Darcy Lewis always knew her mother wasn’t in the running for any Parent of the Year Awards, but after she left for college and the real world, it didn’t really matter all that much. It didn’t define her like it did when she was little.

Until the day a very special package ended up on the figurative doorstep of Stark Tower, and each member of the Avengers be in for a lot more than they ever bargained for.

Especially one formerly brainwashed assassin who just decided to take the leap and let the man he knows used to be his best friend—and his target—help him recover from everything he suffered at Hydra’s hands.

Or

Darcy meets Bucky, Darcy’s sister adopts Bucky, and everyone eats grilled cheese.
MARCH 4, 2018: And we're back! As promised, the first eight chapters have been heavily edited, and posted alongside chapter nine!

Notes

So, I'm back with my epic, Darcy/Bucky long-fic where Darcy's little sister shows up out of nowhere and everyone has to adjust (among other things).

Be advised, this will eventually cross over with an AU future of Gossip Girl (let's just put the deviation in the time jump in the finale). Y'all don't need to know much about the show's continuity, since it takes place after the series ends and I toss a bunch of canon aspects right out the window, but yeah, it's going to happen in a way that I promise makes sense.

Anyway, sit back, relax, and enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number Ninety Eight: “I’d like to see you figure out the difference between blood and marinara sauce.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Pepper Potts started working for Tony Stark, her normal days spread out few and far between. They spread further and further apart after Afghanistan and the Mark I suit, so far that now, after the Manhattan incident, Pepper’s not sure she remembers what normal feels like.

She thinks that this day in May is as close to normal that she’s going to get in her not-so-new life, stepping off the jet in Stark Industries’ private airstrip at LaGuardia.

The sun warms her face as Happy jogs ahead of her to meet the car waiting on the tarmac, and Thor’s heavy footfalls echo off the steps behind her. He follows her into the car, and Pepper sighs as she stretches her legs out in front of her, kicks off her Jimmy Choos while Thor settles in for the drive.

Happy turns the car toward the airport exit for Grand Central Parkway, and out of the corner of her eye Pepper sees Thor pinch the bridge of his nose, his other hand splayed against Mjolnir’s side where it rests on the seat between them, “I never realized how mentally taxing a day spent speaking could be,” he says. “I should have heeded my father’s lessons better when I was young.”

Letting out a hollow laugh, Pepper cracks open a bottle of water and takes a delicate sip, “Dealing with our government is always going to be difficult, but there’s no one better suited to negotiating that protection agreement on Asgard’s behalf. Odin will be proud of you.”

He tips his head, “Thank you for coming to advise me in Jane’s stead, Lady Potts. I understand why she chooses to avoid the political arena, and why Darcy has altered her academic future to better assist our initiative.”

“If she wanted to get her master’s, I’m sure she would have made a fantastic lobbyist, but I’m thrilled she decided to stay on and help when I’m not in the city. Tony really needs the help keeping on track, especially these days.”
Thor nods in agreement and turns his focus to the scenery passing by as they head deeper into the city, and Pepper turns to the messages she missed in the few minutes it took to transfer from the plane. Soon enough, Happy pulls the car to a stop in front of Stark Tower, and Pepper scowls before reluctantly putting her shoes back on.

Slipping her tablet into her briefcase’s side pocket, Pepper lets Thor help her from the car, “Thank you,” she smiles, but it slips off her face when she spies a girl with disheveled brown hair exit the taxi in front of their car, the vehicle pulling away with a shriek of its aged breaks and nearly plowing over a cluster of tourists taking selfies in front of the building.

“Thor,” she catches the demigod’s attention and tilts her head toward the girl standing on the sidewalk. She’s looking around and rocking back and forth on her heels, a bright pink backpack on her shoulders and a matching trio of cheap vinyl suitcases piled up next to her.

Another pair of tourists jockey for position near the girl’s luggage so they can best get Thor’s profile in the background of their selfie, and they nearly knock her over in their haste.

Thor’s brows furrow when he sees the girl, but he accepts Pepper’s briefcase and watches as she walks over to the barricade separating the public and private sections in front of the Tower.

There’s very little chance that this isn’t what she thinks it is, so Pepper takes a second to steel her shoulders—and only just one second, because there are so many people with so many cameras that the last thing she needs is for this to get out before they’re ready—before bending down to get into the girl’s eye line, “Hello there,” she girl blinks up with a pair of wide, blue eyes, and the panic building in Pepper’s chest lets up just a little, but not by much. “Are you lost?”

Smiling toothily, the girl shakes her head, her tangled hair whipping over her shoulders, and part of Pepper wants to ask Happy to get her toiletry kit from her bag, “Nope! My mommy said I’m staying at Stark Tower at One Avengers Plaza. It’s right over there.”

Even expecting an answer like that, Pepper’s heart freezes at the sight of the crinkled envelope in the girl’s outstretched hand, and she forces a deep breath into her lungs—notice out of the corner of her eye that more and more tourists are focused on her than they are on Thor, and they really should take this off the street as quickly as possible.

The girl just stares at her with an innocent grin and tiny hands, and Pepper frowns at the quivering in her own fingers as she takes the envelope, peeks inside and swallows hard at the words she finds.
It’s not what she thought, but that doesn’t make any of this any easier.

Shaking out of it, Pepper turns her focus back to the girl, who is busy taking in the sights of the plaza with wide eyes, “Sweetheart,” she swallows around the lump in her throat. “What’s your name?”

“’m Charlotte. What’s yours?”

“My name is Pepper. It’s very nice to meet you,” she straightens, winces at the way her knees pop, and holds a hand out. “Why don't you come inside with my friend Thor, and we’ll help get you settled in, okay?”

The girl, Charlotte, turns her wide eyes—Pepper really should have figured it out just from that—toward the Asgardian, and squeals when he gives her a wave, “I know you!” Her voice is bright as she points with the index finger of the hand not wrapped around Pepper’s fingers. “Is that Mew-Mew?”

A hundred questions flash across Thor’s face as he looks at Pepper, but she just shakes her head and holds the girl’s hand, leads her through the crowd of SI staffers and into the lobby. Thor rushes as her heels, leaving Happy to deal with adding the pile of pink suitcases to the cart already stacked with luggage from their two-day trip to the Capitol, “Lady Potts,” his voice is low as they reach the private elevators that lead to the residential levels. “Who is—”

“I’m not quite sure what’s going on,” she says out of the side of her mouth while Charlotte turns back to stare at the massive statue in the middle of the lobby that Tony insists classes up the place. “But we will get to the bottom of this.”

The elevator doors slide open, and Pepper nudges Charlotte in ahead of her. “JARVIS, the penthouse please.”

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Tony Stark’s personal lab is a massive, high-ceilinged space with an obscene amount of state-of-the-art equipment and technology. After the remodel of the Tower, it didn’t take him long to allocate space for both Bruce Banner and Jane Foster to work on their respective projects, now that they’re full-time residents at Stark Tower.
One on side of the lab, Tony tinkers under a console, his bare feet sticking out from one side as he argues quietly with JARVIS about something that Darcy Lewis doesn’t bother to pay much attention to.

If it’s not about to explode, it’s probably not important.

She’s at her desk—a microscopic space crammed between the Edible Food Only (I’m serious you guys. PLEASE don’t mix them up) refrigerator and a massive pile of boxes that probably aren’t going to get unpacked anytime soon, if ever—with Clint Barton’s surprisingly detailed list of requirements for the new recurve bow the SI techs downstairs are developing for him propped against the pile of folders awaiting Jane’s signature.

Because this is somehow her life now, making sure that the new Avengers team doesn’t blow through Tony’s billions before they have another chance to save the world from certain doom.

Or Doctor Doom, depending on what planet the Fantastic Four are currently on.

After terrorists blue up the Malibu mansion—among other things that Darcy’s still not entirely clear on—Pepper and Tony relocated to the renovated tower, joining Bruce, who hadn’t left after the now-famous Battle of Manhattan.

Seriously, there was an action blockbuster due out next summer.

Jane and Thor moved in not long after the pair of back-to-back clusterfucks that hit London and D.C. within months of each other, and Darcy took the opportunity to come right along with them and take over the guest suite in their apartment. Considering the fact that she barely had her Bachelor’s, the last thing she expected was for Pepper to ask her to help with the never-ending list of things Tony needed to accomplish in order to meet the requirements that his life demanded, but it’s not like she was about to say no.

Not long after she settled into routine, Clint stumbled into town, a postcard from Natasha in hand.

It was a photo of a generic beach with the words ‘Best from Key West’ emblazoned over it, the letters fading in an attempted sunset of yellow to pink, while the neat handwriting on the back ordered him to take his head out of his ass and take it to the city from whatever desert he was sulking in before Natasha found him herself and sent him to the Tower via shipping container.
The postcard now hung in a place of honor on the refrigerator in the common kitchen, held up by a pair of spider magnets Darcy happened upon during her first few days in town.

Darcy is finishing up with Clint—double-confirming his list of thinly veiled demands while he perches cross-legged on the topmost box piled to her right and flings colorful multicolored paperclips at her—when JARVIS noticeably breaks off his conversation with Tony and adjusts the speakers so his voice carries through the room, “Ms. Potts and Lord Odinson have returned,” he says. “They request that everyone joins them in the penthouse lounge.”

Because there’s about one thing that can pull Jane from a science-stupor these days, her head jerks up from where she’s going over atmospheric readings on the Earth-side of the still-damaged Bifrost with Bruce, “I thought they weren’t due back until tomorrow,” she muses even as she turns off the tablet and sets it on the desk.

Darcy smacks Clint with the pile of forms before she tosses them into her makeshift out-box—empty 72-packs of PopTarts really work wonders, and hey, wasn’t recycling great for the environment?

She hops off her stool, “I don’t care, I just hope they ordered dinner.”

Tony leads the way off the elevator and into the penthouse—because it’s his home, he insists that he should always be the first to set foot in it.

Darcy chalks it up to a combination of weird billionaire habits she’s not capable of understanding and also partly his undiagnosed slash blatantly ignored PTSD that she definitely does not want to understand.

That’s for Pepper.

And then she runs right into his back when he stops short in front of the elevator doors.

“Pepper, light of my life, my only everything,” he gasps and dramatically presses a hand to his chest, doesn’t notice the rest of the elevator’s occupants trying to skirt around him. “If you’re leaving me, couldn’t you at least pack in the Rimowa luggage set I bought you last year?”

Over Tony’s shoulder, Darcy finds the woman in question perched on the couch in the sunken lounge, her bare toes curled up in the carpet. Her gaze flicks up from something on the coffee table, to the pile of battered bags that caught Tony’s attention from their out-of-place spot tucked under the
entry table, and she lets out a delicate snort, “Why would I leave you if I couldn’t take my twelve percent of the building with me?”

Darcy and the others manage to get around Tony, who mutters something under his breath about Pepper’s inability to let go the things he says when he’s sober. Her brow ticks when she finds Thor on the other side of the room, exuding deity with every breath even though his slacks were a little wrinkled and his shirt untucked as he stares out the window, points at something in the direction of the last of the reconstruction efforts from the Chiutari attack.

Her frown deepens when she spies the little girl standing next to him, her tiny hands pressed to the glass as she looks out to the city lit up in gold by the sunset.

“Who’s the kid?” Clint asks the question rattling around Darcy’s brain as he heads to the bar and hops onto a stool, rests his bandage-wrapped arm against the granite, which gives him leverage to reach one of the beers in the ice-filled sink.

Pepper stands, her hands clasped in front of her, but before she can say anything, the girl spins around, and Darcy smacks a hand over her mouth, “Oh my god! Charlotte, what are you doing here?”

She’s stick skinny and pale, but with them standing in the same room there’s really no mistaking the girl’s bright eyes and the wave in her tangled hair, “Darcy, Darcy!” She squeals and runs across the room, her flip-flops slapping against the smooth concrete floors, and she skirts around a flabbergasted Tony and flings her arms around Darcy’s waist. “Mommy said I was going to stay with you! Like a vacation!”

Blinking hard, Darcy shakes her head and drops to her knees so she can wrap the girl in a proper hug, “That’s such a great surprise, Charlie,” she manages as she runs a hand over the girl’s tangled hair, before she glances at Pepper. “Where did you find her?”

The unease on Pepper’s face tells Darcy that something is definitely wrong, and worry coils in the pit of her stomach at the weight of everyone’s eyes on her. With the slight weight of her sister hanging off her neck, she slips her hand in her pocket and fumbles for her phone, but there are no missed texts or calls.

Of course, there aren’t.
She pastes a grin on her face as she pulls her sister’s arms from her neck, “Welcome to New York, Kid!”

“Thanks! Pepper and Thor are really nice! And I got to see Mew-Mew,” she spun around and pointed so quickly at the ceiling Darcy instinctively held her hands out in case she tripped over her shoes. “And JARVIS! Did you know he’s a computer? That’s really cool.”

Darcy manages a nod, “He is,” she angled Charlotte toward Jane, who stands to one side with her hands shoved in the pockets of her oversized flannel shirt—one of Thor’s, of course. “Do you remember Jane? We Skyped with you when we were living in New Mexico.”

“Hi!”

Jane waves, and Darcy tilts her head in the direction of the kitchen, “Jane’s going to make you a snack while I talk to Pepper, okay?”

Charlotte takes the hand Jane offers, and Darcy sends Jane a wordless nod of thanks before stepping down into the lounge where Tony and Bruce now stand with Pepper and Thor.

“I swear, I had no clue she was coming,” she hisses, anger flushing through her voice as she crosses her arms over her chest, watches out of the corner of her eye when Jane helps Charlotte onto a stool at the counter. “I had no idea they even left Seattle! And where the hell is my mother? Ugh! This is so like her. Just dump the kid and go on vacation, why not?”

With a wince, Pepper reaches for the envelope resting on the slice of petrified tree that is Tony’s unnecessarily expensive coffee table, holds it in both hands as she explains how she and Thor found Charlotte outside the Tower.

“Over the years, I’ve dealt with more than my fair share of potential ‘accidental Starks’,” she rolls her eyes at Tony’s affronted squawk. “So, it didn’t occur to me that the name on the envelope and in the letter wasn’t Tony’s. I’m so sorry Darcy.”

She waves away the apology and pulls the scrap of notebook paper, glares down at her mother’s nigh illegible cursive.

*Darcy,*
I’m sorry I didn’t call, but I need her to stay with you.

You know I was never cut out for this, and you’re in so much better a position to give her what she needs.

I do love you both, and I’m sorry,

Your mother

“Are you serious?” Darcy barely manages to hold back a shriek as she drops back onto the couch and reads the letter one more time, crumples it up and tosses it away. “Not five months after I move in and she decides that she’s just not cut out for parenting? Jesus Christ!”

With a groan, she drops her head in her hands, leans back against the cushions, halfheartedly hopes she can just melt into them, “Oh god.”

A hand touches her shoulder, and she nearly flails violently before she drops her hands and sees the kind smile on Pepper’s face, “Everything will work out just fine, Darcy,” she assures. “Charlotte is more than welcome to make her home here like you do.”

Tony holds a hand up, “Don’t I get a-” he breaks off at the pointed look Pepper shoots his way. “Never mind! The kids more than welcome! The more, the merrier. Except not, because I don’t do diapers.”

“Oh my god,” she groans again, smacks her forehead with her palm. “I can barely mind myself, let alone Jane, Tony, and a genius four-year-old.

“Excuse me, but I don’t need any minding.”

All eyes turn to Tony, and despite the emotions churning in her chest and the fact that she kind of wants to throw up, Darcy snorts, “You are full of it,” the fact that her sister is here smacks her in the face again, and she buries her face back in her hands. “Oh my god, what am I supposed to do? I don’t even have a bed for her. I live in a guest room! It’s a great guest room, don’t get me wrong, I totally love all of it, but there’s no room for both me and my sister.”
The hand on her shoulder squeezes gently, which stalls the rest of her rambling, “Darcy, we can remodel one of the guest floors for you both,” Pepper is a bastion of calm that Darcy can only aspire to become. “It won’t take long at all, and everything will work out just fine.”

Darcy’s chest heaves as she takes another deep breath, so deep she goes a little dizzy on the verge of hyperventilation, “Thanks Pepper,” she manages through her fingers. “I can’t even, I just don’t know what to do!”

“Give it a few days to settle in, and remember, you’re not alone.”

Darcy sighs again, shifts her fingers to press against her eyes in attempt to stop the throbbing that started as soon as she read the words on that stupid piece of crinkled paper.

The pattering of tiny feet forces her to drop her hands, and she plastera smile on her face as Charlotte darts over, Jane at her heels, “Darcy! Jane shared her chocolate PopTarts with me!” She gushes. “Mommy never buys chocolate PopTarts!”

“That’s great, Kid,” she meets Jane’s curious gaze and shrugs, because there’s not much else she can do, and pulls Charlotte up onto the couch next to her. Then she narrows her eyes when she notices the matching, disconcerting, looks on Tony and Bruce’s faces—looks that usually serve as the preamble for the kind of science that has Darcy dragging them out by their ears at hour thirty, “What? Don’t tell me you haven’t seen a tiny human before.”

Still gazing down at an oblivious Charlotte, Bruce tilts his head, looks like he’s trying to see into her brain, “You said, genius?”

Darcy halfheartedly tries to unravel a tangle on the side of her head, “At least I think so. I wasn’t setting up my own Skype account when I was two. Hell, I couldn’t even sight-identify words until pre-K. She can use an iPad better than I can, and she doesn’t even go to school yet. She probably should. I should probably look into—oh my god.”

Ignoring Tony’s scoff at how she even dared to utter the name of a Steve Jobs-developed piece of technology and how he went on to mutter about how much better StarkPads and StarkTech were, Darcy pinches the bridge of her nose, swallows hard, and looks at her sister, “You want to go on a tour, Kid?”
“Yeah!”

The guest suite in Jane and Thor’s apartment—also known as the small room, but huge upgrade, from Jane’s mom’s couch, which Darcy calls home—is like a really, really nice room at a five-star hotel.

Not that she expected anything less since Pepper had all the influence on furnishing the residential levels after the Battle of Manhattan.

It opens into a sitting area that’s arranged around the massive television that takes up like, half the while, while Darcy’s bed takes up the other half of the room, and the en-suite was one of the largest Darcy had ever encountered.

Fresh from her bath and a much-needed hair-combing—did her mother ever think to buy Charlotte a brush? Ever?—Charlotte curls up on the massive couch that splits the living area from the bedroom side, watching some cartoon about a girl—who apparently was also a sorcerer in training, because of course, who had to adjust to the life of a princess when her mother—whose career was only ever glossed over and part of Darcy thinks she might have been a concubine or something—married the kingdom’s king. It’s incredibly insipid and Darcy tries not to listen to it as she unpacks the tiny trio of suitcases Charlotte came with, the sparse piles of threadbare clothes arranged on the padded bench at the foot of her bed.

Sitting on her knees, Darcy grabs the last suitcase by the closest wheel and drags it to her side, and the frown planted on her face deepens when she finds a thick, legal-sized manila envelope tucked under a small pile of t-shirts.

“Hey Charlie?” She looks up as the girls pokes her head over the back of the couch. “What’s this?”

Blinking at the envelope, Charlotte shrugs and drops back down, “Dunno,” her voice is muffled and distant as she turns her focus back to her show, where the little sorceress and her friends are harassing a young witch like she’s not exactly like they are. This show makes zero sense. If this episode doesn’t end with some life-affirming moral, she’s tempted to call Tony in and have him by the network so he can cancel it.

“Mommy said it was for you.”
Darcy shifts off her knees and sits cross-legged as she picks at the tab.

Her jaw drops when she finds Charlotte’s birth certificate, immunization records, social security card, *everything*.

And at the bottom, an even thicker packet of legal documents.

She scans the paperwork, lets out a quiet curse when she snags her finger on one of the red tabs pasted next to a line awaiting—*oh seriously*?—her signature.

Darcy jams her finger in her mouth, and the coppery taste of blood bursts across her tongue, “Oh my god,” she says for say, the millionth time today.

Charlotte pops back up, “What?”

Letting the paperwork fall back into the envelope, Darcy shakes her head and, like she has all afternoon, forces a smile to her face.

It’s really starting to make her head hurt.

“Nothing important, Kid,” she lies easily as she gets up and grabs Charlotte around the waist, flipping her legs over her shoulder so she can tickle her stomach. “Come on, let’s get you into bed.”

The stick skinny girl—and good *god*, had her mother even bothered to *feed* Charlotte all this time?—looked so incredibly tiny as she curled up in the center of Darcy’s massive bed, burrowing under the blankets and tucking her battered stuffed cow against her side, “I’m going to run upstairs for a little while, but if you need anything, ask JARVIS, and he’ll let me know, okay?”

Charlotte grins wide and holds her arms out, “Hug and a kiss!”

With a laugh that’s probably the first genuinely happy sound she’s made all afternoon, Darcy does as asked, “Good night Kid, I love you, and I’m really happy you’re here.”
“Love you too!”

Tucking the blankets back up, Darcy smacks another kiss to Charlotte’s forehead before she swipes the envelope off the floor, glares down at it as JARVIS wordlessly dims the lights so she can slip out of the suite.

Jane and Thor aren’t in the apartment she steps into, so Darcy heads to the elevators, still pondering what the paperwork meant as the AI pretty much read her mind and cued up the elevator for the penthouse in a way that would probably be a little terrifying on a Skynet level if it wasn’t, well, JARVIS.

Upstairs, the other members of the Avengers are still scattered around the room, Jane and Bruce bent over that tablet from the labs while Clint is mixing drinks for Thor at the bar, and Pepper and Tony are curled up on the couch, as relaxed as they only ever are when they’re at home.

When the elevator sounds, Jane looks up, “Is Charlotte asleep?”

“Out before I left the room,” Darcy rolls her eyes and pads in. “She actually thinks she on vacation. Ugh, I could kill my mother.”

Pepper nods with her chin at the envelope Darcy has clutched in a white-knuckled grip, “What is that?”

“I was hoping that you, with your highly advanced knowledge of legal whatever, could explain some of the paperwork,” she mutters as she holds out the thick packet. “And maybe confirm that they’re not what I think they are.”

Passing her tablet to Tony, Pepper’s brows fly to her forehead as she flips through the first few pages, and she swallows hard before she looks back up, “Oh, I’m so sorry, Darcy.”

Darcy flops on the couch and groans again, stares up at the ceiling and ignores whoever sidles up next to her until they press a cool glass against her fingers. She brings it to her mouth and drinks it down, glances out of the corner of her eye to find Clint hovering not far away, “Thanks,” she mutters as he trades the class out for the full one in his other hand.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she takes a shorter sip from glass number two, “Pepper, please, for the love of all that is holy, tell me it’s not what I think it is. I really don’t want to be right.”
She sighs, and Darcy knows what she’s about to say, “Your mother wants to sign Charlotte’s custody over to you.”

“Oh hell.”

The room goes silent, and Jane wordlessly passes the tablet to Bruce before she makes her way over, “Oh Darcy, I’m so sorry.”

Ignoring her, she downs the rest of her drink, wrinkles her nose at the burn that sears the back of her throat, “I mean seriously,” she shrugs Jane’s arm off her shoulders and scoots to the side. “This is some drug-fueled nightmare spawned from a lab accident, right? This can’t actually be happening. My mother cannot possibly be this stunningly irresponsible.”

With an uncharacteristically serious look on his face, Tony leans around Pepper, rests his elbows on his knees, “We can track her down. In fact, JARVIS and I will have to have a long discussion if he can’t find her.”

Darcy throws her arms up, pushes off the couch and paces up and down the length of the lounge, her toes bashing against the steps on her first pass, “What’s the fucking point? Crazy woman clearly doesn’t want Charlie anymore. What am I supposed to do? Force her into responsibility?”

“Worked for me,” he shrugs.

“A billion-billion-dollar corporation isn’t the same as the welfare of a small child.”

Pepper clasps her hands together, “Not that it matters, but you’d be surprised how similar it really is.”

After her fourth pass, Darcy gives up and drops onto the step, buries her face in her hands as best she can with the empty glass held cool on her forehead, “I’m going to need the whole damn bottle if I’m going to feel any better about this,” she scoffs. “Except I can’t, because hungover! Darcy can’t handle people, let alone a needy four-year-old. Damn that woman!”

Jane rushes across the room and sits next to Darcy, nudges her gently with her shoulder before she shifts back to give her some space, “Whatever you decide, you know we’re going to support you, right?”
“She’s my sister, what am I supposed to do? Send her away?” She tries to rub away the pounding under her right eye, but it persists. “Pepper, can I have the paperwork please?”

“Are you sure?” She asks, but stands and grabs it and a pen off the coffee table anyway.

“If this is the way she wants to play it, then fine, it’s fine,” it’s definitely not fine. “I’ll sign the papers and I am so beyond done with her. Charlotte can decide if she wants to track her down again when she’s old enough to understand she was abandoned by her mother. Good god, she left her in the middle of one of the busiest blocks in the country. What if you and Thor didn’t find her? Ugh!”

Her jaw ticks as she scribbles her name and the date next to each tiny flag—including and especially the one dotted with her blood—and her fingers clamp down on the edges of the paper, words blurring with the force of the angry tears flooding her eyes.

She doesn’t know how long she sits and stares, startles when Jane plucks the pen and packet from her hands, “Take a deep breath,” she orders sharply, squeezes Darcy’s shoulders. “You need to calm down.”

“But how am I supposed to be a parent?” She screeches instead, because logic is not applying to her brain right now. “I never wanted any of this. I don’t want any of this.”

Pepper pads over and kneels in front of them, “You’ve got us, we’ll give you all the help you need,” she says, ever the most reasonable human being on this planet. “We’ll do everything in our power to ensure Charlotte has everything she needs. You have nothing to worry about.”

Eventually, she rubs her eyes and takes a deep breath, the force of it sending her shoulders all the way up to her ears, “Pepper Potts, you are a goddamn superhero. Don’t let anyone tell you different.”

Blushing, especially when Tony chuckles in agreement, Pepper places her hand on Darcy’s knee, pats it carefully, “You’re too kind. Let me clear my schedule and we’ll have lunch tomorrow, discuss the renovations. There’s plenty of room in the empty apartment on the floor we set aside for Steve.”

Tony lets out a derisive snort, “If he decides to stop running after that tall, cranky Russian of his.”
She’s not sure why that comment brings her out of her stupor, but it’s probably because Clint got her a little drunk, “I’m so telling Agent Romanov you called her that.”

“But I didn’t—”

“She won’t know that.”

Tony huffs in a way that reminds Darcy of Charlotte when she used to tell her to listen to their mother, “Not fair!”

Chapter End Notes

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number Ninety Eight: “I’d like to see you figure out the difference between blood and marinara sauce.”
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

It was eleven-thirty on a Saturday morning in August, and Darcy was in the kitchen making lunch.

Because apparently, that was her life now.

Chapter Notes

I have been absolutely stunned by the response from the first chapter, and also apologize for the delay in this posting of this one. Work has been insane this week, and it’s only going to get crazier as I move into March, but I’m still going to try to be consistent as possible and hopefully wrap things up before AOU comes out.

After I get back from my tropical-and so ill-timed it’s not even funny-vacation.

Aloha friends!

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number Ninety Nine: “I’ve never met a hyperbole I didn’t like.”

“I know.”

“You do?

