonde, “I was just...”

“Making sure I kept it in my pants?” Red assumed.

“Aside from being proud of you for resisting her... charms.” Liz allowed his assumption. “It’s difficult not knowing what I’m allowed to do at such a moment.”

“What did you want to do?” he teased.

Liz sighed heavily, falling back into her chair, “...She is an associate.” she scowled. “A jealousy display is not exactly a mature, rational response.” she lifted honest eyes. “I don’t want to embarrass you.”

“And were you,” he probed, “jealous?”

She scowled at him, “Tell me what I should have done.”

Red scowled right back, “Protect yourself, at any and all costs.”

“And you?” she questioned. “When do I protect your virtue?” a smile played at her lips.

“I had no interest in that woman, what-so-ever.” Red reminded honestly.

“I wasn’t implying you did.” Liz said. “I just wondered, if I stepped out and made my presence known, would it cause problems in your work?”

“I told you,” Red connected eyes with her, “you are my main priority. Nothing else.”

Liz took in the man’s posture and the words, looking for the truth in them.

“You do whatever you feel you need to, Lizzy.” Red reasserted his feelings on the matter. “I will support you.”

After a few seconds, Liz inclined her head in silent assent.

“You look exhausted.” she changed the subject.

“Sleeping has been sporadic.” he smiled.

“Long meetings?” she questioned.

“That...” he nodded, “but mainly, I missed my security blanket.” he rubbed his nose along hers, drawing a smile from the woman.

She had missed him too, and had to admit, it had been hell going to sleep without him.

“That cryptic farewell remark...” she grinned up at him, a playful lilt in her voice, “did you essentially dedicate a song to me?”

Red chuckled after a second, nodding. “Yes, I guess I did.” he fully admitted. “In my own way.”
A soft knock on the door broke the two apart.

“Do you have your weapon?” Red asked quietly, quickly directing her to safety.

Liz shook her head, grimacing for her oversight, “It’s in the bedroom.”

Red pulled his extra piece, shoving it in her hand before gesturing her to the darkened hall. She did as asked, scurrying across the room as he approached the door.

Standing to the side, he stretched, tapping out another distinct rap on the facing. He received a reply in kind.

She witnessed the man’s tenseness fade. He stepped, opening the door having hidden his weapon beforehand.

It was only their dinner arriving but a fully armed guard accompanied even that, Liz noted.

Red tipped the waiter, nodding his gratitude to that guard.

And once again, the room was quiet and secure.

“Come and eat, sweetheart.” Red said, setting the covered dishes and iced tea on the long dining table.

Liz emerged from the darkened hallway, a fixed smile on her face.

A short time later, appetites having been satisfied, the couple sat, enjoying coffee and what remained of their scrumptious meal.

Twinkling lights of the city spread out below their windows like small diamonds scattered about haphazardly by a powerful sweep of an unseen hand.

Red was not usually as talkative as he was proving tonight. He often deferred to her, allowing Liz to take the lead in which way the conversation would flow.

Four days spent apart was a long time. There was so much to catch up on.

Liz was a good listener and enjoyed when the man opened up so freely in her presence.

Tonight, she found her thoughts wandering here and there several times having lost the topic of the man’s words.

“Am I boring you?” Red chuckled, having picked up on the fact.

Liz’s face softened, “One thing you never are, Red Reddington... is boring.” she pulled herself back into the fray.

“Are you tired?” his expression took on a concerned slant.

“Not at all.” she shook her head. “It’s just a silly woman thing.” she managed a smile.

“So share this ‘silly woman thing’,;” Red suggested, placing his fork aside, his attention focused, “with a man who gives a damn.”

“I know you do,” the lovely mouth pulled into a gentle smile, “and I love you for it but it’s really not that import—”
“It’s important,” Red corrected, “to me.”

Liz sat back, realizing what an incredible man she had found, “You’ll laugh at me.”

“I’m not Silas.” his eyes were steady, fixed. His finger tapped idly against the tabletop, waiting for her to confide in him.

She chuckled easily, “Thank the Lord.” the woman shifted about wondering how to put what had been troubling her into words.

“...I got my period.” she blurted, realizing suddenly just how inappropriate a subject this was over a dinner table of all things.

Red’s eyes shifted to the deep grain of the table... processing the unexpected information, “...Okay.”

He wasn’t certain how to proceed or how to even respond just yet.

“No, I mean,” Liz stressed, “...I’m not pregnant.”

Red’s hand stilled, his wine glass inches from his mouth. He slowly set it aside, nodding minutely, his brow furrowing.

“I was under the impression Mr. Kaplan had settled this issue.” he sought her out. “Are you saying, you think she could have been wrong in her–”

“I know what she said,” Liz pushed her fork through her mashed potatoes, “...I just thought,” she fidgeted aimlessly in her seat, “it was a little early, to...I mean, wasn’t it?”

Red felt a shift in the space between them, something that told him... tread carefully here.

The woman had been harboring this ‘secret’ with her for days, obviously. She had not been able to fully accept Kaplan’s results.

Red took the time needed, studying the woman across from him intently.

What had brought this on?

Liz sat, worrying her napkin with unsteady fingers. She refused, as yet, to seek out his eyes.

A realization dawned on the man.

“You know what I think,” he ventured forth his theory, the silence surrounding them like a warm blanket suddenly.

Liz’s eyes shot to his, “...No.”

There was hope and expectation in those eyes that touched him.

“...Unlike other couples who have gone through the... anticipation,” he felt his way, “trepidation, and, in some cases,” he teased with his look, “relief, in whatever form, staring at that pregnancy test takes...”

Liz lifted resigned brows.

“...A moment, a very private and intimate one... was taken away from us.”
He idly tapped the table, his mind calculating, swirling about to solve the problem presented.

“I would give anything to have that moment back, Lizzy.” he sought her out. “What about you?”

Liz was confounded by the question, “Well, it can’t be brought back.”

“Can’t it?”

“Well... no.” Liz was pretty sure that ship had sailed.

Maybe there was a way.

“This bleeding you mentioned,” he questioned, “are you certain it’s your period?”

Liz questioned the question with a look.

“My ex-wife experienced breakthrough bleeding when she was pregnant with Jennifer.”

“I... it feels pretty normal?” Liz frowned slightly. She had heard of that breakthrough bleeding thing before, but didn’t know much about it.

“I’ll tell you what.” Red leaned into the table on his forearms. “I’ll run down, get a pregnancy test and we’ll just make sure, all right?”

He pushed back his seat, gathering their plates as he went. “I’m sure you’re right, Lizzy.” he soothed the woman. She had fallen silent and he could not read her mood or stress level.

“I just want to double check.” Red braced his arms on the table. “Doesn’t hurt to get a second opinion,” he leaned, kissing her lips, “does it?”

“I think this is just... normal.” Liz hesitated.

She didn’t feel any different, anyway? She felt like she always did during her period. Some days were okay, some days she felt like one of the walking dead.

“Maybe we shouldn’t fuss.” she blinked those huge eyes up at him. “And Mr. Kaplan said... I wasn’t.”

“Kate is not infallible.” Red’s eyes held hers easily. “Sit tight.”

She pushed her chair back, watching the man take his leave. He smiled brightly at the guard in passing, waving the man off when he went to follow.

“You’re being silly.” Liz told herself after the door closed, blocking sight of Red.

Walking back to the master, she went about her earlier activities.

Setting out her toiletries and what not, appreciating the busy work, her mind too hectic, her thoughts uneven. She paced the room restlessly.

She noticeably startled when she heard the door close to the penthouse. She had not heard it open, so deep in her reverie was she.

Red entered the master, pharmacy bag in hand.

“Calm down.” the man smiled gently, having seen her state of nerves. “It’s just so we are sure.”
“I know.” she nodded quickly. “I don’t know why I’m so jumpy.”

He could think of a few reasons, but now wasn’t the time to dump them on her. He handed her the box, leaning back into the counter folding his arms over his chest.

Liz opened the box, pulling a test free. Red watched as she tried to tear the package open but her hands were shaking so badly, it brought a scowl of concern to the man’s face.

“Are you all right?” He placed his hand over hers, taking the wrapped stick.

“Yeah, sorry.” she reddened with embarrassment. “I’ve done these so many times, I guess it’s an ingrained nervousness... with Tom, I mean.” she hastened.

“Did you want a child, Lizzy?”

“I don’t think I did, upon reflection.” the reality troubled her. “I think, even before we started the adoption process, I sensed... something wasn’t exactly right.”

Once or twice when they settled in the brownstone, she remembered a subdued excitement, though. When things were good. There had been good times, or what she perceived as ‘good’.

But the let-down she expected, when the test was negative, never really materialized.

“Whatever the outcome, we’re in this together, Lizzy.” Red stressed.

She took a deep breath and smiled before turning to the private toilet. She came out a minute later, sitting the test on the counter.

She stood, staring at it, without blinking...her mind chaotic with possibilities.

Red stepped in behind her, wrapping his arms about her waist, softly kissing the nape of her neck, sensing her state.

“Did you enjoy some off-time with your team before you left?” the man distracted her.

“Huh?” Liz looked up into the mirror, looking at his reflection, her thoughts miles away. “Oh...oh, yes. Last night.” she confirmed.

“We went to that hole in the wall joint you recommended.” she smiled at him, “and it was great. Everything was amazing. The food, the service....” she hesitated, “then the bar you said to check out.”

Red grinned. “A fun place, yes?”

“Very!” she giggled. “Aram about got a dart stuck in his neck.” she narrowed her eyes at the man, though playfully. “Was that part of your diabolical plan for us?”

“I did so want your time in New York to be memorable.” he chuckled, falling into the stressed lightness.

“Silas didn’t throw that dart... did he?” Red questioned Silas’ wicked sense of humor.

“No...” she laughed. “Why would you ask that?”

“Silas has unique ways of warding off potential competition.” Red knew the guy’s modus operandi.
“What are you talking about?” Red fully caught her attention.

“Silas is interested in,” Red searched for an acceptable way to phrase it, “...Samar’s feminine charms.”

Liz gasped, shocked and slightly alarmed, “Are you saying,” she shook her head fretfully, “...Silas wants to bang Samar?!”

“So much for subtlety.” he chuckled then glanced at his watch. Five minutes had passed. More than enough time. He dropped his eyes meaningfully to the test.

Red lifted the stick eye level, getting her attention. She snapped her mouth shut, squinting at the results, but her eyes simply refused to focus.

“What does it say?” she looked up at him again.

Red laughed quietly, showing her the results right beside his thumb. “One line, not pregnant. Two lines, pregnant.”

She stared at it again, while he waited for her to comprehend what her senses were telling her.

Red chuckled, dropping a kiss in her fragrant hair. “You’re not pregnant, baby.”

“You’re sure?” she lifted wide clear eyes.

“I’m positive.”

“It could be a false negative.” was she grasping at straws and if so... why?

He roughly figured the time passed since her ovulation days, reminding himself if nothing else, to pay better attention to that detail from now on, “If you were pregnant, this thing would light up like a Christmas tree.”

His ex-wife began testing the day after they made love. Each day it showed up with a single pink line. A couple days before her scheduled period, all that changed when both lines glowed a neon pink. Alerting them Jennifer was on her way.

“Okay.” Liz nodded, processing the information.

Red dropped the test, gathering her in his arms, “How do you feel about all this?”

“I...” she hesitated, laying her head against his shoulder, “I don’t know.”

“Are you...” he drawled, “upset or relieved.”

“I’m not sure, exactly.” she replied honestly. “Maybe a little of both.”

Red understood. He felt the same way. It just wasn’t time for the woman. He knew as much.

“Are you...” she hesitated, “upset or relieved?”

Red pondered a moment on how to answer that question. He never lied to her but then, how to say the words correctly...

“I was perfectly fine with either outcome,” he confessed. “I embrace the idea of more alone time with you.” he admitted. “But I am more than prepared to start our life together in earnest. A child is part of
that equation... at least, for me, Elizabeth.”

Liz released the breath she’d been holding, nodding her understanding. “You really would have been okay with–”

“Absolutely.” Red replied quickly.

He refrained from returning the question. Elizabeth was unsure of her feelings on the matter. But then, she was in a different stage of her life than he.

He was at that age where he felt secure and ready for anything thrown his way. He knew what he wanted in life.

Lizzy was still trying to find her footing.

They had ample time to explore that avenue.

“I confess, there is a part of me that is... disappointed.” he confessed, realizing the truth was best for them.

Liz’s eyes blinked, shocked by his answer, “Really?”

Red framed her face with his hands.

“Yes.” he lay a gentle kiss on her lips.

Gathering her in his arms, he hugged the woman, giving them both a moment of quiet introspection... just like they should have been allowed to experience in the first place.

He was shocked to realize; it was a moment he had desperately needed.

Liz inched closer, snuggling into his embrace, sensing Red needed this... as much as she did.

A hospital setting... and the dire circumstances of the day had not been a proper place in which to immerse themselves in the emotions both were experiencing.

Liz was a whirlwind of confusion. She was at once relieved, sad, elated, crestfallen... but here in Red’s hold, she just felt loved and incredibly safe.

Red was glad he listened to his heart. Even if he sensed the outcome would remain the same... he at least gave them a semblance of what was stolen away.

Closure.

A closure that secured a connection... a reality between them that wasn’t there before.

“We can try again...” Liz murmured quietly, “sometime.”

Red pulled back at the unexpected statement, smiling softly, finding the same uncertainty in her eyes.

“Now, whatever shall we do to pass the time for the rest of the evening?” he changed the subject, muttering into the woman’s neckline, making her giggle.

She turned in his arms, kissing him. “I can think of a few things...”

“Yeah?” he asked with great interest. “What do you suggest we do?”
“A rousing game of Chinese checkers?” she lifted innocent eyes.

He had been without Lizzy for four damn days. Four long days. “While I find the suggestion very difficult to refuse...” he managed tongue-in-cheek, his arms tightening about her small waist, “...I have another activity in mind.”

“Whatever could it be?” she feigned ignorance.

“Let’s just say...” Red’s eyes fell to the full, pouty mouth, “it doesn’t involve using a condom... does it?”

Liz liked that Red gave the choice over to her.

The man waited patiently, the look he gave heating her blood quite nicely.

He was asking something more, however. He needed to know her future thoughts on the matter.

“I had my heart set on checkers but...” Liz sighed evenly, easing her thighs closer to his straining bulge, “gosh... what you said sounds fun too.”

“Doesn’t it?” Red’s tone deepened erotically.

She crinkled her nose adorably, “That condom thing...” distaste tinged her statement, “they are just so time consuming, don’t you think?”

“Oh, hell yeah.” Red was quick to agree. “And to be honest, I don’t even think there are any in the room.”

“You’d have to go back down to the pharmacy,” she commiserated, her hand easing over the prominent bulge in his trousers, “which might break the mood.”

“God knows.” Red’s eyes closed, his breathing a little more taxed suddenly. He savored the familiar touch. His Lizzy had become quite the expert when it came to handling him. “Knowing you, I’d return to a completely set-up checker board.”

“Not completely...” she gently squeezed the hardening flesh. “You know, I just get so flighty and distracted, keeping a handle on those balls.”

Red’s brows rose exponentially. His gaze lowered to Elizabeth’s activities as she artfully demonstrated her ability at handling things.

She tiptoed, her lips caressing his with more than a hint of passion present. “You’ll forgive me... won’t you?”

“Baby, I would forgive you anything,” he stated so simplistically, the woman was a little taken aback, the flirting put aside for a moment.

“Anything?” her brow quirked quizzically.

Red’s eyes willfully held hers, “Anything, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth’s heart swelled because the man made her believe him.

She tightened her slender arms about his neckline, leaning fully to his aroused state. Her mouth parted sensually for his provocative kiss, her insides melting.
Liz started visibly, the ring tone of Red’s phone jarring the moment.

She pulled back, the mood tempered.

Red’s head fell back, growling his disbelief, “What the hell,” he lamented, “don’t they understand about–”

“It’s okay, honey...” Liz soothed hastily, “I’m the intruder this time.” she reminded herself.

“You could never be–”

“Just see what’s going on,” she urged, “it might be Silas. If he’s lost all his cash, you’ll have to bail him out.”

Red flipped the phone open angrily, “I’ll bail his ass out,” he barked into the phone, “right after I cut his dick off and feed it to the gold fish in the hotel’s pond.”

“The hotel has a pond?” Francis’ wry amusement was the immediate response.

“What the hell do you want, Francis?” Red snapped.

“World peace.” the young man chuckled for the other man’s mood. “For you to get laid...” he commiserated. “Where are you?”

“My room,” Red barked, “why?” he asked but was met with silence. The young man had hung up.

Red hung his head dejectedly. Why had the boy even calle–

“I should have known,” Francis said as he sauntered without a care into the sanctuary of their room, “Lizzy had something to do with your sour mood.”

Liz’s head was swimming with the speed it had taken the man to intrude into their domain. She stared at the phone dangling in Red’s hand, awestruck.

“When I informed you of my location,” Red’s ire was barely contained, “it was not meant as an invitation to join us.”

“...Red,” Liz pouted pseudo-seriously, softening the man’s vexation.

Francis winked in her direction, moving about Red’s bulk to kiss her cheeks. He shoved experimentally on Red’s hold about the woman but Red shoved right back, his look incredulous.

Liz’s lips trembled, barely controlling her amusement.

Francis chuckled quietly ignoring the man all together, “When did you get in?” he questioned the woman.

“What the hell do you want?!” Red interrupted the conversation before it could start.

Francis sighed, giving Liz a look, “He has issues...”

“She was fixing those issues when you interrupted!” Red grated.

Liz snuggled closer to the man, rubbing her nose gently into his nape. She smiled when the Red’s frame relaxed, his breathing lowering to a controlled level.
“Family can’t interrupt.” Francis seemed slightly confused by the accusation.

Liz tsked when Red’s head snapped threateningly towards her friend, “Francis is not privy to the new rule.” she reminded.

“What new rule?” Francis enquired.


Francis beamed happily, but sobered, finally giving over the true reason for the call, “You’re wanted downstairs.”

Red sighed more than heavily, his fate sealed, he realized.

“Duty calls...” Liz commiserated with the man, her eyes softening.

“They are ready to sign the agreement.” Francis relayed. “But a few odds and ends are dangling.”

“So... handle it.” Red drawled his annoyance.

“They want your input.” Francis broke the bad news.

Red’s eyes searched out Elizabeth Keen’s, the disappointment clearly visible.

“It’s fine.” she told the truth. “I’m just happy to be here... really.” she felt a thousand times better in his presence.

“Go away...” Red murmured to the man beside them, needing a few private moments.

“I’ll get a drink,” Francis took the hint for a refreshing change, “I feel suddenly parched... don’t I?” he glanced between the two, waiting patiently for a reply.

Red’s arms snapped up with a velocity that actually made a whooshing sound, his index finger pointing decidedly to the exit.

Francis followed the trajectory obediently, “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Liz watched the man gingerly walk away, shaking her head minutely for his antics.

Red cupped the back of her head, pulling her gently into his sphere, his mouth claiming hers in a bold display of unrequited lust.

“I’m mildly content as well... that you are here,” he responded to Liz’s previous remark, his tone a husky mix of lascivious restraint and pent-up frustration. “I hate my fucking job right now.”

Liz grinned at his mood, “Your fucking job let’s you stay at a hotel that has fish in its pond.”

“I made that up.” he grumbled.

“I know,” she soothed.