“You spent the last hour shouting to the rooftops about how we’re out of soup.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s eleven-thirty on a Saturday morning in August, and Darcy is in the Tower’s common kitchen making lunch.

Because that’s her life now.

Charlotte’s sitting at the breakfast table that took up most of one side of the sun-drenched space, rubbing out a red crayon on a page torn out of her brand-new Avengers coloring book.

Thank you Tony, for snapping up the team’s merchandizing rights so the Avengers could actually
accrue income to fall back on since SHIELD was full of Nazis and their former salaries were tied up in about a million years of lawsuits.

Though, in those first few weeks after she made the move to London, Darcy tried to help Tony and JARVIS track down the bottomless hole of misappropriated funds, but they hadn’t had any luck.

It was like it all disappeared, which isn’t actually possible.

But all things considered, that’s neither here nor there.

After the first week of what was probably the longest three months of Darcy’s life—including the aftermath of the everything that happened in Puente Antiguo, where she’s pretty sure she didn’t sleep for days on end—she was ready to tear her hair out and drink the entirety of Tony’s admittedly impressive wine collection.

If there’s one thing she picked up from her own upbringing—see: raising herself because her mother couldn’t be bothered—and the continued responsibilities she had with Jane, Tony, and Bruce, it was that she was not cut out to be a mother.

Slightly frazzled and constantly exasperated caretaker, yes. But not mother.

After all, her default method of calming a manic Jane is still to shove a latte and PopTart in her hands and send her down to Thor.

She’s just not nurturing.

Sure, she’s more nurturing than some people, but that’s not hard when comparing her capabilities with Tony I’ve Blown Myself Up On More Than One Occasion Stark and Bruce I Have So Many Issues It’s Not Even Funny Banner.

But it was difficult enough when she can’t just tell a tantrum-having child to suck it up and deal.

Charlotte was a great kid—she did love her sister to pieces, because how could she not—but everyone had their limit, and on most days, Darcy reached hers quickly.
Some days were bad enough that Bruce was offering her to teach her the meditation techniques he used to keep the Other Guy from wrecking yet another part of downtown Manhattan.

Pepper, ever the godsend—and Darcy still had no idea how she managed to get the empty apartment renovated in mere days—suggested that Darcy take advantage of Stark Industries’ employee daycare program, which not only gives Charlotte the chance to spend time with kids her age, but more importantly, gives Darcy a few hours a day to herself.

And with JARVIS being the best built-in nanny there ever was, Darcy’s able to try to take care of her scientists at odd hours without worrying that Charlotte was going to get into somewhere that should be secured.

Darcy’s mind races while she cuts a plate of washed vegetables to go with the grilled cheese that’s finishing up on the fancy cooktop island.

How is she supposed to tell Charlotte that she wasn’t going back to Washington to start Pre-K at the end of the month, especially since she was so damn excited it’s pretty much all she talks about?

The fact that she should have been in kindergarten by this point, two months away from her fifth birthday, is neither here nor there.

How in the world did no one in their cozy—and more importantly nosy—little neighborhood not notice that Charlotte wasn’t going to school?

But then again—no one really noticed when Darcy started walking herself to and from school in the first grade like a real-life Matilda, so basically, her neighbors were just as bad as her mother.

Even after two and a half months of venting to her bathroom mirror, to Jane and Thor, and even a few staged conversations in the elevator with JARVIS, and Darcy’s still no closer to figuring out how to explain to her sister that their mother just doesn’t want to deal with her anymore?

So much so, that after dumping Charlotte on the Tower’s doorstep, Carissa Lewis and the gypsy cab she was riding in dropped right off the face of the damn planet, like she and it never existed.

Sighing as she runs face-first into the same mental wall she’d been banging her head against for
weeks, Darcy turns away from the cutting board and scoops the spatula into her hands, pokes at the sandwich sizzling in the skillet.

If she ever sees her mother again, she is going to *strangle* that woman.

Darcy slides the toasted cheesy goodness onto a waiting plate, pulls a knife out of the block and slices it in half, “Order up, Charlie! Crayons away!”

Halfway through cutting the sandwich into manageable pieces and waiting for it to cool off, JARVIS pipes up with, “Ms. Lewis, as the only affiliate currently in residence, I feel it prudent to inform you that Captain Rogers has returned from his trip abroad.”

“Cool, cool. Think he wants a sandwich of six? I’m sure home cooking isn’t easy to come by in butt-fu—“ she remembers the tiny parrot in the room and wrinkles her nose. “*Fudge* nowhere.”

Not being able to curse like an adult is yet another curse to her new life.

“I would not know,” JARVIS says pointedly, and it’s not like it’s Darcy’s fault she forgets he’s not human. “He has an associate with him.”

Darcy’s brow hikes to her hairline as she snags a piece of crust with very-burnt-cheese that Charlotte won’t eat for some reason—picky weirdo—and pops it in her mouth, “Oh really? Is it that Wilson guy from the cluster-mess in D.C.?”

“No. Though I have been unable to confirm by merely *asking*, I can extrapolate and infer from the information that Agent Romanov leaked upon discovering the compromises within SHIELD that it is Sergeant Barnes.”

Darcy blinks and spares a quick glance to the arched doorway that leads to the elevators, “Guess that means things around here are going to get a lot more exciting, aren’t they J?”

“I am not entirely sure what you’re insinuating, Ms. Lewis.”

She smirks, “Sure you’re not.”
The chime on the elevator rings out as Darcy hands the plate to Charlotte, and she hears JARVIS’ muted greeting for the new arrivals, so Darcy starts in on buttering more slices of bread for another round of grilled cheeses as footsteps grow louder in their approach to the kitchen.

“Ms. Lewis?” Steve looks surprised to see her—but also travel weary and like he’s been beaten with a stick. “I didn’t think anyone was supposed to be home this morning.”

He also looks concerned, like her being here is a bad thing.

Last she knew, from a conversation she overheard—was allowed to overhear, probably, because spies—when Clint was on the phone with Natasha a few weeks ago, Steve had been in the middle of lord-knows-where, Europe, and or some of the countries that used to make up the Iron Curtain.

“So nice to see you too, Cap,” she grins, and then continues before he has a chance to try to stumble into a very awkward apology. “Pepper is making Stark live up his responsibilities and actually attend SI’s bi-annual board luncheon, and Jane, Thor, and Banner have been up north doing something related to atmospheric distortions for the last two days. I’m not sure where Clint is, but he promised to bring back cupcakes, and JARVIS won’t let him back in the building if he doesn’t.”

Steve blinks at her while another man slips in behind him, and Darcy watches as he takes note of the room’s occupants and its entrances with a practiced, cautious eye.

Neither man says a word, so she waves a hand and trudges on through the growing awkwardness, “Anyway, can I interest you and your friend in some sandwiches comprised of melted cheese and happiness?”

The man at Steve’s shoulder—like she doesn’t know exactly who she is—narrows his eyes in Charlotte’s direction, the girl completely oblivious as she sits with her back to them, humming as she eats and stares at the cartoon playing on her personal StarkPad.

To say that Tony doesn’t know how to deal with the Tower’s youngest resident is an understatement of hilarious proportions, so he’s instead decided to indoctrinate Charlotte against Apple products as a way to acknowledge her existence and presence in his home.

Darcy would worry that she’s getting spoiled, but then again, she has a closet full of adorable and expensive clothes that Pepper gave her to commemorate Charlotte’s first month in New York, so—
it’s not like she should talk.

“That’s my little sister,” Darcy clears her throat to get Charlotte’s attention. “Charlie, say hi to the Captain and his friend.”

She glances up and chirps a greeting like the polite parrot she is when she’s not moody, and then falls back into her own little world. Darcy nods with her chin as she grabs the butter and a block of some fancy cheese Tony imports from somewhere in Europe that specializes in fancy cheese, “Your turn, Cap.”

“Really, you can call me Steve,” he shifts back and places a hand on the other man’s shoulder, but retreats quickly when they both notice how he flinches. “This is Bucky. He’s, we fought together back in the, uh,” he looks at Bucky helplessly as his response wavers and then unceremoniously dies.

“During World War Two,” Darcy supplies, somehow resisting the urge to roll her eyes as she finishes the sentence that Bucky doesn’t. “I studied history during my aborted attempt to get my degree the first time around, I know exactly who he is. Also, I’m going to pretend I didn’t tell you exactly that when you came to see Thor when we were bumming around in London.”

Steve’s cheeks pink and Darcy would needle at him, but she does have some manners—sometimes, “Now you sir,” she says to the one who’s trying to blend into the shadows that aren’t in the kitchen this time of day. “Look like you need a shower, some comfort food, all the alcohol in the tri-state area, and some serious therapy. We can start with sandwiches, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

He remains silent, his eyes flicking around the room, and Darcy’s arched brows raise higher toward her hairline as she looks to Steve for answers, “What’s his deal?”

“I think he’s a little concerned about the knife you’ve been waving around since we walked in.”

With a blink, Darcy whips the blade around and drops it on the counter, takes a step away so it’s out of reach, “My bad,” she tries to sound apologetic. “Better?”

Bucky doesn’t say anything, but his shoulders drop a fraction and he looks a little less like he’s a heartbeat away from disarming her and stabbing her, or running away, or just shitting himself.
On the other hand, Steve smiles, “Thank you, Ms. Lewis.”

“Shit Rogers,” she lowers her voice so Charlotte won’t overhear, not that she’s paying any attention to the elephants or assassins in the room, “Ms. Lewis is a psychotic dumbass who dumped her four-year-old on her twenty-six-year-old daughter because she decided she couldn’t handle parenting a second time. For the love of all that is holy, please just call me Darcy.”

“Oh,” and now he looks like he wants to run and hide. Oops. “Sorry?”

She waves a hand in dismissal before returning to the sandwiches on the stove, “Long story short, you missed a few things during your whirlwind road trip to find your wayward beastie. How ‘bout I make you guys some lunch and we can talk about those exploits instead of the fact that I literally want to murder my mother?”

Bucky makes like, half an expression at her words, and she can’t tell if he’s entertained or extremely concerned, “Figurative-literal-murder, I promise,” she smirks, though his face doesn’t change from the neutral mask it’s fallen back into. “While I’m sure Stark would donate some of his billions to my legal support, I have enough to deal with right now with him and my other scientists. But seriously, you guys do need food.”

Steve blinks, and then turns back to Bucky and gestures toward the bar stools tucked on the other side of the island, “We probably should,” he rubs a hand over the back of his neck. “It’s been a long couple days.”

Bucky’s booted feet don’t make any noise as he shuffles deeper into the room, keeps one wary eye on Charlotte as he shifts onto the stool by the wall so he can keep everyone in view. Steve follows once he’s settled, dropping their bags in the doorway before he sits two stools away.

“What about your father?” Steve asks, and he has this painfully earnest look on his face that makes Darcy feel a little sick. “Was he not in position to take Charlotte in?”

Darcy laughs in an ugly way that’s not laughing at all, “For all I know, Tony is my father,” she rolls her eyes. “But not really, and JARVIS, please don’t go fishing,” she adds in direction of the ceiling. “Let’s just say that mommy dearest doesn’t know who either our fathers are. There’s a gaping hole on our birth certificates, woo-hoo.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Steve frowns. “That must have been difficult.”
“It’s whatever,” she drawls pointedly, because this subject is so over, and she drops two slices of bread on the skillet before she digs into a cabinet for one more. “So, sandwiches. Five each? Ten each? Twenty? Thirty? Special requests for toppings? If you can dream it, we probably have it. And I do mean that literally, have you seen this pantry?”

Looking as overwhelmed as Darcy feels, Steve glances at Bucky, watches as his brow twitches, which he seems to take as some sort of response, “Why don’t we just start with a couple? And uh, plain is fine Ms.—I mean, uh, Darcy.”

“Sure!”

She works, keeps watch on Bucky out of the corner of her eye and telegraphs every move she makes, using every skill she ever picked up in dealing with how trigger-happy Clint is before his first three cups of coffee.

“All done!” Charlotte chirps while Darcy presses the sandwiches together with a twist of her spatula.

She hops off her chair and grabs her plate, takes it into the kitchen and drops it in the sink with a clatter that makes Bucky jump.

“Grab a chair and come help me, Kid,” Darcy says with a gesture to her right side with her elbow.

Charlotte runs back around the island, unaware that Steve watches her as he leans over the counter and grabs half of a slice of cheese lying on the cutting board, “You never mentioned you had a sister.”

“I came home from my second junior year of college and found out that mumsy was eight months pregnant and, like I said, the mystery sperm donor had long since flown the coop. It was great, except, you know, not at all. A few months later I ended up in New Mexico with Jane, and the rest is history.”

She lifts Charlotte on the chair and pats her head, “You’re on cheese-laying duty, Kid. The more the better, these two eat like Thor does.”

“Okie dokie!”
The first two sets of sandwiches are finishing up, and Darcy fiddles with the heat settings as she looks back at Steve, “So,” she drawls. “Do any good sight-seeing while you were away?”

Steve levels her with a pointed, bland look, but she shrugs, “What?” She counters. “No one is going to judge you if you decided to take twenty minutes to have a look around. I mean, dude, Europe. Have you seen EuroTrip yet? You should add it to that cute list Thor said you were making.”

“Darcy,” he says around a put-upon sigh that’s not too unlike the sound Pepper made this morning when she tried to coax Tony out of the lab.

“Come on, the only reason Bucky’s sitting here watching me cook is because this is where he wants to be right now,” she looks at him and waits for a nod of agreement.

And then she remembers who she’s dealing with and continues, “You know I saw the footage from D.C. and read some of the zillion and a half files Natasha released. I mean, it was like something straight out of one of those spy thrillers I don’t have time to read anymore. Crazy.”

She grabs the spatula and eases the sandwiches onto the plates Charlotte holds out, “Here you are,” she takes them and slides them over the island. “Round one.”

As the plate ends up in front of Bucky, a knife springs into his right hand from out of fucking nowhere.

Darcy snatches her hand away and takes a step back, “If you don’t like grilled cheese, you could have said something, or you know, frowned in my general direction,” she mutters, tries to stay calm so Charlotte won’t notice. “Unlike most people my age, I’d like to think I can cook more than just the basics.”

Bucky scowls down at the pieces of bread with cheese oozing out of the sides like it’s offended him personally. “There are fourteen ways to compromise both the bread and the cheese with supplies found in this kitchen,” his voice is a harsh rasp, like he doesn’t use it often.

Which is a sickening not-surprise.
“The grilled cheese isn’t compromised,” Darcy looks at Steve, who looks about ready to jump at Bucky in case he lashes out. “It isn’t. Why would I do that to the best meal ever? That would be mean.”

Steve ignores her half-frightened rambles, “You need to eat something. If Darcy gets you something unopened, will you?”

“I’m functional.”

“You won’t be if you keep this up,” Darcy mutters before she looks to her sister. “Kid, grab me some more cheese and bread from the pantry, yeah? Something unopened.”

There probably isn’t a lot of wisdom in keeping her in the room with the guy who single-handedly destroyed an entire city block and beat a super-powered Steve so badly he spent three days in the hospital, but hey, there’s a massive granite-topped island between them.

And a Steve.

Charlotte returns with a new loaf of brioche and some unopened sharp cheddar, and Darcy grins as the girl juggles it and climbs back on the chair. Darcy takes the cheese and places it in the narrow gap between them that’s both in Bucky’s reach and, more importantly, out of stabbing distance, “How’s this look?”

Shoving aside the so-called compromised sandwich—which Steve eagerly digs into like he has no self-preservation—Bucky takes the cheese and turns it over in his hand before he nods once, “It is adequately wrapped and doesn’t show signs of tampering.”

“Well yeah, Pepper would castrate Tony if he tried to kill me,” Darcy snorts. “You want in on slicing duty, or am I allowed to grab that knife again?”

Bucky glances between her and the knife before he places his own on the island and nods once.

Grabbing the butter and the dullest spreading knife in the kitchen, Darcy passes them to Charlotte for the bread and starts in on carving into the not compromised, seriously, cheese.

Steve finishes one half of what was supposed to be Bucky’s sandwich and clears his throat, “So how
is, Ian was it? Is he still in London?”

“Ugh,” Darcy flinches, and her eyes flick to Bucky, who seems to be content with ignoring them as he eats, so she rolls her gaze back to Steve. “I’m guessing that means you didn’t hear about the thing that happened while you were busy not being a tourist.”

Concern flashes across his face, his eyes sparking with a new level of attention, “What happened?”

She huffs a sigh and shoves a piece of cheese in her mouth to delay having to talk about one of her least favorite recent memories, “After the Intern was done basking in the glory of your biceps, he remembered that he was a disciple of the big H and tried to steal Jane’s research. Oh, and kill us in our sleep.”

Darcy says it all in a rush, so it takes Steve a second to translate the meaning behind her words, “Oh.”

“Yeah, oh. So, ugh,” she waves her hand in dismissal, because she despises having to talk about Ian. “And for the record, I’d like to think that he was an aberration and not at all due to my judgement being subpar. For the record, my judgement is awesome. But anyway, I got to taser him before Thor took care of making him go away, and now we’re all here. In this kitchen. Eating.”

Before Steve can, Darcy doesn’t know, attempt to apologize for revealing that nearly half of SHIELD was a Nazi or something, Charlotte grabs the hem of Darcy’s sweater and tugs, “Can I have a snack?”

“Excuse you, you just had lunch,” Darcy rolls her eyes and eases another sandwich on Bucky’s plate.

Apparently after the first, he realized how hungry he actually was, and Darcy does not want to know what he’d been living off of since slipping Hydra’s super creepy leash.

Charlotte rolls her huge blue eyes, stamps her foot against the seat she’s standing on, “Lunch isn’t a snack.”

Darcy rolls her eyes right back before looking at the men across from her, “See what I have to deal with now? You’re lucky you don’t have siblings.”
With a short laugh, Steve shakes his head, but he breaks off when he notices Bucky’s frown and the way his half-eaten sandwich falls from limp fingers back to his plate, “I-” his eyes are wide as he breaks off, swallows hard.

“Buck?”

His shoulders are a tense line as he eventually looks at Steve, “I had a sibling?”

Darcy winces—of course, her offhand comment about family and not her blatant reference to his former captors would trigger the poor guy.

She mouths an apology in Steve’s direction, but he probably misses it as he makes to place a hand on Bucky’s arm before thinking better of it and letting it fall to the counter between them, “You did,” he says gently. “Her name was Rebecca.”

“I-I don’t,” Bucky’s eyes dart back over to the exit again, and Darcy curls her fingers around Charlotte’s arm, ready to pull her away from the counter when his shoulders tense up around his ears. “I don’t remember.”

Bucky squeezes his hands to fists, and Darcy hears a low, dull sound coming from his left side, like gears grinding under his ratty, oversized windbreaker. “Hey Charlie, go get something to eat and take it into the other room,” she mutters, not so gently urging her sister off the chair. “Go enjoy that Tony’s got all the TV channels known to man and most to monkey.”

“But-”

“Go.”

She’s gone in seconds, and Darcy watches as she disappears around the corner, so when she looks back, it’s in time to see smoke rising from Bucky’s shoulder, the mechanics of what’s obviously his metal arm whirring and grinding into a high screech.

She turns her frown toward Steve, “He going to be okay?”
He keeps his focus on Bucky, ready to move to defend her if need be, which is incredibly comforting, “His arm was damaged,” he says, gentle enough that Bucky doesn’t startle. “He agreed to come here so Stark could take a look at it.”

The limb in question twitches hard, and Steve makes to reach for it again, “Bucky,” he draws his hand back. “You need to calm down, or it’s going to get worse, remember?”

It’s the wrong word to say, and Darcy flinches, but Bucky’s attention remains focused on the space between him and the counter, his mouth moving slowly even as he remains silent but distressed by whatever he’s recounting.

“I don’t remember.”

“I know,” Steve makes to reach out again, squeezes his hand into a fist and presses it into the counter. “Bucky, you need to look at me. You came here because we can help you. We’ll get you the help you need.”

His body shakes with the force of the shudder that rocks through him, and his eyes flick to the hand resting inches from his arm, “There’s nothing to help,” he rasps. “Help is for humans. I am not human anymore.”

Darcy wants to throw up, and it looks like she’s not alone, because Steve swallows hard as he gathers his thoughts, “Yes, you are Bucky,” he insists. “You saved my life. You wouldn’t have pulled me from the river if you didn’t have any humanity left.”

It takes a while, but he finally looks at Steve, “I’m not him. I can’t be. Even if you fix me, I can’t be him,” he looks back down at the plate, pushes it across the counter. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

Just as Darcy thinks he’s going to flip out and run off—like out a window and down the side of the building or something equally ridiculous—Bucky heaves a heavy sigh, blinks twice more, and looks back up, “I am—I have returned to functioning within acceptable parameters.”

“Bucky, your arm caught fire yesterday.”
He looks down at the limb, his gloved fingers splaying shakily against the granite before he forces them into a loose fist, “The statistical probability of that reoccurring with the repairs you and I were able to make is zero point zero-two-five percent.”

Resisting the urge to roll her eyes, Darcy flicks the burner off, “As reassuring as you think that sounds, I should probably call Tony. You’ll be his number one favorite person in the world for giving him an excuse to cut out on his luncheon.”

“I’d rather not interrupt,” Steve tries, but Darcy cuts him off with a wave of her hand.

“As much as I have first-hand experience with the building’s fire suppression protocols and know full well that they work perfectly, one of Tony’s rules is that people aren’t allowed to catch fire on the premises. Especially when it’s not his fault.”

Steve looks half-ready to argue again—and hey, it’s not like she doesn’t know how trying Tony can be—but Bucky sighs and mutters, “You heard the lady, punk.”

Surprise smacks Steve in the face as he gapes at Bucky for a second, but Bucky is looking blankly at his arm, so Steve shakes out of it, “All right, yeah,” he turns to Darcy. “Could you call him, please?”

She flips her phone from her back pocket and unlocks it, “You won’t regret it,” she frowns and taps her phone against her lips. “Okay, maybe a little. I heard about that pissing contest on Helicarrier 1.0.”

Steve rubs his eyes, “I’d rather not talk about it.”

Looking between the amusement on Darcy’s face to the annoyance blooming across Steve’s, Bucky arches a brow, “I am not supposed to be surprised, I don’t think?”

Eyes flaring, Darcy shakes her head and goes back to her phone.

Everything is going to be just damn great when Tony gets back.

Or—more than likely—the building was going to explode.
She puts the phone to her ear in time to hear him say, “Lewis, please tell me the world is ending.”

Yes, the building is definitely going to explode.

--

Fortunately, the building didn’t explode.

Yet.

Not that Darcy’s privy to what happened once Tony got back—in obnoxiously record time via a new suit he apparently kept in the trunk of his town car—once he and Steve managed to coax and extremely reluctant Bucky into the lab before sealing it off.

And that’s why it’s important to make nice with the computer system that runs the household.

“I’m sorry, I just can’t wrap my head around this,” Jane says as she sips her wine, the sound of Thor clattering around the kitchen as he prepares dinner—along with being the her to a glittering, otherworldly kingdom, he was a fantastic cook. Seriously, who knew Jane caught the catch of all catches?—echoing faintly into the sitting room of their suite, a floor above the one Darcy and Charlotte live in.

Looking away from the breathtaking view of the city skyline—she was obsessed, so sue her—Darcy shrugs and taps her fingers against the side of her glass, “It’s not like it’s rocket science, which I know you understand, at least parts of. They got in from wherever they were, and I made them lunch. I didn’t go out of my way or anything, I was already cooking for Charlie.”

“He was a Hydra assassin for seventy years!”

“Not willingly,” since Charlotte had long since been tucked into bed and was most definitely asleep, Darcy rolled her eyes and took a long sip of the cabernet she and Thor pilfered from Tony’s not-so-secret stash. “And assassins need to eat too. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if Agent Romanov could eat Thor under the table if she really wanted to.”
Jane spares a look over her shoulder to the kitchen, “I don’t think it’s the same thing.”

“Well, I don’t think Steve would have brought him here if he was really a threat.”

“Darcy, you said he pulled a knife on you.”

She snorts, “I think he was more threatened by the sandwich than by me. Pretty sure he knows that the only way someone like me is going to get the upper hand on someone like him would be by compromising his food. Which I wouldn’t,” she says pointedly in case he was somehow listening, because spies. “Because that would be rude.”

Jane narrows her eyes at something in Darcy’s tone, “Are you really okay with him being here with Charlotte around? I know we’re all doing things a little differently since she got here. Even Tony is being more responsible with what projects he takes out of the lab these days.”

She shrugs and drinks down the rest of her glass, “I’m fine with her being around Bruce, and let’s be real here, it’s basically the same thing. At least Barnes isn’t going to get ten feet tall and green when he gets snippy.”

“Yes, but-”

“I’m not worried, okay?” She cuts Jane off, because when she gets going, no matter the subject, it’s nigh impossible to get her to stop.

Isn’t that a law of motion or something?

“I mean, he basically ignored her the entire time he was with us, which in retrospect, may not have been the best idea I ever had, but whatever. It turned out fine.”

Whatever Jane may say in reply is interrupted by the thump of the oven door closing, and then Thor joins them, a mug of beer in one hand and the half-full bottle of wine she and Jane were drinking from in the other.

“Thanks,” she murmurs as she takes the bottle, refilling her glass before she tops off Jane’s and pointedly ignores the face she makes when she fills it all the way to the rim.
Clad in sweats and a t-shirt, Thor takes the seat between Jane and the arm of the couch, and she curls up against his side, “We haven’t discussed it yet, Darcy,” he says, tone this side of grave. “But for whatever it may mean in your realm, Charlotte is under Asgardian protection, just as you and Jane and Erik are.”

She rubs her fingers down the bridge of her nose, “I know. Thanks, big guy.”

He grins around a swallow of beer, “Of course,” he tips his head. “Have you given thought to Charlotte’s schooling? I know you said she was behind due to the circumstances of her upbringing.”

“So behind,” she grumbles. “But according to the stunningly competent team of tutors Pepper brought in, it’s apparently not as bad as I first thought. I just need to take a closer look at the list of schools Stark Industries can get her into.”

“Anything sound promising?” Jane asks, her eyes flicking to Darcy’s tablet, which is propped on the coffee tablet against a pile of paperwork and science journals.

Darcy rolls her eyes, “They all do,” she snorts into her glass. “I’m leaning toward the Constance Billard School for Girls. The graduation rate is disgustingly high, endless extracurricular activity options, through the roof SAT and ACT scores, and the campus is easily secured, since I’m pretty sure the entire student body is spawned from the elitist of New York’s elite.”

“Sounds like you’ve already made your decision.”

She shrugs, “I’m a lot out of my depth here, but it feels right. That tour I took the other day pretty much has me convinced.”

“Your instincts are unlikely to steer you wrong,” Thor grins. “They didn’t when we first met.”

Smirking, she wrinkles her nose at him, “I sure as hell hope so. I’m going to talk to Pepper about finalizing the paperwork on Monday,” she mutters around a jaw-cracking yawn. “Crap, I’ve gotta get to bed soon. This pseudo-parent thing is making me super lame.”

But before she can, Thor makes sure she eats a full meal—like, seriously a full meal—and she
stretches her legs out in front of her until the feeling returns in the form of sharp pins and needles. She gets up, leans down to hug Jane and clasp wrists with Thor before he walks her to the door.

“Sleep well, Darcy,” he hugs her again, hard enough her back cracks. “All will settle down soon.”

“I think Pepper said that three months ago, but thanks,” she grins, throws a final wave at Jane over her shoulder as she makes her way to the elevator at the end of the hall, low strains from an acoustic guitar slipping into the space from Clint’s apartment.

As the elevator makes the seconds-long trip downstairs, Darcy flicks through the Twitter feed on her phone—@AvengerSightings was hilarious in all the ways it was almost always wrong, @HulksPants kept throwing out endless and ridiculous theories about how said garment could defy just about every law of physics, @CapDoesntKnow had some hilarious memes of Steve’s imagined reactions to modern-era technology and media, while @ShitStarkSays was one of the best things on the Internet.

And, knowing his narcissism, probably run by Tony himself.

So, she doesn’t notice the person standing outside the elevator doors until she steps right into someone’s arm.

“Crap!”

Her free hand flies to her forehead after she rebounds off something hard, and she blinks away the pain to see the sleeve of a gray Henley taking up most of the space in front of her.

“Er, Bucky?” She blinks again, and yeah, it’s him.

He takes a step back, angles his left arm—holy shit that thing really hurt—away from her, “Sorry.”

“No, that’s all on me, I wasn’t watching where I was going,” she grins up at him, tries to be calm because he’s probably not entirely comfortable with people who aren’t, well, Steve.

Then, she blinks, “Wait. What are you doing here?”
He points to the door across the hall from hers, “That is my residence.”

Right, they were saving the other apartment for whenever Steve decided to show up.

Bucky’s hair is wet and tied back, and he’s not only shaved, but also no longer looks like he’s on the run, even if his black sweats were tucked into the calf-high combat boots he had on when he and Steve arrived earlier that day.

“You do not possess many relevant survival skills,” he finally says, and then looks her up and down, probably away of the way her gaze keeps sliding off him as her wine-addled mind tries and fails to focus.

She’s going to have to get the name of the brand from Jane before she throws the bottle out, and make Tony get more of that wine.

Knowing him, he’d probably just going to buy the entire winery.

Back up.

“Was that supposed to be an insult?” She’s mostly sure she didn’t actually sound accusing. “Because I survived both a crazy, flame-throwing robot sent by a demigod having the temper tantrum of the century and creepy non-Tolkien elves from another universe. My survival skills are awesome.”

Bucky frowns, and part of her wants to ask him what’s going through his mind, but that’s a can of worms that she’s definitely not sober enough to handle.

Eventually, he shakes his head, “This floor is secure.”

Blinking slowly, she nods once, “Uh, yeah. Biometrics in the elevator won’t allow unauthorized personnel into the residential levels anyway. JARVIS is totally on it. Yay JARVIS.”

“Thank you for your vote of confidence, Ms. Lewis.”
Bucky shifts, his shoulders tensing from the AI’s interjection, but instead of running off, he nods again, “It’s significantly better than your last residence.”

“My what?”

“The residence you shared with the woman, the man who hung a hammer on the coat rack, and the other man who didn’t wear pants.”

Darcy flinches at the thought of Erik—who hopefully was still taking his meds, and she should probably call and check in on him sometime soon—and then her eyes flare wide, “Wait, you were in London? Did Steve know?”

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, rests his metal shoulder against the wall, “It took me a while to remember where I saw you. My memory isn’t very,” he trails off, jaw ticking. “Accurate. Sometimes.”

“But you were in London, like, months ago, right when Steve first started looking for you?”

“I did not know what he wanted from me.”

“Steve?”

“I will not be taken in and wiped again.”

She nods slowly, and then stops when her brain catches up with what he’s saying, “Wait, wiped? Do I want to know?” He seems like he’s about to deflect when she cuts him off with a shake of her head. “Never mind. I’m not sober enough for stories of Hydra-themed shenanigans. I don’t think I will ever be sober enough. There’s no point in telling me, so don’t work yourself up about it. Seriously. All good.”

Silence falls over the hallway, and it’s on the verge of diving headfirst into awkward town when Bucky tilts his head, his blue eyes boring into her bleary pair, “You require additional electrolytes before you go to sleep.”
“Dude, I require *so many things* before I go to bed,” she smacks her hand over her mouth. “Please pretend I didn’t say that.”

A *look* crosses Bucky’s face.

On a person who had been allowed to express his emotions for most of his life, it might have been a smirk.

It falls away quickly, back to that impassive mask he’d been wearing most of the day, “Why don’t you start with Gatorade?”

“Sounds like a plan,” she chuckles as she moves around him. “Thanks.”

As she makes her way to her suite, she slaps her hand against the panel next to the door, waits for it to read the lines on her palm before it beeps and lets her in.

Sparing a final glance over her shoulder, finds Bucky still watching her, another strange frown on his face.

She doesn’t think he’s going to say anything, but then he does, “Those sandwiches were nutritionally adequate and,” his jaw works as he fights for his next words. “Tasted good. They were good.”

She dips her head, “I’ve got a whole list of combinations I’ve been meaning to try out, if you’re interested.”

Apparently, it was Get Tipsy And Make Friends With Your New Assassin Neighbor Day.

Except he probably has about a million better things to do, like dismantling the remains of the organization that kept him captive for so long, and recovering from everything that happened while he was in custody of said organization. Not to mention the whole, metal arm thing, and a whole host of other things Darcy was *still* not sober enough to think about at the moment.
“Maybe.”

“Well then.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, I love to hear from you :) 
Aloha everyone!

---

Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number Ninety Nine: “I’ve never met a hyperbole I didn’t like.”

“I know.”

“You do?

“You spent the last hour shouting to the rooftops about how we’re out of soup.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

“You didn’t come watch Frozen with us.”

Bucky was in the living room on the common level a few nights later, moving from one end of the massive space to the other and back again when he heard the tiny voice, and he spun around, palming his knife as he barked, “Znayet li vasha sestra, chto ty prosnul’sya?”

Charlotte stared up at him with wide eyes, and his mind eventually caught up with his mouth as he slowly realized that there was something off about what he just said.

Her brows furrowed, “I don’t know what ‘znayet li vasha sestra, chto ty prosnul’sya’ means.”

Chapter Notes

Firstly, sorry for the delay, I was in Hawaii last week (yay ill-timed vacations) and accidentally spent most of my downtime writing fic for the Canadian-SWAT show Flashpoint (which I may or may not be in the middle of my second watch-through on Netflix since I finished the first go-around in January.) It's just. I can't even with Winnie and Spike. And Sam and Jules. And like, everyone.

So there's that.

And secondly, I don't speak Russian, so what Bucky says comes courtesy of Google Translate, and he translates himself as the dialogue goes on.

Lots of Bucky/Charlotte interaction in this one, so enjoy!

---

Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 108: “Is it weird if I congratulate you on hitting the marriage jackpot?”

“Extremely.”

“Okay, but I’m going to do it anyway.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It all goes to shit over breakfast, on a rare morning where they don’t eat in the common kitchen, because Darcy is pretty sure she’s catching a cold and doesn’t want to spread it to everyone’s least-favorite hypochondriac—Tony, she’s talking about Tony—when Charlotte asks the innocent question Darcy’s been dreading for months:
“When is Mommy coming back to take me to school?”

Darcy’s fumbling attempts to explain everything end with Charlotte running from the suite, tears streaming down her small, puffy cheeks as she dashes through the open elevator doors.

Curling up in one corner, she wraps her arms around her legs and buries her head against her body knees.

Where is here mommy?

Why didn’t she want to be with her and Darcy?

What did she do wrong?

What did she do?

WhyWhyWhyWhyWhyWhy?

And back inside the apartment, Darcy lets her head fall heavily on the surface of the kitchen table.

“Son of a bitch.”

--

Bucky is pacing back and forth in the living room of the apartment he shares with Steve in attempt to silence the buzzing in his ears, when the slam of a door pierces through the din in his mind.

“Computer?” He snaps as he edges toward the door, a knife slipping into his palm.

Mostly for his own comfort, because it is safe here.
“It seems that the young Ms. Lewis is having a fraught moment.”

Right. The Lewis’.

Other than the moment in the hallway, Bucky hadn’t seen much of his new neighbor or her sister in the week since he and Steve made it back from Yugoslavia.

He’d been busy with Howard’s aggravating offspring—within seconds of meeting Tony, he understood why Steve had that angry look on his face whenever the man was brought up—as they worked on ways to upgrade his arm without compromising the structure that kept it fused to his torso.

And, to take some of the well, Hydra, out of it.

Part of him wishes he could have more insight into what Stark is trying to do—he has so much more available to him than his father ever did, purely due to the fact that Howard helped pioneer some of the most significant developments in technology in history—but when he’s down in the lab, all he hears is the echoes of his screams as he’s wiped, and drugged, and beaten, and frozen, over and over and over and over again.

Edging into the hall, Bucky glances around for Darcy, but the space is empty, the door to her apartment closed.

“Computer, where’s the kid?”

The elevator pings, and Bucky looks over, finds a small ball of miserable, sniffling human curled up in the back corner.

He looks down the hall again, waiting for Darcy’s inevitable appearance, but it doesn’t seem to be coming anytime soon, so he huffs a sigh and heads over, stopping just inside the doors, waits for Charlotte notice.
Eventually, she does, and she sniffs and wipes her eyes with a small hand, “Hi.”

“Are you operating,” for the moment, the incessant buzzing of muffled screams in his ears lowers into a quiet murmur, and his shoulders drop a fraction. “Are you all right?”

She sniffs again, rocks a little from side to side, “My mommy does not want me,” blinking, she tilts her head and narrows her eyes up at him. “What is your name?”

“I am,”
“I am not sure.”

Rubbing his temple, Bucky sits down heavily against the panel under the scanning plate, and he mirrors Charlotte, drawing his knees up and wrapping his arms around his legs, “I do not know.”

“You don’t?”

He shrugs, presses a hand to his temple as the screeching blasts through his head in wave after wave after wave, “Steve calls me Bucky,” he manages. “You may call me that.”

“But is that your name?”

“Went by it once,” allegedly. “It was a long time ago.”

Small lines appear between Charlotte’s brows, “I don’t get it.”

“It’s kind of complicated.”

Charlotte gnaws on her lower lip, curls her arms tighter around her legs, “I do not know why she doesn’t want me anymore,” she mutters. “Did I do something wrong?”
Bucky doesn’t know what to say to that.

He also does not know why Charlotte is staying with Darcy, but this does help put a few of the pieces together, “Sometimes people are not capable of caring for others. Even their own family.”

“Capable?”

“Not,” he breaks off, jaw working. “Not able to. It happens sometimes, but it’s not your fault.”

Prephim. You are a gift to mankind. The mission. He has been out of cryo too long. The mission. You are my mission.

Bucky draw a sharp breath through his nose as the screeching increases, but Charlotte doesn’t notice his rising discomfort.

“I want my mommy,” she mutters into her knees. “I want to go home.”

He presses a hand to the base of his skull, digs his fingers into his skin hard enough that it’s probably going to bruise, “Sometimes those things are out of your control,” he has no idea if he was helping, and where is Darcy? “I cannot go home either.”

Blinking, Charlotte lifts her head, cocks it to one side, “Why not?”

“Some jackass land developer turned it into a boutique hotel.”

Despite her upset and the tears streaking down her cheeks, Charlotte giggles, and Bucky’s shoulders drop a little more as the sounds seeps into his mind, which helps dim the screeching, “You said a bad word.”

“So I did.”

“Darcy yells at Tony when he says bad words in front of me.”
“Yeah?” She nods eagerly, and he pushes down the urge to smirk and the nerves that follow, because it’s almost terrifying that he doesn’t remember how. “Think she’s going to yell at me?”

“No offense, but with your current mental state, I think I’d rather not.”

Bucky tenses, his hand going for the knife he stuffed in his boot when he sat down, but the noises in his head case completely when he looks up at Darcy.

She’s in front of the still-open doors, a sheepish smile on her face when the overhead lights reflect off the metal blade, “I startled you. That’s mean. Sorry Bucky.”

Slowly, he takes a deep breath and lets the knife go, stretches his legs out in front of him, “No. You didn’t.”

Darcy arches a brow and snorts, “I did, but I won’t tell Steve,” she glances at Charlotte. “Kid, can we please talk?”

“I dunno,” she mumbles and slowly drops her arms.

“Come on kid, we have to,” she holds her hand out. “Besides, I’m sure your new friend would like to brood in peace.”

Bucky snorts, “I don’t brood.”

Charlotte stands and grasp’s Darcy’s hand, “Sure you don’t,” she drawls. “No one’s judging you here.”

Standing as well, he follows them into the hall, “Stark does.”

Darcy glances over her shoulder, meets his eye, “That’s because he has some seriously unresolved daddy drama, and you totally knew Howard better than he ever did. I wouldn’t worry about it. He just wants to ask you about all the stories Steve’s too nice to tell, but he doesn’t want to overtax your puzzle-brain, so he deflects with judgement and sarcasm.”
“Do you worry about anything?”

“Is that another jab at my perceived lack of self-preservation?”

Stopping short, Bucky swallows hard until Darcy turns and he sees the amused smirk on her face, “Just curious.”

She passes her free hand over Charlotte’s hair, “I worry about plenty.”

“I know.”

“Then why’d you ask?”

He racks his mind for answer, can’t find one, so he settles on, “Because I can.”

Darcy tilts her head, regards him for a moment, “Yeah, you can,” she looks back down at Charlotte. “Let’s get a move on, Kid, I need cold medicine and we’ve got a lot to go over.”

Her eyes widen, “Can we watch Frozen again?”

“Talk first, then movie,” she laughs and looks at Bucky. “Will you come? I’ll probably drag the nerds out of the lab too, remind them that there’s such a thing as natural sunlight.”

He freezes.

While he knows they’re a very inclusive group, spending as much time as Steve told him he and the Howling Commandos did during the war, he still didn’t expect to be welcomed into the fold so quickly.

“I don’t know.”
“Well you should. *Frozen* is a children’s phenomenon no adult should miss.”

Bucky stops in front of the door to his apartment, “I will think about it.”

--

Here is something Bucky knows:

The residential levels of Stark Tower are *safe*.

Steve tells him so, the computer built into the walls, the one that controls the building tells him so, and Darcy and Charlotte flit around like they have no cares—their marked lack of self-preservation makes his brain *itch*—and most importantly, the Soldier that hovers in one very large corner of his mind confirms it to be accurate.

As he continues making the painstaking withdrawal off the drug cocktail Hydra used for so many decades to keep him docile, Bucky runs headfirst into terrible spans of day after day after day where the screeching is so loud he can’t sleep, followed by long stretches of hours and even days where he fell so deeply asleep that sometimes he wakes with a monitor wrapped around his wrist so the computer could be sure that he’s still *alive*.

The first morning he woke like that went by in a blur, but he does remember that the monitor ended up crushed into a mess of metal and wires embedded into the wall on the other side of his room.

He remembers *that* so vividly, and guilt gnaws at the pit of his stomach no matter how hard Steve tries to assure him that it’s okay to have reactions like that.

On the long days and nights when his fractured mind keeps him awake, Bucky paces up and down each and every hallway, crawls through the mazes of air ducts, and inspects each nook and cranny of every level he has access to.

Except the labs.

He doesn’t go there unless he absolutely *has* to meet with Stark, which wars from the man from the nineteen thirties and forties who was so obsessed with science and technology and the future but *he*
was not that man anymore.

And the man he was now, was not ready for that.

Not yet.

So, he walks and walks and walks until his feet and legs and lower back scream louder than the screeching he heard all the time, and then passes out until his fractured memories break through the bone-deep exhaustion to torture him all over again.

The constant walking is the only thing that keeps him calm, because there are corners and sides and walls in his head that refuse to accept that his place is safe unless he sees it himself.

And not just for him, but for all of them.

They all need to be protected.

So, though Steve thinks it'll only exacerbate his paranoia, he asks Tony to give Bucky access to the security feeds covering the streets outside the Tower. There, Bucky sees the too-routine-to-be-causal rotation of men and women—poorly concealed, low-level government agents that would have never survived in SHIELD, let alone in the forces of Hydra that hid within the organization. They keep watch on the building, and it doesn’t take much effort to find that they’re regularly reporting to a man called Ross.

Bucky doesn’t want to know whom they’re watching for—he doesn’t think it’s for him, and he would be highly, highly insulted if they were—but he has to know to keep his new home safe.

But he does not want to know.

“Computer,” he clears his throat. “JARVIS.”

“Yes, Sergeant?”
A second inquiry from JARVIS yanks him from the roar that fills his ears again, and he forces his hands out of the tight fists his fingers curl into. “Does the name Ross have any bearing on anyone in this building?”

“One moment please,” JARVIS pauses, and he continues pacing up and down the length of the—his, it was his, because he has possessions now—bedroom, until he continues. “General Thaddeus E ‘Thunderbolt’ Ross matches the parameters you described. He is the man the agents casing the Tower have been reporting to.”

“You knew?” He can almost feel his blood boiling, and he pivots toward the hall, intent on waking Steve.

But JARVIS interjects before he reaches the door, “If you would just wait a moment,” Bucky pauses and tilts his head, one hand presses against the wall next to the door, digs his fingers into it. “General Ross is waiting for a moment to regain the upper hand and apprehend Doctor Banner. He and his agents have no bearing on your presence here.”

Doctor Banner.

He wasn’t a medical doctor, but Tony insisted that he check him over when he first arrived.

There was something about the mild-mannered man that kept him on edge the entire time, and it was only Steve’s calming presence at his side that stopped him from bolting.

He runs a hand through his long, tangled hair as tension slowly drains from his shoulders, “Why is Ross after Banner?”

“The simplest way to explain would be to point you to the circumstances that led to Doctor Banner becoming the Hulk,” JARVIS’ tone is succinct, like he’s told the story many times before. “Shall I download the files to your tablet for your perusal?”

The object in question is still in its box on his dresser, and Bucky’s left hand twitches, the joints creaking and servos purring loudly, “No. Yes,” sweat beads at his temples and he swallows hard, glares at it. “No. No.”

“Well, if you ever desire to see them, I will allow you access.”
Bucky rests his forehead against the door, breathes deep, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Sergeant.”

He huffs, pushes off the door and opens it.

He needs to walk.

--

“You didn’t come watch Frozen with us.”

Bucky’s in the living room on the common level a few nights later, moving from one end of the massive space to the other and back again, when he hears the tiny voice. He spins around, palms and knife and barks, “Znayet li vasha sestra, chto ty prosnulysya?”

Charlotte stares up at him with wide eyes, and his mind eventually catches up with his mouth, and he realizes that there’s something off about what he’d said.

Her brow furrows, “I don’t know what ‘znayet li vasha sestra, chto ty prosnulysya’ means.”

Narrowing his eyes, he stashes the knife and tils his head, steps toward her, but stops short, “Does your sister know that you’re awake?”

“I was thirsty, but we don’t have anything in our kitchen except PopTarts and air,” she shuffles from one foot to the other, the low lights reflecting off the shiny rainbow butterflies on the front of her nightgown. “What language was that?”

“It’s Russian. Sestra means sister,” he takes a slow step toward the kitchen. “What did you want?”

He waits for her to catch up, her hum following him before she says, “Milk please?”
Bucky freezes, falls heavily into his next step as a wave of memories threatened to overwhelm him and his still-fragile psyche.

Somehow, he claws back to reality, chest heaving as Charlotte stares up at him, and he rasps, “Milk?”

Her tiny feet slap against the floor, “Yes please. Are you okay?”

“Functioning,” another harrowing moment follows when he’s faced with an entire fucking shelf of milk—seriously, why did they need so much fucking milk—and he blindly grabs for a carton, kicks the door shut so hard the entire thing rattles. “I’m functioning within adequate parameters.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he watches Charlotte stand in front of the sink, rocking on her heels as she watches him watch her. He grabs a glass from one of the upper cabinets, “How did you do that?”

Charlotte stops rocking, looks at him like he spoke in a different language again, but he was sure—yes, he was, he was—that he said the words in English that time.

“Do what?”

“The Russian,” he pours half a glass before slapping the cap back on the carton. “You mimicked my accent perfectly.”

Charlotte sips at the milk, whispers under her breath, “Znayet li vasha sestra, chto ty prosnulsya?”

He’s pretty sure that’s supposed to be weird.

“Most people who don’t know other languages wouldn’t remember that as well as you do.”

“They don’t?”
He places the milk back in the refrigerator quickly as possible, leans against the door and forces down the completely irrational feeling that the cartons were going to somehow make their escape and attack him, “It’s a very useful skill for a person to have.”

Charlotte takes another sip, “I like to remember things,” she glares and her pale eyes flash. “I remember you were going to watch Frozen with us. Darcy made Steve sing the songs with her.”

He remembers that too.

But he couldn’t bring himself to join them.

“I had to stay away.”

“Why?”

“Because I had to,” he watches her drain the rest of her glass and holds his hand out for it. “You should go back to sleep.”

Charlotte’s features twist into a tiny frown, “But-”

The screeching is getting louder again, “Go back to bed. Go.”

Eventually, she huffs in exasperation, and it would have been funny he was anyone else in this building, “Fine,” she mutters. “Goodnight.”

“Night.”

When she’s gone, when the sounds of her footsteps disappear into the elevator, he pushes off the refrigerator and drops the glass in the sink.

Huffing as he tries to steady his shaking hands, he nudges the faucet on and leans his head down, his left ear next to the steady stream of water, and he listens to it pound against the metal bottom and drown out the screaming in his mind.
“Where is Bucky?”

Darcy pauses, her coffee halfway to her lips as she looks across the table at Charlotte, who was sitting on her knees on the chair between Jane and Thor. She’s picking at the lukewarm pancakes on her plate as she looks at Darcy with innocent curiosity plain on her syrup-smereared face.

“What?”

Taking another bite of pancake, Charlotte doesn’t realize that everyone at the table—Steve, Bruce, and Pepper too—are watching with frowns on their faces, “Where is Bucky?” She asks again.

Steve glances at Darcy, and then clears his throat, “Why do you ask?”

Her eyes are wide and she blinks them slowly, and then swallows the bite in her mouth, “I am curious,” she rolls her eyes and rips another piece of pancake, smears it and her fingers with more butter and syrup. “Because I am four, and four-year-olds are supposed to ask questions.”

“I was right, you are too dam—dang smart for your own good, Kid,” Darcy tries to hide her unease as she stuffs a large bite of the ham and cheese omelet Thor made for her in her mouth.

“I’m normal.”

Darcy snorts, her shoulders dropping and the tensions easing out of the kitchen now that Charlotte’s moved onto another subject, “Not living here you’re not.”

“But doesn’t Bucky have to eat?”

Or not.

Darcy should have known better.
So, she looks at Steve and shrugs, and he takes a long sip of his coffee, “He’s sleeping, Charlotte.”

With wide eyes, she turns to Darcy, her hair flipping over her shoulder, and the ends would have fallen onto the mess on her plate had Jane not swept the mass away, “Why can’t I sleep in?” She whines, pouts hard, “No fair!”

Rolling her eyes, Darcy props her chin on her palm, “Because you, little miss, are going to spend the day down at Daycare with all your cute little friends while Jane and I get some work done on breaking the laws of physics.”

“But Daycare’s boring.”

She pouts again, and it’s still adorable.

“I hate Daycare! I want to break laws of physics!”

Darcy shares an amused look with Jane, who stuffs a fist against her mouth to mask her laughter, and when she’s back under control she looks back at Charlotte, “It’s art day, Kid, and trust me, no you don’t.”

She perks up, “Can I finger paint?”

Darcy pretends to think about it and fakes a sigh, “I guess.”

“Yes! I love Daycare! Daycare’s the best!”

Thor’s throaty chuckle echoes through the kitchen, “Your exuberance is quite similar to that of your sister’s, little Lady Charlie. I am sure we would all prefer to partake in finger painting, rather than the work we must do.”

Tilting her head, Charlotte shifts on her knees and looks up at him, “What does exuberance mean?”

He places his hand on her shoulder, “You get excited.”
“Oh,” she blinks, and then nods. “Yeah, I do that.”

Darcy looks back at Jane, who’s watching Thor and Charlotte with a look on her face.

Oh boy, Jane’s in some serious trouble.

Well, more serious trouble compared to the last million times Thor swept her off her feet.

With a smirk, Darcy files the look away to tease Jane when they’re in the labs, because human-Asgardian wedding bells were so ringing, no matter how Jane tried to insist that it was way too soon. Darcy wipes her mouth with her napkin and stands, “Finish your breakfast, Kid. I’m going to run downstairs and get your bag.”

“’kay!”

As she reaches the elevator, Darcy stalls when a hand curls around her arm, and she finds a worried Steve standing behind her, “Yes?” She draws out the word for a breath. “What’s up?”

He cocks his head back to the kitchen, where they hear Charlotte chattering at Pepper about her favorite paint colors and why she hates her painting smock, because it makes her arms itch, “What was that about?”

Darcy shrugs, “Hell if I know. She’s four. Four year olds are apparently pretty random. I think I read that in one of those pretentious parenting books Stark bought to welcome me into the world of motherhood.”

But apparently, that answer wasn’t good enough.

“When has she spent time with Bucky to ask about him?”

Again, she shrugs, shifts her arm out of his light grasp, “Not since the day she pitched a fit about Mom being the worst person, ever,” she waves a hand. “I wouldn’t make a big deal about it. Sometimes kids remember random things and fixate on them. It’s probably nothing.”
Sighing, Steve rakes a hand through his hair, “I just worry. Being here isn’t all that--”

“Safe. I know. I think about it more than people think I do,” she shakes her head and takes a deep breath before she gets worked up about this, again. “Look, I need to get her stuff and take her downstairs.”

Twenty minutes later finds Darcy in the conference room on the level below the labs, sitting on a cushioned stool in the corner with a tablet on her lap as she takes notes. Jane stands by the wall of monitors up front, talks to Bruce and Tony about the newest news on the Bifrost.

The thing is great when it works, thus proven back in the ye olde when Odin used to take the kids and flit around the Midgardians, but when it broke, it’s almost completely and totally useless.

Tony glances down and consults the data on his tablet, “So riddle me this, Foster,” his eyes flick from one screen to the other. “Thor and his Asgardian buddies used the Bifrost to run amok around the Nine Realms, or they did until Loki had his first round of it’s-all-about-me temper tantrum, correct?”

“Yes.”

“But what about the rest of the universe? Say they want to take a day trip out to the Delta Quadrant?”

Darcy snickers at the blatant proof of Tony’s nerdiness, while Jane resists the urge to roll her eyes, “The technology they use runs very similar to the magic that Heimdal employs to power the Bifrost. I haven’t had the chance to get my hands on any of that technology since we’re so focused on repairing and reinforcing the bridge.”

She pauses, and Darcy waits for her to continue until Jane clears her throat, and she looks up to see her waiting, head pointedly cocked to the monitor behind her, “Oh!” Darcy scrambles for the remote on the bench next to her and clicks a sequence that changes the images on screen to a collection of galaxies they got when they borrowed the Hubble Telescope, “My bad.”

It’s difficult to not let her mind drift as the trio starts bantering theories back and forth.
Darcy knows enough to parse that they’re trying to devise some sort of transportation device or even a ship that could allow the Avengers to travel through space at faster than light speeds so they can make alliances, and even find an easier way in and out of Asgard, but they were only in the preliminary, theoretical stages.

It was going to take a while.

A long while.

They go back and forth, throwing off ideas and theories, some that seemed legitimate and some that were straight out of the most obscure side of the Star Trek universe, but Darcy keeps note of all of them—even if she doesn’t understand half the words they use.