Red was grateful for her attempt to make their parting less stressful, “They’re in the hotel beside us.”

Liz smiled, handing him his jacket and fedora, “The sooner you go, the sooner you can be back.”

Red looked at the articles morosely.
“Don’t worry about me.” she offered one last dig, happy to cheer him up a bit. “If you’re too long, I’ll just start... without you.”

She batted innocent eyes his way, brushing a gentle hand over his shoulder, straightening the jacket.

The man offered a sardonic look, setting his hat in place, “You think I would be heartbroken to walk in on something like that taking place?”

Liz’s mouth fell askew, “Oh...”

She allotted him the ‘win’ on that one, “A mark for you.”

Red grinned wolfishly, pleased he had gained ground in the round.

Liz rolled her eyes slightly before seeing the hint of challenge in his, “Don’t think I won’t.”

“Oh, I hope you will.” the man grinned confidently, sauntering to the door. Turning about, the smirk still on his handsome face. “Snap a few pictures along the way for me, will ya?”

Liz gave him a chastising glare, “I’ll post them to your Twitter page.”

“I don’t have Twitter.” he wasn’t going to be out-done apparently. “You keep them in your phone... just for me to bask in later on.”

The woman cocked her head, “Go bask with the little blonde that has the hots for you.” she suggested.

“The only woman I’ll be basking with,” Red confided in a cocky manner, “... is you, in about an hours time, right here in this big, welcoming bed.” he indicated the structure with a passing glance.

“If I say.” Liz reminded, attempting to keep him in his place.

“I’ll persuade you easily enough,” Red lifted noble brows, “of that I am confident.”

Liz could not keep the amusement from quirking her lips, as she walked the hall with Red hand in hand, joining Francis in the main room.

Red took the offered tumbler, taking a fortifying drink. The liquor warmed his throat, “Where’s Silas, Joe?”

“I’m not going anywhere.” Liz squeezed Red’s hand. “They’re just next door if I need anything.”

“Right...” Francis pointed, remembering something, “I met Joe when I got here, he said they were swapping shifts so...” he jerked his thumb to the door.

A distinct rapping interrupted the conversation.

Red’s hand instinctively sought out his weapon, as he patiently waited for the ‘rapping’ to sound out the needed code. Elizabeth moved closer to the man unaware she did so, waiting right alongside him.

They both watched in mock horror as Francis blithely crossed the space, throwing wide the door.

Outside the portal a gangly looking waiter stood, patiently waiting for just such an occurrence. He smiled politely and Red’s hair lifted straight up on the back of his neck. Red drew his weapon.
“Lawford says hello.” the man leaned cordially forward before producing a deadly looking Colt .45, silencer snugly in place.

In the back of Red’s mind, he was vaguely aware of the sound of doors opening at either end of the hall. He hoped it meant what he needed it to.

The man instinctively sought out Elizabeth Keen.

“Shit!” Francis jerked away, slamming the door shut in the guy’s face. “Down!” he suggested... politely.

Hooking Lizzy’s waist, Red yanked the woman to the only refuge available, ducking her safely behind the bar. The door splintered with several well positioned shots.

The ornate lock broke free, clanging loudly to the marble floor. Another shot followed immediately, but it was oddly directed outside the penthouse.

A volley of muffled gunfire erupted in a rapid exchange.

An unseen battle ensued.

“Francis!” Liz yelped, surreptitiously glancing around the edge of the bar to locate her friend.

“Lizzy...” Red’s stern tone quickly drew her attention. She took the pre-offered weapon, ducking her head just as the door gave way.

“Where are you, you moron!” Red grated raspingly, seeking out Francis as well.

“Here...” Francis whispered coming around behind a couch, just to their left. He waved jauntily with his weapon, sitting against the back of the sofa comfortably.

Silas and his men were on scene, Red sensed it.

He could also hear that the room had been breached. At least two men had gotten past the outside security.

Pulling Lizzy back, Red took her place. He listened carefully as the men meticulously searched the great room.

A shadow to his left directed his line of sight, shifting towards the threat.

Red gained Francis’ wayward attention, alerting the kid to the reflection in the French doors.

They now had a perfect view of their enemies location.

Locking eyes with the woman beside him, Red motioned their intent, his expression hardening.

“Stay here.” he whispered tightly.

With the men gaining on their position, Red turned back to Francis, immediate communication passing between them.

Liz gripped her weapon, readying herself, as Red gave a three count.

In one simultaneous movement, both men raised to their full height, fire bursting from their barrels in rapid succession.
The sudden quiet was unnerving.

Liz checked both men’s stoic profiles, waiting on pins and needles, her weapon poised and steady. The woman was never so glad to hear her gruff guard’s voice bellowing from the hall...

“Clear!”

“Clear...” Red answered in kind, his glance falling on Elizabeth’s face.

Lowering his hand, he gallantly helped the woman to her feet as Silas and another guard came into the room. They immediately began a sweep of the suite.

“...You stayed.” Red was not only amazed, he was immensely pleased.

“I’ve got your back...” Liz smiled warmly, “you’ve got mine.”

Turning the hand in his, Red placed a gentle kiss on her fingers.

“We’ll have this mess cleaned up in a few seconds.” Silas reported back in, holstering his weapon as he spoke. “Dembe is on the floor below, doing damage control.”

“Get Kaplan’s team over here.” Red nodded his gratitude, glancing around the broken debris of the foyer.

“This is right up her alley.” Francis jumped on the bandwagon. “They’ll have this to rights in no time.”

Liz relaxed when all the men holstered their side arms. She glanced at her own weapon, realizing she had no where to put it. Red took it from her fingers with a chuckle.

“What the hell is Lawford’s problem?” Francis bitched, kicking the wounded leg of the man he himself had downed moments before. He leaned menacingly over the man’s form.

“I forgot to tell you,” Liz winced, whispering to Red, “Lawford went ballistic when he found out about the syrup.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake.” Red rolled his eyes heavenward. “Francis!” he sought out the kid. “Lawford knows you rolled on him.”

“What the hell did I do?” Francis half nodded, “that.” he scoffed disgustedly. “That dude seriously needs to get a sense of humor.”

Red wearily rubbed his eyes before sharing a knowing look with Dembe who had just arrived.

Liz dropped her face, the soft sound of distress muffled in her hands as she relived the proceeding moments in her mind.

Red frowned, instinctively reaching for the woman, “Lizzy?”

She lifted her reddened face, snorting, “He closed the door...” she wiped the tears of amusement from her face, “like that would stop a b-bullet.” she clutched her middle, doubling over.
“I acted on instinct, okay!” Francis defended his actions. “It worked, didn’t it!”

“You’re an idiot!” Liz cackled.

Red shrugged helplessly because... it had been an idiotic thing to do. “You know that we never answer a door unless the code is given.”

“What code?” Francis was immediately interested. “Were we issued decoder rings?”

Red threw up his hands in resigned resignation. He turned away unable to stomach another second.

Silas helpfully thumped out a rhythmic ‘code’ on the boy’s head, “Remember this?”

“Ohh!” Francis rubbed his head gingerly. “Right! Yes, I do remember that now!”

All seemed to relax, the problem evidently cleared up.

“We should get downstairs.” Francis looked at his watch. “They’re waiting.”

Red checked, not at all surprised to find Elizabeth nodding her agreement.

“They’ll get it fixed in no time.” she waved the man’s worry aside. “Really, we’ll be okay here.”

“Am I the only sane one here?” Red questioned no one in particular.

“If you are,” Francis pointed out, “it ain’t saying much.”

Red had as much as he could take. He pulled roughly on Silas’ shirt sleeve, directing him aside, “I want this mess cleaned up before I return.”

The head guard waved off the veiled threat, knowing exactly why Red wanted the premises cleared.

“I’m doing the best I can here!” Silas made mention.

“Go...” Liz inched closer to Red, “I have a bath waiting,” leaning, she brushed soft lips against his, “and photos to take.”

Red groaned meaningfully as visions of a very naked, very wet Lizzy floated in his mind’s eye.

“We’ll see who persuades whom, Red Reddington.” Liz said as she sauntered past the man.

Red tilted his head, watching her little ass swish away.

His cock twitched accordingly but he staunchly reprimanded it.

Challenges were issued and one had decisions to make.

In this instance, Red believed that he couldn’t lose either way.

Lizzy was back in her rightful place... right by his side.

Red began humming his favorite Jimmy Buffet song, the lyrics vividly alive in his memory. A smile graced his face, his entire demeanor totally relaxed and stress free.

Francis Holbrook followed after the man, a bewildered expression on his face. He checked with Dembe but found nothing amiss on the black man’s handsome face, which was good enough for him.
He instantly started harmonizing with Red’s efforts.

Red grinned over, appreciating the gesture.

Both men’s voices raised effectively as the elevator doors closed on the impromptu performance.

Chapter End Notes

Song referenced: "Come Monday" by Jimmy Buffet.
The quiet of the room filtered into Elizabeth’s mind.

She stood, looking over the preparations she made for her long-awaited bath.

It may seem odd to some people... okay, most people, she was calmly preparing a bath after all that transpired a short time ago.

Maybe she should be upset, traumatized even. The truth was, she simply couldn’t find it in herself to expend the energy.

She, in reality, wasn’t phased a bit.

Liz told herself, she was an FBI Agent. Being put into dangerous situations came with the territory.

What did the locale matter? In a warehouse or a penthouse... bullets flying around were considered an occupational hazard.

At least with these people outside those doors, she trusted they wouldn’t freeze up or make a run to save their own hides, leaving her high and dry with no back-up.

The day Red, Dembe or Silas froze during a gunfight, would be the day she’d pack it in and call it quits.

The funny part, she couldn’t even call this the new norm.

It seemed her whole life had been pre-destined to be surrounded with crime and intrigue.

Look on the bright side, Red always said. At least she had a criminal mastermind in her corner to soothe any worry that may crop up.

It didn’t hurt the man was warming her bed, either.

A man she loved very dearly. More so it seemed, with each passing day.

Given her position in life, she probably shouldn’t visualize Red as a Robin Hood type.

She learned overtime, Red gained his greatest pleasure... he was at his happiest, when giving of himself. Whether monetary assistance or his own time and energies to people he admired and
respected.

Could she really fault that type of mentality?

Red was a good and decent man who, contrary to popular belief, had the patience of a saint... even if Francis were in the vicinity.

The man accepted her from the get go, warts and all. She literally cringed when she thought back on those earlier times.

She had been terrible to him in all aspects before having gotten to know the man better, though Liz often wondered if Red secretively enjoyed the opposition just a little?

Even still, it must have been a terrible drain emotionally for Red.

With that in mind, Liz set a plan in motion to erase bits of their past a little at a time while opening herself to this new facet of their relationship.

She was determined to share herself with him, to drop preconceived notions... to expand on an exciting and wondrous new adventure and in doing so... hopefully open an entirely new avenue for she and Red to explore... together.

Not that she would make it easy for the man. Red loved a challenge. She planned to make him work for any further information.

She hadn’t realized how much she appreciated unraveling the mystery that was Red Reddington until the prospect presented itself.

Her parents, the Cabal... the Fulcrum; all were mysteries that had been her driving force for the better part of two years. She was left drained by the effort most days but...

This was entirely on a personal level.

For certain things; like knowing Red’s favorite liquor or guilty pleasure treat... she would just ask. But other things, Liz realized she would have to discover herself by use of trial and error.

She listed the things she found out about the man on one hand... Red liked his nipples played with and when she scratched her nails against his head, she could make the man almost purr in contentment.

She even knew he liked to take part in minor bondage. All well and good, but it wasn’t enough, not nearly so.

What else?

What relaxed him? What made him uncomfortable? What turned him on? What turned him off?

Was there something sexual he enjoyed that he had not brought to her attention as yet? Was he into sex play she wasn’t even aware existed?

She fancied herself mature and educated about such matters but... was she? Her partners to date had been rather... vanilla in nature. They had one goal in mind and focused on that alone. She was just a tool used to achieve that goal.

Red surely possessed much more knowledge. He was much more experienced.
If there proved to be idiosyncrasies which the man enjoyed, would they be on the same page? Would she find his tastes titillating? Or would there be issues?

All Liz knew for certain was, she was excited by the prospect of exploring with a partner, a lover... she could finally trust.

Excitement welled in her chest suddenly as the sound of activity in the front area increased. Red and the guys had returned from their meeting. Though... all had not gone well from the sound of all the bitching rising above the normal conversational level expected.

Liz scurried across the room, making for the closed bedroom door, wings on her feet. Her heart thudded thunderously in her chest, anticipating the very sight of Red Reddington.

Would it always be this way? She hoped on some level, it would be. That they would find a way to keep the thrill alive.

Red was very inventive at such things. She appreciated his efforts.

Liz gasped, pulling up short. Red barreled through the door, his solid frame appearing out of nowhere.

The woman blinked her surprise as a pungent stench assailed her unsuspecting nostrils. “Whoa!” she backed away hastily, wafting the heavy perfume in an effort to clear the air of the overpowering floral concoction.

“Tell me about it!” Red slapped his phone into her palm. “Shut that damned thing off, will ya, baby?”

He held up a warning hand, “Stand back... it will seep into your pours and cut off your air supply.”

She grinned as his serious expression.

“What is it that makes a woman douse herself from head to toe with this malodorous, fetid... toxin.” he griped, roughly pulling at his jacket.

Liz covered her lips, hiding her smile as the man continued on his tirade.

“The air in that room was noxious!” he grumbled. “I think Francis may have died... I don’t know, I left as soon as possible. Every man for himself, I say.”

Liz switched his phone to vibrate, helping the man pull free of his vest.

She held his jacket tentatively between two fingers, grimacing. The astringent odor swirled about her senses, leaving her rather nauseated.

“I made a motion to open a window.” he turned, spreading his hands wide, the light eyes seeking her out. “As if one window could have obliterated that foul smell.”

“It wasn’t the pretty blonde?” Liz stuffed his clothes into a laundry bag, following Red as he went.

“Greta Vanderbluff.... Vinnie Vanderbluff’s very conspicuous but very cordial wife.” Red called
over his shoulder.

“Really, she’s a lovely woman in temperament,” he held his tie aloft, eyeing it regretfully, “but I highly suspect her sense of smell failed her years back.”

“No one had the courage to inform the woman... less is more.” Liz nodded knowingly.

“As I said, a lovely, gracious woman.” Red nodded succinctly. “No, I chickened out as well. Honey, don’t worry about those things... we’ll just burn them. Unless, they combust on their own.”

Liz grinned, “They are perfectly good clothes.”

“It would embarrass me to send them to the cleaner.” Red scowled. “You do not understand,” he stressed, “just how much I missed you... especially that amazing... soft, clean scent you wear.”

Liz chuckled happily, “A couple hours in this stuff probably gave everyone a horrendous headache.” she noted the redness of the man’s eyes.

She sat the laundry bag out on the balcony, closing the door soundly.

“My head is throbbing,” he admitted, shaking it woefully. “I’ll take a few pills and be right as rain in a few–”

“You most certainly will not.” the woman’s brows furrowed. “You need some downtime, I think.”

“No, no,” he objected quickly, “I’ll shower, careful to use copious amounts of soap, mind you and then we will celebrate your–”

“I have an idea,” she mused moving closer to him only to retreat rapidly, “...why don’t we share a long, hot bath in that monstrous tub?” she pointed to the structure.

“You didn’t take your–”

“Something came up.” she crinkled her nose. “But I can have that tub up and running in a few seconds.”

“What came up?” Red scowled instantly.

“I handled it just fine.” she smiled brightly. “Get out of the rest of those clothes,” she motioned, walking to the tub then hesitated, “unless you would rather take a shower?”

Red halted all activity, a thoughtfully musing expression gracing his face.

“Let me see,” he pondered, “would I rather take a shower, all by myself mind you,” his brow furrowed even more so, “...or relax in a luxurious bath with a beautiful, exciting, naked woman beside me?” he sought her out. “That’s a tough one, Lizzy. Let me take a few moments to–”

“Oh, shut up.” she chuckled, enjoying his mood which seemed to be swinging to a better place.

“Although,” he added cryptically, “it might be wise for me to shower before the bath.” he nodded his decision. “That’s what I should do.”

Liz watched him entering the extravagant shower, her chuckle a genuine one.

“I’ll only be a moment though so...” he stuck his head back out, “don’t lose the momentum, okay?”
Liz shook her head, “You’re spending too much time with Francis.” she stated her belief. “You’re getting as crazy as he is.”

“No need for insults.” the water sprang to life inside the shower.

Liz sat back against the sink basin, content to wait out the moment but something came to mind. She sighed mentally, realizing she would have to tackle the issue sooner rather than later.

“Red... I think I better talk to you about something.”

She hated to be the one to break his mood though.

Red halted his soapy hands at the serious tone, his brow crinkling, “....What is it?”

He waited tentatively, wondering if he should cut the shower short.

“It’s not really anything,” Liz grimaced, “or at least, I hope all is well. I... I may have overstepped boundaries earlier... with Mr. Kaplan.”

Red was totally shocked not having expected anything of this nature when Lizzy first announced there might be a problem on the horizon.

“Kate? She was here?”

“No.” Liz was quick to reassure. “I... I had Silas call her.”

Red stepped to the opened walk-in for the shower, “Lizzy... what’s going on?”

The woman pulled a face, “Oh, I probably should have kept my big mouth shut, I know that now.” she lamented. “But I couldn’t stand how that woman was speaking to Silas!”

“Kate?”

“No, not Mr. Kaplan.” Liz was becoming frustrated. “That other woman, the one Mr. Kaplan sent.”

Red digested, “The Cleaner?”

“Yes.” Liz relaxed. “Red, she is just a horrible woman! If I had to choose between Moore and her... I’d pick Moore.”

Red was taken aback.

“Please, go on with your shower.” she motioned. “I’ll tell the sordid tale but I’d rather you not be standing there looking at me when I do.”

Red shook his head for such a foolish outlook, as if he wouldn’t accept anything the woman thought to do or say. He slowly returned to the hot, steamy spray, albeit reluctantly.

“So I hear Silas, right?” Liz began anew stepping closer to the stylishly tiled area in which the man resided. “He was highly pissed, and I mean... highly.” she recalled the incident clearly in her mind.

“So I go out to see if there was a problem, right and they’re at each other’s throats. I mean, I have never heard Silas speak to a woman in such a manner.”

Red washed his body clean of the stench of the day, in more ways than one, listening intently.
“But that woman... that... that...” Liz couldn’t find a word ladylike enough, “she kinda deserved it, if you ask me! She treated not just Silas, but all my guys out there like...” she sought a feasible word.

“Pig slime?” Red repeated carefully, relaxing, sensing this momentous problem wasn’t all that horrendous after all.

“Worse... the things she was saying and the tone?!” Liz’s tempered resurfaced. “Like she was Queen of the Nile and my guys were her little minions... less than minions! And I just wasn’t going to stand for it, Red!”

“Well, I’m sorry but I called her on it, right then and there!” Liz related. “And I said, in no uncertain terms, that no one spoke to my guys in such a manner and I didn’t care who the hell she thought she was... I wanted her gone! Immediately!”

Red nodded slowly, adjusting the temperature, “...You did.”

“I most certainly did.” Liz stood her ground. “But she said Mr. Kaplan was her employer, not me and she had no intention of leaving her post until Mr. Kaplan advised as much.”

“...And Silas had nothing to say to all this?”

“Oh, he said plenty.” Liz sing-songed her head, her expression a worried one, “but I can’t repeat any of it in mixed company.”