That’s what JARVIS is for, anyway.

“I really hate to be the one to bring this up,” Bruce says, nearly an hour later. “But what about the device that Loki had Doctor Selvig build? There has to be a way to apply that technology to what you already know about worm holes and the Bifrost.”

“Yes, but it was powered by the Tesseract,” Tony groans as Jane mentions the shining blue cube of everyone’s nightmares, and Darcy can’t help but let out a quiet nose in agreement. “There’s no way Odin is going to allow it off Asgard. Not after everything that happened after they lost it the first time.”

Jane flinches, “Let alone what Loki did with it.”

Waving a hand, Tony leans back in his chair, “It might be viable one day, but we’ll put it on the backburner for now.”

Darcy had been around Stark Tower long enough to know what that meant.

Tony is going to start plotting something, with or without their help.

She can’t fight back a grin as she ducks her head toward her tablet, focuses on making notes.
Just another day in paradise.

Even if paradise is a place that is probably going to make her crazy.

--

Losing time is not acceptable for The Asset.

It didn’t happen often when he was under Hydra’s control, but if it had, it still wouldn’t have been acceptable.

Now though, is a completely different story.

Bucky rakes his flesh and bone hand through his hair, winces as his fingers catch in a couple days’ worth of tangles, and he scowls as his bleary eyes catch the readings on the monitor on his wrist.

The fact that, once again, he slept deeply enough that absolutely no part of him noticed Steve enter his room, let alone put the monitor on and leave again, was more than a little disturbing.

But the monitor didn’t end up embedded in his bedroom wall like the first three time.

So, progress?

Maybe.

Shuffling off the elevator and back onto the common level, Bucky follows the orders of his growling stomach and crosses into the kitchen, squinting at the bright lights that reflect off the stainless-steel appliances.

“Hi.”

He blinks, eyes narrowing on Charlotte where she perches on a stool, which she pushed to the
counter near the toaster, and was waiting for something flat and square to finish cooking.

“Kid,” he growls, voice rough from days of disuse.

She smiles and waves, “Steve said you were sleeping.”

It takes a second before he realizes that meant she had to ask about him in the first place, and something hard stabs into his chest as he forces out a rough, “Did he really?”

“Couple days ago,” she shrugs. “You sleep a lot.”

His stomach growls again, and he crosses to the pantry, “I required it.”

The toaster pings, and he tries to suppress a startled jerk, the fingers of his metal hand digging into the soft metal door-handle, and he glances over his shoulder to see Charlotte frown when she carefully pulls the toaster door open.

“Wait,” he snaps as she reaches in, and she drops her hand back to her side. “You’re going to burn yourself.”

He strides and reaches in with his metal hand for the pair of garishly frosted pastries, gently eases them onto the paper plate next to Charlotte’s elbow.

“I do know how to use a toaster,” she mutters under her breath. “But thanks.”

“Pazhalsta.”

Charlotte tilts her head up so she can see his face, “Does that mean you’re welcome?”

“Da.”

“How do you say thank you?”
He arches a brow, “Spasiba.”

As he walks back to the pantry, Charlotte mouths the two words under her breath before she takes a tiny bite of her PopTart, watches Bucky take in the immense display of food in front of him, “Can you teach me?”

Bucky stills and glances back over his shoulder, “You should eat and go back to sleep malyshka.”

She pouts, “You’re not the boss of me. I want to learn it. What does malyshka mean?”

A muscle in his jaw ticks, and he swallows hard, resists the urge to flee as he grabs the first thing off the middle shelf, a packet of cheese and crackers, “You have no idea who I am little one.”

Charlotte rolls her eyes, “Darcy says you’re Bucky. You say you’re Bucky.”

No, he really wasn’t.

He can’t go back to being that man, the war hero from the museum.

But maybe he can find someone somewhere in between.

If he wants.

Finally, he sighs and tosses his snack on the table, and it smacks against the stone fruit bowl, “Fine,” he yanks a chair back, sits heavily. “Get some paper and a pen.”

“’Kay!”

Chapter End Notes
Worth the wait?

As usual, I love hearing from you :)

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 108: “Is it weird if I congratulate you on hitting the marriage jackpot?”

“Extremely.”

“Okay, but I’m going to do it anyway.”
“Come on. I need you to use your mad knife skills.”

“Most people would prefer I stay away from the knives,” he muttered as he followed her.

“Chocolate and brie grilled cheese,” she tossed over her shoulder. “It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

Chapter Notes

Yeah, so I'm sorry this took so long to get out. I went to Hawaii, and then work went crazy. It still is crazy, but tis the season and all. So here's the next chapter.

I usually go through and respond to the comments individually, but my brain isn't really functioning in the capacity that allows me to do that, so to each and every one of you, I thank you for your words and appreciate them greatly!

The adventures continue!

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 110: “It’s largely considered impolite to infect your co-workers with whatever it is you’re incubating.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It doesn’t surprise Bucky to discover that he’s not the only Tower resident who struggles with the urge to move at all hours, spurred on by more than just nightmares.

More often than not, he’s alone—though he knows that when Pepper is out of town, Tony spends many of those nights working the lab he still can’t bring himself to approach unless his arm is in truly dire need of service—but other times he stalks through the halls late and night and runs into an equally sleepless Hawkeye.

Former SHIELD, the good side of it, whatever that meant, who had been trudging through some nameless stretch of desert in the Middle East on a covert operation when everything in D.C. happened.
He doesn’t know what keeps the bow-toting Avenger from sleep, and he doesn’t ask. Doesn’t want to know.

Clint offers him the same courtesy, and it helps, more than a little bit, to settle into the Tower known that he’s not alone and that there’s someone who faces the demons he does.

As helpful as Steve has been, he doesn’t know this, can’t understand it.

One evening, during a walk that starts early enough that most of the household is still awake, Bucky strides into the living room, stops short when he sees Darcy pacing back and forth by the edge of the glass-topped coffee table, muttering under her breath and shooting glares at the white envelope resting on her StarkPad.

He narrows her eyes at the metal knitting needs she holds tight in her right hand, ways to disarm her flashing through the front of his mind while Darcy remains unaware that she’s no longer alone.

But the longer he stays surrounded by these people, the manners of protecting himself from potential arm are becoming less and less lethal and he doesn’t know what that’s supposed to mean.

Darcy lets out an irritated squeak after he clears his throat, and she rounds on him, “Oh, hi Bucky,” she follows his gaze to the needles in her hand and mutters a curse before she throws them on top of a bag full of wool and a half-knitted blanket. “Sorry about that. What’s up?”

His mind keeps racing with ways to stop Darcy in the event that she goes for the needles again, and he shakes his head to force the thoughts back into the low, buzzy thrum that never seems to go away, “I am functioning within acceptable parameters,” he clears his throat. “Are you all right?”

She blinks, probably at his choice of words, before she narrows her eyes back to the source of her ire, that envelope on the coffee table, “I got a thing in the mail for Charlie."

“And it is a bad thing?”

“When it’s the money my mother somehow got from selling the house we grew up in?” She snaps and swipes a half-full bottle of beer of the table and drinks down most of what’s in it. “Well, I’d say yes. What the fuck am I supposed to do with it? I mean, where the hell is she going to live? What is she doing?”
Bucky shrugs and Darcy resumes her pacing, “And there isn’t a return address or forwarding address so I can send it back and tell that woman where she can shove it. I even called the company she used to sell the house and they’ve got nothing. Oh my god, what is wrong with her?”

Snorting, Bucky crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the side of the massive entertainment console, “You know, you get pretty vicious when you’re pissed.”

“It’s a skill. At least I don’t have my taser,” she downs the rest of the bottle and flops onto the recliner, her legs trailing in the air and falling to the floor with a pair of echoing thumps, one after another.

With a shake of his head, Bucky pushes off the console and heads to the kitchen, rifles through the small refrigerator dedicated to beer—because they had one of those, of course—grabs one he vaguely remembers as one that he liked, “You want another?” He calls as he pushes a bottle to one side, looking for one with a label that matches the one Darcy was drinking.

She doesn’t answer, and he glances up, braces his hands against the door and takes in the look on her face, “What?” He lets out a raspy laugh. “I’ve been good at keeping my English and Russian separate, I know that.”

“But you can’t even get drunk.”

He flinches and looks at the ceiling for a second, “Just because I can’t doesn’t mean I don’t still like it.


Shut up!

“Sorry,” she winces and looks at the empty bottle in her hands, picks at the peeling label. “That was really rude. Blame my mother. She always brought out the worst in me.”

Again, he shrugs and kicks the refrigerator shut with his foot and brings her the fresh bottle, “I’ll leave you alone, if you want.”
She shakes her head, “No, sorry, sorry,” she twists the cap off, rolls it between her fingers. “I’ve just been on edge about Charlie starting school next week. My greatest nightmare is becoming one of those terrible Stepford PTA moms, and Constance, as great as it’s going to be for her, is like, the epitome of that.”

“All the things you’ve seen and that’s your greatest nightmare?”

“Hey, I can’t control how my brain works.”

He salutes her with his bottle, “You’re strange.”

“And yet, I am by far one of the most normal people in residence. Go figure, right?”

Gazing out the window at the glittering city, he listens as his feet scrape against the floor in her shift to move the empty bottle to the coffee table, and he’s pretty sure she’s still glaring at the envelope, “Darcy, can I ask you something?”

She blinks, “Of course. Fire away.”

“You’re normal.”

There’s a beat and he feels the heat of her gaze on the side of his face, watching as he takes a long drink, fights to gather his thoughts as that damn buzzing starts back up again.

“Is there a question there? Or are you fishing to see if I belong upstate with those kids at Xavier’s? The answer is no, by the way, though the ability to teleport would be super convenient with everything I’ve got going on these days.”

He finally looks at her, “It’s not that. You’re the most normal person here. Why is that?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”
Biting his lip, he considers his words, “Why do you risk it?”

“That would be my massive, rent-free apartment in one of the most expensive cities in this country.”

There’s a look on his face, and she’s pretty sure that on any other person—she doesn’t want to say normal, but that’s what it would have been—would have been him rolling her eyes at her.

Shaking her head, Darcy shifts so she’s cross-legged, leans forward so she can rest her elbows on the arm of the chair, looking up at him, “I may not have superpowers or an I.Q. of a gazillion and five, but when I was in New Mexico interning with Jane and Erik, I was in the right place at the right time, because when Thor was kicked out of Asgard for being a Grade-A douchebag, I was thrown headfirst into a whole new world, and it was so much shinier than doing what I thought I wanted.”

She takes another sip, “I finished my poli-sci degree when I was in London, because I thought it was something I needed to do for SHIELD, and I thought I could do some good with them.”

Bucky winces.

“You know what happened next,” she tosses him an easy grin and wink that he doesn’t know quite what to do with. “But I didn’t have time to feel sorry for myself and worry about what I was going to do next, because Stark came along and scooped us all up like a fairy godfather with weird facial hair.”

She toys with the bottle, rolling it between her fingers, “I know I can’t do much with the team, directly, especially now that Charlie’s here, but I know that keeping Jane was passing out when she refuses to eat because she’s so busy, and making sure Tony doesn’t fall into a manic-obsessive constructive cycle with his new suits, keeping Bruce calm, and helping take the load off Pepper and the business side of things is important. I’ll do what they ask because someone has to. I can’t see myself anywhere else,” Darcy takes another sip again, and then sighs. “End speech.”

“That’s admirable. Most people wouldn’t.”

“You did too,” she falters at the blank look on his face. “I mean, the Bucky from back in the day did. I read about you, when I was in school. You-he-you could have gone back to the States after Steve rescued you, hell, you were highly encouraged to go back home, take your honorable discharge. But you stayed, helped Steve form the Commandos.”
“Not like that Bucky was going to leave Steve.”

She doesn’t skip a beat with the way he refers to himself and the Bucky from back then as two separate people, and he’s thankful for that.

The fact that he does it in the first place speaks volumes about the progress he made since he and Steve got to the Tower.

Baby steps are better than nothing.

“And it’s not like I’m going to leave Jane behind any time soon. She’s my best friend.”

Darcy knocks back the rest of her beer, “So,” she drawls, tilts her head toward the table. “You up for helping distract me from the massive elephant in the envelope?”

“What are you thinking?”

“Certainly not what you’re thinking,” she laughs as his eyes go comically wide, and she shakes her head. “You ever had a grilled cheese with brie, chocolate, and basil?”

“You serious?”

She snorts and pushes off the recliner, curls two fingers around the bottle on the table while the other three still hold the half-full one pressed against her palm, “I’ve been drinking, of course I am,” she pats his shoulder. “Come on. I need you to use your mad knife skills.”

“Most people would prefer it if I stay away from the knives,” he mutters at her back.

“Chocolate and brie grilled cheese,” she tosses over her shoulder. “It’ll be worth it, I promise.”

--

After a grueling sparring session with Thor, Steve rubs a dry towel over his sweaty hair as he pads
barefoot off the elevator, but when he turns the corner to the kitchen, he nearly walks into Clint’s back.

“Oh, sorry,” he frowns at the archer, who has a curious look on his face as he watches—*something*. “What’s wrong?”

Snapping out of his reverie, Clint scratches the back of his neck and nods toward the opposite side of the room where they can see into half the kitchen. There, they find Bucky leaning against the pantry doors while Darcy pokes at something on the stove, “What are they doing?”

He makes to step around Clint, but he puts a hand on his shoulder, keeps him from stepping into the common room, “Don’t,” Clint mutters. “They’ve been in there for twenty minutes. He’s helping her cook.”

Steve blinks, “That’s,” he breaks off and shakes his head. “That’s different.”

Clint shrugs, and Darcy’s voice carries through the common room over the hiss of the food on the stove, “So, I forgot to ask,” there’s a clattering of cutlery as a drawer is pushed shut. “But are you all right? You looked kind of twitchy when you came in.”

For a minute, Bucky doesn’t say anything, and the last thing Steve expects is that he’s going to, but then he says, “I just needed to walk.”

“That’s cool,” she says, and Steve can imagine the look on her face, one that says she doesn’t believe him for a second.

She uses that one a lot.

“Well anyhoo,” she goes on. “I’m going to run downstairs and make sure my geniuses don’t pass out on things that may or may not explode. Will you throw whatever you don’t eat into the toaster and ask JARVIS to tell Steve and Clint that they’re here before you go back to trekking?”

“I can do that.”
“I know you *can*, but will you?” They can hear the laughter in her voice. “Thanks again for distracting me.”

A quiet clatter and clang echoes as a skillet falls into the metal sink, “Darcy?”

“Yeah?”

“The sandwiches,” Bucky pauses. “They weren’t very nutritious.”

She laughs, “That wasn’t really the point.”

“Well, they were still good.”

“And that *was* the point. All hail the comfort food. I’ll catch you later.”

They hear the slap of her shoes as Darcy makes her way to the auxiliary elevator bay on the far side of the building that fast-tracks to the labs.

Steve shares a look with Clint, and they both shrug as they head through the living room, where they find Bucky standing in the doorway to the kitchen, watching them through narrowed eyes.

“Buck-”

He cuts Steve off with a sharp tilt of his head back over his shoulder, “Darcy left you two something to eat.”

Steve doesn’t know what to say, but Clint recovers quicker, “Thanks man,” he claps Steve on the shoulder while Bucky moves out of the way, and he makes a bee-line to the toaster.

“I didn’t know you were interested in cooking,” Steve says after they regard each other in something of a standoff.

Bucky shrugs, “Darcy is. She’s good at it,” he turns and heads the way Steve came in. “You should eat some before they get cold. They won’t taste as good.”
He leaves Steve standing in the middle of the common room, staring off and trying to make sense of what just happened, until Clint pokes his head out of the kitchen, half a sandwich held in a hand wrapped in a dingy Ace wrap, “You have try this, man. How did we not know back in Puente that Darcy could pull this together?” He goes on, mostly to himself as he shuffles away. “Good God, JARVIS, we need to erect a shrine, or something.”

Shaking his head, Steve spares a final glance at the hall before he goes into the kitchen.

--

“Snack time!” Darcy’s voice rings out through the lab as the doors swish open.

Unsurprisingly, her call goes more or less ignored, with Tony’s robots perking up more than her humans.

She walks to Jane’s corner, passes the mess that is her desk and the discarded equipment, wipe boards and marker boxes that make for an interesting obstacle course that Tony refuses to approach, “Hey Jane, you awake in there?”

It takes a few minutes of gentle cajoling to draw Jane away from the readouts on the trio of wall-mounted monitors above her desk, but eventually she blinks out of her intense focus, and then blinks a few more times when she realizes how dry her eyes are, “Darcy,” she sounds a little surprised. “Where have you been? I needed you to turn in those requisition forms.”

“Already handed them off to Stark’s people down in R&D. I was having a huge case of the ugh when the courier handed off something from Ms. Missing In Action and needed a break before I broke something,” she shrugs, holds the covered platter out. “Made you and the bros some very tasty sandwiches.”

Jane’s eyes flare, “Darcy, the courier was scheduled to come hours ago! Why didn’t you tell me something was wrong?”

“You were really engrossed in those molecular stabilization readings,” she waves a hand at said monitors. “I didn’t want you to knock you off your groove.”

“Darcy!”
“What? I’m okay,” she insists. “I paced a bit, had a couple beers, and made some comfort food.”

Finally, Jane takes in the platter Darcy placed on her desk, wrinkles her nose at the way it covers the messy piles of reports and dog-eared science journals, “That’s a lot of food.”

“Bucky helped me,” she lifts the lid and eases a few onto a plate before she hands it off to Dum-E, and the robot scurries over to the far side of the lab where Bruce and Tony have devolved into throwing little balls of digital files back and forth at each other. “We made a bunch for everyone.”

She hands Jane a plate with a couple, arches a brow, “What? Why with the face?”

Jane tilts her head, still has that face on her—face, “Did he volunteer, or did he-”

Darcy rolls her eyes, props her hip against the desk, “No, he was not volun-told. Like he’s really going to let someone like me order him around. Come on. All I did was ask him to slice up some brie and pulverize a few blocks of chocolate, and he did. That’s it. Now eat before it gets cold, woman.

As Jane nibbles on the corner of her sandwich, she focuses her laser-like gaze on Darcy, “You like him.”

Doing a double-take, Darcy spares a glance to the far side of the room, but Tony and Bruce don’t look like they’ve heard the accusation.

Because if he had, Tony would have probably jetted over courtesy of the new suit boots he’d been wearing all day—because of reasons, and really, Pepper had to stop leaving the country.

“Left-field much, Janey? I’ve seen the guy like, ten times since he moved in, and he lives twenty feet from my apartment. I had more interactions with those truck drivers on their monthly trips through Puente.”

“So?” She shoots back, her eyes fluttering as she hummed around another happy bite of toasted cheese and chocolate. “You know how long it took me to figure out I had feelings for Thor.”

“Because they guy literally swept you off your feet with stories of the great beyond. What does any
of this have to do with me being the best best friend you’ve ever had and bringing you a snack,“
Darcy mutters as she looks down at Jane’s desk, compulsion taking over as she picks up the pens scattered over the surface, collects them all in a chipped Culver coffee mug.

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe the fact that you won’t look me in the eye?”

Darcy’s eyes snap to meet Jane’s, “What? So what if he’s hot. So is like, every single person in this building. Even the janitorial staff on Seven is attractive. I think it’s a Stark Industries hiring requirement or something.”

“Darcy.”

Forgetting she has a pen in her hands, Darcy throws them up in the air, and it flies across the room and pings off U’s chassis, “Come on Jane, it’s not like I expect anything to happen. He’s got enough on his mind, you know, rebuilding said mind.”

Finishing the half of the first sandwich, Jane wipes her fingers off on a napkin, “Well, you shouldn’t let it stop you.”

“Jane.”

She shrugs and grabs the other half before she turns back to the monitors, “Well, if you’re not going to keep me distracted by the best gossip I’ve heard since you spilled that you were actually sleeping with your intern, you might as well help me with this,” she grabs a thick stack of haphazardly piled printouts. “I’m going to give you some numbers and some categorical baselines, and I need you to highlight anything outside the parameters.”

Accepting the pile, she wrinkles her nose and pulls a couple of highlighters out of the coffee mug, “I really wish you wouldn’t mention him.”

“In retrospect, not one of my best references.”

Darcy drops on the chair Jane hadn’t been sitting in since that morning and waits for her to write out the numbers, and then she takes the bright Post-It and slaps it on top of the pile before she pushes across the room to her own desk.
Kicking her feet up, she props the papers against her legs, “You know something Jane?” She calls before the other woman falls back into the haze of new discoveries. “You’re a real stinker, and sometimes I hate you. Really.”

Without looking over, Jane scoffs, “You do like him. It’s cute, really.”

“Shut up.”

At least two hours and halfway through the pile later, Darcy realizes she left that stupid envelope in the living room, and it startles her so badly she almost topples off her chair.

Damn it.

--

The day and night before Charlotte’s first day of Pre-K finds Darcy so busy wrapped up in a project Jane and Bruce are working on that she thinks involves the Bifrost but might have been about adapting a larger arc reactor into a power source for something with the power requirements larger than an Iron Man suit.

Or both.

But it boils down to the fact that she barely has time to pack Charlotte into bed before she has to get back to the labs.

A pang shoots through her chest when she takes the time to think about how many times she leaves Charlotte to her own devices, or to the supervision of the trio of early-childhood education specialists employed by SI.

It’s well after midnight by the time Darcy finally stumbles home, kicking her shoes off in the doorway as JARVIS brings the lights up enough for her to see without walking into the furniture scattered around the living room.

Draping her bag over the back of the couch, she shuffles into her bedroom and shucks her layered
shirts and ratty jeans in favor of sleep pants and a tank top before she flops on the bed face-first.

She breathes deep, her mind drifting.

And then it hits her.

*Tomorrow is Charlotte’s first day of school.*

Letting out a defeated groan through her nose, Darcy curses her mother for the umpteenth time as she pushes off her deliciously warm and rumpled duvet, groping for her glasses where she’d tossed them on the nightstand and shoves them back over her nose.

As she crosses back into the living room, she kicks aside one of Charlotte’s abandoned dollar before she can make her way into the hallway off the small kitchenette that rarely was used.

Pressing her ear to Charlotte’s door, she’s greeted by silence—which Darcy expects, because it’s oh-dark-really-late—and she presses one hand against it as she slowly twists the nob with her other hand, eases the door open and lets in a tiny shaft of light from the hallway into the room.

Which is empty.

Darcy flicks the door the rest of the way and lets it bang against the wall, rubs her aching eyes as the noise breaks the silence of the apartment, “J,” she groans. “Where the hell is Charlie?”

“In the kitchen, Ms. Lewis.”

She sighs and pivots heavily, stumbles against the wall and catches her elbow with a curse, rubs it as she heads out of the suite, “A warning or notice or *something* might have been nice.”

There’s a pause.

“My apologies, Ms. Lewis.”
She slumps against the elevator wall, “Yeah, yeah.”

Squinting at the bright lights, Darcy finds Charlotte sitting on her knees on a chair by the kitchen table, markers and paper scattered around her.

That’s not surprising, since the kid likes to draw when she can’t sleep—Darcy’s come into her room many mornings to the sight of her surrounded by paper and arms covered in ink.

What Darcy doesn’t expect is Bucky Barnes sitting next to Charlotte. He has a marker in his left hand, which he uses to draw a symbol that looks Cyrillic on a piece of paper that he slides in front of Charlotte.

At the indrawn breath that she can’t hold back, Bucky’s head shoots up, and color bleeds away from his already pale face, “Uh, Darcy-”

“What are you two doing?” She asks, her voice a little strangled, but more or less even as she grabs a bottle of water out of the refrigerator. “At,” she squints at the clock on the microwave. “Way after midnight. On a Sunday.”

Charlotte bounces on her knees and picks up another piece of paper that has another Cyrillic letter drawn in Bucky’s hand with her shakier repetitions printed in a row below it, “Bucky’s teaching me Russian letters.”

“You don’t even know all your English letters yet.”

Bucky, who has tensed so badly the marker in his hand cracks in half, snaps back to the present, tosses it away and ignores the way ink splatters all over his metal hand and part of the table, “Sorry, I’ll just go,” he mutters, bolting out of his chair and the kitchen. “Sorry.”

Before Darcy has a chance to say another word, he’s gone, disappearing into the darkened hallway.

“Darcy?”
Charlotte’s voice snaps Darcy out of her reverie, and she holds a finger up and narrows her eyes, “Do not move, Kid. I’ll be right back.”

“But Darcy—”

She glances back over her shoulder with narrowed eyes, “Charlotte, you keep that butt glued to that chair. I’ll be right back.”

Charlotte rolls her eyes and slumps back down, “Okay,” she says to the empty room, and she looks at the splattered mess on the tabletop before dragging her fingers through it.

--

JARVIS points Darcy right back where she came from, to the apartment Bucky and Steve shared across the hall from her own.

Like he’d go anywhere else.

She taps hard on the door until a bleary-eyed captain yanks it open, irritation quickly falling away, replaced by confusion, “Darcy? Is something wrong?”

Shouldering past him, she steps into the sparsely-decorated living room—other than the decorations Pepper ordered to furnish all the apartments, there were a couple framed portraits of Peggy and the Howling Commandos torn from Steve’s sketchbook, but not much else, “I need to have words with your heterosexual life-mate.”

Steve blinks as he makes his way after her, his sleepy mind trying to keep up and failing, “My what?”

Whirling around, she crosses her arms over her chest and tilts her head, “Bucky. Where the hell is Bucky?”

“I think he’s in his room,” Steve frowns. “Darcy, what’s wrong? Did something happen?”
She takes a deep breath, her shoulders hunching up to her ears before she makes herself calm the hell down, “Nothing is wrong. I just want to talk to him. One person way out of their depth to another.”

“Darcy, it’s really late.”

“And I’ve been up twenty-nine hours, what’s one more?”

Darcy does her level best not to flinch as Steve stares her down before he finally shakes his head and gestures toward the hallway, “End of the hall.”

“Thank you.”

The door to Bucky’s room hangs half open, and she sees him pace back and forth in front of his bed—which looks like it hasn’t been slept in, ever, even though one of the fancy decorative pillows is on the hardwood between the bed and the wall that, if this apartment is configured like hers, meets the en suite.

Bucky flips around and curses under his breath when he sees her, but this time it’s in English, “I’m sorry, Darcy.”

“For what?” She snaps, well aware that Steve is definitely still standing at the other end of the hallway and making no attempt to pretend he’s not listening in.

Frowning, Bucky finally stops pacing and shrugs, “I shouldn’t have been alone with her,” Darcy glowers at the way he won’t look at her when he talks. “I should’a told you when she started coming out to see me.”

And suddenly, some of the pieces carved out by Charlotte’s off-hand comments and newfound love for afternoon snoozes begins to fit together into something that almost looks like a picture.

And it’s one that, apparently, features Bucky.

“How often does she?”
He shrugs, “Few times a week the last couple. I should have told you. I’m sorry.”

It takes everything she has, but Darcy manages to suppress the urge to either roll her eyes so hard they risk falling from their sockets or smack him upside the head.

That probably won’t go over well.

“Stop apologizing! Other than not telling me that my sister’s apparently a little sneak, you haven’t done anything wrong!”

Throwing his hands up, Bucky favors her with a look that borders on pained and starts pacing again, “Woman, are you insane?” She does her level best not to flinch at his raspy shout. “Do you have any idea what I am?”

“You’re the guy who’s putting up with my insomniac sister and teaching her Russian,” she squares her shoulders. “That’s all I need to know.”

“I’m not safe to be around.”

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Darcy drifts to one side and props her shoulder against the doorframe, “Bucky, I let Charlie use a man that shares his body with a giant green rage monster as her own personal jungle gym. Hanging out with an assassin totting around a case of PTSD that a team of shrinks could write papers about for decades, all while being monitored by a semi-autonomous robot in the kitchen of one of the most protected buildings in the tristate area is, quite frankly. The very least of my actually extensive list of things I am worried about.”

Bucky bites down on her lower lip before he falls to the foot of his head, blue eyes wide and full of something that makes Darcy feel a little sick. Because she’s pretty sure it’s fear.

“You’re insane.”

“I work for Jane foster and am Tony Stark’s unofficial nanny. Of course, I’m crazy,” she deflates a bit, rubs at the spot below her right eye to dispel the sudden throbbing. “Bucky, I have a question.”
“Yes?”

She crosses her arms over her chest, rolls her head toward the ceiling as she carefully pieces her words together into something she hopes won’t set him off, or worse, scare him off, because Steve will probably kill her if she does, “Do you actually like teaching my sister?”

It takes a minute, but Bucky shrugs, his gaze sliding past her and out the door where Steve is still listening, but he’s moved back into the living room in a pretense of offering them some privacy.

Like Darcy doesn’t know his super powers include super hearing.

But save one shrug, Bucky doesn’t say anything else, and Darcy has to tamp down on the frustration building back up her chest.

“No, no, I need an actual answer to this one,” she tries again. “It is something you’re doing because you like it, or because you feel obligated to fill a four-year-old’s time to atone for sins you didn’t willingly commit?”

Bucky is still quiet, gaze focused inward as he chews on his lower lip, and Darcy tries really hard to not let it distract her.

Damn it Jane.

He finally looks at her, “It’s,” he trails off and tries to think of the write word, and Darcy watches him mouth out a couple before he settles on. “It is nice.”

“Good,” she chirps. “Then I don’t see a problem with you keeping it up. Though, maybe you could try to keep it to the daylight hours. Charlie is only four, and she’s got school tomorrow. Also, you’re not the one who has to deal with her when she’s cranky and overtired.”

Bucky deflates further, his wide eyes taking her in like he’s never seen her before.

Which, admittedly, he does a lot when he looks at her.
“Really?”

“Dude, why not? Whacky parenting magazines say that learning a second language is important for child development, and you’re a hell of a lot cheaper than any fancy tutor I could ever dig up. Or really, ask Pepper to dig up, because how is this actually my life?”

Laughing hollowly, he rubs his flesh and blood hand over his forehead, “You really are crazy.”

“Come on,” she holds her hand out. “I think you were in the middle of something before I barged in.”

“Might’ve been.”

He hesitates long enough that Darcy thinks about dropping her hand, but then he stands and curls his fingers around hers, almost startling at the warmth of her skin.

Shaking it off, he lets her lead them through the apartment, passing Steve, who watched them with eyes narrowed at their joined hands, “You two work everything out?” He asks.

Darcy tosses a grin over her shoulder and keeps moving, “Like you didn’t hear every word we said. Have a good night, Cap! Thanks for letting me barge in.”

They step through the hall and into the elevator, and Bucky isn’t sure what dashes through his chest when Darcy drops his hand, but he knows he doesn’t like it, feels like something goes missing.

Something he might want back more than the memories of his old life.

Darcy doesn’t seem to notice the turmoil rushing through his mind as she pads off the elevator a step ahead of him, and he only just realizes she’s barefoot, but he doesn’t know why it matters so much.

When she realizes he’s hesitating, Darcy pivots back and tugs on his arm, “Come on Bucky,” she gets him to take a step forward before he pauses again. “This is your home. You don’t have to hide here.”
He swallows hard around the lump in his throat, “Are you sure, Darcy?”

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

Drop a line if you like, and I promise I'll respond this time :)

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 110: “It’s largely considered impolite to infect your co-workers with whatever it is you’re incubating.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Jane was at her desk by the time Darcy got back to the lab, going over paperwork with no less than four pens tucked into the sloppy bun at the nape of her neck, and she looked up with bleary eyes at the arrival, “So how was it? Did Charlotte go in all right?”

“I think I feel like a parent,” she muttered as she dropped the strap of her bag on U’s arm and the robot glided over to place it on her desk.

Looking up, Jane made a face, “And what does that feel like?”

“Well, I kind of want to throw up.”

Chapter Notes

So this is the part of our fair tale where Darcy begins to make some new friends outside Stark Tower.

Also, for those of you who have missed it, Constance-Billard is the school from the show Gossip Girl. And Darcy’s new friends? Yeah. I went there.

For those of you who are aware of how the show ended, just know that I’m diving into an AU that deviates from right after Blair and Chuck’s wedding and the announcement that Gossip Girl (Dan? Really?...I guess) is dead. So no five-year jump.

All will be revealed.

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 111: “I’m bitter and complicated. It’s one of my charms.”

“I don’t think you know what that word means. Or how to count.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With one hand curled around a mug of shockingly quality coffee—poured into a real cup and not some cheap disposable—Darcy stands in a corner of Charlotte’s massive Pre-K classroom, the Kindergarten Development Center Room A, at the Constance Billard School for Girls.

She’s on one side of the room, one wary eye on her sister and the other on the parents huddled together like a herd of well-dressed gazelles.
Some are wishing their children a wonderful first day, fat tears running down many a Botox-frozen mother’s face—but not smearing their waterproof mascara of course—while others are trying to contain the odd temper tantrum, favoring their fellow parents with mutual looks tinged with exasperation.

And a few others are, oddly enough, completely absorbed by whatever was on the tablets and cell phones they clutched in their manicured hands.

They were so impeccably dressed, and Darcy forces down the urge to shift in her well-worn Docs, jeans, and t-shirt.

Because even if Charlotte is the only child attending school on scholarship, neither of them are any lesser than the families with their millions and billions and legacies with the school.

And maybe, if she keeps reminding herself of that, she’ll eventually believe it.

The building even is just as much a sight to behold as the families of the children in Charlotte’s class.

Not far from their home at One Avengers Plaza, the building that houses the Kindergarten Development Center Room A is historic, brick, beautiful, and most importantly, surrounded by a tall fence with officers from a private security company stationed at each entrance.

Darcy watches the herd of thirteen preschoolers as the mutter through awkward greetings before—as if a switch flipped—they spread around the room to play, and she smiles when Charlotte makes a beeline to the table covered with cups of markers and piles of colorful construction paper.

One of the parents, a tall, leggy woman with blonde hair weaved into an intricate bun sidles up next to her with a smile and shrug of her shoulder, “So, which one is yours?”

Blinking out of her reverie, Darcy meets the woman’s blue gaze, “Oh no, I’m not a parent,” she cocks her head toward the far corner of the room. “That’s my little sister, Charlotte.”

“So, she’s the recipient of the endowment from Stark Industries,” she muses before she blinks, lets out a sheepish giggle that makes her look about ten years younger. “I didn’t mean for that to come out that way.”
Darcy shifts and takes a long sip of coffee to mask her discomfort, “Well yeah, she is.”

“I’m sorry for sounding so nosy, I’m on the parents board, and someone mentioned it at our last meeting,” she holds out a hand, the pale blue of her nail polish glittering in the overhead lights. “Serena Baizen.”

“Darcy Lewis,” Serena has a loose grip, something Darcy hadn’t encountered too often after the last few years spent around strong handshakes and stronger warriors. “It’s nice meet you.”

Serena glances back at the corner where Charlotte is still drawing, now accompanied by a little girl whose long, brown hair is weaved into a neat French braid, “Looks like she’s made friends with my Margo.”

“Well, what do you know?”

“Don’t worry,” as much as she tries to hide it, Serena must notice the trepidation playing on her face and in her voice. “Mo will show your sister the ropes and they’ll be running the school in no time.”

Darcy barks a quiet laugh, “I’m a little worried she might have some trouble in that department. Charlie isn’t really familiar with,” she makes a sweeping gesture at the massive room. “All of this.”

Serena pats her shoulder, “I wouldn’t worry. Kids this age aren’t really focused on all that. And your sister is very tall. I was like that when I started school. It does help.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” Darcy watched the girls for another moment. “Charlie should really be in kindergarten, but I didn’t feel like through her right into the fire of real school. Figured she deserved at least one year of fun before she’s sucked into the next thirteen plus.”

“She hasn’t done Pre-K yet?”

Darcy sighs, the gaping hole that was her mother’s competence still nagging at her, “It’s a long story.”
“I didn’t mean to pry,” Serena says as a tall brunette, one of the women teaching the class, begins herding the children back together.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Darcy and Serena head to the door, shuffling through the bottleneck the other parents are inadvertently causing as they make their last goodbyes to their children.

And good lord, they were barely going to be there four and a half hours.

Darcy tries to tamp down on the judgement threatening to cloud her thoughts, because really, how is she supposed to know how these real parents are feeling right now?

“You want to get another coffee?” Serena offers, her heeled sandals clicking as they walk through the hall. “I can tell you a little more about the school. I went here was little. Did all my schooling here, actually.”

Fishing her phone from her back pocket, Darcy winces at the time flashing across the screen, “Thanks, but I really should get back to work,” she’s already left her scientists alone too long as it is, since they’ve been working on their current project for the better part of the last two days. “Maybe another time?”

“Absolutely,” they were outside, and Darcy hears a distant voice call Serena’s name, and she turns toward it. “I’ll see you around.”

Serena waves over her shoulder, “Bye!”

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Jane is at her desk when Darcy gets back to the lab. She’s going over paperwork with no less than four pens tucked into the sloppy bun at the name of her neck, and her eyes are bleary when she looks up, “So, how was it? Did Charlotte go in all right?”

“I think I feel like a parent,” Darcy mutters as she drops the strap of her back on U’s arm, and the robot chirps at her before gliding around the junk littering the floors to place it on her desk.
Looking up, Jane makes a face, “And what does that feel like?”

“Well, I kind of want to throw up.”

--

[212-555-2329]: Darcy, hi, it’s Serena Baizen. Hope you don’t mind, but I grabbed your number from the school registry. I was wondering if you were coming to the parent-teacher reception tomorrow at the Empire? Would be a great chance for you to meet some of the other parents in our class.

Darcy arches a brow at the message—with the least amount of chat-speak she’s seen in years, seriously, even Tony abbreviates the shit out of texts he doesn’t dictate to JARVIS—and she stops in the middle of the hallway as she types out, ‘I’m not sure it’s my scene.’

[212-555-2329]: Don’t be silly!

Before she has the chance to think of something to say to that, the chat bubble pops back up.

[212-555-2329]: I remember I saw you at the rededication of Grand Central last summer. You will fit in just fine! :)

Frowning, Darcy tries to think back to that warm summer night not long after Charlotte moved in—so she’d been ridiculously exhausted as it was—and the whole night had gone by in a blur.

She spent most of it trying to keep Tony in line and Jane from disappearing into a conveniently located supply closet with Thor—her dress had been killer, thank you Pepper—and she had to run back and forth over the restored floors in borrowed shoes she had been sure she was going to break an ankle in.

For all Darcy knew, Serena had been there, but she’d been too focused on embarrassing herself to notice.

But considering her face wasn’t splashed across the tabloids and there were no videos going viral on YouTube of her crashing into the buffet tables, at the very least she’d been successful.
Looking back down at the message, she finally sighs and types, ‘Okay yeah, sure. I’ll see you there.’

[212-555-2329]: Great!

--

And on the subject of borrowed shoes.

“Oh my god Pepper, I need your help,” Darcy whines as she breezes into the living room the next night.

Because Thor really was a god, he offered to make Charlotte dinner and put her to bed so Darcy could freak out about going to the Constance reception in relative peace.

Pepper looks up from her perch on a pillow next to the coffee table, her feet bare and one of Tony’s old concert t-shirts hanging off her frame as she picks at a slice of pizza, “What is it?”

Darcy drops on the couch between Tony and Bruce, groaning as she grabs a slice from the box and stuffs half of it in her mouth, “What on Earth and in Asgard and I supposed to wear at a cocktail reception with the parents and teachers from Constance?” She swallows hard around another bite. “Ugh, why is even a thing?”

“Where’s the party?” Pepper shifts around and looks up at Darcy, the men on either side of her sharing a look as they scoot to the far sides of the couch.

Rolling her eyes at them, Darcy checks her phone, “Empire Hotel. I Googled it, and apparently Serena—one of the mothers in Charlie’s class—her step-brother bought it a couple years ago.”

“Chuck Bass,” Pepper offers, and Darcy shrugs again. “I’ve met him a few times. Bass Industries has become extremely philanthropic since he regained the title of CEO after his father died,” she wrinkles her nose. “The second time.”

“The what now?”
“Bart Bass, Chuck’s father, faked his death,” Pepper ignores Tony’s derisive snort at the man’s name and stands up, holds her hand out. “Come on. I’ll tell you about it while we raid your closet.”

“Let’s be real Pepper, I don’t have anything appropriate for this!” She suppresses a squeak as Pepper grabs her arms in a surprisingly—though it really shouldn’t be, what with the Extremis still running, albeit suppressed, through her blood—strong grip and heaves her off the couch.

She laughs, “We’ll make it work. Plus, I can’t tell you what shoes I have for you until we know what outfit.”

Darcy’s eyes flare wide, “Shoes?”

“Of course!”

She glances back at the couch, “Tony, I love her.”

“Hey! My girlfriend! Don’t even think about it.”

Sharing an amused look with Pepper, Darcy winks, “Too late.”

--

Pepper Potts is an absolute genius, and should just take over the world now and be done with it.

“When I was just starting out down in the secretarial pool, I had to figure out very quickly how to dress like I made more money than I did,” she says as she picks through Darcy’s closet, glances at one dress before shoving it to one side in dismissal. “Once I corrected Tony’s math and got prompted, I was encouraged to charge a few outfits to the business until I could get by on my own salary. The dealing-with-Tony bonuses helped too.”

Eventually, they settle on a black dress that Darcy doesn’t actually remember owning—it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that someone smuggled it into her closet when she was distracted, *cough* Pepper, *cough*—and Pepper sent her off to change while she ran back to the penthouse for accessories.
With a final check of her makeup, Darcy smooths out her dress, the hem of it swinging against her knees. She stuffs her phone into the clutch Pepper lent her and slips into the hallway as Bucky comes off the elevator, “Hey there, stranger.”

He blinks, like he’s surprised to see her, “Hi,” his hands are clenched around the towel draped around his neck, his lightweight shirt soaked with sweat from his workout. “You uh, you look nice.”

“You’re too kind.” she still feels more than a little ridiculous that she’s going to a school function like some parent. “Thank Thor’s dad for Pepper’s shoe closet and her carefully cultivated collection of Louboutins.”

“Louboutins?”

“Shoes,” she clarifies. “Very pretty shoes with very pretty red soles that cost like, more than the rest of my first apartment and then some, which circles back to why Pepper is and will always be my hero.”

Opening his mouth, Bucky is probably about to ask Darcy, again, if she’s crazy, but he must reconsider, “You’re talking about shoes?”

She nods brightly and looks down at the shiny red pumps that have delicate straps that cross over the tops of her feet, and she carefully rocks her ankle so Bucky can see the bright red leather on the bottom, “They’re basically the equivalent to, I don’t know, you’re dream brand of sniper rifle, or something.”

Bucky seriously doubts a pair of shoes could be on par with his Dragunov.

“I think I’ll just take your word for it.”

She smirks and steps back toward the elevator, “That’s probably your best bet,” her phone chirps, and her eyes widen as she glances down at it. “Gotta go. Pepper is letting me borrow Happy, so I don’t have to take a Lyft over. I mean really, is she the best ever, or what?”

“Yes,” he agrees for lack of a better answer, because Pepper is very intimidating. There’s something about her hair that sets him on edge. “Where are you going?”
“School function, because apparently that’s part of my life now,” she wrinkles her nose. “The things I do for the kid.”

Bucky tilts his head, checks to see if she’s armed at all, and she’s—definitely not, “Alone?”

“Well, Happy’s going to make sure I get into the building okay, but it’s not like this is a thing,” she grins. “Don’t worry, it’s all good.”

With a wink, she slips away, and Bucky half waves as the elevator doors slide shut.

What she misses is how Bucky remains in the hallway long after she makes the descent into the underground parking garage where Stark’s long-time driver-slash-sparring-partner is waiting in an idling Stark Industries fleet vehicle.

“You all right, Buck?”

Bucky almost jumps when he realizes that Steve has poked his head out of their apartment, and he takes a steadying breath and faces him, “Operating,” he breaks off and shakes his head. “I am fine.”

Concern is plain on his face as Steve takes a tentative step out into the hall, obviously looking for whatever could have set him off, and Bucky tamps down on the annoyance clawing at the back of his mind, “I am fine,” he insists. “But hungry.”

“Oh,” Steve’s brows furrow. “Want me to order in Chinese?”

Bucky considers it for a moment, shrugs, “Don’t forget the egg rolls,” he mutters and passes Steve, their shoulder bumping into one another’s as he enters the apartment.
The echo of the bathroom door clicking shut bounces off the walls and into the rest of the apartment, and Steve spares another look at Darcy and Charlotte’s door before he turns around to dig his phone out of the mess of art supplies on the coffee table.

As he rattles his order off to the owner of the tiny shop a few blocks from the Tower—one that specializes and appreciates their bulk orders—he falters with the realization that Bucky actually expressed a desire for something for the first time since he moved in.

Progress, maybe.

--

It’s like a scene out of a modern-day *Great Gatsby*, and the mantra of ‘what the hell am I doing’ runs through Darcy’s mind as she makes her way into the reception.

All around the ballroom, members of the Constance Billard staff mingle with the parents in attendance, white-shirted waiters and waitresses weighed down by platters of drinks and hors d’ourves and even canapes, and—

Weren’t school functions supposed to be full of stale baked goods, bad coffee, disgusting punch, and even worse music?

Before she can allow herself to sneak away in the hopes that Happy was still not far from the hotel and return to the relative safety of the Tower, Darcy grabs a glass of champagne—no shit, really?—off a passing tray.

Over the rim of her glass, she scans the room, and finds no one she knows, or hell, wants to get to know.

“Darcy! You made it!”

Never mind.

Ever the vision in a flowing yellow dress, the crowd parts for Serena as she makes her way over, leans in to kiss Darcy’s cheek, “It’s so great to see you. I love that dress!”
“Thanks,” she glances around. “So, this is one heck of a shindig. This what I can expect as a Constance Parent?

Serena bounces on her heels and winks, “Oh no! It gets better.”

Something gnaws at her insides, and it feels a lot like how she felt when she was running from those crazy elf creatures in London.

Dear lord.

Darcy manages to shake it off as Serena links her free arm through hers and leads her through the room, throwing out names of parents and teaches she recognizes as they pass. She introduces Darcy to a few, but for the life of her, she can’t remember much from the whirlwind.

They finally reach the far side of the ballroom and break through the sea of people, and that’s when something out of the corner of her eye catches Darcy’s attention. When she looks over, she sees two men standing a few feet away, talking over their drinks.

The dark-haired man, the one facing her, Darcy recognizes from a picture Pepper showed her—Chuck Bass, hotelier extraordinaire, now a little older, but still wearing a bright patterned tie that somehow doesn’t clash with his striped suit.

But it’s the man Chuck is speaking to that makes Darcy narrow her eyes.

She can only see the side of his face, but there’s something about it and the way he carries himself that triggers hard on the edge of her awareness.

And when he turns his head, shock slaps Darcy in the face.

“Oh, holy shit.”

Fortunately, she manages to restrain her voice to a whisper, and Serena completely misses it as she
waves a hand to the two men, who are heading up a staircase that almost blends into the rich wood panels that make up the inner wall of the ballroom, “That’s my stepbrother Chuck, Blair’s husband. I’ve told you about Blair, right? She’s around here somewhere, I’ll introduce you,” she wrinkles her nose delicately, something fond playing around her features. “And my husband, Carter. They’re probably going to talk about their newest joint acquisition, even though they promised they wouldn’t talk business tonight, but I’ll introduce you as soon as they come back down.”

Darcy shakes herself out of her shock and downs the rest of the champagne in her glass, hands it off to a conveniently located waitress, “Sounds great,” she coughs, gives herself a pat on the back for being able to speak. “If you’d excuse me a minute, I just have to make a quick call.”

“She’s dying to get your friend Pepper into half of the new collection she’s designing for next summer. It’s all she can talk about since I mentioned that Charlotte is one of Mo’s classmates.”

She lets out a short laugh that hopefully doesn’t sound too hysterical, “I’ll see what I can do,” she says before she heads out to one of the massive, yet fortunately secluded, balconies, one hand already dipping into her clutch for her phone, and she flicks through her recent calls for Steve’s contact.

“The party that bad?”

Darcy reaches up to rub her fingers over her eyes before she remembers the layers of eyeliner, shadow, and mascara and Pepper will definitely kill her if she ruins her makeup, so she lets her hand drop uselessly back to her side, “I need you to come to the Empire Hotel, right now,” something inside catches her eye, and an idea forms. “Oh, and Clint too, if he’s around. I think there might be a thing. A small one.”

“A thing?” The humor vanishes from his voice, and Steve completely disappears, replaced by Captain Rogers. “Darcy, are you in danger?”

“No, no, no, I don’t think so,” she’s quick to assure, even though she’s not entirely sure. “But there’s a guy here, one of the parents of Charlie’s classmates, and he-”

“What about him?”

She sighs, her jaw working as she tries to force the completely ridiculous words running through her
mind into a coherent sequence and out of her mouth.

“Darcy? What about him?”

“He could be Bucky’s clone,” she blurts. “He looks just like him.”

The line goes silent for a beat, and then, “What?”

“I wish I was kidding.”

Steve coughs, “I don’t, I—are you sure?”

“I only got a quick look before he—Carter, that’s his name—left the room, but at first I could have sworn that Bucky finally decided to ditch the hobo chic look he’s been rocking since you brought him in.”

“Okay. If you’re sure then you’re sure.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose, because she’s really not, “Can you just get down here?” Like she needs to ask. He’s probably halfway there even as she rambles. “The last thing we need is to worry about the evil H and cloning, or something worse that I don’t even want to think about in case it somehow comes true.”

“Of course. We’ll get to the bottom of this. Give us ten minutes.”

“Sure. Wait, Steve,” she catches him before he hangs up, and the echo of a door slamming shut sounds in the background of the call. “How do you know where I am right now?

“Bucky mentioned it. I think he was worried about you going out without protection. I told you the story about that time you used your taser on Thor.”

Her brow ticks, “Bucky’s worries about me?”
“He doesn’t like that the Tower’s being surveilled by Ross’ people, I think,” Steve reasons, and she hears him mutter something in the background, but isn’t sure to whom it could have been. “Hang tight, we’re on our way.”

Steve hangs up, and Darcy looks down at her phone, her face lit by the glowing screen until it times out.

Since when did Bucky talk to Steve about her?

“Huh,” she mutters as she spares a glance back inside, immediately picks out Serena’s statuesque form as she chats with a tall brunette.

Shoving her musings onto the backburner, Darcy slips her phone away, shakes her head as she goes back inside.

--

Darcy keeps an eye on the staircase where Bucky’s fucking clone disappeared as she makes small-talk with one of the only normal-seeming people in the room, Charlotte’s teacher Meg. She’s in the middle of telling Darcy about part of the cross-country move the made to take the position at Constance when she breaks off mid-sentence, her hazel eyes popping wide, “Oh, um, wow.”

Her brows furrow at the segue, and it takes a second before Darcy feels the pressure of a pair of gazes on her back.

Steve and Clint—and what took them so damn long—are making their way through the ballroom.

“Hey guys,” she tries to keep her voice even as Steve glances around the room for the clone or whatever Carter is.

Clint smiles and kisses her cheek, and she smirks and turns back to Meg. “This is my neighbor, Steve Rogers, and our fellow, uh, building-made, Clint Barton. Steve, Clint, this is Meg Powell. She’s one of Charlie’s teachers this year.”

Megs snaps out of her surprise quicker than Darcy expected, “It’s nice to meet you both,” she glances at Darcy. “I can’t say I realized that-”
“That the Stark Endowment meant we actually left in the building,” she finishes Meg’s sentence with a grin. “I told Charlie to try not to advertise since we have to vet any of her potential playdates.”

Still a little shocked, Meg nods anyway, and Darcy feels a little bad for throwing so much at her at once, “Well, like I said,” she looks between the pair. “It’s great to meet you both.”

Well, since she’s not about to run off, maybe this will bode well.

Darcy grins, “Meg,” she drawls as she turns to Clint. “Grew up in Iowa. Waverly, to be specific.”

“Really?” Clint’s eyes are bright. “You did?”

Meg nods, and Darcy claps her hand on Clint’s arm, is not subtle about pushing him closer, nor does she miss the look on Steve’s face when she does it, “So, why don’t you two talk about the ye olde homestead while Steve and I talk about that thing, and maybe I introduce him to some of the members of the parent-teacher board.”

They walk away before either can respond, Darcy linking her arm through Steve’s.

Clint rocks on his heels and turns to the tall brunette, rakes a hand through his hair, “So, uh, Waverly?”

“Interesting place,” she shrugs as she toys with the glass of champagne in her hand. “I got out as soon as I could. Was accepted to a liberal arts college in California when I was sixteen. You?”

A bashful grin crosses his face, “Joined the circus.”

She tilts her head, “I think I can see that. Is that where you learned the archery thing?”

“Yeah,” he gestures to the hallway that leads to the hotel bar. “I could tell you about it? Or do you have to stick around and chat up the parents.”
Meg places her glass on a high-top table, “Something tells me they won’t miss me if I sneak off for a while.”

--

Darcy glances over her shoulder and watches Clint lead Meg out of the ballroom, and Steve nudges her side with the elbow she’s gripping, “Really Darcy? I thought we had a crisis.”

“If there’s one thing I learned from Jane, it’s how to be a champion multitasker,” she pokes him in retaliation, grins when he tries to shift away from her pointy finger. “And it’s not like he doesn’t deserve something nice after the shit parade he’s been trapped in the last couple years. What’s nicer than a cute preschool teacher?”

“Darcy-”

She frowns at the look on his face, shakes her head, “He needs to get back on the horse sometime.”

“Yes, but,” he sighs. “Never mind. You didn’t call me because you’re worried he’s getting a little too good at Duty Calls.”

“Call of Duty,” she corrects, even as the impish look on his face tells her he knows exactly what the video game’s name is, and she wrinkles her nose right back. “And I know. Come on, they’re over here.”

Serena’s eyes are bright as she gestures animatedly to the brunette that Darcy vaguely recognizes from the cover of the fashion magazines Pepper likes to flip through when she’s unwinding at the end of the day, “Darcy!” Serena greets. “You found a friend!”

“Steve was in the neighborhood and thought he’d drop by,” she’s nervous, but somehow doesn’t skip over her words, the lie flowing from her mouth in a rush before she forces herself to calm the fuck down. “Steve Rogers, meet Serena Baizen and-”

“Blair Bass,” the woman in question cuts in and holds a hand out, her brown eyes narrow as Steve shakes it.