Red grinned.

“But I didn’t need Silas!” Liz objected strenuously. “Really, I told him to get Mr. Kaplan on the phone and he did.”

Red’s smile lingered, “...And?”

“I explained the matter calmly and asked the woman be,” Liz swallowed hard, “... well...”

“Dismissed?”

Liz couldn’t read the man’s tone.

“I know it wasn’t my call or my place but,” she exasperated, “who the hell did she think she was talking to, Red? My guys know their business! They are not second-class citizens to anyone!” she lifted her chin stubbornly. “At least, not while I’m around!”

The silence was strained for Liz. She wrung her hands unconsciously.

“What did Kate do?”

Lizzy’s story surprised Red. Kaplan’s employees were always efficient. They learned how to fade into the background, to become faceless spectators in a crowd.

“She... spoke to the woman, and she left.” Liz winced. “I don’t think Mr. Kaplan was very pleased with my interference.”

“Why do you say that?”

“She was very... silent on the phone. She spoke just three words to me.” Liz recalled. “Put her on.”

Red would be interested to see Kate’s reaction to this new development.
“So, I gave the phone over to the beastly ogre and they talked for a while and,” Liz shrugged, “...the woman left.”

“Did another Cleaner arrive?”

“Silas said yes, in a remarkably short time actually, but,” Liz shook her head, “I guess there are bad feelings all around now because I didn’t handle the situation as I should have.”

Liz sighed heavily, “I was afraid I would blow it, if push came to shove. I’m not like you... with people or situations.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” he muttered sotto voce, a smile playing at his mouth.

“What?” Liz hadn’t caught the mumbled statement.

“So what is the problem you are talking about?” he raised his voice.

“...Well... I just told you the problem.” Liz was mystified. “Mr. Kaplan is probably upset with me for interfering in her affairs.”

“Let her figure it out.” Red turned the spray off, accepting the towel Lizzy held out for him as he exited the stall.

“Lizzy,” he absently tucked the towel about his waist, seeking her out, the worried little expression endearing her to him, “do you really think I would have stood by and casually allowed someone... anyone, to berate my people without saying a few choice words on the matter?”

“Well, that’s you,” she reminded, “I’m not... you. I’m just–”

“You are an extension of me and the sooner everyone realizes that fact, the better off we will all be.” he stated the facts as he saw them.

The words stunned and delighted the woman. She stared at Red, the large blue eyes seeing him in an entirely different light.

“You mean that!” she realized.

Liz stepped hastily, her arms lifting about the man. “I thought...” she swallowed the sudden lump in her throat, “I had butted in where I shouldn’t have.”

“We discussed this,” he reminded.

“But... the business stuff. I shouldn’t be involved–”

“You are my partner,” he made it clear, “in every aspect of my life. I want and expect you to be involved. If that is what you want, of course.”
Liz took a moment to grasp such an implication, “... But Mr. Kaplan–”

“Is a dear and trusted friend,” Red nodded minutely, “And she can take care of herself but you... Lizzy,” his eyes softened, “my priority is and will always be... with you.”

Liz’s eyes shone her love for the man. He really did support her... trusted her.

“Are we clear on the matter?”

She hugged him tightly, planting a kiss on the leathery sunburnt flesh of his neckline, “I think I love you Red Reddington.”

“When will you know for sure?” he leaned, a scolding look on his face.

She smiled secretively, “I’m gonna run that bath now.”

“You do that.” he approved wholeheartedly, knowing that gesture alone said it all.

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~

Propping his head comfortably on the soft pillow behind him, Red idly drummed his fingers on the island beside him.

Lazily pushing a hidden inset, the water stirred to life. Pulsing jets pelted his tired muscles, numbing the stress of the day.

The large black marble surrounding the tub held candles here and there, the soft glow and scent setting a tranquil scene.

Overhead a modern, stylish chandelier gently flickered an ambiance Red could appreciate.

An oblong fireplace crackled its elegance, the heat warming the space to perfection.

Red watched the dancing flames hypnotically.

He was glad Lizzy had suggested a hot soak. In just this few minutes, his headache was easing considerably. The horrendous stench he had not only smelled, but tasted... was a thing of the past thankfully. The scented waters swirling about his body were a very pleasant substitute.

This pampering Lizzy had initiated was something to which the man could rapidly become accustomed.

Moments after submerging himself in the steaming water, the sound of Lizzy’s presence flicked his eyes open.

She stood before him, her expression a contented one. The white fluffy robe encased her body. She fiddled indecisively with the tie.

“Something wrong?” he himself, could find nothing what-so-ever wrong, but her hesitation alerted him to a possible problem.

“No, no...” she waved him to remain seated and relaxed. “I’ll be right back.” tightening the tie back around her waist, she held up a hand to signify there would be a short delay before disappearing from sight.
Flicking the stream his way, Red groaned his relief as the pulsing water massaged the tension in his body.

The sound of the outer door closing and bare feet on the marble floor brought a small smile to his face.

“Lock that door.” he tried to soften the request, but it still sounded irritated to his ears.

Lizzy seemed to forgive his gruff demeanor however, chuckling quietly as she, thankfully, did as requested.

“Afraid Francis and his rubber ducky will wish to join?” she asked.

“Hell yes.” he slit his eyes as the lights overhead lowered to an even more comfortable level, allowing him to take in the vision nearing him.

Never in his life had he seen anything more adorable, yet incredibly sensual.

A few loose soft tendrils fell from the messy bun atop her head, skirting the shoulders of the oversized robe engulfing her slight frame. A robe he was certain was stolen from the other hotel. It had the monogram after all.

The thought tickled him. She had warned him she would abscond with it.

As she neared the low flickering flames, her cheeks glowed a healthy pink, her eyes sparkled with a hidden mischief he found very appealing.

Red’s heart softened when the woman’s pretty mouth fell into the most alluring pout, wincing sympathetically for his suffering.

“You poor baby. You’ve had quite a day, haven’t you?” she produced an unexpected gift to ease his suffering.

“Normally,” she sat the heavy tumbler and expensive scotch on the island beside him, “I would advise against this, since you’ve taken your pills...”

Red’s brows rose, watching the dark amber liquid fill the heavy crystal halfway.

“We’ll share...” she read his thoughts. “That way, I won’t feel so guilty.”

Taking the pre-offered drink, “And you can lie comfortably with a straight face when the paramedics show up after I’ve had a heart attack.”

“Well... yeah.” she shrugged innocently, a smile tugging at her mouth.

He lifted it to his parched mouth, inhaling the rich aroma. He held the warm liquor on his tongue a moment, savoring the heady taste.

“But... you’re a manly man.” her eyes traveled his exposed torso appreciatively. “You can take it.”

Red’s eyes shifted when the woman slowly pulled at the ties at her waist, her look more than inviting.

“I am a man...” he agreed.

He rather enjoyed the unexpected burn coursing through his body as he unintentionally swallowed
the stout liquor in one gulp when sight of her pert breasts came into view.

“But... will I have to take it?” he teased.

Liz slid her robe slowly from her shoulders, baring herself to his rapt gaze, “I’ll let you know.” she mused, bringing a smile to Red’s lips.

“Do you need anything?” she asked, hanging the expensive robe on an available hook.

“...You.” he gestured her closer, his eyes following her movements as she stepped unto the ledge surrounding the luxurious bath.

She toed the swirling depths, withdrawing hastily.

“Is it too hot?” he questioned, instinctively reaching for the faucet.

“No, it tickled.” she giggled before taking his offered hand. She eased into the fragrant, bubbling water finally laying back into Red’s chest.

Sharing the glass between them, both basked in the quiet for long moments... both enjoying the amazing feel of the bath and each other’s presence.

The heat leeched into their skin, loosening tight muscles and soothing their souls.

“This is nice...” Liz hummed her contentment, squirming luxuriously against his frame, loving the feel.

“Yes,” he kissed her temple tenderly, “it is.”

And it was. Lizzy was here with him. They were alone....

He couldn’t be happier.

Losing himself in the sensation of her soft curves laying intimately against his, Red could not recall one troubling incident occurring the entire day.

The woman unexpectedly pushed away from him, shaking him from his reverie.

He frowned his discontent watching as Lizzy turned, making a space between his open legs. She reached for the soap.

“How’s your head?” she murmured, rolling the soap between her palms, her eyes caressing him softly.

“...Easing,” he said. “Between the pills, liquor...and you... here with me,” he told the truth as he saw it, “I’m floating,” he closed his eyes to savor.

His heavy lids flickered open when he felt the sensation of Lizzy’s soapy hands caressing his torso.

“Just relax.” she soothed.

Not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Red’s body instantly conformed to the gentle slope of the tub as he luxuriated in Lizzy’s attention and touch.

With each swipe of her little hands, he felt he was being cleansed of the sins of the day.
And maybe he was?

He was the sinner... and she the saint. *His salvation.*

Liz skimmed her soapy hands along the plains of Red’s body, smiling her own pleasure.

“We’re going to have to do this more often...” Red groaned appreciatively for her actions.

To see Red in the bath, so uninhibited and openly fixated on her touch felt as intimate as when they made love. Performing oral sex on the man could not have been more personal. She was astonished at how close she felt to the man at this moment.

She rather liked that only she was allowed to see him in these unguarded moments. Like Red’s orgasms, this private time was hers and hers alone.

“Feeling better?” Liz murmured softly, rubbing soothing soapy circles against the man’s forearms.

She repeatedly rinsed with the hot, steamy water until she sensed his body relaxing into the moment.

“Much better,” he sighed, shifting thankful eyes her way.

“You were just what I needed.” the man mumbled.

The woman’s brow arched knowingly when the man’s erect penis caught her attention. The heavy shaft bobbed in the water, the thick head almost breaking the water line.

Red wouldn’t deny her touch aroused him. He felt a stirring in his groin that had not been present earlier, every time her wet body brushed against his shaft or her hands caressed him.

He had often fantasized about taking a bath with Lizzy. As he masturbated when showering in the morning, the visions were both vivid and erotic.

This was a fantasy come true, having her naked flesh sliding against his in such an intimate venue.

But making love to her was not all he intended his statement to convey.

Reaching, Red lifted the delicate chin, directing her attention to his expressive features, “Thank you for coming to be with me.” he clarified. “Your presence...calms me.”

Liz’s eyes softened, understanding the sentiment all too well.

“I needed to come.” her soft reply filled him with an urgent anticipation.

‘Antsy’ was an apt description as his gaze swept her wet frame. His groin stirred at the stunning vision sitting so innocently before him in the steamy waters.

Lizzy’s flushed skin radiated under the soft glow of the low light. His tongue itched to catch the beads of water trickling down her curvy frame.

“Come here.” his voice was raspy, lower than he could account for.

“You up for that game of checkers?” Liz asked coyly.

“I’m up for something...” he murmured, the evidence stiff and aching between his legs.

Taking the soap from unresisting fingers, he worked up a frothy lather, gently caressing the woman’s
torso, more than happily returning the favor she had bestowed upon him.

Leaning, Liz captured his lips in a slow, gentle kiss. The man wrapped his arm about her waist, pulling her flush with his body.

He smiled warmly when her slick skin conformed to his as she lay against him comfortably.

Lazily hitting the surge to a new position brought unbidden sighs when the forceful water tickled their skin. The swirling jets hit his back and feet... and it felt wonderful.

“Red?” Liz ventured on, something on her mind. She drew in a blissful breath as the man continued stroking his hands along her back.

“Uh hmm?” he lost himself in the soft silk of her skin. Feeling the satin against his soap covered palms, the rough calloused area a contrast both noted.

“Did you get anything for your last birthday?”

Red’s mouth curved upward slowly at the unexpected turn of her mind. Still asking her questions, was she?

“Dembe gave me a book I had been wanting and a new satchel.” Red replied. “Silas got me a bottle of scotch.” he remembered. “Which he has greatly depleted, mind you.”

Liz rubbed her cheek against his pectoral... waiting. Silence fell between them for a brief interval.

“That’s it?” she frowned. It sounded so... sad.

“You... gave me a bottle of wine.” he smiled at the happy memory, gently squeezing her middle.

She flushed, remembering how she agonized over her purchase. But... he had not picked up on her true meaning.

Red knew hundreds of people. Only two had remembered his birthday? Well... three.

Liz thought back on that time, her mind floating like the bubbles in the bath.

She and Red had been getting on well enough, just a few spats now and then. That week though, Red had been particularly pleased, no arguments or disagreements having ensued.

The cases had been light; she had been well fed and rested... and it showed in her mood. She had even taken the man up on his offer for a bite at a local deli down from the Blacksite.

Their relationship had hit a happy medium.

So when she happened upon that bottle, he instantly came to mind. And since his birthday was on the horizon...

She impulsively bought the gift.

Once in the quiet of her house though, she second guessed the purchase.

It was bad enough when the Secret Santa gift exchange happened at work. It was impossible trying to find a gift for someone you barely knew but to do so with a twenty dollar budget?

Her anxiety raised exponentially when faced with the prospect of buying Red something. He was her
partner. Her CI.

All good points of contention...

But more importantly, she was not a wine connoisseur. *What if her choice sucked?*

By chance, Red dropped by that day to provide her a vital piece of information needed to close out their last case file... when he noticed the gaily wrapped gift.

During their lunch, she mentioned an old colleague was going on maternity leave. He naturally assumed it was a baby gift, wondering over her purchase. A natural enough assumption.

She blushed deeply, but held the offering out to him, correcting his mistake.

He had been so delighted by the unexpected gift... that *she gave him*, he eagerly pulled the tissue paper from its package

If it had been half-rate, Red hadn’t let her know it by his reaction.

As Red stood there, staring down at the bottle in his hands, a silence fell between them that was neither awkward nor comfortable.

Liz waited for the verdict on tenterhooks as she tried to read his indescribable expression.

Ready to wallow in her misery, she about buckled under the pressure of the moment when he quietly suggested... sharing a toast.

Knowing the man now and some of his tells... it hurt, remembering his face as he readied himself for her inevitable rejection.

The good part of that memory was, however... she had accepted.

Liz led him to the kitchen, offering him a corkscrew while she set about pulling down her cheap wine glasses.

Red had either not noticed or been too gentlemanly to remark on her rather boring fare.

Or maybe, because she hadn’t made an excuse for him to leave...it stunned him silent.

It had been their usual method of communication, after all.

Hugging herself to the man now, she was pleased as the memory unfolded further.

She wished Red a happy birthday and clinked his glass, breathing a sigh of relief the wine wasn’t horrible. In fact, it had been quite good... at least to her unpracticed palate.

Red, himself, said as much. Whether he was being kind, she didn’t know. But it helped her relax.

They sat opposite of one another at the bar, sharing not a glass, but the entire bottle.

Tale after interesting tale erupted from the man’s lips as the time passed quickly.

They had been nearing the end of their second glass and yet another amusing story... when her stomach had growled... loudly.

Red glanced down at the sound, a smile tugging at his lips. He offered her an apologetic grimace,
having realized he overstayed his welcome.

Liz waved him off, asking he finish the story. She pulled containers of Chinese food from the fridge. She didn’t know what possessed her, but asked him to share in the meager repast.

Red grinned, sliding off his stool, rolling up his sleeves. Brushing her aside, he made himself at home in her kitchen.

As he continued on with the story, he intently scoured her cupboard, mixing unseen treasures he found, along with the leftover ingredients producing something... incredibly mouth-watering.

Having finished their feast, Red had sighed quietly knowing the unexpected celebration was at an end.

After demanding his rights as a guest, he assisted with the clean-up.

Red was gathering his jacket and hat, a wistful smile on his face. Dembe was a little over half hour away, Liz had heard the conversation having taken place on Red’s check-in call between the two men. Red waved the issue aside saying he would wait out front.

Charmed by the easy conversation, the relaxed atmosphere and comfortable companionship... Liz gestured him to sit back down.

He could await Dembe’s arrival in the warm house.

A thought struck her as she watched Red lay aside his jacket and fedora, easing back onto the stool he had just vacated.

“Stay there.” she indicated when the man had retaken his seat in the kitchen nook. “Don’t move.”

She hastened quickly to the fridge having noted a forgotten treat when she pulled the earlier meal from the shelves.

She felt a little silly but giggly as she rummaged her kitchen drawers searching for a long-forgotten item.

Her hand secured the tiny object, and she chuckled gleefully.

Red watched with half-suspicious eyes.

Liz turned motioning, “Close your eyes.”

A definite scowl met the suggestion and Liz realized exactly what she was asking.

Looking back now, she realized again, what trust it took when he actually accomplished her bidding.

He waited patiently, head cocked.

Lowering the lights, she slid the chocolate éclair, replete with one lone, half-used candle before him.

The man, hearing the sounds, opened his eyes immediately chuckling that low, sensual laugh as he realized the ‘surprise’ she intended.

Liz broke into a slightly off-key rendition of ‘the birthday song’.

Red’s laughter was contagious. She had a hard time finishing the tribute, they were both enjoying
the little ‘joke’ so much...

It was a very special memory.

They floated, parts of their bodies weightless in the soothing liquid surrounding their very private world.

Lifting soft eyes, she smiled at the man who also looked lost in his own thoughts. Reaching, she lifted the tumbler, sipping the rich liquor before offering it to Red.

Red took the glass, raking a wet hand against his face and scalp, enjoying the cool burst prickling his skin.

A thought occurred to the woman, “I offered you a stupid éclair.” she sought him out for a reaction, she realized.

Red chuckled genuinely, instantly picking up on her meaning, “The quirks of your mind, woman...” he shook his head in amazement. “Yes... and it wasn’t stupid at all.” he had seen the gesture in an entirely different light.

“You blew out the candle,” she continued to her point.

“A time-honored tradition.” he nodded he was following along so far.

“I always wondered, do those wishes come true?” Liz half-teased. “Did you get what you wished for?”

Red became pensive for a long beat, “...I did actually.” it was as though he had just realized the fact.

Liz lifted amused brows, “Really!”

Red’s hands fell to her hips when the woman abruptly sat up, her bottom settling on his groin. He followed a bead of water run trickling over the slope of her breast before disappearing into the swirling waters tickling her belly button.

“And what was that?” she was enraptured.

The man’s eyes shifted almost contemplatively, “...You.” the deep resonant tone moved her.

“You’re...” she swallowed the rise of emotions, “...you’re just saying that.”

Red’s eyes held hers effortlessly, “No,” he stated simplistically, “even then... I knew what I wanted.”

Liz was speechless at the turn of the conversation, “...You... took that empty bottle.” she had the vision still of him sliding into the back seat of the car Dembe had driven to pick him up. “Why did you do that?”

Red looked at her oddly, “It was the first gift you ever gave me. Why wouldn’t I take it?” it seemed clear enough to the man, “I still have it.”

He reached, idly tracing the swooping slope of her breast, letting the weight settle on his fingers. Red’s mouth pulled at the corner when the woman unconsciously moved into his touch.

“...You do not.”

“For an FBI Agent, you’re not very observant.” he chortled lowly. “It’s on the bar at home, right
front and center by the crystal decanter...” he jogged the woman’s memory, “...it has a bow on it.”

Liz blinked.

“It means a great deal to me, Lizzy,” a slight frown graced his brow as he continued to watch her reaction, “why would it not?”

“It cost twenty bucks!” she blurted then flushed slightly for the faux pas.

He laughed fully, “...Okay.” her manner and confusion enchanted the man.

“I meant,” she faltered, “... you must have received hundreds of gifts, expensive ones that made mine pale in comparison.”