Before he can say anything, Serena puts a hand on Darcy’s arm, the other waving at the staircase
she’d been eyeing most of the night, “Carter, Chuck! Come meet Darcy!”

Following Serena’s gaze, Darcy feels Steve go still and grasp her arm tighter as the two men head downstairs, the one who looks like Bucky in the lead.

So, at least she’s not imagining things.

That could be either really good or really, really, really bad.

Serena takes Carter’s hand and lets him kiss her cheek before she makes introductions, and his eyes go bright the second she says Steve’s name, “Steve Rogers, the Howling Commando, right?” He asks, his accent basically the same as Bucky’s.

This is definitely going to be a problem.

“Most people tend to recognize me from stories of my more recent exploits,” he grins, every inch of the man who sold war bonds in the forties showing through, but Darcy feels the barely-restrained tremor racing through his hand as he grips hers tight.

Carter shrugs, “My grandmother loved to tell me and my cousins stories about you and the Commandos.”

“She was around during the war?”

“Oh yeah,” his grin is wide as he nods, and Serena, Blair, and Chuck are listening in, hanging on his every word with fond looks on their faces. “She always talked about how she and her friend went on a double-date with you and Sergeant Barnes the night before he shipped out.”

Glancing at Steve out of the corner of her eye, Darcy watches his eyes tick up and to the side as he recalls the night, “Your grandmother,” he swallows, his face going almost startlingly pale. “Connie?”

“Yes! That was her!”
Serena laughs, “Wow, what a small world!” She says, giving Steve a moment to collect his thoughts as she turns to Carter. “Why didn’t you ever tell us?”

He shrugs, and Darcy grabs two glasses of champagne off a passing waiter, shoves one into Steve’s free hand as she delicately sips at her own, “You have no idea.”

“Oh my gosh, you have to tell us about the double date,” Blair says, gushing in a way that somehow also makes it sound like an order. “Connie was gorgeous back in the day. It must have been amazing.”

Steve ducks his head, and Darcy sees the telltale signs of red blooming over the back of his neck, “I actually signed on with the army that night. Bucky’s the one who took Connie and Bonnie out dancing after Howard’s show.”

“What’s it like living with Tony Stark after knowing Howard so well?”

Darcy watches Steve’s jaw, the muscle ticking at Serena’s question, “It’s an experience,” he smirks, and that does sound genuine. “Will you excuse me a minute?”

He untangles his arm from Darcy’s and darts out to the nearby balcony, and she sighs, “Sometimes it’s hard for him to reconcile that most of the people he knew back then have been gone for decades.”

It’s only sort of a lie.

“I hope we didn’t pry too hard,” Carter winces, looking in the direction Steve retreated to, and he really does look like Bucky even more when he’s bashful.

Crap.

She waves a hand, “It’s okay. Let me go talk to him,” she looks down uncertainly at the glasses in her hands until Chuck plucks them from her grip. “Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

Steve isn’t pacing up and down the length of the balcony like she thought he would be, and she leans
against the wall to the right of the glass-paned doors, waits for him to speak, but then says what’s on her mind when he doesn’t, “What do you think?”

He finally looks away—of course he’s staring off in the direction of the Tower, where his wayward roommate is—and turns, leans against the railing so he can see into the ballroom where the Baizens are mingling with some of the other parents in Charlotte and Margo’s class, “That’s Bucky.”

“So you really remember going out with Carter’s grandmother?”

“I do,” his eyes are still wide. “Bucky never said, he never mentioned her when we were overseas.”

“There was a lot going on,” she rubs her forehead, winces at the understatement of the century. “What now? How do we tell Bucky that he not only apparently has a living grandson, because there’s no way Carter’s anything but that, but also a great-granddaughter? He doesn’t remember who he is sometime.”

“Darce,” Steve sighs. “I think he knows more than he lets on.”

“And I know he hides more than he lets on,” she counters with a dismissive wave of her hand. “But that’s not even part of the point. How do we tell any of them? For all they know, he died in the Alps, but it’s been barely a week and Charlie and Mo are attached at the hip at school. We won’t be able to keep this from them for long.”

For a while, Steve looks resolutely down at his feet, but Darcy still can tell that the wheels in his head are turning as he does what he does best and plans, “We’ll take it slowly,” he finally says, which—it’s not much of a plan, but it’s better than nothing. “We bring in Bucky first, and when he’s ready, we’ll tell Carter and Serena.”

“Fine, sure. I mean, what other choice do we have?” What’s she supposed to do, argue? “But this is weird, right? I mean, more than the fact that you’re all a bunch of genetically modified superheroes?”

Steve sighs again and looks down to the busy street below, the road clogged by idling yellow cabs, “I remember how Bucky used to be with women back then, but after Zola, why didn’t I ask him?”

There are so many questions swimming in his eyes, but she doesn’t have any of the answers he’s begging for.
“Do you think he knew?”

She thinks back to the time she’s spent with Bucky, and her shoulders slump as she shakes her head, “No matter how much he recovers,” she says carefully. “I don’t think we’re ever going to get an answer to that question.”

The blare of Steve’s phone cuts through whatever he would have said, though Darcy’s pretty sure he’s going to agree with her, “What is it, Tony?”

As he listens, Darcy watches his jaw tighten as he shifts away from the railing, the Captain quickly replacing the Steve, “Is everyone okay?” He waits for Tony’s reply before he glances back toward the Tower. “Have JARVIS lock down the entire floor. I’ll be right there.”

“What is it?” She asks as he hangs up.

“Something’s wrong with Bucky. I have to get back.”

Shit.

“What happened? He was fine when I saw him before I left.”

He shakes his head and takes two long strides to meet her by the balcony entrance, “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” she swallows, her feet pinching in her shoes as she races to keep up with him once they’re inside, and she’s definitely going to have to ask Pepper for lessons in how to run in these things. “Go on ahead. I’ll get Clint and we’ll meet you at the Tower.”

He dashes from the room, and Darcy slips off in the opposite direction in search of her wayward chicken.

“Darcy!”
She spins back around, finds Blair and Chuck behind her, “I’m sorry, I have to get going.”

Blair frowns, “Is everything all right? We didn’t upset Captain Rogers, did we?”

She shakes her head, resists the urge to blurt out everything, “No, no. Something came up back home. Can you tell Serena thanks for pushing me to come out tonight? I really appreciate it.”

The Basses both look confused, but Blair nods anyway, “I will,” she decides, like she did just decide something. “It was nice meeting you and your friend.”

“You too.”

Seriously.

How the hell is this her life?

--

“So, why Constance?” Clint asks as the bartender places a pair of beers in front of him and Meg, the bar mostly empty since most of the hotel guests this evening are occupied by the party.

She shrugs, pushes an ashy brown lock of hair off her face as she nudges the orange slice in her Blue Moon to one side before she takes a drink, “I had been working as an au pair for a pair of ex-pats living in France after I graduated college, and they recommended me for the position. When the headmistress offered, I wasn’t about to say no.”

“You know, that’s exactly what’s happened to just about everyone who’s fallen in with Stark lately,” he laughs at the questioning look on her face. “We all have trouble telling him no. Darcy especially, and I don’t think she’s even trying anymore.”

“Really?”

“Stark likes to collect people,” he resists the urge to roll his eyes.

Meg arches a brow, “Collect?”
“I think it’s a crazy billionaire thing.”

She lets out a snort, then claps on hand over her mouth, “I’m sure I’ll pick up on that pretty quickly working here.”

“It has its perks,” he smirks as he meets her hazel gaze. “How do you like teaching the kids?”

“I originally wanted to teach high school, but Headmistress Queller said there had been an incident a few years ago involving a student and another teacher who also grew up in Iowa, so she wants me on staff a couple years before I can move up,” she rolls her eyes and toys with the napkin under her glass. “I try to ignore the blatant sexism in favor of appreciating that I have a job.”

“And you’re okay with teaching little kids instead?”

One shoulder lifts, “They’re really adorable, so I guess it’s worth it, for now. I can make it work.”

“If they’re anything like Charlie, you’re in luck.”

She grins back at him, “Do you spend a lot of time with her?”

“Some. We all kind of live on top of each other, and she and Darcy spend a lot of time on my floor at her friend Jane’s place. The kid’s great at collecting people too. You should see her with Tony.”

She blinks, “Tony, as in Stark. Didn’t he say a couple years back that babies were definitely a no? Did he have a personality transplant or something after he fell out of that portal?”

“The kids pretty persuasive.”

Clint is in the middle of telling Meg some of his more PG stories from his circus days when he sees Darcy slip into the room from the reflection in the mirror above the bar, “Everything all right?” He asks as he turns on his stool, shifting away from Meg a little.
And when did he get so close to her?

“Where’s Steve?”

Darcy doesn’t bat an eye, but favors Meg with an apologetic smile, “I hate to steal him, but Clint and I need to get back to the Tower,” she meets his gaze and the curiosity in it. “Steve’s already on his way back.”

“Darcy, what’s going on?”

“Something about his roommate,” she says pointedly, because as far as the world knows, they don’t when it comes to Bucky Barnes, especially not his role as the Winter Soldier, or the fact that he’s living in the heart of New York City.

And they want to keep it that way for as long as possible.

Clint nods and shifts off his stool, reaches into his pocket to pay for their drinks, but Meg waves him off, “I’ve got this,” she shrugs off his objection. “You can owe me one.”

“Thanks,” he tugs his jacket over his shoulder. “I’ll see you around.”

Casting a quick glance to one side, Meg snags a pen off the bar, scribbles her phone number on the dry edge of the napkin and presses it into his hand, “Count on it.”

With a wave, he hesitates a second before following Darcy outside, watches as she peels a couple bills out of her clutch to get to the front of the taxi line, “So,” she drawls as she sidles back up next to him. “Meg’s nice.”

Resisting the urge to roll his eyes, he steadfastly looks out to the street, “I know what you’re doing.”

“Oh, don’t be like that.”

He snorts, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he shakes his head. “What’s the deal at the
“I don’t know,” she frowns hard and she shrugs, wringing her hands together. “Tony called and told Steve something was wrong with Bucky. He told Tony to lock down our floor and ran off.”

He sucks a breath through his teeth, “That could be a problem.”

“No shit.”

Following her into the cab, Clint waits for her to give the cabbie the Tower’s address—and his reaction to having to fight through the permanent travel at One Avengers Plaza—and nudges her, “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

He rolls his eyes and pokes at her again, grins when she shies away and smacks at his hands, “Thanks for that.”

An impish grin spreads across her face, “I wish JARVIS was here to record this glorious moment.”

“Don’t gloat.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah. I. Went. There.

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 111: “I’m bitter and complicated. It’s one of my charms.”

“I don’t think you know what that word means. Or how to count.”
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It was a little awkward, typing with her left hand, but thank you predictive texting, she managed to tap out the short message of, ‘Missing a hobo? I’m playing ‘Hey, that’s mine!’ In the lab.’

‘You all right? I’m on my way.’

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes as she considered typing that being a human pillow was very likely not written in her staffing contract, but settled on snapping a selfie and sending that to Steve instead.

Chapter Notes

So in honor of my birthday today, my gift to you all is a freshly-completed chapter six!

I'm so sorry.

Oh wait, no I'm not.

(Note: This chapter DOES involve some of the canon-typical torture Bucky endured with Hydra.)

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 113: “I can’t believe you arrested him out of spite.”

“I had probable cause.”

“Yes, but mostly spite.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[212-555-9657]: Hey, it's Clint. Sorry I had to run out on you last night.

[212-555-0981]: Is everything all right? Darcy looked worried.

There is a two-minute break between texts.

[212-555-9657]: It’s fine. Or it will be. Soon. Anyway, I owe you a drink, don’t I?
[212-555-0981]: *I was going to give you a few days before I brought that up.*

[212-555-9657]: *Is it bad that I don’t want you to wait?*

[212-555-0981]: *Of course not.*

--

And now, it’s Sunday, and Darcy _still_ hasn’t been allowed back to the apartment she and Charlotte shared, across from everyone’s favorite and currently _extremely reclusive_ World War II transplants.

“JARVIS, _I hate_ to be a pest, I really do, but Charlie and I have been in pajamas for a day and a half, and mine aren’t even _mine_. And as much as she loves this whole extended slumber party thing we have going on with Thor and Jane, Charlie has school tomorrow, and _I need real pants._”

She stands in the elevator, her arms crossed over an old t-shirt she scavenged from the back of Jane’s closet, along with a pair of shorts, but the rest of the rail-thin woman’s clothes can’t even attempt to contain her curves.

And it’s not like she can lounge around in that _dress_.

_Especially_ without the excuse of an epic one-night-stand to go with it.

She _have_ standards.

But even with said standards, the doors stay open and JARVIS refuses to move the car down one measly floor, “I am afraid I must comply with Captain Rogers’ orders on this matter, Ms. Lewis.”

“JARVIS, I want to go into my apartment. Just me,” it’s probably futile to barter with a computer, but that’s not going to stop her, and she’s _desperate_. “Five minutes _at most_. I’ll lock the door, and you can totally monitor me the whole time. Even when I’m in the bathroom.”

“Ms. Lewis, I am afraid—among other things—that there is currently no door to _lock_ to ensure your
security.”

What the hell?

She blinks and looks at the floor, wishes for a moment that she did belong upstate at Professor Xavier’s super nerdy super school, specifically with some added x-ray vision, “JARVIS, are they okay down there? I don’t care what Steve says, do not lie to me.”

The AI doesn’t respond.

“JARVIS, please don’t make me call Tony.”

If an AI could sound exasperated, he’d sound like he does at this very moment, “Ms. Lewis, Captain Rogers is handling the situation. On his orders, I am to ensure that he and Sergeant Barnes remain isolated on their home level. As such, I cannot allow you downstairs. It is too much of a risk to your safety.”

She sighs, runs her fingers through her tangled hair, “Fine,” she deflates. “Can you order me and Charlie some clothes so we can get by until we can? Like I said, I really need to put a pair of pants on, and Jane’s really don’t fit.”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis. A package will arrive within the hour.”

“Thanks,” she shuffles back out the open doors and back to Jane and Thor’s.

“I am sorry for the inconvenience, Ms. Lewis.”

And now she feels guilty for making a computer feel bad.

“I know,” she tries to keep the whine out of her tone, but isn’t entirely successful. “You’re still my favorite, J.”

Inside, Thor is sitting on the floor in front of the couch while Charlotte stands on the cushions behind
him, her little hands buried in his hair as she tries to twist the mass into a braid.

Jane is perched on the recliner next to them, her phone in hand as she gleefully snaps photo after photo of the pair, “No luck?”

Darcy grins at Thor as she curls up on the floor next to the coffee table, props her arm on it and her chin on her palm, “I would say that your man has more information from the flybys he thinks we don’t know about than what I managed to wrangle out of JARVIS.”

The demigod squares his shoulder, doesn’t look apologetic as he meets Darcy’s teasing gaze, “It’s for your safety, and that of the building”

“I know,” she sighs and taps her fingers against her cheek. “JARVIS did tell me that our apartment is kind of, well, broken.”

Dropping her phone on her lap, Jane arches a brow, “Broken how?”

“At the very least, I don’t have a door to lock even if he could let me downstairs,” she shrugs, because it’s not like the renovation crews won’t be on it as soon as lockdown lifts, whenever that is. “He’s ordered some clothes so the Kid and I can get through the next couple days. Thanks for letting us take back over your place, again.”

Jane waves a hand and rolls her eyes, “I just hope Barnes snaps out of it soon, whatever it is.”

With her hands still stuffed in Thor’s hair, Charlotte looks up from the knots she’s weaving, “Is Bucky okay?”

They flinch, “He will be,” Jane recovers first and manages. “Steve is taking care of him.”

“Will he teach me more Russian soon?”

Jane and Thor look to Darcy in concerned unison, and she winces, “Did I not mention that?” She asks, voice as light as possible. “It’s a thing. Their thing. Because they have a thing. That they do. Sometimes.”
Thor’s shoulders square as best he can without disturbing Charlotte from her perch against his back, “Their thing? Darcy, in Allspeak, your vernacular does not always translate with its proper intent.”

She huffs, “He enjoys spending time with her. I think it helps him, to be able to do something positive for someone else.”

“Darcy,” Jane says carefully, placing her hands on her lap. “Are you sure that’s a good-”

“Idea? Is it safe? Bucky thinks I’m insane, if that makes you feel any better.”

“I can’t say it does.”

Stretching her arms across the table, Darcy shrugs even as she buries her nose on the hardwood, “Look, if I thought Charlie was in danger here, I wouldn’t have asked Pepper if we could say. That’s that. Anyway, Bucky’s pretty good at avoiding her, avoiding all of us, when he knows he’s having issues being around people. Look at where we are now, locked out of the floor we live on.”

“Darcy.”

“Jane.”

She lifts her head and they stare at each other in a wordless standoff before Jane blinks first and rubs her fingers over her forehead, “Okay, fine, I’ll take your word for it.”

“Thanks boss-lady.”

--

It’s another two days before JARVIS lets Darcy back downstairs, and the apartment is indeed missing its door, most of the wall that encased the half-bath just off the destroyed foyer, and the living room is pretty much in shambles.

Her eyes are wide as she takes in the damage.
What the hell happened?

The Stark Industries repair team is already hard at work by the time she sees the state of things, a contractor going over blueprints in her kitchen while a fleet of electricians are busy repairing the wiring in the body-shaped hole—though Bucky’s or Steve’s, Darcy can’t tell—in the wall that separates the hallway from the apartment.

She doesn’t have time to muse over it, or any of the other million questions she had for the two men who are nowhere to be found.

She does need to get back to the lab.

After a long morning, Darcy shuffles into the kitchen to make snacks for herself and the scientists when she sees a redhead who is definitely not Pepper Potts standing in front of the refrigerator.

“Oh,” she murmurs, and when the woman turns at the sound of her arrival, she blinks. “Agent—Agent Romanov?”

Natasha taps her chin, “You must be Darcy Lewis. It is nice to finally meet you,” she points the manicured fingers at the refrigerator. “Could you tell me who framed my postcard?”

Laughing sheepishly, she shifts from one foot to the other, “That was me,” she runs her fingers through her hair, wincing at the tangles, because Natasha’s is curled to perfection like it had been during the Battle of Manhattan, because of course it was. “It’s one of the best veiled threats I’ve ever seen. I couldn’t let Clint get rid of it.”

Of course, now that she’s said that—to one of the modern world’s greatest spies, to boot, a role where paper trails aren’t supposed to exist—Darcy’s probably going to get a new hole ripped in her backside.

But Natasha just tilts her head, a mischievous smirk playing on her lips, “Good. Sometimes Clint needs to be reminded that being alone doesn’t always help in recovery. You have been a good friend to him.”
“Her brows furrow, “You’ve been off the grid since D.C., right?” Natasha nods. “So, how can you know that?”

“I was wrapping up my assignment in Los Angeles with Stark when Clint was stationed with you in New Mexico. We talked.”

“Talk?” Darcy tilts her head. “You two are—”

And suddenly, throwing Clint at Meg like she did the other night seems like a momentously terrible idea.

“Partners.”

Oh, thank Thor’s dad.

“Okay,” she finally steps into the kitchen as Natasha moves away from the refrigerator so she can get to it. “What brings you back after all this time? Or it that classified?”

“No, no,” she shakes her head, leans against the counter, her green eyes following Darcy as she flits from one corner of the kitchen to the other. “Steve asked me to come in and help with Comr—with Barnes.”

Stopping short, Darcy looks over her shoulders, brows furrowed at what Natasha almost called Bucky, but after a minute of searching her impassive face, she decides it’s better to not open that can of worms, “Are they all right? I didn’t see them when J finally let me downstairs.”

Natasha pauses, “They’ll be fine,” she says eventually. “They should both be resting.”

The way she says that makes Darcy think there were some very not veiled threats aimed at one or both of them.

“Cool,” as much as she wants to ask what the hell happened to Bucky, Darcy goes back to the salad she’s throwing together—Bruce working in the labs means she has to step up the quality of meals she makes for the trio—but she’s more aware of Natasha’s gaze on her back.
She’s almost done when Natasha sidles up next to the table, “I am curious about something. Could you enlighten me?”

“Oh, that.”

“Yeah, sure,” she turns and sees her rifling through a pile of construction paper by the fruit bowl.

“Your sister is learning Russian.”

Darcy doesn’t bother asking how she knows about Charlotte, because spies.

Or, more than likely, because specific spies.

A specific Clint.

“Who is teaching her?”

She can’t stop the smirk that crosses her face, “Never underestimate the persuasiveness of a toddler.”

Both of Natasha’s eyebrows rise, but before she says anything, they hear a shout from the hall, “Hey Lewis, what’s the holdup?”

Tony stops short just inside the kitchen entrance, glares at Natasha, “Oh, it’s you.”

But Natasha doesn’t skip a beat, “Stark.”

“And what are you doing here?”

“Steve asked me to come in. I’m going to have lunch with Maria and Pepper while my things are delivered to my apartment,” ignoring Tony’s spluttering that she needs permission to move into his tower, she turns to Darcy. “You should come with us. We have a lot to talk about.”
She blinks, “I don’t really think—”

“Don’t think, just say yes.”

“Uh, yes. Would love to.”

Tony clears his throat, and they both look at him, “Can I object to having the four of your together, plotting things?”

Darcy shares a look with Natasha, and they somehow end up saying in unison, “No.”

“It’s my building. I really think I can object.”

“No Tony.”

--

That lunch turns out to be one of the most strangely awesome experiences of Darcy’s entire life.

Hands down.

Midway through the meal and a raucous retelling of the incident in D.C. from Natasha’s perspective, Pepper waves a hand, the other bringing her wine glass to her lips, “Never mind that, Tasha, we all saw the Triskelion go up in flames.”

“Good riddance,” Maria mutters under her breath as she takes another bite of her sandwich. “That building was ugly.”

“But tell us more about that Sam Wilson,” Pepper goes on with a huge, almost maniacal grin. “Flirt?”

She rolls her eyes, “Huge, but not my type,” Natasha turns to Darcy. “And what about you?”
Darcy drops a forkful of the best kale salad she’s ever had, “What about me?”

“Tasha wants to know if you’ve been seeing anyone since you moved to New York,” Maria translates the pointed eyebrow Natasha raises.

“That would be an emphatic no,” she wrinkles her nose as memories of the Intern come to mind, but instead of bringing that up, she says, “Kind of hard, what with the needy little sister.”

A look crosses Natasha’s face, like she doesn’t understand what Darcy means, but then she shrugs, “Well, if you ever decide you want to, I’ve been told I’m a great wingman.”

Darcy’s eyes go wide, and she almost chokes on her drink, “Uh, thanks,” she manages.”

And here she thinks her life can’t get any crazier.

She really needs to stop thinking that.

--

Steve finally returns to the land of the living that night, joining the team for dinner and pointedly not talking about the fading bruises marring the right side of his face and the way he’s favoring his right leg.

On the other hand, Bucky doesn’t resurface until the end of the week.

Darcy is prepared for him to be standoffish when he does, especially considering just how badly he reacted to whatever it was that set him off—though, no one who knew was saying anything on the matter.

But—

She didn’t expect Bucky to be blackout drunk.

After a long day—or was it two? She’s not entirely sure—in the labs, Darcy is cleaning up after
shuffling Bruce off to bed, pointedly reminding him that getting stuck on sequencing algorithms happened to all the best scientists, and the work will probably make a lot more sense in the morning.

She’s setting his desk back to rights—Bruce makes a mess of epic proportions when he gets super absorbed—when she’s startled out of her fragmented mental checklist when she hears a metallic crash echo across the lab.

Whirling around, she presses her hand to her chest, breathing hard, “Jesus, Barnes,” she snaps when she sees who’s slumped in the doorway, looking paler and ten times more ragged than he did the day he arrived. “Warn a girl!”

All he does is grunt in response, and she tilts her head when he stares blankly at her with bleary, pupil-blown eyes, “Bucky,” she takes a careful step forward, and stops when he tenses. “Are you all right?”

He waves a hand in what must be a coherent response in his own head, but the entire movement just serves to knock him off balance.

“You are drunk,” she narrows her eyes. “Wait a second, we talked about this. I remember this. You can’t get drunk.”

“Not easily.”

Shit, his liver probably looks worse than Tony’s.

“I’m going to assume you’ve drunk a metric fuckton of whatever, but I hate to break it to you, there’s no alcohol down here. Tony’s not even trying to brew his own brand of super vodka this week.”

The look she gets in return tells her that Bucky hasn’t processed a word she said, and then he jerks in surprise when the doorway he’s leaning against chirps at him—they were trying to close after timing out—and his hands squeeze to fists as he takes a shaky step inside.

“I’m here for the elephant tranqs.”
“Seriously?”

His arm crashes against a metal filing cabinet—why did they have filing cabinets when everything in the lab was digital anyway—and the echo rings out through the room as she slumps against it, “I can’t sleep, but I need to sleep,” he slurs, eyes squeezing shut. “Where are they?”

“Actually, I think you might feel better if you had something to eat,” as if on cue, her stomach growls. “I can make grilled cheese? BLT grilled cheese, which is awesome, because bacon. And reminds me that I don’t think I’ve eaten anything in like, nineteen hours.”

Bucky’s eyes are focused on a spot on the floor between them as he shakes his head, “Darcy, I just want to sleep.”

Her heart lurches hard, and Darcy finally forces her feet to cooperate. She crosses the room with the intent to lead Bucky over to the leather couch that was in the lab for no other reason than the fact that Tony thought it made the space seem more ‘homey’.

But Bucky somehow manages to duck around her, stumbles further into the lab and trips over a discarded box as he nears the glass-front cabinet on Bruce’s side of the room.

It was the most graceless she’d ever seen him—which was scarier than it was weird.

His boots actually made noise with each step he took.

The only way you’re going to get to sleep is if you get some food in you,” and because Thor’s dad knows she loves arguing with brick walls, she keeps going. “The tranqs won’t help.”

“I need to try. It’ll work.”

“How of course, it’ll work,” she mutters as she rushes after him. “But it’s not going to help!”

He beats her to the cabinets because she’s slow and tired and apparently blackout-drunk! Bucky is still faster than she is, and she watches him search through the neat rows of syringes and vials before he finds the ones they keep on the off chance they can reach it and preemptively stop a Code Green.
“JARVIS?”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis,” the AI says as the blue lights around the doors turn red, signaling the lockdown protocol, and metal shutters fall down over the already shatterproof glass.

A yell rips from Bucky’s throat as he smashes his left fist into the metal. It dents, but holds, “Damn it Darcy! I need it!”

“It will only make you worse,” she snaps as she rounds on her, his chest heaving, and she pinches the bridge of her nose as she tries to keep her own breathing under control. “Seriously Bucky, for the love of all that is holy, just sit the hell down!”

Darcy expects him to rage.

But he doesn’t.

When she opens her eyes, she watches Bucky’s body shake with the force of the shudder that runs through it.

And then he squares his shoulders and walks, no marches over to the couch.

His back is ramrod straight, hands splayed on his knees as he forces his bleary gaze straight ahead, and guilt stabs at her heart because Darcy knows she fucked this one up pretty badly.

Pressing her hand to her mouth as bile sears the back of her tongue, she shakily forces her feet to move, “Bucky,” she whispers through her fingers. “Come on Bucky, please look at me.”