“Do you equate the value of a gift with its price?” he debated artfully.

“Well, of course not!” she was quick to deny the accusation but upon second thought, “...Oh, my gosh... do I?”

His hands skimmed Lizzy’s sides, memorizing the weight of her breasts on his hands before inching downward to the slight tapering at her waist and flare of her hips.

“No,” he replied confidently, “you just assume I do.”

Liz processed, “But you don’t.” she suddenly ‘got it’.

“No.” Red’s tone gentled.

“You really don’t.” Liz was flabbergasted which made the man chuckle again.

“The gesture touched me deeply, especially seeing how,” Red explained, “our relationship, for lack of a better term, was a fledgling one.”

Red swallowed the warm mouthful of which he had just partaken, sitting the glass aside, his eyes aligning with hers.

His eyes dropped to the turbulent waters when the woman shifted on his lap, her thighs tightening about his hips. The fleeting glimpse of the dark triangle covering her sex settled against his own lighter pelt, was hypnotizing.

“I made a wish too... that night at my birthday dinner.” Liz settled comfortably on his form.

“Is it permitted to ask... what it was?” he mellowed further, enraptured by the sight of his large hand dwarfing the small indentation of her waist, his fingertips came to rest on the sloping curve of her bottom.

“A new Ferrari.” she stated instantly.

The man’s laughter delighted her.

“A red one.”

“Of course,” he played along. “You look good in red.”

“I know.” she quietened, “A couple weeks down the road though.. I would have changed that.”
He nodded amiably, “To a blue one?”

“I would have wished,” she shook her head, the soft tendrils swishing hypnotically about the beautiful face, “that our relationship, for lack of a better term, continue to grow.”

“And it took so long to make this wish... why?” he teased gently.

Finding the outline of her legs braced beside his hips, Red slowly inched his hands up her silky thighs, his fingers curving around the toned muscle tugging her gently. His eyes closed when her mound pushed against the curvature of his penis.

“I had to mold you a bit... make you more perfect,” her expression asked, “isn’t it obvious?”

Red held his amusement, “You have succeeded admirably in your efforts.”

It was Liz’s turn to chuckle. She leaned, catching his mouth in a warm kiss, the taste of delicious scotch on his lips heightened the feeling.

“Did you really wish,” she flushed, “... for me?” she couldn’t believe the man harbored such thoughts where she was concerned, even then. He hid them so well.

Reaching, Red slowly pulled the pins holding her hair, sitting them aside one by one.

Her vision swam for a moment, the movement just as erotic as if the man were undressing her layer by layer.

Red thread his fingers through the dark locks, easing the ache left behind.

“That... and to kiss this amazing little mouth just once before I died, yes.” he said, his eyes holding hers effortlessly, a fire burning deep inside the blue orbs.

Liz exhaled shakily, her heart beating hard in her breast, “...And now you have”

Cupping her small head, Red drew the woman closer, his eyes locked firmly on hers.

“Not nearly enough.” he whispered his belief.

A natural instinct to strain towards the man was held in check by his controlled movements, which heightened her anticipation.

“Humans are such stupid creatures.” his brow crinkled in thought, his gaze restlessly searching her face. “How often do we allow our pride and misconceptions to rule our judgements and decisions?”

“What do you mean?” Liz was held spellbound by the low, hypnotic voice.

“We lost so much time.” his thumb traced the pout of her mouth. “I should have just told you what I was feeling at the time I was experiencing it.”

The desire to kiss the woman surged when Lizzy’s small nipple grazed intimately against his chest, easing his emotional state to another level entirely.

She inhaled sharply as his warm breath brushed tantalizingly against her eager flesh, her tongue darting to sensually flick against her tingling lips.

The man’s wet mouth brushed teasingly against hers, a whimsical shadow of things to come. His nose nudged hers gently. Catching her bottom lip, Red gentled the pink skin erotically, their breaths
mingling heatedly.

When the woman’s breathing and heart rate accelerated, her body molding comfortably to his, the man felt his entire system go on high alert.

Wrapping his arms securely about her small frame, he stroked her warmed skin possessively, his palms sure and confident wherever he chanced to touch. He lifted her into his attention, determined to further his hold on her psyche.

A carnal grunt hummed low in his chest when her little tongue flicked wantonly against his mouth, demanding entrance.

He found her lack of patience, charming as hell. He loved her eagerness, in all its magnificent form. It meant he was reaching her on some primal level.

Her bottom bowed, arching against his groin in added temptation, persuading him to give into her desires.

She was doing so well in her endeavors... he almost complied...

Almost.

How the hell a man on his back exerted so much control, Liz would never know, but every second that passed she knew she was falling deeper under his spell. She would allow his every whim. A part of her determined to fight the good fight but...

Carding his fingers through her thick hair, Red deepened the sultry connection.

His tongue slid easily past her lips, any resistance she may have thought to give... vanishing before it even materialized.

So much for the good fight...

Liz arched upward, mewling in the man’s mouth, her tongue gently mirrored his sensual probing.

Red skimmed his soapy hands along her sides. The sensation of her plump breasts and tiny waist imprinted itself on his mind. The urge to retrace his steps and savor the soft curves over and over, called to him.

He continued on his agonizing path however, a certain destination in mind. He curled his fingers about her buttocks. Soapy bubbles tickled his calloused palms as cupped the rounded flesh.

Leaning over the man, Liz’s mouth latched hungrily to his. She wriggled about anxiously, demanding his attention.

Tenderly squeezing the handful of the luscious flesh, Red’s fingers slid along the small crevice he had discovered, skimming the tiny puckering of her anus.

Unlike the first time he had explored that area, Liz didn’t startle from the touch, but lifted against it, welcoming his actions.

The man’s knuckles brushed against the small hole in no set pattern, his attention focused on her response.

Her sex throbbed anxiously, a waving pulse of desire tugging at her vulva. The pink lips swelled, tingling with anticipation.
Her tunnel clenched, surging with a swift, searing heat as it readied itself for Red. The cream of her arousal thickened in response... suddenly hotter than the water surrounding them.

Pleased with her reaction, Red concentrated his index finger against the small hole, rubbing it in a lazy, circular motion.

She gasped sharply against his mouth, her bottom pressing into his touch.

Quickly recapturing her mouth, Red’s lips silenced any protest the woman might think to utter.

Directing his touch, Red massaged her with determined strokes. Blindly grasping for the soap, he worked a healthy amount of suds in hand, working the slippery substance where he needed it most.

“...Trust me,” he rasped thickly as the woman’s labored breathing crested. His fingers moved gently against the tender flesh, the small puckering flexing under his every stroke.

Liz’s senses were in overload mode. Red’s mouth demanded she comply with his ardent display as the man’s middle finger slid alongside the one already in motion.

The thick fingers rubbed her methodically, establishing a definite rhythm to his madness.

The sultry and passionate slide of his mouth against hers was erotic, stimulating the woman to new heights of passion.

As was the rigid shaft which rubbed unobtrusively against her thigh from time to time, beckoning her ardent, tempting it... persuading it to unfold.

Trailing her hand down his chest and rib cage, she inched further towards her goal... to take the man in hand, so to speak.

Red’s hand grasp hers, stopping her intent, gently twisting the stealthy arm behind her back.

Liz gasped against his mouth as a strong fountain of water hit her nipple. The pressure concave the pliant flesh, beating steadily against the hardening nub in a maddening slow caress.

“...Does that feel good?” Red husk deeply, watching the woman unconsciously move closer to the force. His thumb joined the tantalizing caress, rubbing the pink tip in an equally maddening slow motion.

Any other time, it might have embarrassed her, to be forced to admit a weakness. At this particular moment, other priorities surfaced.

She closed her eyes, her pouty mouth desperately searching for his, her arms pulling him closer.

She sighed blissfully, murmuring a reply, arching towards the source.

Slowly rolling the woman, Red took a dominate position, grasping the edge of the tub to keep them afloat and his lover above water.

The tub was ridiculously spacious and deep, the swishing waters obscured by millions of tiny white bubbles.

Wrapping his arm about Lizzy’s waist, he lifted her small frame against his. Her head now lay comfortably against the small pillow Red had abandoned.

Her open legs naturally cradling the man’s body, the slick skin brushing along his firm thighs at
every vantage point.

Lowering his head, Red caught her full mouth, hungrily capturing her mewl of contentment on his tongue.

He angled the cascading water to hit her breast, drawing a sharp gasp of appreciation from her throat.

“I missed you…” he murmured softly against her mouth, “so very much, Lizzy.”

Wrapping her legs about him, she lifted into his frame, hugging the man happily.

Cupping her bottom, Red returned the sweet gesture. They floated about in the water, once again twisting with the direction of the swirling force.

Planting his foot against the textured bath stopped their movement just as the pelts pulsed unexpectedly against Lizzy’s bottom.

In lifting her form, Liz was pleasantly and unexpectedly inundated by a forceful expulsion of water which cascaded along her backside, the hot rivets running between the slit of her ass cheeks.

The sensation was ever so pleasant. She had never felt anything like it before.

A soft grunt escaped her throat. She squirmed her bottom about experimentally, unaware of having done so.

Red picked up on the fact, his eyes hooding with a sensual stare. He reached, his fingers parting the velvet slit judicially.

“Red!” Liz flustered, squirming immediately from his touch.

“Don’t even pretend that doesn’t feel good.” he murmured erotically, holding her in place, directing the spray back to its former position.

“S-Stop it.” she pushed at his hands hold.

Red caught one puffy nub in his mouth, suckling hungrily hardening the tiny nipple, refusing to allow the woman any sort of reprieve.

Between the constant rush of lascivious spray and the urgent antics of the man’s mouth, a losing battle ensued.

Liz gave in, her eyes closing to the wondrous surge of eroticism washing over her.

Red’s mouth felt so good... the torrent spray so sinfully forbidden.

She relaxed into the moment, mindless of her modest upbringing.

“Have you never masturbated like this?” the man’s voice was husky, his middle finger probing about the tight flesh of her anus.

Liz felt open and totally vulnerable, her center flaming to vivid life, an ache trailing up into her most private of places.

The question had secretively shocked the woman. Red was so open about such things. He spoke freely, even that holding a measure of the forbidden which attracted Liz like a moth to a flame.
She shook her head negatively, encouraged by his open, frank manner.

The man’s hand stroked idly along her thigh, his free arm encompassing her form, holding the lithe body close.

“I... guess it,” she allowed him to guide her clitoris to the titillating experience, gasping her amazement, “n-never came up.”

“Well, it has now.” Red decided, sliding his middle finger inside her molten cavern.

His thumb pulled incessantly at each side of her anus as he alternated the force from one sensitive spot to the other.

He knew, by the woman’s disgruntled gasps, that his mission was unfolding nicely.

Liz required more than his fingers to alleviate the pangs of arousal, however. He also knew that.

He had planned for it, in fact.

“I love to see you like this...” Red maneuvered her closer to the pulsating burst, most intent upon observing her reaction.

Liz groaned her awe, the sensation of Red’s fingers and the hot water pelting her ass was... amazing.

As Red moved her back against the teasing vibration, which unexpectedly splashed his sack.

“Damn...” he breathed his own growing need, “that does feel good.”

Liz nodded slowly, her attention concentrated elsewhere.

Grinning knowingly, Red lifted her full breast, suckling the woman’s puffy nipple into his mouth.

Liz’s fingers instantly curved about the man’s head, holding him to his pastime. The hot tug of his mouth sent jolts of awareness to her clit, causing the creamy heat to build in her core.

Spreading her legs wider, Red directed more pressure to hit her in the new hot spot he had unearthed. His rough tongue scraping against the crinkling swirl of her nipple.

Tightening her hold on the man, Liz hooked her leg over Red’s hip which allowed his shaft to shift between her legs.

Red’s vision blurred as the unexpected and electrifying sensation of the strong current beat against his sensitive cock head.

“Oh, shit...” he hissed his shock, his fingers tightening about the tubs frame and Lizzy’s bottom.

Raking gentle teeth against the man’s lip, Liz’s dark blue eyes lit with amusement, “...Does that feel good, Red?” she echoed his own sentiment back at him.

“...You tell me,” Red’s gravely voice left her reeling, the lust so clearly defined within.

Red jerked his hips, pushing into the intensity, the crown of his shaft slipping between her rounded cheeks.

She was dismayed to feel her bottom wriggle closer, her mouth falling agape as his rigid flesh dragged along the sensitive tissue of her anus.
“Jesus...” she forced her eyes open. Intense pleasure pulsed erratically through her nerve endings.

“I believe the correct term is...” Red concurred with her assessment, grunting a soft lived expression of his own pent-up desire, “… Touché.”

Liz rolled her hips, jerking against Red’s erection, increasing the pressure of the vivid strokes.

Her ass skimmed the rippled texture, the slick heat of Red’s cock slid between her legs. She worked harder for her release, her breaths coming in short, whispery gasps.

“Son of a bitch...” Red breathed his appreciation, the sounds and frantic movement igniting an untamed passion.

Readjusting his hold, he trapped his length between her cheeks, pressing the thick head against the puckering hole of her backside.

Securing the woman’s mouth, he caught her shaky exhalations as they grew in intensity; her panted breaths... giving him life.

He had never enjoyed a ‘dry’ hump more in his fucking life. Lizzy’s little hips rolled expertly, rubbing her little ass greedily against his cock.

“Oh, God...” she mewled, rocking faster against the man’s unyielding shaft as the pleasure rose to a fevered pitch.

Unable to withstand the temptation, Red joined in her efforts, shoving up and against her frenetic pace.

The water sloshed erratically around them with their frantic movement. The soapy water lapped over the sides, wetting the island surrounding them.

He damned his fingers as they slipped from their tight hold on the edge. Quickly readjusting his grip, he gratefully grasped a washcloth in his haste, securing their position.

His fat cock slid heavily against her hypersensitive flesh, the ridges rubbed incessantly where she needed it most.

Leaning, he caught her mouth in a passionate, frenzied kiss. The woman involuntarily cried out in his mouth as she neared the pinnacle.

“Oh, God...” she drawled her awe, “I’m gonna come...” her shaky breath grew in pitch, “fuck... I’m gonna...”

“Fucking hell...” he rasp against her parted mouth, flicking his tongue sensually along hers. He fought the convulsing contractions, his own need rearing its ugly head.

Curling her fingers into his back, Liz rode the cock harder... faster. Her breasts shifted against Red’s chest, the hair scrapping along her sensitive nipples sending a searing jolt to her clit as it slapped repeatedly against Red’s groin.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Red held tight to his world... his fingers numbed as they tightened painfully around the top of the tub as he valiantly fought the urge to come right then and there on her little ass.

“Dammit, baby;” Red growled through clenched teeth, “fucking come!”
He was not happy with his own lack of control. Not happy at all. His plans were going remarkably awry.

But then... Lizzy had never rubbed her ass against his cock with relentless determination, eager to come.

Red secured his stronghold as the woman seized in his arms, releasing a sharp, startling cry of release.

Her shouted exclamation echoed back off the water as the woman clawed frantically at the man, edging even closer to his solid frame.

Ducking her nose into the man’s neckline, Liz shook with the tremendous rush of endorphins assailing her senses.

The sensation of her body pulsing against his and the woman’s muffled cries of ecstasy tore through Red’s psyche.

*Four fucking days he had been without her...*

He had never wanted anyone so badly in his life.

The urge to *fuck* her until she was a quivering mess of tortured delight, was intense.

But the need to love her...

Nudging his nose against her neckline and jaw, he encouraged her to come back to him from the exquisite journey she had just taken.

Liz eagerly lifted, snuggling into Red’s embrace, nuzzling at his neck, mewing her contentment

Red’s heart hammered in his chest when her little face came into view. Those blue eyes were serene with bliss. Lizzy’s mouth searched instinctively for his kiss.

Shushing her soft whimpering, Red tenderly peppered that little mouth with gentle kisses as she calmed from the high he had just gifted.

Grasping her leg, he edged his way between her thighs as he rolled her beneath him. Her body naturally floated, conforming to his as he continued loving the woman. His mouth slid effortlessly along her neck and shoulders before returning to the lips he so loved.

Liz lethargically bent to his will, opening herself to his exploration. She hummed melodically as he wrapped an arm about her waist, lifting her breasts free of the water.

Red breathed his excitement as her tiny nipples broke the water line before the rest of the ample mounds followed. An overwhelming desire to taste the glistening skin left him on edge and restless.

His mouth trailed a searing path over the rounded flesh, tasting the light fragrant bubbles. He suckled her sharp peaks into his warm mouth.

The delectable tug of his mouth stirred a reawakening between her legs. Her clit tingled with awareness, a heaviness settling in her core.

Liz could not believe he could arouse her so quickly. She marveled at the man’s abilities, basking in them.
A low growl rumbled in Red’s chest as his engorged erection slid along Lizzy’s slit, the thick head slipping easily between the aroused flesh.

The woman arched into his touch, breathing euphorically as his weight settled against her slim body.

Curving his arm about her waist, Red cradled her small head in his palm, reverently kissing the mouth he desperately missed the last few days.

His cocked jerked hard against her center when the woman’s crystalline blue eyes fluttered open, staring hazily up at him.

Sliding his hand over the swell of her abdomen, Red’s fingers danced lightly over Lizzy’s mound, gently parting the lips of her vagina.

The rough imprint of his finger smoothed over her clitoris, rubbing leisurely circles against the swollen hood.

His eyes darkened when her legs fell apart in open invitation, further beckoning him to take what he wanted.

Lizzy was insatiable during her period. All that blood flowing to her genitals made her a frisky little thing. Like a kitten that couldn’t get enough playtime.

Once he got her over that first hump, as it were, she allowed herself to satisfy her needs.

It felt amazing for them both. Her senses were heightened and sensitive to the most simplistic of touch. Her orgasms were intense and frequent. She often came in rapid succession, much to her delight... and his own.

Even through the condom that first time, he had never enjoyed a better fuck in his life.

She was stunningly beautiful, all wet and swollen. She felt amazing. Feeling her engorged lips and clit dragging against his cock was more than mind altering.

He had every intention of making love to the woman but the minute he spread that hot hole open, shoving that snug cushion apart with his cock head... all his good intentions often flew out the proverbial window.

Lizzy never seemed to mind. Red himself was more than eager to give her the fucking she so richly deserved.

He took great pride in allowing the woman multiple orgasms. It was how he judged his merit these days.

She seemed more than pleased with his efforts and content to comply with his rather intense manhandling.

A heady warmth spread through his body upon the realization, he would be afforded that overpowering sensation again. Only this time, he was extremely privileged to feel her as God intended. A man and a woman... here, alone in their own private Garden of Eden.

Bracing an arm, Red pushed upright, startling Elizabeth with his departure.

Liz lay, a little dazed, watching the water sluicing down Red’s torso.

Her mouth watered as she followed the line of soapy trails gliding sensually through the hair.
covering his chest and stomach down to the light curls at his groin.

Her core tightened in response to the stimulating sight of his heavy erection. She stared covetously at the thick, length straining for her undivided attention.

Red’s muscled thighs bunched as he raised to his knees, the thick shaft bobbing with his movement.

“...I need you,” he rasped, the yearning for an intimate connection with the woman very apparent inside his fevered body.

Liz’s brows furrowed with confusion. What part was she supposed to...

“On your knees.” he demanded roughly. He jerked his head to the ebony island running about the bathtub. She would use the surface to brace herself for what was to come.

Her heart quickened at the man’s deep, thready demand. The liquid heat inside churned, tugging pleasantly at her abdomen and groin. She purposely hesitated, wanting to be persuaded.

“...Now, Elizabeth,” he urged brusquely, grasping a thick towel, throwing it for a cushion to lay her arms against.

Red watched the woman turn about under the water. Glancing back over her shoulder, she ever so slowly inched her bottom towards the surface.

The glorious sight of her bare backside breaking the waterline like a seductive Siren arising from a frothy sea, held his rapt attention.

Red unconsciously licked his lips as the water ran in a steady bead between the ample swell of her bottom.

The suds sheered off the rosy flesh, cascading over her rounded cheeks and labia. The rush of water parted the delicate folds, opening her to his heated gaze.

He reached, his fingertips grazing her naked hip as her body naturally curved towards him, willingly readying itself for his intrusion.

Inching forward, his palms slid along her wet flesh, curling into Lizzy’s shapely hips. The woman relaxed into the position she had assumed.

Reaching blindly for a hand towel, Red shoved it under the hot waters between her legs, lifting one knee then the other, settling them on the makeshift cushion.

Liz flushed a deep red, one part pleased the man was so considerate at such a time. The other part, understanding the deeper meaning. He wanted her stationary... for their activities.

Red’s breathing shallowed as he took in the sight of the bubbles strategically spotting her pink flesh.

The tantalizing peak of a nipple, the fleeting glimpse of the curvature of her glistening wet spine, teased him mercilessly.

He licked his lips hungrily watching one certain line of suds trail deliciously between her ass cheeks only to curve about her full lips before dripping from her clit.

He blew out a steadying breath as visions of his cum following the same path fluttered about in his very active imagination.
Liz squirmed about restlessly, her core aching to feel the man.

Red’s eyes raked the little bare ass boldly, his palm running over the firm slope possessively... he took the moment to run gentle fingers between her legs, slowly caressing the sweet clit several strokes.

He nudged her forward.

Following the silent directive, Liz rested her forearms more comfortably on the edge of the tub rim, willing to allow the man’s every whim at this stage.

Resting his legs beside her closed ones, he curved her hips giving him a front seat view of the luscious pink pussy and erotically sensual backside.

He had lost the advantage of the water jet but Red Reddington was nothing but resourceful.

He ran his palms over the satin cheeks, tilting her bottom for a better hold... and view. His thumbs slid teasingly between the plump cheeks, enjoying her soft moan of pleasure.

Leaning he placed his lips on either side of the voluptuous slopes suckling tenderly, marking the flesh with subtle marks wherever his travels took him.

Liz grunted her dismay but did not once think to chastise such behavior even when the man’s experienced tongue darted fleetingly between her cheeks, flicking the tightly puckered skin of her anus, a few light, teasing strokes.

Red grinned, having expected the woman’s startled outcry. She moved from his touch.

Reaffirming his hold, he brought that delectable treat back, nuzzling the sweet flesh lovingly.

Liz returned to her earlier thought... to open herself to exploration... to experience Red’s predilections, but she could not have anticipated what they would entail.

Certainly not this.

In truth, the sensation was so fucking phenomenal, she could not find the courage to fight the overpowering stimuli invading her senses.

“...You shouldn’t,” she was more than relatively certain of the fact, her tone a scolding one.

A predatory smile curved Red’s mouth. Spreading her cheeks wider, he allowed her to feel his full tongue rub along the crinkled flesh.

He chuckled softly when the woman gasped sharply and unconsciously bowed her back, opening herself to the man’s exploration.

“Why shouldn’t I?” he husked, his hot breath teasing her intimate alcove.

Her world shifted, her objections turning to a jumbled mess as the man’s wide tongue pressed firmly against her backside, rubbing against the tight hole incessantly.

“...I,” she swallowed hard, her brow furrowing as a wave of arousal surged through her, “... it’s um...” she faltered, her mouth falling open with her panted breaths.

“I’m waiting.” his eyes traveled the expanse of her back, enjoying the view provided.

He knew what she objected to, determined to change her views to a standard... conventional
outlook.

Holding her in place, he regretfully lifted from his pastime, “Stop worrying,” he soothed, “I cleansed you myself.” he reminded.

She remembered, he had soaped her bottom, most likely with the view of this activity in mind... easing any concern she may harbor.

“If you want the God’s honest truth...” he kissed the curvaceous slope, “I had my heart set on teasing your tiny clit tonight as well.”

“You c-can’t!” Liz wriggled in his touch, totally dismayed.

“I don’t like to limit our horizons...” he whispered sacredly.

“Red...” her cheeks flamed with embarrassment, “...no.”

“I assumed you’d say as much,” he disgruntled.

“...I’m,” she frowned her dismay, “...Red, my period is–”

“I will very reluctantly accept this... for now,” he eased her tension, “but soon, I reserve the right to show you just how possible any obstacle is to overcome if one is truly determined.”

She moved forward, intent on ending the face off only to feel the man tighten his hold. She moved from his touch, her decision a firm one.

“It’s either let me taste your clit,” the man rasped, “or allow me to return to my... previous activity.” he negotiated. “Choose, Elizabeth.”

Liz held firm objections to what the man was implying. Her intellect dictating one thing but her ripe, aching body more than willing to compromise.

She couldn’t fathom how the hell Red would give her oral when she was on her period? Perhaps she had misunderstood his intentions, she knew, deep down however... she had not.

All she knew with absolute certainty was her core was aching badly for release.

Her senses too inflamed to confront the issue at present, she would accept the fact, what he had attempted was the lesser of two evils.

Readjusting her stance, she slid back into her previous position, opening herself to Red.

Red’s eyes darkened watching that tiny ass tilt for him. A soft grunt worked in his throat as he lowered back to the offering, wasting no time in rubbing his tongue briskly over the sensitive flesh.

Liz’s breath was suddenly stolen from her as the man nuzzled his face into her cheeks.

His tongue worked diligently against her aroused flesh, quickly bringing her earlier passion back into focus within seconds.

He grunted approvingly when Lizzy rocked against his face, pushing into his touch. Increasing the pressure, Red felt the little hole flutter in response to his efforts.

Tightening his tongue, he alternated between licking and poking the tight orifice repeatedly, imitating the movement of lovemaking.
Liz’s body tensed with exquisite pleasure as the man stabbed at her opening, the sensation a foreign... yet undeniably erotic one. She felt her abdomen tighten in response, her vulva tingling with heightened arousal.

“...God,” she breathed her awe, “...G-God!”

Grasping her own cheek, she pulled at it, opening herself more to the intense sensation.

Red exhaled sharply, waiting for such an occurrence. The sweet tang of her arousal flooded his senses. His cock hardened further, shifting heavily between his stocky thighs.

He tenderly slid a thick finger into her core.

Red centered his attention on the swollen nub inside, petting it in a steady, titillating pace.

The tightening of her anus clenched under his tongue alerted him she was close to orgasm.

Doubling his efforts, Red tongued that beautiful ass until she cried out. Her back arched sharply, shoving the round flesh against his face... the little hole fluttering wildly under his ministrations.

Slowing, he gentled his touch, flickering the tip against her quivering flesh.

“That wasn’t so bad,” he pushed upward, inching forward, “... now was it?”

Lethargically shaking her head, Liz’s senses were still reeling when the man’s fat cock head parted her swollen vulva.

He pushed past the tight resistance of her vaginal lips, smoothly gliding inside.

“...Jesus...” Red hissed his contentment and gratitude to a benevolent deity when the tight hold grasped him, massaging his crown.

“I’ve missed this little pussy so much, can you tell?” he groaned his delight.

Liz’s fluttering walls tugged at his cock, drawing him deeper into the abyss. Rolling his hips slowly, he eased his cock into the tight sheath inch by agonizing inch.

Settling his hands at her waist, he lowered his eyes avidly watching his cock vanish into the rippling hole until his sack was snug against her clit.

She whimpered despondently, moving suggestively when his sack nudged her. She lifted into the touch, encouraging his actions.

His mouth curved, “...I’ll take that as a, yes.”

Red’s body trembled visibly when her tunnel fluttered helplessly around him before conforming to the large shaft, squeezing the fuck out of him.

“Finally,” he breathed a raspy whisper, “it felt like a damned eon since I last touched you.”

Quickly falling into a steady rhythm, Red watched the show unfolding before his very eyes.

The rounded cheeks of Lizzy’s ass jiggled with each gentle thrust of his cock. The tiny hole clenched tightly each time he completed their connection.

He rather enjoyed the unhurried tempo he found. He could feel every nuance of Lizzy as he glided
evenly into her warm hold.

The way she conformed to him, the mind bending tug on his cock head when she clench... he had missed this private, intimacy with her and was really in no hurry for it to end.

Wetting his thumb, he rubbed gently against the small pucker of her ass, enjoying her soft groan of approval.

He smiled warmly after a few moments as he felt her ease under his touch. Working his index finger against the small hole, he eased the tip into the totally relaxed anus.

“Stop...” the woman tensed against his intentions, stopping the foreplay dead in its tracks. “What are you... doing?” she questioned hesitantly.

“Just... relax.” he soothed her worry, careful to not push his good fortune any further.

Liz bit nervously at her lip, unsure, “I’m not–”

“I swear to God, I won’t hurt you, baby,” Red stressed, “I promise.”

Red would never hurt her... intentionally, of course he wouldn’t... she reminded herself. He may not be out to hurt her but... she had never done anything like this before.

She was... a little more than apprehensive, “...But-”

“Do you trust me.” he slowed to a standstill, waiting to see what she wanted to do.

“Just... try it.” he encouraged. “If you don’t like it...”

His heart warmed when he felt the woman try to lessen the tension in her body.

Dropping her chin, Liz breathed through her anxiety determined to open herself to his needs.

“Take a deep breath,” Red instructed quietly, once again rubbing the small hole persuasively, “let it out...”

Liz did as told and kept doing so as his finger inched further into her body until he suddenly stopped the momentum.

“Did it hurt?” he enquired softly as his knuckle settled in place.

It hadn’t hurt... at all; to her great shock.

To be honest, she hadn’t expected it to end that suddenly or smoothly.

“...No,” she told the truth, “it’s... it’s all right.”

“Now, just keep breathing,” he gently eased his finger back and forth, allowing her to become accustomed to the foreign object.

“Good?” he asked, stroking the steamy hold with ease now.

“Y-Yes...” she moaned melodiously, “yes it’s...” nothing like she expected, not at all.

This was beyond titillating.

Red’s eyes gentled on the woman, pleased beyond measure she was enjoying the added incentive.
“I’m going to move now,” he warned before swiveling his hips, driving his cock deep inside the woman’s warmth.

He slowly worked back to his earlier tempo, watching the very stimulating sight of his cock and finger sliding in tandem until his sack pulled tight against his groin.

He grinned happily as the woman pouted at the loss as he eased his finger free of its confinement.

She whimpered as the man’s hand cupped her, the large hand encompassing her lower abdomen and mound easily.

“I can feel myself,” he hissed, pressing against the movement, “…inside you.”

Liz’s hand fluttered to his, her slim fingers laying against her abdomen. Red placed his hand over hers, pressing against her taut stomach.

Her mouth gaped as she felt the large cock slide past her mound into the very depths of her core. The thick head jabbed inside her, pushing at her belly. The pressure against her hand was... intense.

Red snarled when he felt the movement of his cock through her hand. He couldn’t believe how well they could feel it... nor how deep inside her body he really was.

He knew she was tiny compared to his bulk, but to feel such a sensation... never had he experienced anything so exquisite.

Never had he been inundated by such varying emotions.

To feel himself within her body in such a way, brought on such a surge of dominance... he fought the urge to fuck her until she submitted to his every whim.

The overwhelming impulse to protect her was intense. Even now, his body sheltered hers. Palming her breast, he pulled her into the safety his body afforded. He braced his other hand alongside hers, effectively blocking sight of the woman from possible intruders.

He was almost positive Lizzy felt the change within him. Her center flooded with heat as she bared her neck to the man... a very symbolic gesture to the Alpha male inside.

“Do you feel me?” his panted breaths tickled her neckline. “How deep you’re taking me....”

“Yes...” she opened herself to his affection, mewling breathlessly with each deep thrust of his cock.

Liz lifted into his shallow thrust, her mouth parting sensually for a host of reasons.

“No one is allowed to touch you like this,” he growled, asserting his rights to the territory, “love you... like I do.”

Liz moved into his body, the enticing sensation of his chest hair against her back and her bottom, robbing her of any coherent thought.

“Do you understand me?” he husked, the implication more than apparent.

She nodded jerkily, fully accepting his terms. The thought of anyone other than Red touching her, disturbed her. Only Red had the right... ever again.

“Good girl...” Red circled her clit, shallowing his thrusts. The desire to stay deeply encased in her heat... to feel connected to her was suddenly overpowering.
She gently bounced off his fat cock, clenching tight around him.

“Yes...” he hissed, “that’s my good baby...” he increased the pressure where she needed, “tighten that pussy for me.”

Her core clamped about the man’s shaft, her head swimming as the hard-textured cock pushed against her tightening core, demanding entrance.

“Shit...” he continued his steady rhythm, “keep doing that.”

She moaned, desperately trying to push back against him, wanting him so badly to fuck her little hole.

“Do you have any idea,” the man’s head fell against her shoulder, rubbing the swollen peak of her clit harder, “just how much pleasure you give me?”

She instinctively raised her bottom, gasping with joy as his hard sack pressed intimately against her.

Wrapping her in his embrace, he pumped his hips slowly, “Not only this...” he cupped her breast, thumbing the tiny peak, “there is so much more, Elizabeth.”

He shook his head for the depth of emotions inundating his heart, “How do I make you understand?”

Liz lost herself in Red’s voice and the evocative impact of their bodies coming together.

“My adoration of you grows with each passing day.” he needed to share a part of what he was feeling.

Liz whimpered as his large hand curved about her waist, pulling her back into his gentle thrust.

“I have never felt such contentment... until you.” he stated.

Securing her pelvis in his hold, he lifted her bottom into his shallow thrusts, which pushed the woman over the edge.

Her core pulled at his shaft, squeezing the thick muscle in the warm, loving embrace of her body.

His head fell back, his eyes closing rapturously as the hot cushion convulsed around his cock head.

The excruciatingly pleasurable contractions of her body desperately massaged the large bulb, determined to extract what he freely and willingly would give Lizzy anytime she required.

“God, yes...” he sighed euphorically, “you’re such a sweet little fuck...”

Adjusting his hand on her abdomen, he lost himself in the sensation of his cock sliding deep past the recesses of the snug heat before the heavy weight of his cock pushed against his hand.

Lizzy’s thready moans and breathless pleas delighted his senses, drawing him closer to what he knew would be a profoundly gratifying release not only in body, but soul.

“...You feel so good,” Liz mewed.

She felt a delicious tug in her clit, the cresting wave of orgasm edging closer once more, stunning her.

“Shit,” he grated the fact, realization dawning, “I can’t wait any longer.”
Red’s eyes softened as Lizzy babbled breathlessly, professing her love and lust for him in rapid succession.

“Help me...” he coaxed, increasing the pressure on her clitoris, “baby... come with me.”

A low, gravelly groan rolled through Red’s chest and parted mouth as he neared the apex, sending sharp jolts to her clit.

Just as his cock head throbbed, the intensely satisfying tug of Lizzy’s pussy enveloping his shaft in liquid heat consumed him.

His vision blackened as his cum pulsed thick jets from his sensitive slit.

Liz cried out as Red’s fingers curved about her hips, gently pulling her back into his deep rutted thrusts. She lifted her bottom as his substantial load pooled deep within her core.

Red groaned brokenly as Lizzy’s pussy fluttered relentlessly around his throbbing shaft, extracting the hot fluid in mind-altering waves.

“...I missed you...” the woman gasped a shaky breath as his thick cream filled her, “...so much.”

The ache in her center subsided with each pulse of his shaft. The heat of Red’s cum spread through her pelvis and thighs, leaving her weak and sated.

“...This is what my baby wanted,” he husked, “...isn’t it?”

Her heavy lids shut as Red pulled her snug against his groin.

“...Oh, my God,” Liz gaped as the overflow of fluid pushed around the man’s shaft, trickling over her lips and clitoris.

Red dropped his hips, pushing her down below the water. He felt the hot liquid rush in around him, as he pushed back inside, swirling their arousal out around him and their bodies.

“Ohh....” she flushed.

He frowned slightly, not understanding her embarrassment, then saw the pink tinted water.

“Baby, it’s all right.” he chuckled softly, regretfully sliding free of her warmth.

He reached around, pulling the plug, arising.

“Let’s have a quick rinse off.” he gestured to the shower, offering his hand.

Liz nodded, stepping over the tub with Red’s help, “We’re going to look like prunes.”

“What time are you leaving tomorrow?” Liz asked, rubbing lotion into her arms after their quick shower and dry down.

She frowned after a moment when the man didn’t reply instantly. “...Red?” she stepped from the bathroom, finding him unfurling a towel over their sheets.

“Hoping to get lucky again?” she grinned.

“Always,” Red replied without hesitation, “but in this case, I was aiming for your comfort.”
Liz’s eyes softened on the man as she slipped into the luxurious bed.

After the man shut down the lights and situated himself, she rolled towards him.

He sighed, when she snuggled up to him, stifling a yawn.

“What time are you leaving in the morning?” she repeated.

“Are you on Eastern or Pacific time?” he smiled.

“That’s why I’m asking.” Liz rolled her eyes towards the man.

“I suppose I’ll be leaving around eight,” Red hid his smile when Lizzy gasped indignantly, “... Pacific time.”

He chuckled, kissing her temple when Elizabeth visibly relaxed.

“Are we old, Red?” she asked after a moment silence.

Red chortled quietly, “Well...I’m not, but why do you ask?”

“Well, we’re in LA and it’s well before midnight.” she realized. “Shouldn’t we be out enjoying the nightlife, or something?”

“I am enjoying the nightlife.” Red turned, snuggling the woman closer. He dipped his nose into her neckline, drawing a soft giggle from Lizzy.

“I meant, it’s barely ten o’clock and we’re in bed.”

“If it makes you feel any better,” he murmured against her soft flesh, “it is two our time.”

“Oh... right,” she remembered, “no wonder I’m so sleepy.”

“Exhausted, perhaps?” Red rephrased. He had quickly become accustom to bouncing between time zones. He adapted to each he visited with little issue any longer.

“To be honest,” Liz began, “being away from you was more taxing than anything else.”

Red’s heart warmed, hearing the words, “Then we’re on the same page.”

Liz smiled, leaning to kiss the man before turning on her side, wiggling back into Red’s body.

Red eyes softened, his arm held aloft allowing her to get comfortable. Once she settled, he pulled the blankets up around them.

Only after a few moments had passed before he felt the pull of sleep. In the preceding days, he found every excuse not to visit this empty bed.

It was not empty now, however.

“Lizzy?” he pressed his lips into her soft hair. The woman hummed sleepily in response. “I’m glad you joined me.”

“You know what I’m glad for,” she murmured sleepily, “Jacuzzi tubs.”

His sensual chuckle filled the silence of the room, “Especially those with adjustable jets.”
Chapter End Notes

We wanted to title this one... Rub a Dub-Dub Let's Make Love in the Tub.... but it wouldn't fit. :D

If there are any typos, point them out. We had a heck of a time with this chapter.
June 10

Dembe’s timely assistance afforded Red the opportunity to enjoy a leisurely morning with Elizabeth. His friend had interceded on Red’s behalf, asking a favor of Francis Holbrook and Ben Gilchrist.