He continues staring straight ahead, and dread pools in Darcy’s stomach as she watches another shudder shake through him, “Bucky, come on,” she drops to her knees, leans up so her face is in high eye line. “Bucky, that wasn’t an order.”

She holds her hands out, but makes sure to hold them out just over his knees, “Come on, can you
stand down, please?” He’s looking at her, but he’s not seeing her. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have gone off on you like that. Come on, just stand down.”

It takes a few more harrowing minutes of quiet coaxing before he lets out a shuddering breath and finally lifts his hands, gently rests his fingers against her palms, “I just want to sleep and not dream anymore,” he rasps.

Her heart lurches again, and she swallows hard, “I know, I know,” she shifts his fingers in her grasp and rubs her thumbs across his knuckles.

She could spend way too much time cataloging the differences between his flesh and the rarely-seen metal limb, but now is not the time.

“Will you let me try something before we resort to the Hulk drugs?”

It looks like he’s going to answer—which is really fucking encouraging—but the words stick in his throat, and he lets his mouth hang open for a moment before he nods once instead.

Darcy’s heart is in her throat when he meets her gaze again, but she’s still not sure if he’s really seeing her, “Okay,” she takes a breath to steady her own frayed nerves. “Will you let me touch your head?”

He doesn’t object, just swallows, and she feels a tremor run through his hands, so she shakes her head, “We’ve been through this, I need an answer. Silence isn’t consent, my friend.”

Glaring down at their hands, at the steady way she grips his fingers, Bucky takes a sharp breath through his nose, “Okay.”

“Okay, okay,” she slips the fingers of his metal hand back to his lap and does an awkward lurch-leap onto the couch before steadying at his right. “Okay, Bucky, I need you to lie down on your side.”

After sitting long enough and staring down at a spot on the ground where she’d been kneeling, Darcy thinks he’s about to tell her off and go back to fighting Tony’s security protocol to get to the tranqs, but he eventually turns his unfocused gaze toward her, “Come on, Bucky,” she gently urges and squeezes his fingers. “Just go with it.”
“Why aren’t you afraid of me?”

That lump is back in her throat again, and her eyes sting as he scoots away from her and drops her hand. He hesitates before dropping his shoulder and resting his head on her lap.

“One too many blows to the head,” she quips quietly, hopes he doesn’t hear the quiver in her voice. “Come on, bring your legs up too, there’s enough room.”

When he’s settles, she gently nudges his had so his spine is in alignment, rests light fingers on the side of his neck while the other hesitates over his metal shoulder before she taps it with two fingers, “Take a deep breath and drop your shoulder.”

With the first, his shoulder lifts, and through the tear in his collar, she sees the edge where the metal is fused—oh god, it’s fused to his skin, and she is this close to throwing up—to his torso, “You just keep doing that. I’ll take care of the rest.”

“It’s not going to work. It’s not going to stop the screeching.”

Shit, is that what’s going through his head all the time?

“Why don’t you leave the rest to the expert, yeah?”

If only she actually believes her words.

Bucky lets out a drunken, yet undoubtedly derisive snort, and she grins as she slips her fingers up the back of his neck and into his hair.

Her gut twists again when carefully she sweeps her fingers over his scalp and discovers the bumps of countless, long-healed surgical scars that make jagged patterns from the crown of his head to the nape of his neck, “Oh honey,” she sighs, exhaustion hitting her as she scoots forward a bit and sees his eyes still open and staring blankly ahead, so he’s likely not paying much attention. “Do me a favor and start counting backwards from two hundred, yes?”
“Pochemu?”

A desperate giggle claws from her throat as she drags the pads of her fingers down the back of his neck, pressing gently where it rests against her thigh, “Wrong Lewis sister, I don’t know what that means. Just start counting.”

Bucky sighs, settles deeper into her lap, “‘Dvesti, sto devyanosto devyat’, devyanosto vosem’-”

“You are such a little shit.”

“Devyanosto sem’, devyanosto shest’-”

She shakes her head and rubs the thumb of her other hand back and forth over his hairline, “Oh, what the hell am I supposed to do with you?”

Bucky pauses in his counting to snort, and then goes back to it, “Devyanosto pyat’, devyanosto chetyre, I’ve been making a list, devyanosto tri-”

Somehow Darcy manages to stop herself from startling so badly that he notices, especially since his breathing is finally evening out.

“I’m going to give you the same benefit of the doubt that you gave drunk!Darcy last month.”

“Devyanosto dva, devyanosto odin, devyanosto-”

Bucky falls asleep halfway through counting down to vosem’desyat.

Darcy waits until she’s sure his breathing is completely evened out, his exhalations warming the top of her leg, and she eventually slips her hand out of his hair, lift the collar of his shirt so she can get a better look at the part of his body he takes such pains to conceal.

A thick row of deep, jagged scars radiate from below the metal plating, and hell if that isn’t at least part of what keeps him awake day in and day out.
She’s actually is really glad she hasn’t eaten all day.

Throwing up on Bucky would probably mean fleeing the Tower, and possibly even the country.

He lets out a sleepy snuffle, and Darcy snatches her hand away, but all he does is burrow deeper into her lap, his breathing returning to the even respirations of in and out and in and out.

It takes another minute to rebuild the courage to go back to his shoulder—she’s nosy, yes, and it’s probably going to get her killed one day, but at least she has connections to Valhalla—and her fingers slip under his shirt, tracing over the edges of the plating that wraps around the joint, and then over the scar she remembers from when Natasha leaked footage of the D.C. incident onto the Internet.

Arching a brow at the head on her lap and the arm flung over her knees, she eventually reaches into the back pocket of her jeans and fishes out her phone.

It’s a little awkward, typing with her left hand, but thanks to predictive texting, she manages to tap out the short message of, ‘Missing a hobo? I’m playing ‘Hey, that’s mine!’ in the lab.’

[212-555-1233]: ‘You all right? I’m on my way.’

She resists the urge to roll her eyes, and she considers snarking back that being a human pillow is very likely not written into her contract, but settles on snapping a selfie and sending that to Steve instead.

[212-555-1233]: ‘I am so sorry Darcy.’

‘Bucky Barnes is a cuddly drunk. Who knew?’

She sets the phone on the arm of the couch and glances up, “JARVIS,” she whispers, tries not to flinch when she goes back to rubbing her fingers through Bucky’s hair and finds more scars radiating over the right side of his skull. “I hope you’ve got pictures, because one day, I am going to use this as some seriously awesome blackmail material.”
“Already downloaded to your tablet, Ms. Lewis.”


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In the minutes it takes for Steve to get to the lab—and what did he do, scale the building from the outside—Bucky shifts, draws his legs up and curls his metal hand tight around one of her knees.

“Hi,” she mouths, JARVIS silencing the chime on the lab doors that was supposed to alert the scientists to visitors.

*Supposed to,* being the operative words.

Steve’s eyes swim with concern, “You okay?”

She rolls her eyes, “He’s fine, *ish*. I’m whatever,” she swallows, glances back down to the head on her lap. “Did you, uh, did you know what they did to him? To his head, I mean.”

“The brainwashing?” Steve’s frown deepens.

“No,” she looks back up, swallows hard and then tilts her chin down. “He has scars on his head. *All over.*”

He takes a breath, and Darcy watches anger flash across his face, “It was in his file.”

“ Fucking monsters,” she glowers, her voice a raspy whisper that’s only a little from her exhaustion. “You make sure you destroy them, yeah? Rip them all to pieces.”

Steve puts a hand on her shoulder and squeezes, “You don’t have to worry about that,” he looks down at Bucky, scans over his sleeping form. “Let me get him off you.”
Smiling sideways, she watches Steve curl a hand under Bucky’s arm, but flinches when the servos whir and his hand tightens reflexively around her knee, “Oh! Shit!”

Before it gets to the point where he’s going to leave more bruises, or you know, break her kneecap, she stalls Steve with a hand on his wrist, “It’s okay,” she mouths. “I don’t think either of us are moving anytime soon.”

He shakes his head, “You’ve been up too long. I can move him.”

“Nah, leave him be. The last thing we need is for him to wake back up. It’s okay. I’ll stay.”

“Darcy.”

She swats at his arm, but there’s no heat in it, “Just let him sleep.”

“It’s not your responsibility.”

Holding back a snort, she rolls her eyes, “It’s not about that,” she glances down as Bucky lets out another sleepy snort, tenses a little before he settles back against her. “Could you just do me a favor and check on Charlie? Make sure she’s not looking for her study buddy.”

“I will,” Steve runs a hand over her hair before he leans down and presses his lips to her forehead. “Call if you need anything. Seriously. I’ll check on you in a little while.”

She watches as he hesitates at the doors, but she waves cheerily until he slips out of the lab before slumping deeper against the leather monstrosity and toeing off her shoes.

As she settles in, resting her head against the back of the couch, she sighs when Bucky shifts again, snorts something that sounds Russian under his breath.

God, her life is so weird.
Oddly enough, Darcy does not wake up with a crick in her neck and Dum-E or U trying to draw a mustache on her face in Sharpie, which is exactly what she expected after a night in the lab.

Instead, she wakes in her own bed, tucked under the covers in two-day-old clothes, which—

What the hell?

Rolling to her side, Darcy gropes for her glasses, squints until she finds them on the far side of her nightstand where she definitely did not leave them last night. She rubs her eyes and slips them on, “JARVIS?” She mumbles around a yawn.

“Good morning, Ms. Lewis.”

She looks around her room sees her shoes neatly lined up by the wall next to her bedroom door, and she swallows and tries to remember what happened last night, which leads to, “Did I,” she frowns, shakes her head. “Did I hallucinate drunk!Bucky passing out on me last night?”

“That is an accurate assessment. Sergeant Barnes delivered you to your room three and a half hours ago. I have the footage downloaded to your phone, if you’d like to see for yourself.”

Racking her brain for any hazy memories of being carted through the Tower, she comes up with nothing and shakes her head, “I’m sure it deserves an Oscar,” she looks to the window and sees the sun shining on the clear morning. “What time is it? I gotta get Charlie ready for school, don’t I?”

“Only if you don’t want to be late, Ms. Lewis.”

So, she doesn’t bother changing before she drags Charlotte out of bed, and a few minutes later, the bleary-eyed Lewis sisters stumble into the common kitchen, which was—

Full of people?

Thor, Banner, and Pepper? No surprise. They tended to be relatively normal-scheduled human beings.

Jane? Weird after a science bender, but whatever, Thor probably dragged her along.
Natasha? Well, Darcy doesn’t know what is normal with her.

But Clinton Francis Barton up before nine?

Hell no.

Darcy narrows her eyes as she pushes Charlotte ahead of her, and she pads to the seat she always claims, because it’s to Thor’s right, “Good morning, Thor!”

“Good morning, smallest Lewis,” he grins over a plate piled high with scrambled eggs and bacon.

Shuffling to her favorite coffeemaker—one of three on the counter and the only one Tony hadn’t gotten around to modifying, yet—she stabs at the buttons, “I see we have a full house this morning,” she mutters while searching for her mug. “Are you off to Avenge something or something?”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees the near-maniacal grin on Clint’s face as he watches her from his perch on the breakfast bar.

“What?”

Somehow, the grin widens, “Late night?”

She scoffs, “How do you even know?”

“Darcy, I’m a spy.”

“You’re an ass,” she grumbles as she pours sugar into her oversized mug, swishes it around so it coats the bottom.

She smacks her hand over her eyes and counts to ten when Charlotte makes that tiny gasp she always makes when she says a bad word, while half the occupants in the room chuckle at the
reaction, “What do you want for breakfast, Kid?”

Before Charlotte can answer, Darcy dives for the bag of kids’ pancakes stashed in the freezer and grabs a handful, tosses them on the plate before she finally caves from the looks on everyone’s faces.

“What?”

“You know what,” Clint says pointedly, and she kind of wants to punch him in the face.

“Did Tony show you guys the lab feed or something? It’s not a big deal.”

“Darcy, it kind of is.”

She resists the urge to pace as she stabs thirty seconds into the microwave timer, “Well, what was I supposed to do, Jane? Let him at the Hulk tranqs and drag a hundred and ninety pounds of comatose Russian assassin through the halls? Come on, that’s just mean.”

“But it’s what you should have done.”

Arching a brow, she faces Natasha where she perches next to Clint, a mug of tea between her dangerous yet tiny and impeccably manicured hands, “Seriously, Agent Romanov? He needs help, not Bruce’s not-so-happy meds. No offense, man,” she adds with a nod to Bruce, who nods back but is definitely not getting in the middle of this argument. “It’s not like he hurt me. He passed out. On my leg. And let’s be real, it was a long time coming.”

Natasha’s eyes go hard, and Darcy fights the urge to flinch and hide behind Thor, “That does not mean Comr-Bucky is not every inch the Winter Solder when he’s in that state. You could have been hurt very badly if he wasn’t as responsive as he was to you.”

“But it worked, so yay me.”

The microwave’s beep shatters the tense silence that falls over the room, and Darcy jumps, whips the plate out and places it in front of Charlotte. She is stalled from her short pacing back and forth in front of the narrow space in front of the refrigerator when Thor wraps his hand around her wrist in a gentle grip and tugs her to his side.
Letting out a put-upon sigh that the people in this room probably don’t deserve, she curls an arm around his shoulders, “I know, I know,” she mutters as he presses his palm against her back.

“We just want to ensure your safety.”

Jane nods in agreement with him, and Natasha clears her throat, “You will train with me in the mornings after you drop Charlotte off at school. We’ll start today.”

“Say what?”

The assassin favors her with a look that clearly states that she’s not about to repeat herself, “It’s something that should have been discussed the second you set foot in the building. You and Doctor Foster.”

“What?”

Snorting at Jane’s surprised chirp, Darcy lets Thor go and makes her way back to her coffee mug, watches through narrowed eyes as Clint looks down at his phone, a smaller smile replacing the completely ridiculous look that had been on his face, “And just who are you chatting with this bright and shiny morning?”

Her question distracts Natasha from whatever she’s saying to placate Jane—who is not remotely thrilled with the prospect of learning how to fight—and turns, her green eyes narrow as she leans forward and tries to get a look at Clint’s phone.

He scowls and turns the screen from her nosy gaze, “Darce, you’re a menace.”

“But I’m your favorite menace,” she winks and swipes her mug off the counter, grabs a packet of PopTarts for her own breakfast. “Twenty minutes and we’re out, Charlie. Apparently, I have to go put on yoga pants,” she calls over her shoulder on her way out of the kitchen.

Walking into the hall, she pauses when she spies Bucky making his way back to the elevator, “You hear all that?” She murmurs as he lets her slip in ahead of him, presses the button for their floor.
He shrugs and leans against the wall of the car, doesn’t say anything else.

“So, just how hung-over are you right now?”

Bucky shrugs again and the doors slide open with a chirp. She makes her way out, but stalls when a hand—the one made of metal, and huh, *that’s a new one*—curls around her elbow, “Yeah?”

Without a word, he wraps an arm around her shoulders, and Darcy’s eyes widen as she tries to keep her coffee from spilling over his chest, “Uh, okay,” she mutters quietly and presses her free hand to his side.

They stand there, between the elevator doors, for a long time, and then she feels his lips press against the side of her head, “Thanks,” he rasps and lets her go, slips around her and into the hall.

Despite *all* her efforts, Darcy’s heart flutters *hard* in her chest as she watches him retreat to the apartment.

--

“So, you’re seriously serious about this,” Darcy says as she steps into the training room after she dropped Charlotte off at school.

Natasha is sitting in the center of the training mat on the far side of the room, and she looks over, eyebrow arched, and holds Darcy’s gaze before she gestures to the spot in front of her, “Have a seat.”

Toeing off her shoes at the edge of the mat, Darcy leaves them nearly lined up next to Natasha’s discarded pair, pads over and sits in the middle of the bright blue circle, folds her legs in the same way Natasha has.

“Before we do, you know, whatever this is, I just wanted to ask you,” she falters, feels her face turn bright red, and as much as she tries to tamp down on it, it just makes her flush more. “I was thinking, and the other night when Bucky, when whatever happened, it was when I was out, and I was wondering, well, if I did—”

“Darcy,” Natasha reaches out and covers Darcy’s hands where the rest on her knees. “I am going to tell you the same thing I told Steve when I arrived.”
She swallows, “Yeah?”

“It’s not about you,” she pauses to let it sink it. “It’s not. It’s about him. And you need to come to terms with that. You and Steve both need to.”

Darcy looks at Natasha, but she can’t get a read on what she’s thinking, because there are spies, and then there’s the spy, “I’m not, I don’t think I-”

Natasha cuts her off with a gentle squeeze of her hands, “As important as you have become to Bucky since he returned, you did not trigger him by going out. His bad night happened to coincide with it. That happens. That’s going to happen. You must not stop living your own life to help him recover his.”

“I wouldn’t-”

She smirks, “Well, of course you won’t, because I’ll be here to make sure of that.”

“Thanks, I think?”

Natasha sits straight, links her fingers together and stretches her arms over her head, “All the same, you do require some training. It will make us all feel better.”

Wrinkling her nose, Darcy sits back straighter, “Are you sure?”

She grins, and Darcy feels very, very nervous, “Absolutely.”

Chapter End Notes

The adventures continue.

Hope you're still enjoying the ride.

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 113: “I can’t believe you arrested him out of spite.”

“I had probable cause.”

“Yes, but mostly spite.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Tasha’s got your best interests at heart,” Clint corrected, adjusting the ice pack with his other hand. “Apparently you mean a lot to a lot of very famous people. Not just Thor.”

Darcy snorted, “You have no idea what Tumblr says about your butt.”

“And I don’t want to know.”

A laugh bubbled from her lips, “It gets better. Apparently they think Steve’s torso has the proportions of a Dorito, and people are campaigning for Frito-Lay to reach out and ask Steve to endorse them.”

Chapter Notes

So I had most of this chapter done for a while, marinating, and then all of a sudden last night I managed to finish it off (Could it be thanks to watching the Mummy 3? Maybe? Of note: I have 99 problems, and 98 of them are that they recast Evy O'Connell. My other problem is how the Yeti apparently know what football is).

Also, the end of the chapter has a nod to a scene in chapter 18 of boopboop's post Cap2 epic: The Man On The Bridge. I don't always ship Steve and Bucky, but when I do, it's in this universe. It's basically this story that comes from Tony's perspective and IT IS BRILLIANT. EVERYONE GO READ IT. Now. (Okay, read this chapter first, and THEN go read it. I can't recommend it enough).

So in honor of my birthday today, my gift to you all is a freshly-completed chapter six!

I'm so sorry.

Oh wait, no I'm not.

(Note: This chapter DOES involve some of the canon-typical torture Bucky endured with Hydra.)

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 122: “For the last time, we are not naming our future child Lentil!”

“But it’s gender neutral!”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[BLOCKED ID]: ‘Hello? Is anyone online?’
[X53K947V]: ‘This is a private channel.’

…typing….typing…typing

[BLOCKED ID]: ‘I know. I’m looking for someone familiar with, I don’t even know why I’m saying this, but the geo-political impact of Russian ballet on the modern cultural climate.’

[X53K947V]: ‘You may have come to the right place.’

…typing….typing…typing

[BLOCKED ID]: ‘Then I have actionable intel on a large cell of terrorists who trace their beginnings to World War Two. My people don’t have the resources to take down a group this size, but I’ve been told that yours do.’

[X53K947V]: ‘How do I know this isn’t a trap?’

…typing….typing…typing

[BLOCKED ID]: ‘I don’t even know who I’m talking to, but I was told YOU and your people were trustworthy.’

[X53K947V]: ‘Who sent you to me? How did you get access to this channel?’

…typing….typing…typing

[BLOCKED ID]: ‘A friend.’

[X53K947V]: ‘Who?’
She said to tell you it’s The Cavalry. And I got access to this channel because I’m good at what I do.

Hello? You still there?

Tell me about the cell. If this falls through, tell The Cavalry I will hunt her down.

Darcy’s first workout with Natasha is awful.

And the next three are even worse.

After her fifth grueling workout in as many days—and she’s just learning how to avoid injury the right way, because apparently there is a wrong way to do that too—Darcy stumbles out to the common level in search of an ice pack or twelve.

She stalls when her phone buzzes with an incoming call from an unfamiliar, local number.

Even lifting the phone to her ear to take the call sends twinges of pain radiating down her shoulders and back, and she stifles a snort, “Hello?”

“Darcy? It’s Blair Bass. I got your number from Serena. That okay?”

She holds back a snort, because it really doesn’t matter.

“What can I do for you, Mrs. Bass?”
“Please, call me Blair. And come out to dinner with is.”

Darcy stops walking mid-step—which might have hurt more than her slow and steady shuffle to the kitchen—and pulls her phone from her ear, looks down to make sure she’s not hallucinating, “Huh?”

Blair doesn’t seem to hear the confusion in her phone, “Chuck and I are going out for sushi with the Baizens next Saturday night. We like to go out, you know, as couples, every week or so. You and Captain Rogers should come with us. We’d love to have the change to get to know you.”

What.

She blinks, blurts, “Steve and I aren’t a couple.”

“Our mistake,” there’s a teasing lit to Blair’s voice that she’s not touching with a ten-foot pole. “Well, you should come anyway. Carter and Chuck never take the ‘no shop talk at the dinner table’ rule to heart, so Serena and I would love the chance to outnumber them.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Perfect! We’ll pick you up at eight. Stark Tower, right? Talk to you soon!”

What in the world?

Darcy’s eyes are wide as she gapes down at her phone, the screen dimming before it blacks out, which knocks her back to reality, and she taps it against her lips as she goes back to shuffling toward the cold packs in the freezer.

Really, what had she been thinking when she enrolled Charlotte at Constance?

Okay, well, she knows what she had been thinking, getting Charlotte into a good school, since it will definitely do more for her future than living a half-life in Washington, but—

To be taken under the wings of two of the school’s most notorious alumnae—she did some research
after the parent-teacher reception, and boy did she have questions about some of their exploits—well, that part she didn’t expect.

Finally, she reaches the freezer, yanks the bottom drawer open and flips the lid for the inner drawer filled with ice packs, all the while resisting the urge to just sit on it.

There may be space age padding on the gym floor, not to mention halfway up most of the walls, but that didn’t mean shit to Natasha and her crazy ninja skills as she flipped Darcy up one side of the room and down the other.

Grabbing a pack, she gingerly stuffs it between her back and the waistband of her yoga pants, shivers as she cold touches her spine, and she grabs another before nudging the drawer shut with her foot.

She presses the pack against her right shoulder and pads over to the breakfast bar, levers up onto a stool.

Darcy doesn’t know how long she sits—and also doesn’t care—but eventually she feels a warm hand against her neck, massaging gently, and she peaks an eye open to see the hem of a black and purple shirt in the corner of her eye, “Your partner’s a meanie,” she whines.

“Tasha’s got your best interests at heart,” he corrects, adjusting the ice pack with his other hand. “Apparently, you mean a lot to a lot of very famous people. Not just Thor.”

She snorts, “You have no idea what Tumblr says about your butt.”

“And I don’t want to know.”

A laugh bubbles from her lips, “It gets better. Apparently, they think Steve’s torso has the proportions of a Dorito, and people are campaigning for Frito-Lay to reach out and ask Steve to be their new spokesperson.”

“You have taken one too many hits to the head,” he gently grabs her arm and urges her off the stool. “Come on, you.”
“Ugh, no,” she whines as he urges her into the living room. “I don’t want to move, for like, ever. You are the worst.”

He ruffles the sweaty mass of hair wrapped in a bun on the top of her head with one hand, tugs her again with the other, “Just to the couch. It’ll make your back feel better.”

Plopping down by the arm, he takes her shoulders and turns her, urges her to rest her chest against it, and then he slips the ice out of her pants, “No,” her whine echoes through the room. “My cold.”

“You had it on too long. Stop fighting and trust me.”

“Ugh,” she slumps over and presses her forehead against her arms. “Don’t trust creepy jackbooted thugs.”

“Don’t be like that,” he presses his hands to her shoulders and carefully slips his thumbs along the lines of her scapula. “You know I’m your favorite jackbooted thug.”

A sound the might have been a cross between a moan and a pained yelp passes her lips as he works the knots out of her shoulders, the steady pressure of his knee at the base of her spine pretty much the only thing keeping her from falling off the couch.

“I hurt.”

Clint squeezes her shoulder, “All part of the life,” he sighs. “I really should have thought about it when we were in New Mexico.”

“I would have pitched a fucking fit if you pulled this out of your hat back in Puente. And Jane would have tried to hit you with the Pinz.”

Snorting, he does something to a knot of her right side that sends spasms down her back, and he presses hard with his knee to keep her from falling, “That woman’s skills behind the wheel are something else.”

“Ugh.”
“Come on,” he pats her shoulders, chuckles when she winces again. “You need to move or it’s just going to get worse by the time you have to pick up the kid. What’s she got today, soccer practice?”

At the thought of moving, she lets out a disgruntled noise from the back of her throat, “It’s field hockey, actually, which I didn’t even know was a thing until I moved to the east coast. And I guess you’re right. For once,” she amends before he can lord it over her. “I told Bucky the other day that I’d make him some grilled cheese BLTs. You can help. And by help, I mean reach the things, because my arms are still numb.”

Clint taps her back with his palm, and then helps her up, “Yeah, yeah sure.”

--

With a plate in one hand, Darcy taps on the door to Bucky and Steve’s apartment with the other.”

For the most part, he’d been hold up there since the incident in the lab, and when Bucky finally opens the door, he blinks when he sees her, like he’s forgotten what she looks like, “Darcy.”

He looks like shit.

“Hi. You should eat.”

Tilting his head, he eventually steps aside, “Hi.”

She breezes into the kitchen, wrinkles her nose delicately at the mess of plates and cups in the sink—because men, apparently—and rifles through the cabinets until she finds the plates.

“Do anything exciting lately?” She asks as she doles out lunch. “Natasha kicked my ass again this morning, and then I’m going to go back to breaking the laws of physics when Jane after I pick Charlie up from school.”

Bucky’s quiet, and she feels his gaze on her as she shuffles through the kitchen from his perch by the door, and when she looks at him, he shrugs, “I don’t know.”
“How’s the uh,” she taps the side of her head. “Noise?”

He shrugs again, “Still there. Always is.”

Darcy tries to keep any constipated expressions off her face as she grabs the plates and cocks her head toward the living room, “Well, if there’s one thing that’ll quiet it down for a bit, I think it would be *Frozen*.”

“What?”

“Happy animated children’s movie with a strangely and unexpectedly ignored undercurrent of parental neglect,” she makes her way over, gently nudging him along with her elbow. “Come on. Hey JARVIS, can you pull down the movie from the digital archive?”

“Of course, Ms. Lewis.”

Bucky drops onto the couch and Darcy follows, pointedly ignoring his frown when she sits to his left—heh, she’s not crazy, she leaves plenty of room. She holds the plate out to him, and then snatches it back after a second, “You really don’t have to do that.”

“What?”

“Don’t think I haven’t noticed how you make a point to hide your hand,” she tries to ignore how he flinches and lets it fall to his lap. “You don’t have to. It’s part of you. It’s been part of you for longer than I’ve been alive.”

He sighs, “Darcy.”

“Just saying,” she finally gives up the plate, curls up with her own as she turns back to the television, which is already cued up to the movie’s snowy, blue-soaked introduction.

Bucky finally takes a bite, pauses when he tastes the cheddar cheese, thick-cut bacon, and lettuce
melded together, “Charlotte is a much better assistant than Barton.”