Both men took Red’s place in the intricate dealings with the association who had gathered for the important meetings taking place almost on an hourly basis.

It was not, by any means, a long period of time allotted Red and Elizabeth but any amount these days was greatly appreciated by both parties.

Just to have the woman literally by his side as they passed a languid morning, left Red feeling centered once more.

Fortunately, Lizzy seemed more intent upon discussing the merits of the elaborate shower the penthouse offered rather than catching up on the things they missed during their forced days apart.

Tom Keen did come up at one point, the guy was a thorn in Red’s side. A sore spot.

Red expected the little ‘game’ the men were executing would upset Lizzy, but she dismissed the fact all too easily.

It gave Red pause for thought but those thoughts dissipated quickly enough by Lizzy’s look from the shower stall... which spoke volumes indeed.

With a rambunctious brunette awaiting his pleasure, all other matters faded into oblivion.

Besides, Red hoped he was steps closer to unraveling whatever sordid plot Tom Keen had involved himself in.

He could see no further use or reason for the insect of a man after that. Red was looking forward to ending Tom Keen’s pathetic existence, truth told.

He tried to dredge up some emotional regret, reluctance... anything to suggest he still held a modicum of humanity where Keen was concerned, but obviously that ship seemed to have sailed years past.

Perhaps that made him no better than Tom Keen.

God would have to sort it out in the end. Too much water had flowed under the proverbial bridge between the two men.

Red dismissed the interruption to his thoughts instantly, crossing the room to attend to a much more pleasant individual... and most favorite distraction.

After some creative wrangling on his part having applied several different techniques learned through the years.... and Lizzy’s newly acquired appreciation for pulsating water.... that sultry look which enraptured him so, morphed into one of pure contentment and bliss on the beautiful face.

At breakfast, a quiet even mood settled between them.

Red found his appetite a hearty one after so many days taking in bland unappealing food just to
survive.

His mood, too, was much lighter and carefree, there was a new spring to his steps.

Red did not note such things.

His mouth curved into a smile as Lizzy pattered past him in nothing more than her panties, bra... and heated hair curlers she had been rather excited to find the hotel supplied.

“That better be an afterglow smile,” she warned in passing, “and nothing more.”

“What else would I be smiling for?” Red asked, hanging his robe on the provided hook.

Liz glanced at her reflection in a nearby mirror on the wall, her nose crinkling adorably, “It’s hard work... producing the end product you know.”

Red's mouth quirked irresistibly, “Is it?”

“Damned right,” she stood up for her species, “walk a mile in our heels before you judge, fella.”

His smile broke through, “May I ask an impertinent question?” he murmured, stepping decidedly closer to the alluring little figure.

“Can I stop you?” she held her smile.

“... Did you wear such... telling garments,” he ran a finger about the lace of her panties gracing her hip bone, “before I came into the picture?”

She arched a brow, “What is that supposed to mean?” she queried.

He offered another look-over, his interest clearly on the vision before him.

He blew out a controlled breath, “It’s just that...” he confessed a weakness, “had I known what was beneath your staid suits, I might not have been able to control my... inclinations.”

Liz sat a finger under his chin, “My eyes are up here.” she motioned.

The confident stare lifted, albeit slowly, taking in the curves and delectable skin allowed by the scant covering.

“Did you wear them... for him?” Red managed to keep his ire from his voice.

“You want the truth?” Liz mused.

“You want the truth?” Liz mused.

“I don’t want a lie.” his brow furrowed darkly. “Do you think you have to–”

“Not at all.” she cut him short. “I only meant,” she amended, “it’s a rather sad state I was in, I suppose.” she shrugged. “I didn’t feel the need to...”

The silence came for a long beat as the woman confronted some of her past, “I feel... pretty in these.” she glanced down. “I feel like I can wear them now.”

Red’s mind flitted about critically at such a statement.

Liz lifted soft eyes, “You make me feel that way,” a well of warmth filled her heart. “Before, I had moments when I had a good hair day or,” she forced a chuckle, “a certain dress made me feel
She sought him out, “You make me feel that way every day.”

“You should feel it because,” his scowl deepened by the second, “you are beautiful, sexy and incredibly desirable, Elizabeth. Don’t ever...ever doubt your appeal.”

“I didn’t know I had any appeal,” she hugged him tightly whispering the fact, “before you.”

“I can not believe that.” he refused the belief. *Had Tom damaged her psyche to such an extent?*

Liz pulled back, a thoughtful expression on the lovely face, “When you hired Hannah and Katie that time....”

She reminded him of her favored beauticians.

“They not only rid me of the filth of Carver,” she wanted to say it for a very long time now, “but they... taught me,” she floundered for a beat, “well, I guess they erased the damage Tom inflicted as well.” she remembered how clean and fresh and... different she felt.

“Elizabeth,” Red was touched, “it was such a small thing. I only thought you–”

“No, it was a very big thing,” she admonished, “at least, to me. It was... a new beginning or sorts, I think. It sounds kind of stupid, I guess.”

“No, it’s not stupid,” Red almost snapped.

“It was the ego boost I needed to set me back on track. I felt light and optimistic.” she smiled for him. “A silly female moment that just... changed my outlook on so many things in my life.” she sighed blissfully. “I sincerely thank you for what you did for me.”

Red closed his eyes, lifting her hand in his, his mouth planting a gentle kiss on her fingers, “...Don’t.”

“I want to,” she tightened her fingers on his. “Tom crushed my self esteem.” she could admit it now. “He took my confidence away and even though it was all a sham, I felt had I been ‘good enough’, he would have been able to change his ways.”

“You don’t fucking believe that?”

“I did then,” she whispered, “but no, not now. Not now, Red.”

He nodded his approval, his stare a quiet one.

“Hannah and Katie reminded me, I had a few good assets,” she teased. “Add you to the pot and overtime, well... I know I’m worthy of good things in my life.”

The man brooded, not happy with the ‘truth’ Elizabeth related. That she felt those bad things, and he had been unaware.

“I have a man I can trust,” she kissed his thumb, the one worrying her knuckles, “one I can rely on... that has faith in me even when I doubt myself. What more could a gal ask?”

She tip-toed, her lips brushing his.

“It shouldn’t matter what the hell I think, only what you–”
“It’s nice to be reminded every once in a while though,” she reminded, “which you go out of your way to do... constantly. Don’t think I haven’t noticed because, I have.”

Red inclined his head minutely, “If that is how you feel, I’m more than pleased.”

“Then why the scowl,” she traced his brow playfully.

“Because I hate knowing you felt the other shit.” he snapped.

“Haven’t you ever felt,” she sought the word, “less than what you could be?”

She seriously doubted he had. Such a man? No, Red Reddington had an inborn pride. Confidence verging on arrogance at times.

She envied the man.

“I know my weakness,” he had a few, “I know my strengths.” he shrugged. “I will say...” he hesitated.

Should he? To bare one’s soul so easily could be a major weakness.

Red was careful to reveal such things, even to this woman. Or perhaps, especially to this woman because Elizabeth had the ability to hurt him deeply.

“Sexually speaking,” he altered his intended truth, “...I take certain pride knowing that a woman of your caliber finds me... acceptable in such a capacity.”

He shifted a curious stare. “You do find me acceptable... right?”

“Mildly,” Liz held her grin, running a teasing finger down his biceps.

Red had never given his body much thought... until recently.

He sensed Lizzy found his arms attractive, if only by her reaction to them and bared them at every given opportunity these days.

It shocked Dembe and Silas when he joined their daily regimen of exercises but they held their opinions, for once, when he claimed his health as the reason for his participation.

They knew why he was out there. They had gone out of their way to assist him in his endeavor.

While both men approved of his affair with Elizabeth, they approached the task with differing goals. Silas wanted to help his boss get laid. Dembe wanted to improve the man’s health.

It was a win/win situation.

He hadn’t felt this sexy in years. He had forgotten the sensation.

The sexual connection of a look shared. The rush of endorphins when a woman’s mere touch ignited one’s passion.

Sex was all well and good but it was different, what passed between him and Elizabeth.

It was just... not the same.

They shared a deep, powerful... achingly poignant thing.
His cock and balls knew that difference, they felt it to their core.

How did one explain such a thing?

And Lizzy had become the essence of every woman he desired.

The woman of his dreams. Witty, intelligent, amusing, caring, loving, kind and incredibly beautiful and sensual.

And the best part? It was as if someone had designed that hot, tight little pussy just for his pleasure.

Had he searched for her his whole life? He hadn’t been aware he was searching but the minute he looked into those deep blue eyes... something stirred to life.

“Have I lost you?”

Red blinked, stirred in another way.

“...So you didn’t and don’t wear these for me?” he attempted to lighten the moment, his fingers flicking the bows at the sides of her panties.

“Of course, I wear them for you,” she confessed freely, “I just didn’t want your head to swell any bigger than it already is.”

“Which head?”

“Don’t you even think about it.” she moved slightly away. “I haven’t even packed yet and you know what a stickler Dembe is when it comes to flight-time.”

“Dembe can go suck himself.” Red maneuvered the flimsy garment below her plump cheek line, glancing at his handiwork.

Liz’s hand caught the action, trying to prevent it. She giggled infectiously, “He doesn’t have to... so many women are in line for that privilege.”

“Are you one of them?” Red’s hands eased the silky blue material down those shapely hips determinedly.

“I have my hands full enough dealing with you,” she squirmed uselessly about. “If we’re late, you’ll have to explain yourself to Dembe.”

Red lifted the slight frame, effortlessly throwing the squealing woman bodily into the air.

Liz landed into the cushy mattress, laughing her delight, “My hair is in curlers!” she fingered the rolls dancing about her shoulders, feeling for lost items.

“It isn’t your hair which interests me at this particular moment,” Red removed the offending panties, climbing onto the bed, shoving Lizzy’s legs apart.

His eyes fell to the delectable pink lips of her center.

“You’re gonna get in trouble.” she prophesied. “Dembe will be irritated with the delay.”

“He will thank me for teaching him patience.” Red unzipped his trousers, extracting his painfully enlarged cock.
“You won’t always get your way, you know.” she welcomed the man’s weight, squirming into the warmth enveloping her body.

“I will,” it was Red’s turn to prophesy, “... today.”

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“Well can’t you be on time?” Silas grumbled.

Liz glanced at the guy, “And why haven’t you had your coffee yet?”

Silas lifted disgruntled eyes, “Which implies?”

Liz clamped her mouth shut, looking around innocently, sidling closer to Red.

Red didn’t, “It means you are a veritable asshole before... and oft times after, your daily caffeine fix.”

Dembe checked his watch, a critical look on the handsome face.

“We can’t leave anyway,” Red reminded peevishly ignoring Lizzy’s stifled giggle for Dembe’s mood. “Francis informed me there is a hitch holding up the contractual agreements... I have to smooth it out.”

Dembe sighed heavily, not happy with the news. But he also knew, the delay wouldn’t take long.

Red’s constituents were expecting the same old grumpy, out-of-sorts man they had contended with these last few days.

That was not the man they would see in their midst this day.

Red had a new lease on life. His patience was back. His mood mellow. His outlook clear.

The proceedings would not last long.

“What time frame are we talking about?” Liz was itching to browse a few high-end shops the hotel offered. “I need gifts for everyone.”

“My God,” Silas snapped, “everyone is here... with us. Why do you need to get them gifts?”

“Not everyone,” Liz defended herself, “Nora is home, the guys.... Samar.” she checked the guard’s reaction.

Silas fell uncharacteristically still.

Liz frowned at the man for the fact. After what Red said about the man’s infatuation, she expected something different.

“What’s going on?” Francis asked as he and Ben took a seat, dragging their plates closer.

“I believe Silas wants to go home.” Dembe intoned.

“Yeah? Why?” Francis cut his pancakes, smothering them in syrup. “And who’s this Samar?”

“A woman.” Dembe raised a knowing brow.

Red hid his smile behind his coffee cup. It was so rare Dembe needled the guard, and with so little effort.
“You want to see a chick?” Francis scowled at Ben, smacking the man’s hand away from his bacon. “When the hell did you get soft? Are you gonna eat those pancakes—”

“Shut up, Francis or I’ll stuff these pancakes up your ass!” Silas tersely advised.

“Kinky...” Francis seemed titillated by the threat, his expression saying as much.

“Why do you want to go home?” Liz asked seriously.

“I don’t want to go home.” Silas’ glare was a threat for Francis to drop the matter. “So shut the hell up about the subject, Francis.”

“She’s the one who asked?” Francis seemed confused.

“Sounds like he wants to go home to me.” Ben murmured under his breath.

“What?!” Silas demanded having heard the murmured statement.

“Nothing.” Ben returned to his toast, his expression totally neutral.

“No need to be pissy about,” Francis doused his bacon in syrup. “missing... Samar.” he mooned dreamily.

Liz’s mouth fell open.

Red halted his coffee mid-sip, shaking his head.

Ben chuckled quietly but did not once think to attempt any sort of interference, Red noted. Such was Silas’ reputation it preceded the man.

All knew to avoid confrontation if at all possible... except of course, Francis Holbrook.

Maybe the boy did have a death wish.

Silas was up and around the table in record time, his bulk lifting Francis Holbrook bodily.

Ben backed up, practically falling out of his chair to get out of the way of the guard’s wrath.

Francis instinctively grasped the fingers gripping his throat, his voice unnaturally strained as he asked the obvious.

“What the hell is wrong with you today?” he rasped roughly, not the least bit disturbed by the display. “Have you not have your coffee yet?”

The veins in the man’s neck bulged as Silas tightened his hold, intent on strangling the life from the twit.

“Silas,” Red sighed, “put him down, people are looking our way.”

Silas huffed irritably, slamming the boy back in his seat.

Francis coughed dramatically then returned to his pancakes, “You got issues, man.”

“Yeah,” Ben agreed, “issues.”

Silas stalked off in a black rage.
Liz watched him go.

Ben turned about, ensuring the man’s exit, “Women issues.” he nudged Francis knowingly.

“Who the hell is Samar?” Francis asked around his fork.

“She’s a friend of mine.” Liz fidgeted with her napkin.

“A woman can mess with a guy’s mind...even his,” Francis rubbed his reddened neck, “that’s all I’m saying.”

Red resumed his coffee.

Liz worried after her guard, “I should talk to him, right?”

“He has a gun.” Dembe’s mouth twitched slightly for his own wit.

Ben’s good mood was back, “A big one according to him.”

“That’s his problem,” Red joined in, in high spirits after his morning with Lizzy, “he can’t use it.”

“But it’s cocked and ready.” Francis joined in the frivolity, laughing at the good line he had come up with.

Red chuckled his appreciation. Even Dembe smiled. Ben was in stitches for Silas’ dilemma.

“Oh, oh,” Francis raised his hand as if asking permission to speak, another good dig coming to mind, “but will it fire when ready?”

“You better not let Silas hear you question his virility,” Red warned. “He will kill you then.”

“You guys are horrible.” Liz threw down her napkin. “No wonder he’s in such a bad mood.” she glared at Red in particular. “You are no help at all.”

“....Baby,” Red soothed, “we’re only teasing him.”

He chuckled when the woman full on pouted and stalked off, taking the same route Silas had minutes past.

“What did we do?” Ben wanted to know.

Red smiled warmly, when she gave him one last look before turning away with a flourish, her adorable nose in the air. His eyes trailed after the woman until she met up with her guard down the way.

“If I pay for that later,” Red warned, “I’ll kill you myself.”

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“Oh, Silas... that is so beautiful!” Liz had found her guard in an odd place.

She could not miss the man’s bulk, especially inside the quaint, eclectic shop he wandered into.

He stood, hands in proverbial pockets, staring moodily at one particularly lovely rendition of a female depicted in a striking pose.

The nude figure, surrounded in a moody swirl of iridescent purples was accentuated perfectly against
an opaque background, the dark hair wildly disarranged and flowing.

The gorgeous profile was all she offered but the curvaceous body was both seductive and sensual.

Even Liz sensed the allure of the stained glass beauty.

“I always loved stained glass.” Liz could feel the tension in the man’s frame. She continued on, searching for a way to reach him. “I always wanted to incorporate it into the Brownstone but, there just wasn’t a perfect spot.”

She glanced at the rows and rows of different variations offered in the shop.

There were colorful butterflies, overflowing garden scenes, waterfalls which took her breath away; all gloriously imprinted into the stately lead-lined treasures.

“Oh, look...” she pointed out an interesting design, “she looks like the mermaid Red has tattooed on his arm.”

Silas stopped to glance the panel over. He merely stared at it.

“...Silas,” Liz broached the elephant in the room, “is there something I can do to help?”

Silas glanced down to the earnest eyes, returning to the mermaid at length.

Liz wracked her brain for something else to say... more effective than the feeble attempt she had just offered.

“I think Samar is... interested, if that helps.” she winced for the badly stated introduction to a sensitive subject. “What I mean to say is--”

“That one.” Silas pointed.

Liz followed the direction needed, surprised by the misdirection.

Silas had found a tall sailing ship surrounded by different hues of chipped glass in blues, greens, purple and even shades of grey; all melded together to surround the impressive ship in a turbulent and stormy sea.

“Are you... sure?” the large, startling panel took Liz by surprise. “I mean, where?” she couldn’t think of a place and then, “Oh! Red’s study!”

“When did it become his study,” Silas questioned the new development, “it’s your house.”

Liz ignored the veiled insinuation, “The window with all the sun!” she beamed happily.

Silas nodded, “He’ll see it every time his sits back in his chair.”

The more she looked at the turbulent waters, the more mesmerized she became.

“It’s almost transient... like it transports you back to another time... another era.”

“Are we redecorating?”

Both Liz and Silas gave over their attention to the new group who had arrived.

“How did you find us?” Liz greeted Red with a genuine smile.
“He’s hard to miss,” Red crooked his head to her guard. “What do we have here?”

Liz allowed Red to peruse the selection at his own time and pace.

Her selections were quite beautiful, full of color... vibrant, like their soon to be owner. Red nodded his approval.

“The meeting went well, I take it?” she hadn’t expected Red so soon.

“You should have seen it.” Francis was turning a knick-knack this way and that, upsetting the delicate structure.

“Red goes in, tosses his hat on the table, right,” Ben was excited to relate the tale, obviously.

“I’m telling this!” Francis slammed the statue down, not happy with the interruption.

“Then tell it, you idiot.” Ben urged.

Francis was happy again, “They expected they would have worn Red down after all the haggling—”

“But he wasn’t, see!” Ben couldn’t help himself.

“Hey!” Francis objected strenuously to the other man’s interference.

“Both of you two, shut the hell up.” Red rolled his eyes.

“Five percent hike across the board.” Francis beamed his pride.

“Take it or leave it, he says.” Ben was even more impressed.

“You could have heard a pin drop!” Francis took his turn.

“They want me to be civil,” Red pulled at his vest, “then they should have waited until the Santa Ana winds came through before dragging me here.” he grumbled. “I’m tired of the smog.”

“There are a hundred suppliers waiting in line for my product.” Ben practically giggled for Red’s audacity. “Maybe some new blood in the business might be just the thing.”

“It was a bluff.” Red lied but couldn’t help but enjoy Lizzy’s look of admiration.

“The man knows how to wheel and deal.” Ben stated jovially. “I’m just saying.”

“Line butter!” Francis accused.

“Get over it.” Ben scolded. “You take too long to get to the good stuff.”

“It’s not as bad as last year,” Francis reminded everybody.

“Last year?” Liz asked genuinely interested.

“There was bloodshed...” Francis painted a vivid picture of his own.

“...Mayhem..” Ben nodded knowingly.

“Tears flowed.” Francis stated emphatically.

“And you started it all.” Ben remembered as well.
“It was all a misunderstanding.” Francis defended himself.

“People got undercut.” Red told the truth of the matter. “It’s the nature of the business.”

“Except that crying jag Francis went on.” Ben shook his head. “That was so embarrassing.”

“It got me Lucinda’s number, sucker.” Francis offered a victorious smirk.

“Why are you asking?” Red enquired of Lizzy. “Are you interested in starting your own business or wondering how much profit Sugar Daddy made today?”

Liz’s answer was to bat her eyes playfully, snuggle up to the man and purse her lips suggestively. The guys got a good laugh out of her actions.

“At least she’s honest.” Francis shrugged.

“What would you know about honesty?” Ben was amazed. “You took ten bucks out of the churches collection plate.”

“I needed change dammit.” Francis reminded.

“What were you two doing in church?” Liz was mystified.

“We’ve set up a money laundering operation out of St. Peter’s over on Church Street.” Ben advised. “He left a fake ten and replaced it with real ones.”

Francis scoffed openly. “After all the money I’ve given that church, I figured they owed me.”

Red shifted Lizzy a stare, “I’ve listened to this shit for the past hour. Can’t we find a good psyche ward to place them in?” he glanced at the two, shaking his head. “You break it you buy it, Francis.”

Francis was holding up a glass panel to the light, “You know who this is?” He showed the men his find.

Liz took in the lovely honey colored hair, and full sided view of an ample breast.

The opened pose was daring, in your face kind of sexuality that was at once appealing and yet... not. At least to Liz’s way of thinking.

She mused over the fact. Was she being too critical?

“Madeline.” Ben nodded knowingly, having taken his time in the appraisal.

Silas rubbed his finger down his chiseled nose line, “The legs aren’t spread wide enough.”

“Silas!” Liz gasped her shock then found herself hard pressed to hold back a giggle. “You shouldn’t say mean things like that.”

She was absolutely shocked to see Dembe nodding thoughtfully as if he were in complete agreement with her guard’s assessment of the glass art.

“Dembe!” she truly was shocked now.

“I want this.” Red’s tone made her seek him out.

“You already have it.” Silas grumbled going off down the way.
Liz glanced after him fretfully. She needed more time with the man but the others had interrupted.

Silas was still in a pissy mood.

She didn’t like to think the man was hurting... pining after Samar.

But when did Silas ever pine after any woman?

Maybe it was something more.

“What do you think, baby?” Red held his find up for inspection.

Elizabeth dutifully examined the piece.

The nude alabaster backside of a woman with a slender build greeted Liz’s stare. Turned sensually, the woman’s wild, windswept hair allowed only a teasing glimpse of her breast and lithe frame. When held up to the light, the ethereal perception gave way to seduction.

A temptress in disguise.

It was just enchanting. Red’s taste was impeccable, as always.

Red could not stop staring at the alluring image.

“You’re not going to get that?” she whispered in a rush, checking on the other men’s positions. They all seemed suitably preoccupied, thank goodness.

“I am definitely going to get this.” Red confirmed. “It’s stunning and provocative.”

“Well yes, I know.” she agreed, her cheeks flushing with color. “Which is why I’m questioning your purchase, but...”

Did he find nothing in this female that was lacking? A tiny hint of jealousy reared its ugly head. Liz squelched it determinedly.

“This is you, Elizabeth.” he pointed a finger at it.

“It is not!” she hissed quietly, her flush increasing. “Put it down, this instant!” she tried to force the man’s arm to drop.

He looked at her, amused for her sudden awkwardness.

“The likeness is uncanny, Elizabeth.” Dembe smiled warmly at the woman. “It’s very beautiful.” he nodded his approval to Red. “A remarkable find.”

Liz gaped at the man, her embarrassment complete. Where had the man come from?

Dembe had a knack for disappearing into the woodwork at times. She thought she and Red were alone... safely ensconced from prying eyes ogling what Red found.

Red lowered his arms, quirking his brow pointedly. “Told you so.”

“Of course, he would say me!” she whispered harshly.

Dembe must have overheard the conversation.

Red shook his head, lifting another nude for Dembe’s inspection. “Who is this?”
Francis was instantly there, sensing he was needed. He screwed up his face, his eyes rolling dramatically. “That woman in Rio de Janeiro.” he grumbled.

Ben pointed assuredly, “The one on the beach that night.”

Liz looked at it again, squinting her eyes. What woman? Who were they all seeing?

“Yeah...” Silas called from across the aisle, having chimed in his opinion. “She had a set.” he seemed to approve of the fact.

Liz gasped quietly as Dembe scowled, “She was a good woman.”

“Good and ready.” Ben chuckled but all the men turned a dark scowl his way. “I just mean... she was a good sport.”

Red shrugged indifferent shoulders, placing the frame back in its place without a second thought.

“Her name,” he reminded one and all, “is and was... Renata.” was he the only one to remember what exactly happened on the beach that fateful night? How invaluable she had been.

“Well, I didn’t see the attraction.” Francis sulked.

“Francis, the reason she didn’t,” he sought out Liz, softening the tale, “seek you out is because,” he stressed, “you actually were the only one she found acceptable.”

“Thanks...” Ben disliked the implication, then second guessed his assumption. He pointed again, “Are you lying to him to placate, because I get that.”

Red ignored the man, continuing, “Renata was searching for something in us that she knew she could never find.” he placed his hand on the boys shoulder. “With you, she wasn’t so sure and she wasn’t going to take the chance.”

“Yeah,” Ben agreed readily, winking at Red, “that’s exactly what went down, Francis.”

The boy was mollified.

“Baby, how are you going to get these home?” Red questioned seriously, holding his smile when the woman looked at him in a sudden panic.

“He’s fucking with you.” Silas sighed at the woman’s face, shaking his head for gullible she could be. “You have your own plane, twirp.”

Liz lay a stilling hand to her chest, the other smacking her guard across the arm for calling her a name, “Don’t do that.” she scolded Red.

Red chuckled quietly, kissing her sad lips, “We’ll have them delivered to the airport.”

Dembe stepped forward, providing all the information needed to insure Elizabeth’s happiness remained intact.

“They must arrive without fail.” Red held his card aloft, bypassing an impatient Elizabeth, who was attempting to find her own card in the voluminous purse attached to her arm.

“I can buy my own things, you know.” she grumbled as Red signed the slip, having been faster in his efforts.
“There are other necessities,” his eyes swept her form heatedly, “upon which your money could be spent.”

She valiantly attempted to keep her stern expression in place, but knew she was failing spectacularly. She enjoyed the subtle innuendo the man suggested, and he knew as much.

Only she and Red knew of the intimate secret shared between them.

She truly appreciated the varied challenges he presented, along with his heated ‘look’.

That one remark had her thinking of all sorts of wicked things which she might purchase to... stir his interest.

She rather liked the frivolity of it all.

And Red knew that as well. The man’s mouth pursed imperceptibly, his eyes lighting, his interest piqued.

Remembering Silas’ words of wisdom, she slowly lifted her eyes to the waiting blue-green orbs watching so intently.

She sought him out, remembering each and every moment the man had touched her intimately, holding his stare stubbornly.

Red focused on the dark blue eyes, his stomach pitching pleasantly. One could never be certain what Elizabeth was thinking... but in this instance, he thought he had an inkling.

He fancied she was recalling every moment he flicked his tongue over her lithe body... but she could just as easily be vexed with him still.

Both scenarios appealed to him greatly, in truth.

His sack pooled with heat. Knowingly or not, the mysterious aura Lizzy exuded intrigued him. And he so enjoyed the woman when she was in a temper.

Though neither had outwardly emoted any sort of response... it was there. The silence spoke volumes.

Liz’s sex prickled with awareness, sensing the change in atmosphere where no one else did.

It was an empowering sensation, knowing she affected Red so much. Never in her life had she felt so sexually provocative.

Mysterious, even.

It surprised her to realize, as arousing as it was, it was equally comforting. Sharing this private moment with a partner who loved her as much as she did him.

Red stepped, slowly lowering his mouth to hers. She lifted into the affection, meeting him halfway. A sense of contentment blanketing them.

“Am I forgiven?” he murmured against her soft mouth.

Liz’s mouth pursed into a small smile, her fingers playing with the knot of his tie, “I’ll let you know... after you feed me.”
“Wouldn’t that be considered bribery?” Red countered. “Buying your,” the man’s eyes swept the body inching closer to his, “...favors.”

“Isn’t that how we happened upon this stalemate?” Liz’s eyes lit with merriment. She slid her hands under his jacket, encircling his waist as the man pulled her into his embrace.

“No,” Red’s tongue flicked about his mouth, “I only suggested you spend your money on... essentials.” the man slid his finger under her waistband, skimming the delicate lace of her panties.

Liz’s brows rose in feigned surprise, “Is that what they are?”

“They are to me...” Red husked.

“I would have thought you preferred me in nothing at all.”

“Is that an option?”

Images flooded his mind. The memory of seeing the outline of her tear-shaped breasts under his shirt and pert bottom snuggled into her tight jeans made his dick throb.

But visions of her prancing around in those cute little panties was equally captivating.

“It could be if I’m given the right incentive.” she shrugged. “Never say never.”

“You drive a hard bargain.” Red mused, enjoying the play.

“All right you two,” Silas grumbled, “let’s get this show on the fucking road already.” he bitched. “You can make eyes at one another and God knows what else... in the car.”

Red chuckled in spite of himself. Two birds with but one stone. “We’ll get you home.” Silas was assured.

Red could feel Lizzy up in the back of the car, hopefully presenting the proper incentive to lose those pesky panties they had been discussing before being rudely interrupted.

They could also get Silas to a point where the man could get himself in a better mood.

If Samar would stay as receptive as Red sensed she might be, anyway.

The day was looking brighter.
Liz felt the old familiar tinge, hiding a grimace of pain.

Damn!

_Damn and double damn_!

She knew this feeling well. She knew the signs.

Well, there was just no damned way anything was going to spoil such a happy reunion with Red. No way in hell, not when things had been going so well.

She made certain the man in question was occupied before searching out what was needed in her handbag.

“What are those?”

Liz started, recovering quickly, “Aspirin,” she frowned the lie, “being around you and Ben tends to give one a headache.”

Francis frowned right back, “Maybe it’s Silas’ constant bitching that’s doing it.” the man pointed to the front seat.

“Just drive over the bastards!” the man in question was gesturing for Dembe to make a path in the congested traffic patterns. “They’d do it to you!”

Red looked up from the papers he had been attempting to read the past few minutes, “Will you guys knock it off! I’m trying to concentrate here!” he held the papers aloft, rattling them to any and all.

Elizabeth swallowed the pills, downing them with water.

“What the hell is wrong with these people?” Silas wanted to know. “Who the hell taught them to drive?”

“Grandma Moses?” Francis smirked.

“We will arrive on time.” Dembe’s calming tone stopped the chaos... for all of two seconds.

“There’s no stopping here, you fuckwit!”

Liz looked out the window at the slowly passing scenery.
Palm trees lined the freeway they drove, their tops towering above the concrete jungle below. A local In-N-Out burger joint caught her eye.

Damn!

Well, there was one thing she couldn’t check off her bucket list this go round. It had been a goal to sample one of the famous concoctions before they left.

But then, she didn’t feel like food, anyway. Her stomach cramped and gnawed at her insides. She hoped the pills took effect quickly.

She decided not to think about it, returning her interest to the cars and buildings outside her window, absently humming “Big Yellow Taxi”.

Red grinned, hearing the tune even above Francis’ constant diatribe.

“Next time we should hold the meeting in a cool place.” he suggested.

“With a beach and cabana girls.” Ben readily agreed.

“Then Silas won’t be so upset.” Francis pointed out.

“You couldn’t get closer to Van Nuys?” Silas grumbled at Red.

“Since this was the West coast contingency,” Red spread his hands, “it seemed only logical to meet... on the West coast.” he explained to Francis and Ben.

He turned narrowed eyes to Elizabeth’s guard, “And if you wanted to leave out of Van Nuys so damn much,” he reminded in a peevish tone, “you should have landed at Van Nuys... not LAX.”

“Shit...” the guard hissed.

“So why didn’t you and save us all this bitching?” Red questioned.

“There was an emergency on the runway...” Silas remembered now, “I didn’t want to wait.”

“Which upsets Silas.” it was Francis’ turn to spread his hands.

“I’m upset all right!” Silas called from the front seat. “Colossal stupidity has that effect on me!”

The traffic crawled along at a snail’s pace beside them. The gaps between the cars non-existent. Dembe studiously watched for an opening between the cramped lanes for they needed the rapidly upcoming exit which would lead them to the waiting jet.

“These sons-of-bitches aren’t going to let us over!” Silas sensed as much. “Stop the fucking car!”

Dembe glanced over at the man even as Silas was shouldering out of the SUV’s door.

Liz’s mouth fell agape at his behavior, “Silas! What are you...”

Even Red put his papers aside to check on the guard’s intent.

The large man walked, well... okay, stormed into the next lane, stationing himself in front of the upcoming car.

Dembe took the opportunity presented, easing into the allotted slot.
The car horn blared for Silas had barred its path.

Silas slammed both hands down hard on the hood of the stylish BMW convertible he had waylaid.

Dembe, having found his space in the exit lane, now waited for their passenger to return to the car.

“Oh my God!” Liz was up, gripping the front seat as she witnessed the BMW lurch menacingly toward her guard.

Horns blared for the totally uncalled for intrusion into the established drive patterns of an L.A freeway system.

“Oh, no you don’t.” Red grasped the small waist as the woman reached for the door handle. “You’re not going out there.”

“A twenty says he hits someone before he gets back in the car.” Ben was already digging in his wallet.

“That’s a given.” Francis disdained. “I’m saying he’ll hit them more than once.”

Ben nodded agreeably to the terms.

“Stop it! He could get hurt out there!” Liz wailed. “I can calm him, Red. Let go!”

Red held steady but nodded to Francis that he agreed with the bet. He held up one finger to signify he was ‘in’ the pot.

Silas’ fury was greater than a mere one shot, he was certain.

Dembe continued to wait patiently, offering a very... very dark scowl to one particularly bothersome woman in the vehicle next to them.

She immediately backed off her horn, gulping her new found fear. She settled instantly preferring to stare straight ahead and now... patiently wait for whatever Dembe’s decision might be where the traffic snarl was concerned.

Silas kicked out a booted foot, smashing the expensive headlight of the BMW’s front.

Francis and Ben were enjoying the show tremendously if their rowdy reactions were any criteria by which to judge.

Liz cast them an annoyed glare, “Get out there and help him.”

Her words fell on deaf ears.

“Another twenty he takes out the side mirror on his way back to the car.” Francis saw opportunities abounding to make a fast buck.

Ben greedily shook the out-stretched hand offered.

“Forty.” Red knew his guard.

Liz gasped her dismay for his involvement.

Ben hesitated, “What the hell... okay, you’re on.”
“This is so exciting.” Francis could barely contain his glee.

The driver of the BMW unfolded himself out of his car, a thunderously black look of fury on his face.

The guy must have had forty pounds on Silas and stood over six feet tall.

Liz’s mouth widened further, her eyes bulging with alarm as the driver approached a now patiently waiting Silas.

He waved the fuming driver forward with mocking fingers waving aloft.

“Red! Do something...” she pleaded.

“He’ll be fine.” Red patted her shoulder lovingly, holding up two fingers to Francis, upping his wager considerably.

Liz smacked at his hand, “You are no better than those two.”

Ben and Francis were beyond censure, falling all over themselves with glee for Silas’ new-found position.

“Guy’s gonna pound his ass into the asphalt.” Ben happily predicted.

Red smirked his disbelief, “Put your money where your mouth is.”

Ben obliged more than exuberantly, “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world!”

Francis pushed him out of the way to get a better view.

“Silas!” Liz scolded. “Get back in this car, right now!”

“Hush, woman!” Francis squawked his dismay.

Silas and the BMW guy exchanged obscenities, the words filtering over sounds of planes passing overhead and the continual blaring of impatient drivers wanting to know what the hold-up could be.

The driver belligerently gestured to his smashed headlight.

Silas kicked out the other side.

Ben pointed excitedly out the window just as the driver took a swing at Silas.

“We have got to stop bringing him here to L.A.” Red nodded thoughtfully.

Francis opened the door for a better view of the proceedings just as Silas shoved hard on his nemesis’ chest, the force slamming the guy back into his own car hood.

Silas wasted no time or effort, his meaty fist coming out of nowhere to pummel the antagonist’s face with two quick, efficient punches.

The man was left dazed and confused, bloodied and more than subdued.

Silas kicked out with a swipe of his leg, taking the victim’s legs out from under him.

The BMW driver slid slowly to the pavement, doubling over in front of his once sparkling, impeccable vehicle.
Silas offered a rather vulgar departing oath, stalking back to his own waiting car. On the way, he ripped off the side mirror closest to him... and snapped the radio antenna in half.

“Yes...” Liz cheered victoriously.

Red gave her a ‘look’.

“I didn’t expect him to do that.” she confessed sheepishly.

Silas flipped off several of the honking people as he approached each individual vehicle.

The horns stopped immediately... at least the ones close enough to have witnessed the previous mishap.

“Little fucking prick.” Silas slid back into his seat, grumbling audibly. He slammed the door, rocking the car. “No damn manners in this God forsaken hell-hole.”

Ben and Francis discretely settled their wagers, big smiles on their face.

Red wiggled his fingers, wanting his fair share.

Liz’s lips tighten irritably for their behavior, “Silas, I seriously hate when you forget your afternoon coffee!”

“He’s always like this when we come here.” Francis commiserated, stuffing his winnings into his jacket pocket.

“I’m not always like this!” Silas griped. “This particular day I just happen to detest–”

“You are.” Dembe moved ahead slowly with but one glance to the once impatiently honking woman to his left.

Liz settled back, her nerves frayed, her stomach pitching sickeningly. “Silas, that man could have hurt you. Please think before you react. That’s what you’re always telling me.”

“Do as I tell you... not as I do.” he scowled. “The day some little preppy hipster like that hurts me is the day I hang up my credentials.” he promised.

“He wasn’t little.” Liz argued. “He towered over you!”

“The bigger they are... the more sound they make when they fall.” Ben quipped. “Say, are we going to get food before we board the flight? I’m starved.”

“There was an In-N-Out burger place back there.” Francis remembered.

“Yes, Francis that’s what we’ll do.” Red looked at the man oddly. “Fight this traffic to go back to a burger place.”

“It’s In-N-Out.” Ben reminded.

“There’s food in the private lounge and on the plane.” Red snapped. “Shut up, both of you. You’re getting on my nerves.”

A sharp pain pierced Liz’s abdomen, she winced retroactively.

“We’re not doing this.” she reminded herself sotto voce but... Red had heard and misinterpreted,
“I know baby but... Jesus,” he snipped, “I’ve been with these two idiots all morning. Cut me some slack, huh?” he adopted a pout.

She forced a smile, “I thought more people were joining us.” she hastily changed the subject. “Didn’t Dembe say that Michael guy was coming back with us?” she glanced at the occupants. “And for that matter... where is Joe?”

Why hadn’t she noted his absence before this? Oh yeah, right. The period from hell was sucking the life energy from her. She hated this time of the month, always had. This one more than others.

“Will they meet us at the airport?”

“Michael wanted to meet you formally... but had to leave out directly after the negotiations ended.” Red apologized. “He offered Joe a flight so he could get back to the house for security measures... make certain everything was in place for our arrival.”

Dembe pulled alongside the waiting jet before he and Silas disembarked the vehicle, both vigilant of the surrounding area before opening the back doors.

Francis and Ben poured from the vehicle, both rushing for the private concourse in search of vending machines and other foodstuffs, leaving Dembe and Silas to direct the porters handling their luggage.

“So Hunter and David caught the same ride?” she assumed. “With Michael, I mean.”

“Mark has taken Hunter on as his head of security.” Red relayed. “Same as Silas, only not on so grand a scale.”

“No one is quite the same as me.” Silas reminded everyone present.

Dembe rolled his eyes expressively for the statement as Red escorted Lizzy up the stairs, his hand protectively on her back.

She pulled up short a few steps up, stifling a gasp as pain shot through her frame, her fingers tightening on the guardrail.

“...What is it?” Red was instantly solicitous. His eyes searched her face for any telltale signs of distress but Lizzy hid it well.

“I almost twisted my ankle,” she frowned at the proceeding step. “I hate these shoes.”

“Kick them off when you get inside.” he smiled down at her. “You can relax.”

She nodded, “That sounds... really great.”

They proceeded, both taking their customary seats once situated on the plane.

Red grinned when the woman pulled her laptop free of its satchel.

He knew Lizzy was hoping to take her mind off the lift-off which still scared the shit out of her were she honest with herself.

Noticing his interest, she tried to pass it off, saying she had to catch up on her work... but he knew
She studiously studied the screen even now, blocking out all else.

How anyone could block out the ruckus Ben and Francis were causing, was anyone’s guess.

Red sent them an annoyed glare but they ignored him as was their way. He couldn’t be too cross with them, they gifted Lizzy with her favorite snacks upon their return.

“Those are mine.” Ben pointed to a bag of Cheeto’s, Francis placed in his pile of goodies on the surface between the seats.

“I bought some too, loser!” Francis bitched.

Ben searched about, “Oh, yeah,” his smile returned having found the wayward bag, “here they are. The red Kool-Aid is mine, freak.”

Francis wasn’t happy, but he reluctantly settled for the blue Kool-Aid.

Red grimaced at all the junk food. He didn’t mind an occasional Twinkie, who did... but all that stuff constituted a sugar rush from hell in his opinion.

Those two were hyper enough without added assistance.

And why?

“You had a plethora of gourmet cuisine to choose from in the private longue,” Red waved over their bounty, “and you pick this?”

“We grabbed a couple sliders,” Francis protested, “we’re not completely gauche, you know.”

“Oh, yeah...” Ben dug around in his bag, coming up with treats for Dembe and Silas before tossing Red a bag of chips and a Twinkie.

Red caught the unexpected projectile, shrugging.

Liz’s mouth pursed, holding her smile as Red kicked back in his seat and popped open the bag as both finally enjoyed the blessed silence which fell as the plane started to taxi down the runway.

Once they were airborne... Red chuckled, patting the hand squeezing the ever living hell out of his.

“You did better this time.” Red praised, as he peeled the woman’s fingers from his forearm.

“Yeah, you didn’t draw blood.” Francis cackled from across the aisle, stuffing a Tootsie Pop in his mouth. Ben shared the good-natured joke at Liz’s expense.

Liz shook the blood back into her fingers, grimacing apologetically at Red... and for the fact she left crescent shaped nail marks on the man.

Sighing for the unnecessary crack, Red rolled his eyes towards Francis and Ben, “Is everything moving?”

He had noted both men had instantly picked up their phones the minute they were airborne, falling into ‘business mode’.

Francis lifted the phone away from his mouth, “I’m on with Warsaw now.” he pulled a face. “Why
do they talk so funny?”

Ben covered his mouthpiece, “Caracas is moving but...” the man took a quick sip of his drink, “you may want to have a little chat with that bitch, Alessio.” he uncovered the phone, reading off the manifest he had been supplying to the other end.

Red scowled at the man and Francis, “Genoa, Alessio?”

Francis nodded, half-listening to his end of things, “He wants to wait ‘til morning to deliver,” he cocked his brow, “... has a hangover.”

Red’s jaw worked irritably, shaking his head, “Excuse me, sweetheart.” he apologized, pulling his own phone free.

Liz smiled wanly, going back to her laptop. This part? She was used to.

It took only minutes to establish contact with Alessio.

The man was obviously still drunk, his slurred responses to Red’s clipped statements pissing Red off royally.

Red snapped the phone shut, gathering his cool before putting through another call. It took only minutes to work his own particular brand of magic.

With one short phone call, he aligned himself with Alessio’s competition, which ensured the Genoa shipments were en route to their various destinations.

To further provoke the drunken imbecile who could not handle the task assigned him, Red also secured Alessio’s crew employment... with Gian.

Red and Dembe checked off one shipment after another, confirming their quantity and payments received. Even working in tandem, it took quite a while to accomplish the deed.

Red groaned, stretching his back and neck to work the kinks free, surprised to find almost two hours had passed. While it had taken longer than he wanted, it was done, meaning the rest of the day was free to spend with Elizabeth.

“I’m assuming Gian was pleased with the unexpected windfall to come his way?” Francis grinned, setting his own phone aside.

“He seemed to appreciate the opportunity presented.” Red sighed wistfully as he drank the last of his rich liquor. “I’ve warned Alessio before to curb his... extracurricular activities, or there would be consequences.”

Red pushed from his seat, heading to the bar for a refill just as Silas emerged from the private bathroom near the back of the plane.

“This incident,” Red murmured, stilling the guard in his tracks, taking an opportunity himself, “with Lizzy and the Cleaner–”

“It was handled.” Silas snapped quietly.

“Oh?” Red smiled pleasantly, never a good sign. “Now tell me the gory details.”

“If you’re thinking Liz was in the wrong–”
“I’m not thinking anything,” Red clarified, “until... I get the details.”

“That bitch had it coming, talking to Liz like she did.” Silas lifted his chin defiantly.

Red’s brow furrowed, “I thought Lizzy was defending you?”

Silas settled a tad, sighing lightly, “Yeah, well...” he sing-songed his head, “my contention is with the bitch Cleaner who didn’t even bother to hide her contempt for Liz.”

“Why the hell would this woman take such a stand?” Red wanted to know. “Who the hell does she think she is?”

“The Cleaner believed she and Kaplan had a ‘thing’,,” Silas air quoted, “and could get away with talking to Liz like any of us other lower life forms.”

“What the hell was said exactly?” Red’s temper flared.

“Talked to Liz like she was your...” Silas searched for a proper term, “mistress...and not much more.”

“To which you replied.” Red demanded.

“I didn’t have a chance.” Silas grinned slowly, recalling the incident clearly in his mind, “Liz ripped her a new ass.”

“That’s when Kate came into the picture, I assume?”

“Not much was said there.” Silas was disgruntled over that fact. “Kaplan assumed the rest, I’m sure. She’s very intuitive. Liz stuck to her guns though. She didn’t back down.”

“So...” Red studied the man’s body language, “you approve? How Lizzy handled–”

“Damn right I do.” Silas defended the woman’s actions, before clarifying his thought on the matter. “So whatever Kaplan said–”

“I haven’t spoken with Kate.”

Silas’ brow furrowed.

“You don’t have to defend Elizabeth’s actions to me.” Red said. “She is aware of my unwavering support.”

Silas frowned, “Then what’s the problem, ‘cause I sense one.”

“That is what I am trying to ascertain.” Red tilted his head questioningly. “Is there a problem?”

Silas’ frown deepened, then realization dawned, “Liz is right,” he grumbled, “this talking in riddles shit is fucking annoying.”

Red huffed his amusement as he took a sip from his tumbler.

“I had no issue with her taking charge, if that’s what you’re asking.” Silas deduced. “She handled it better than I was going to, if you want the truth.”

“Lizzy views you as her,” Red thought how to phrase it, “... confidant.”
“We’ve hit a rhythm,” Silas nodded that he was following along.

“So there are no problems of which I should be made aware?” Red schooled his expression, “Do you have any issues with Elizabeth that need to be addressed.”

The large guard scowled, “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Most men in your position, with your experience... and ego,” Red rolled his tongue, “wouldn’t appreciate being... subordinate to a female Elizabeth’s age.”

“Ah, that’s fucking bullshit.” Silas narrowed his eyes expressively. “And I am not subordinate with Liz... it’s not like that!”

Red shrugged, “With some women—”

“She ain’t like that.” Silas reiterated... strongly.

Red breathed easier when the guard snapped to Liz’s defense so quickly. While he supported Elizabeth without question, he needed to know where Silas stood.

“I’ve got her back, she’s got mine...” Silas jerked a thumb towards the woman. “Liz has proven herself. She doesn’t need you interceding on her behalf. If she has a problem with me... she’ll let me know in no uncertain terms.”

Red held up a stilling hand, easing the man’s quick temper, “That’s all I needed to know.”

Silas’ jaw pulsed with agitation, but he nodded sharply after a moment, “Are you gonna call, Kaplan?”

“Why should I?”

“I think Kate got the hint.” Silas confirmed he agreed with the assessment. “Liz was... terse.”

“Then, no,” Red shook his head, “Lizzy handled it just fine.”

Saving her work files, Liz vaguely listened to Francis and Ben bitching about everything under the sun before closing down her laptop.

Grimacing painfully, she shoved the computer aside, curling up in her seat.

“Lizzy?” Francis’ smile fell away, a frown pulling at his mouth. He had noted her quietness. “You okay?”

Red looked away from his conversation with Silas, instantly focusing on the woman.

Nodding silently, Liz curled further into the seat, tightening her forearms about her stomach.

This was going to be a bad one. She readied herself for the onslaught as best she could.

Red watched her lean heavily into the wall, laying her forehead against the cool window.

“Elizabeth,” Red walked the few feet, leaning over the woman, “what’s wrong?”

Red’s scowl tightened, watching the woman tense with each passing second. Her lovely face suddenly contorted with pain.
“The damn pills aren’t working.” her clipped tone spoke of her discomfort.

Grabbing his bag, Red rifled through the contents for his pain pills, cursing under his breath. He reached for Lizzy’s carry-on which yielded the same results, though more caustic language followed.

“I didn’t think to bring the others you gave me at home.” she cursed her own stupidity.

“Baby,” he approached the now trembling woman, “is this a bad one?”

“I’ll be okay.” she grimaced. “Maybe if I just... lay here and die.” she tried to smile and failed.

She was very embarrassed to sense five pairs of male eyes fixated on her.

“It’s okay, guys.” she strived for brightness. “It’s just a ‘woman’ thing... go back to your gambling, cussing and—” a pain caught her words, taking the breath from her body, “debauchery, I’ll be fine.”

Red’s eyes closed, empathizing with such bravado.

“I’ve got Vicodin.” Silas volunteered.

Ben shrugged helplessly, “I have some muscle relaxers.”

“Would some gummy bears help?” Francis’ expression was so genuine, Elizabeth couldn’t bear to disappoint him.

“Yes, Francis,” her smile was gentle, “you know I can’t resist gummy bears.”

“Get them.” Red snapped.

All three men headed for their respective bags to gather the required items.

Her expression altered with the men’s departure, “Red...” Liz whispered painfully, halting the man in his steps, “do we have a heating pad... or something of that nature lying around somewhere?”

Red shot Dembe a questioning look. He had no idea what equipment was on the plane.

“Raymond...” Dembe stepped up, holding a heating pad they kept on board. Normally it was used to ease the ache of injuries... now, Red hoped it would ease Lizzy’s suffering.

Plugging it into the nearest outlet, his eye ticked irritably when it wouldn’t reach the woman.

Understanding the man’s dilemma, Francis vacated the couch, giving over the space readily.

“...Be useful,” Red snapped, gesturing to an overhead compartment.

Francis held his smile. Only Lizzy could get the man so riled up in such a short amount of time. It was rare to see this caring... loving side of Red Reddington. It felt like eons since he had seen a glimpse of this Red. And never to this extent.

Opening the needed portal, Francis hesitated in his movements. Well, these were new.

The blankets and pillows Red always kept on hand were of the upmost quality, but different designs catering to the masculine side.

These however, were incredibly plush and lilac with the most luxurious satin trim Francis had ever felt.
If it hadn’t been for the large size, he would have assumed they were baby blankets. The fabric was so cozy. He shook away the trivial thought, unfurling blankets to make a comfortable space for Lizzy.

Silas tossed the pills Red’s way, the man catching the bottle mid-air. He was relieved to hear the rattle of several pills. More than enough to get Lizzy comfortable.

His stress level dropped considerably knowing her relief was on the horizon.

Red headed back for Lizzy but Silas pulled him up short, “You should cut those in half.”

“She’s in pain.” Red gritted.

Dembe’s eyes softened on his friend, understanding Raymond’s distress, “They will take down an elephant, Raymond. Listen to reason.”

The large man took the pills, “I will half these, you help get Elizabeth situated.”

Red nodded sharply, doing as suggested, glad to have something with which to busy himself. He felt so damned useless.

“Come on, baby.” Red soothed, offering his hands to aid the woman to rise.

Liz turned slowly, taking a controlling breath, “...I’m sorry.” she repeated, taking in all the men standing about. “This is so stupid...”

Red shook his head, waving off the unwarranted apology. His heart ached for the woman staring so forlornly up at him as she slowly eased from her seat.

Taking her hand, Red steadied the woman as she stood upright. Liz instantly knew she had made a huge mistake, the motion convulsing her system sickeningly. Liz gripped his hand tightly.

He scowled, canting his head, looking worriedly at the small woman.

She swallowed convulsively, “...R-Red...” closing her eyes to the sinking feeling overtaking her.

“Shit...” Red grasped her in his hold sensing the problem. He rushed her towards the back, just getting Lizzy over the toilet when the woman lost the battle.

Smoothing her hair back, Red glanced over his shoulder, stretching for a washcloth. He cursed vehemently, unable to reach it or the sink from his present position.

“I got it.” Ben bypassed Red, running cool water over the needed item before handing it over.

Silas stepped in the doorway, holding a bottle of water, “...I’ll get the nausea pills.”

“Yes, quickly” Red snapped, taking the items handed him before placing the cool cloth on Lizzy’s neck as she heaved helplessly.

Blotting Lizzy with a cold cloth, he searched the men’s faces, “Where the hell did Dembe–”

“Up with Edward.” Silas jerked his head towards the cockpit. “He’s checking our position, Red.”

“...I’m sorry.” Liz cried. She gripped the bowl once more, overtaken by the horrific urge to vomit.

“Shh, baby...” Red soothed, taking the new cloth Ben handed him.
“We are two hours out.” Dembe relayed, he and Silas holding down the aisle outside the bathroom door.

“Dammit...” Red sighed his discontent. “Tell Edward to find a suitable place. We’ll be landing—”

“...No,” Liz moaned miserably, laying her forehead against her arm, “it’s fine... just go home.”

“Lizzy,” Francis chided, “we can stop for the night. It’s not a problem.”

“It’s only a couple hours.” Liz shook her head wearily. “I need to be... home.”

Silas stepped up, handing over the required medication to Red.

Red crouched beside the woman, tenderly brushing her hair back. The soft strands stuck to her flush face. He noted small beads of perspiration tracked down her temples.

“Take these, baby.” he gently wiped her face, his own expression pained for what was reflected back in her beautiful eyes. “They will help.”

Liz had her doubts they would stay down, but she took the pills in hand.

“You might feel a little drowsy.” he warned, steadying the water bottle in her clammy palms.

She shrugged carelessly, gratefully popping the medicine into her mouth, “Its gotta be better than this shit.”

“Lizzy,” his jaw tightened, “let’s stop for the night.” he agreed with Francis’ evaluation of the problem.

“We’re not that far out...” she smiled tremulously. “The pills will kick in soon.”

Liz braced her hand on the wall as the others vacated the area, allowing the couple room to maneuver. Red eased her slowly off the floor.

Red flushed the toilet while Liz gratefully rinsed her mouth of the acidic taste.

She took two steps, leaning heavily into the wall as a stabbing sensation ripped through her body. Painful jolts shot down her legs into her toes as a molten lava settled in her ovaries.

“I hate this shit.” she snapped her frustration. “I hate it!”

She sighed blissfully when Red’s large palm lay over the menace, his heat permeating her body.

“Come, lay down.” he gestured to the prepared bed.

Any other time, she might have balked over Red’s hovering but right now... he was a wonderful distraction and... she admittedly enjoyed him babying her a little.

It was a stark contrast to how Tom avoided her like she had the plague at this time of the month.

Red situated the woman in the comfortable spot provided. Liz felt a little better already.

Dembe slid the partition closed, allowing them a modicum of privacy. Red made certain she was comfortable.

“I think the worst has passed, Red.” Liz said. “You don’t have to stay with me.” she knew he
probably had more business dealings to complete.

“No.” Red shook his head once, dimming the lights.

“You are so stubborn.” she sighed.

“...Yes.” he agreed, laying down beside her. “...Rest.” he leaned, kissing her temple.

“Have I told you guys,” Liz yawned, “how much I love you?”

Red’s mouth tugged at the corner, “Just relax, let the pills take effect. You’ll feel better soon.”

She snuggled into his embrace, getting lost in the large hand soothingly rubbing her back.

“You’re an okay guy Red Reddington.” she murmured sleepily. “And I appreciate the hell out of you.”

~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥~♥

A light drizzling rain greeted their arrival at the airport. A rain which increased to epic proportions as they neared the house.

Red cursed as the already torrential downpour and wind rocked the car as Dembe eased the SUV into alignment with the front door.

Removing his jacket, Red wrapped it about Lizzy’s shoulders. Nora and Joe waited at the front door, ready.

The bulky guard carelessly stepped into the driving rain, holding an enormous umbrella for their exit.

Red craned his neck, his eyes meeting Joe’s as he approached the door.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood straight up, a sixth sense kicking in.

Something wasn’t right.

Outside the rain sheeted window, Joe stopped fully in his tracks, his eyes scanning the stormy skies.

Silas hauled his bulk hastily from the front seat, fluidly reaching to open the back door. His body blocked any unseen threats.

Hooking Lizzy’s legs, Red eased her into his lap, as he turned in the seat. His arms lifted her effortlessly.

“No,” the woman pushed weakly on his chest, “I can walk.”

He could not take the time to explain the unexplainable. He sensed the danger. He sensed how to prevent any calamity befalling the woman.

Bundling her within the confines of his own body would shield her from the cross-hairs he felt trained on their position.

“Please let me walk.” she sighed, sensing a losing battle, however.

“Hush...” he kissed her brow.

Silas signaled with his hand that everyone was in position and ready.
Joe offered the umbrella as a shelter from the elements, and as a deterrent from any would be snipers trajectory. As added caution, his own body also shielded the two emerging occupants.

Readjusting his hold, Red was surprised when the woman offered no further resistance what-so-ever. That Lizzy remained silent and snuggled into his embrace... bespoke of how horrible she felt.

Stepping out, Red quickly made his way alongside the guards. He faltered in his steps, a chill running up his back.

Shaking off the sensation quickly, he tightened his hold on Lizzy stepping into the foyer within seconds.

And out of sight of the eyes that trailed after them.

End Notes

I don't own The Blacklist... Just playing with the characters.

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