“How did you,” she breaks off with a roll of her eyes. “Right. Everyone I live with is a spy. Stupid question.”

“So, you two are close.”

“Charlie and me? Well, duh. Don’t really have a choice in the matter.”

“No, you and Barton.”

There’s this look on his face, but even as exhausted as she is, Darcy knows where this is going.

“You think Clint and I are,” she stops trying and breaks off with a laugh. “No, no, not even. He’s like, one of my bros, on the level of, I don’t know, Thor and his Asgardian war buddies or something. When he was stationed in New Mexico with Jane and me, I made him keep me in beer to make up for the fact that his boss stole my iPod. And then he went and died before he could give it back to me. Jerk.”

“Died? It wasn’t-”

“Hydra? No. I don’t know how much you know about Thor’s brother Loki and his ‘it’s all about me’ shit fit that he went through when he found out he’s not biologically related to his brother who literally looks nothing like him, but during round two, he stabbed Agent Coulson through his chest and sent creepy alien lizards from another galaxy to attack Manhattan.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh,” she shrugs. “Just don’t bring it up around Thor. He always saw the good in Loki and is still super bummed he sacrificed his life for Thor and Jane when the creepy elves attacked London. And Asgard. And the rest of the Nine Realms. Oh, and you know, you probably shouldn’t bring it up around Clint either.”

He arches and a brow, and she shrugs, “Tony said it was something about a really bad Wizard of Oz
reference. I try not to pry. The one time I did, Clint made a spaz face and hid on the roof for two days.”

“You really don’t know how to debrief properly.”

Again, she shrugs, shifts one foot so she can nudge his knee, “Still not an agent,” she sings before she tilts her head. “This is actually the second time in like, the last two hours, someone assumed I was boinking someone I’m definitely not. What’s the deal with this day, am I right?”

Bucky shrugs and faces the TV, and if that isn’t a sign that he’s done talking for the time being, she doesn’t know what is.

And people say she’s bad at reading people.

No, the Intern still doesn’t count.

Idina Menzel’s Elsa had unleashed a blizzard on Arendelle and is rocking hard to the song of her independence when the apartment door bangs open, and Darcy sees the paper plate in Bucky’s hand crinkle when he tenses at that and the shouting that follows.

Darcy pauses the movie and arches a brow at Steve and Natasha’s arguing voices, which precede them down the hall. Steve is walking backwards, his hands waving with the force of whatever he’s saying to an equally angry Natasha.

In French.

Natasha spits something that has to be extremely unflattering at whatever Steve just said—if the glacial glare and the way she smacks her hand against the wall are anything to go by. But when she notices the two people in the living room, she snaps her mouth shut.

Darcy almost waves, but doesn’t, and Natasha throws her hands in the air, mutters something else under her breath before she snaps at Steve again, and then stalks out of the apartment.

Letting out an angry grunt, Steve rakes a hand through his hair, glances into the living room before
he stalks out after Natasha, and the apartment door makes a resounding slam as it closes behind him.

Bucky and Darcy sit in silence for a good three minutes after they leave, “Well,” she drawls as she finally looks away. “And here I thought they couldn’t get any hotter.”

Bucky almost looks appalled, and a thousand points to Darcy for getting him to make a face other than neutral or angsty mask.

“What?” She shrugs around another bite of the half of sandwich she’d been halfheartedly nibbling on for most of the movie. “Please don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

“No, that’s not,” he winces, hunching in on himself. “Never mind.”

She tilts her head, “You okay? I didn’t hit on something, did I?”

“I’m fine.”

“Remind me to add *The Italian Job* to the list of decent remakes that you missed while,” she stuffs a fist into her mouth to stop from saying brainwashed. “Indisposed. Oh, and *Ocean’s Eleven*.”

He blinks at her, and the shrugs, “Well, ten bucks says they end up screwing their frustrations out on each other by the end of the week.”

Bucky’s eyes go wide, “I don’t think that’s going to happen. Ever.”

“Wanna bet?”

“You don’t speak French, do you?”

“The only foreign language I speak is the Internet,” she laughs on the look on his face, another new one—this one a hilarious cross between constipation and fear, and he’s definitely having an extremely expressive day for a guy who hadn’t been allowed to express himself for seven decades. “So, then what were they bitching about?”
He swallows, “I think it might have been about a mission. They were discussing her source. There’s something about them that Steve doesn’t like.”

“Oh.”

--

“Darcy! Darcy! Darcy!”

Clad in a once-white shirt, navy shorts, and knee socks that are covered in grass and mud stains, Charlotte sprints over to where Darcy is standing with some of the other parents, just inside the gate that borders the Constance Athletics Lawn.

Her tangled hair flies through the air, almost whacking the other little girl running at her side, “Darcy!” Charlotte squeals again, stopping before she runs head-first into Darcy’s knees. “I scored a goal in field hockey today!”

“Did you? That’s great,” she grins and flicks a piece of grass out of her hair, and then looks at the girl grinning next to Charlotte. “Hey Mo, did you have fun too?”

The girl tucks a strand of brown hair behind her ear and nods brightly, “I scored a goal too! Miss Meg says our team won! But that the other team that didn’t win also did good things too!”

“That’s very diplomatic of her,” Darcy laughs, looks across the field to where the woman in question is talking to a couple of the other students, gently admonishing them from tearing out the grass, which probably means it’s the Terror Twins.

Charlotte reaches out and tugs on Darcy’s shirt, “What does diplomatic mean?”

“Oh, I know!” Mo squeals, jumping up and down. “Mommy says it’s like when my Daddy says something wrong but she agrees with him anyway because she doesn’t want him to feel bad.”

Snorting back a laugh, Darcy pats Mo’s head, “That’s certainly one way to put it,” she glances around, but doesn’t see the tall blonde standing amongst the cluster of parents. “Where is your mom anyway?”
Mo shrugs, “Aunt Dorota is picking me and Henry up from school today, because Mommy had to go see Uncle Nate,” she says like it’s the most important thing in the world. “Can Charlotte come sleep over at my house?”

Darcy has to resist the urge to flinch, because the last thing she needs was to see Carter and spill the beans about Bucky, but she forces herself to nod anyway, “Not this weekend, but soon, definitely.”

“Yay!”

Both girls cheer, and Darcy can’t stop the grin on her face as she watches the girls hug before Mo darts off to the other side of the grass field where a plump woman in a maid’s uniform was standing with a boy a few years older than Mo, “Bye Mo!” Charlotte yells. “See you next week!”

When she reaches the woman’s—Dorota’s—side, Mo looks back and waves before they head off, and Darcy holds a hand out to take Charlotte’s backpack, “Ready to go home, Kid? One of us needs a shower, and at the moment, it’s definitely not me.”

Charlotte hands her the backpack and wraps her small fingers on her wrist, “I don’t want to shower.”

“But you spent the afternoon rolling around on the grass, so you’re going to.”

“But I don’t want to.”

Looking skyward so Charlotte can’t see, Darcy rolls her eyes, “Tough cookies, Kid.”

When they stop at the corner and wait for the light to turn, Charlotte tugs on Darcy’s hand, “But,” her mouth snaps shut and she tilts her head, considering. “If I shower, can I have a cookie?”

“Since life doesn’t work like that, as much as we’d all like it to, nope. Sorry.”

She’s not actually sorry.
A near-comedic frown crosses Charlotte’s face, “But-”

“Charlotte.”

“Darcyyyyyyyy.”

--

After eventually coaxing Charlotte in and out of the shower, Darcy settles the exhausted girl down for a nap before she heads down to the lab, tosses her bag on her chair, “All right science lady, let’s go break some figurative laws and shit.”

Spinning around in her chair, Janes rolls her eyes, “Where in the world have you been?”

She sits in her chair, whirls around before waving a dismissive hand, “I finished my workout, had to do a thing, and then ran out to pick Charlie up from school.”

Jane pinches the bridge of her nose, “What happened with Bucky this time?”

“Nothing, nothing,” she insists, props her boots up on Jane’s desk, ignoring the way she scowls. “I’m serious. I just thought it would be a good idea to make him something to eat. And it was. And yay progress for the fact that he ate food he didn’t watch me make, considering he almost, sort of, but not really tried to stab me when we first met because he thought I compromised the cheese.”

Propping her chin on her hand, Jane arches a brow, “So, what’s really bothering you?”

“What?”

She waves a hand again, grumbles a little at how well Jane learned to read her over the last few months, “Well, I was invited out to dinner,” her eyes go wide. “Oh. My. God.”

“What?”
She claps her hands over her mouth, muffling, “I was invited out to dinner!”

Jane leans forward and grabs her wrists, forces her hands back down, “Darcy, _why_ is that a big deal?”

“Because,” her eyes snap past Jane, to where Bruce and Tony are working at the other side of the lab, but they barely spare her a glance—outbursts aren’t that unusual from either side of the lab, of course—and go back to whatever they were tinkering with. “Because it _is_!”

Darcy shifts her hands in Janes and wraps her fingers around her narrow wrists, stands and tugs her out of the lab, “Come on.”

“What are you—”

She pulls them into the elevator, “JARVIS, the roof please.”

Jane finally manages to free her wrists from Darcy’s shaky grasp, “What are you doing?”

Darcy paces up and down the narrow space, her arms crossed tight over her chest, “We need privacy. _Crap. Crap, crap, crap._”

“Privacy for _what_!” Jane tries to step in front of her, but Darcy manages to get around her and continues pacing. “Darcy!”

--

The elevator doors open to a glass-walled space that leads to the Tower’s rooftop patio, and Darcy rushes through the doors so quickly it almost swings into Jane as it closes, “Darcy Lewis, what has gotten into you?”

She pulls the sleeves of her flannel over her hands to ward off the cool breeze whipping around the building, and watches Darcy rest her hands on the railing and bows her head.

Jane follows, props her elbow on the railing and gently nudges Darcy’s arm, “Hey,” she nudges
Darcy again until she finally looks up. “Tell me what’s going on. Do I need to call Thor?”

Darcy gnaws on the tip of her thumb, and then sighs, “I was invited to dinner by Blair Bass, one of the mothers from Charlie’s school. She’s got a boy a couple years ahead of the Kid. It’s me, her, Serena Baizen, and their husbands.”

“That’s a good thing, right? Getting to know some parents from Constance?”

She glances down at the city, cranes her neck in the general direction of Brooklyn, “The other night, when I went to that reception, I found out something about Serena’s husband, Carter,” she laughs hollowly. “God, I can’t believe I forgot to tell you.”

Taking another deep breath, Jane goes tense as Darcy finally looks her straight on.

And then she tells her everything.

--

Story told, Darcy and Jane relocate to the padded lounge chairs set up around the giant, gilded fire pit Thor brought down from Asgard as a thank-you gift to Tony for his hospitality, “Wow,” Jane’s voice is muffled by the wind. “Wow.”

“You’re telling me,” she twists her hand around her fingers. “Not telling Bucky isn’t the problem, I know he’s not ready, but I don’t know how I can face the Baizens with that kind of secret.”

Jane barks a hollow laugh, “How in the world did you get wrapped up in this?”

“I was the only applicant for your internship. So, it’s kind of on you.”

Rolling her eyes, she nudges Darcy’s leg with the point of her Converse-clad toe, “You’re the one who stayed.”

“Like I’d leave,” she rests her head back against the cushion and laughs. “God, this day has been so weird. What’s next, are you and I going to rip another hole in the middle of the galaxy?”
Jane smirks and sits up, holds a hand out, “Let’s go try.”

Arm in arm, they walk back inside, and Darcy even remembers to hold the door open this time, “Hey Jane,” she says once the wind cuts off and they’re waiting for the elevator to make its way to the top of the building.

“Yeah?”

“Come to the dinner with me.”

“What?”

“I’m serious. You’ll be able to stop me if I start to spaz when Carter inevitably asks me if Steve told me any stories about Bucky like he’s not my neighbor and likes to teach my sister Russian.”

She rolls her eyes, “Fine.”

--

“Why can’t I come with you?” Charlotte whines while bouncing on Darcy’s bed.

Glancing at her through the mirror as she finishes touching up her eye makeup, Darcy shoves the mascara wand back in the bottle and turns around, “Silliness, this is a boring dinner for grownups. That’s why you get to stay here with Clint.”

Charlotte tilts her head, “But Clint’s a grownup!”

“Sometimes I wonder about that,” she chuckles under her breath before she pads to her closet, digs through the mess at the bottom for her leather boots. “But you are going to have tons of fun hanging out and eating too much candy with him and Thor.”

“How much candy?”
“I’m not going to dignify that with an answer.”

She wrinkles her nose, “What’s dignify mean?”

Pulling back from her closet, Darcy huffs a breath and makes her way back to the bed, ruffles Charlotte’s hair, “Don’t worry about it, Kid. Just think about all the fun things you’re going to do tonight while I’m out. It’s going to be great.”

“Can you stay and hang out with me and Clint and Thor?”

“Not tonight, Kid,” she hugs her and flops forward so they fall back on the pillows at the head of her bed. “But you can tell me all about it in the morning. Sound good?”

Charlotte nods brightly, her hair messing when she rubs it against the pillows, “Okay!”

Darcy’s ready a few minutes later, and she grabs her bag before she shuffles Charlotte into the elevator and upstairs. When they’re in the hallway, Jane shouts something at Thor from the bedroom in the back of the apartment.

“Jane, you ready?” She calls as she drops her bag on the couch. “They’re going to be here soon.”

There’s a thump, before Jane calls out, “Ugh, five minutes Darce!”

With a smirk, Darcy follows Charlotte into the kitchen, where Thor’s pulling snacks from the pantry and piling them on the island next to Mjolnir, “Jane intended to be ready earlier, but borrowed a dress from Lady Potts when she found nothing of her own suited this repast.”

“Good for her. I don’t think she’d be let into the restaurant in her usual digs.”

“But it’s a lot more comfortable!” Jane shouts from the bedroom.
Darcy leans against the counter, laughing as she traces the engravings on one side of the hammer, and Charlotte climbs up onto one of the stools, “Thanks for watching the Kid, Big Guy.

He nods, “Of course. I plan to regale her with tales of my youth.”

“Like the time you dressed in drag and almost got married?”

Thor tosses a light glare in her general direction.

“What’s *drag*?”

Thor’s glare deepens, and Darcy smirks, “Probably not *that* tale.”

Before Darcy has any more chances to keep teasing him, the clicking of high heels heralds Jane’s arrival, “Ugh, that dress is perfect,” she grouses, but smiles, and it widens when Thor steps away from the pantry and takes Jane’s hand, presses his lips to the back and Jane flushes bright red. “You look great.”

Squeezing Thor’s fingers, Jane runs her free hand down the skirt, smooths it over her hip, “Are you sure? It’s so *Pepper-y*.”

“There’s no such thing as clothes being *too* Pepper-y,” Darcy scoffs. “Sometimes I wish I was built like you guys, because oh my god her clothes.”

“Don’t even think about that.”

Whirling around, Darcy sees Clint standing in the doorway, guitar in hand as he looks at her with a frown, “Aw,” she gushes and glides over, kisses his cheek. “It is a wonder how you’re still single.”

Clint goes red to the tips of his ears and rocks back on his heels, “Yeah, well,” he shrugs as Thor’s laugh booms through the apartment. “*Technically.*”

“*Really.*”
He rolls his eyes, but before she can pepper him with questions, her phone rings, “That’s probably them, Jane,” she calls over her shoulder as she spins around and grabs her purse off the couch. “Go time. Bye Charlie, be good!”

--

“Darcy!”

Serena is hanging halfway out of the limo and waving with her free hand, and Darcy tugs Jane behind her, because yeah, apparently she is making new friends, “Hey there! Hope you don’t mind if Jane comes along. She is way beyond overdue for a night out.”

“Of course not,” she grins and gets out, holds the limo’s door open. “The more the merrier. I’m Serena Baizen.”

“Jane Foster,” she says, more focused on not falling off the curb in her heels and on tugging down the hem of her dress as she slips in behind Darcy.

Inside, Darcy waves at Blair and the two men sitting on either side of her, “Thanks for the invite,” she turns to Jane. “That’s Serena’s husband Carter, and Blair and Chuck Bass.”

Small talk on the way to the restaurant is dominated by the kids and school and the project Blair and Chuck’s son had been assigned, so it’s not until they’re seated at the table at the back of a posh sushi restaurant with a literal velvet rope keeping out everyone in Darcy’s usual tax bracket that Blair turns her speculative gaze to Jane, “So, what do you do for Stark Industries?”

Jane toys with her chopsticks—the fancy, polished kind that Natasha has probably used as a weapon at some point in her life—and glances across the table at Darcy, who shrugs and sips her water, “I’m an astrophysicist. Stark brought me in to consult on some projects for him, and allocated lab space to work out of so I can collaborate with him on site.”

Chuck’s brows hike to his hairline and he looks at Darcy, “You work for a scientist?”

“I was Jane’s intern for a couple years ago to get the science credits I needed to graduate from Culver,” she and Jane share a grin. “After she hit a literal god with a car and a tiny town in Middle of Nowhere, New Mexico got blown to bits by another god having a temper tantrum, I figured that
sticking with her was a hell of a lot more exciting than settling down in an internship with some D.C. lobby group.”

“And now you live with the Avengers. How cool is that?”

Darcy salutes Serena with her glass, “Well, they don’t always eat all the food, so we get along.”

“And you’ve never been hit on by Tony Stark?”

“While he’s made it clear that he wouldn’t be opposed if he were single, it freaks him out that I could totally be his daughter since I don’t know who my father really is,” she rolls her eyes. “But Pepper’s got that pretty much locked down anyway.”

Blair and Serena laugh, “So, Tony and Pepper are really dating, you’re with Thor, and it must be so cool to be dating someone from another planet, but Darcy,” Serena frowns. “You’re single?”

“For so many reasons, including my last, stunningly terrible relationship,” she ignores the pitying look on Jane’s face and tamps down on the urge to talk about how terrible the Intern really was. “Besides, I’ve got enough on my plate with Charlie anyway.”

Carter props his elbows on the edge of the table, “And Captain Rogers? Do you see much of him?”

“He’s been in and around the Tower since he moved in back in August.”

And then Carter asks the question Darcy knew he’d asks, even if she really wishes he wouldn’t.

“Has he ever mentioned anything about Sergeant Barnes?”

She feels Jane’s foot touch the side of her leg, and Darcy nudges back, steels herself and shrugs, “Here and there, but nothing I didn’t learn when I was picking up my history minor at Culver.”

It stings a bit to watch Carter deflate for the flicker of a second before he masks it away in a move eerily reminiscent of his grandfather—don’t go there Darcy—and Darcy forces the guilty feeling
down, takes a long sip of the martini the water placed in front of her.

Serena squeezes Carter’s hand and gently nudges her shoulder against his, “Hey,” she kisses his cheek. “I’m sure Darcy will help us wrangle the stories out of him somehow.”

“You know it,” she holds her drink up and Serena taps her glass against it.

Sake and miso soup come next, and Jane delicately sips at hers, “So, what does Darcy need to know if she’s going to survive the next fifteen years getting Charlie through Constance?”

“Everyone is trying to one-up one another, and none of it matters,” Chuck downs a shot of sake while Blair nods in agreement.

“Also, don’t sleep with your teachers,” she adds. “Or lie about sleeping with your teachers to the school board.”

Brows hitting her hairline, Darcy resists the urge to roll her eyes, “Okay, that’s a story I need to hear.”

--

After dinner, which is followed by drinks at a burlesque club that apparently was the first properties Chuck ever bought on his own, and then a stop at an all-night diner for cheese fries, Jane and Darcy stumble back into the Tower lobby sometime—late.

Very late.

“Oh my god Darcy, I can’t believe you actually went on stage,” Jane’s giggle echo through the dimly lit space that was empty save for the bemused security staff who wave them on through as they skirt around the status Tony still insists on keeping in the lobby.

If Victor von Doom has an eight-foot-tall statue in his New York offices, Tony’s obligated to counter.

Of course, the fact that the man is definitely a terrorist is something that doesn’t even ping on Tony’s radar.
Cursing under her breath as she trips against the dais, Darcy snorts, “Like I was going to say no to an easy hundred bucks. You know, they may be rich and more than a little crazy, I mean, Chuck faked his death, what, like three times? That’s totally Tony-status. But I think I like them.”

“I hear you,” Jane presses her palm to the panel next to the elevator door, has to readjust when it beeps angrily before it finally chimes. “Thanks for dragging me out. We should take Thor back to that restaurant for sake bombs.”

“Oh my god, that would be the best,” she slips inside and slumps against the wall, exhaustion hitting her as the floaty, drunken feeling fades away. “Home, please and thanks J.”

The car rises, “Actually, Ms. Lewis, you’re needed in Operations.”

She blinks, then squeezes her eyes shut, “What? J, it’s like oh-dark-ew, and that means bedtime. I’ll deal with it when I’m not hungover.”

“I apologize, Ms. Lewis, Steve was about to send for you.”

“Ugh,” she rolls her suddenly-heavy head against the elevator wall and looks at Jane, who shrugs, and she grunts again. “Fine, I guess.”

They stumble off the elevator and find—

That’s not Steve.

That’s Captain freaking America.

And that space-age Kevlar is something else.

“Before you start,” Darcy holds a hand up, and braces the other against the wall so she can kick off her heels, the world going wonky a little until she’s level again. “I am so ready to pass out right now, so whatever it is, for the love of all that is holy, make it quick.”
Sighing, Steve looks at Jane, his face a mask of Captain, “Could you get Darcy some coffee, please?” He doesn’t wait for a response. “We got word of a mid-level Hydra cell working out of an office park in Connecticut. We’re going to take it down.”

“Sounds terrible,” though Jane getting her coffee totally doesn’t, even if it is, well, whatever time it is. “What could you possibly need from me? I’m not exactly an Asgardian or a geriatric super soldier or a sniper or a lunatic billionaire.”

Tony’s ‘I heard that’ echoes from somewhere behind Steve’s shoulder.

He rolls his eyes before he turns his serious gaze back to Darcy, “We need you to monitor us from Ops. Be our outside eyes when we go out tonight. This morning. Today.”

She points to the ceiling, “I’m pretty sure Banner and JARVIS got that covered.”

“Banner is coming with us, and I want a human eye on things,” he adds, head cocking toward the ceiling. “No offense.”

“None taken.”

Time seems to, well, freeze a bit, and the next thing Darcy knows, Jane is pressing a steaming mug of coffee in her hand, and she takes a sip, “Let me get this straight. The Avengers are assembling, and you want me sitting in on Ops.”

“Yes.”

She blinks, spares a look at Jane to make sure she’s hearing the same thing, and then looks back at Steve, “Are you concussed? I am not remotely qualified to go anywhere near team operations. I am a lab nanny. And I’m cool with that, don’t get me wrong, but seriously, dude. Unqualified.”

“Actually, you are,” Steve counters when she’s done rambling. “Clint mentioned that he was tasked to evaluate you for supervisory agent training before he was reassigned to Doctor Selvig. You probably would have been approached had SHIELD not, you know-”
“Wait, he was what?” She looks around for the jackbooted thug in question, but he’s nowhere to be found. “That little shit never told me!”

But before Steve can say anything else, another thought worms its way through her tired brain, “But anyway, no. What about Maria? You know, former Deputy Director of the non-evil side of SHIELD and current Stark Industries whatever? She’s about a million and a half times more qualified for this than I am.”

“She’s upstate.”

At the new training camp. Right.

Darcy sighs, and then narrows her eyes when she notices the tension that’s radiating through Steve’s shoulders is more than just the normal, pre-mission stress, and when did she get so good at reading these people?

“You’re not telling me the truth and that’s rude.”

Instead of replying, Steve grabs her arm and pulls her down the hall, pushes her into a doorway to one of the mission-prep rooms.

Bruce and Thor are standing in front of a monitor, going over the blueprints of the building they think Hydra is hiding out in, while Clint is sitting cross-legged—or as cross-legged as he can with his funky left knee—loading the bottom section of his quiver with arrowheads, and Natasha and Tony are a few feet away, heads bent over her gauntlets.

But that’s not why Steve is keeping her from going to sleep after a much-deserved night out.

Because sitting at the far end of the room is one Bucky Barnes.

His back is ramrod straight and his eyes scan back and forth over the tablet in his hands.

And he’s in uniform—it looks like the very game gear, or a Tony-provided substitute, as what he
wore during the incident in D.C.—and for the first time in Darcy’s memory, the whole of his left arm is uncovered and shining under the fluorescent lights.

Darcy turns her wide eyes back up to Steve, who is equally as tense as he watches Bucky, “No way.”

“It’s Hydra,” He murmurs, even though Bucky can probably hear them anyway, because hello, super hearing. “I couldn’t keep him out of the action if I tried. This is something he wants to do.”

She presses her hands to her mouth, startling at the gentle touch to her elbow, and she sees Jane shift over to her side, shoulders tensing when she sees Bucky, “Why me?” Darcy looks at him, watches him stare steadfastly at the tablet and she feels a little bad at the attention that’s on him. “You’re going to be right there with him. What can I possibly do?”

“He trusts you, and he’ll follow my lead with the others, but he doesn’t trust us in combat yet,” Steve squeezes her shoulder. “If something goes wrong, I want you to back us up. Back him up.”

“I really don’t know how much use I’m going to be,” she sighs, rolls her shoulders. “But I guess I’m in. Where’s the intel?”

“Darcy?”

She meets Jane’s concerned gaze, her jaw tight as she wordlessly urges her to understand that she needs to do that, “Can you run upstairs and get me a change of clothes? And check on Charlie? Please?”

Jane sighs, and they both know that Darcy agreeing to do this means she’s basically agreeing to become an Avenger in some way, and that’s more dangerous than living in a building that’s likely to explode on a daily basis.

“Let’s get started,” Darcy says, tries to sound calmer than she feels, and part of her wants to flee to the elevators where Jane is. “You guys need to get in and out of there before sunrise, which means you need to leave now.”
Thankfully, Bucky doesn’t have problems on the mission.

From Darcy’s eye in the sky, it seems like he’s *enjoying* himself.

Like, *really* enjoying himself.

“That’s my kitchen knife!” Tony squawks over the comm., and Darcy adjusts the feed on the monitor she’s sitting in front of to get a better view of what he’s talking about—Bucky, in the middle of a pile of Hydra agents, slashing his way through their bodies. “That is not a stabby thing, Barnes! That is for cooking! Oh my god, I’m never going to be able to cook in my kitchen again!”

Darcy rolls her eyes, “You don’t cook anyway, Stark.”

“I blame you for this, Ops!”

Darcy smirks at the monitor as Steve—no, *Captain America*—calls for Iron Man to cut the chatter, and she sits back in her chair and sips her coffee.

This is either going to be the start of something great, or something *absolutely horrifyingly terrible*.

Chapter End Notes

The adventures continue, and now we’ve got a little bit of Darcy-perspective action sprinkled in. This will continue, because she DOES straddle a pair of VERY interesting worlds at the moment.

As always, I love to know what you think!

(Now, go read boopboop's Man On The Bridge. I'm so serious).

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Prompt of the chapter from [The Fake Redhead.com](http://www.thefakeredhead.com)

Number 122: “For the last time, we are not naming our future child Lentil!”

“But it’s gender neutral!”
“Thor, redirect and clear the skies over Hawkeye’s perch,” Darcy ordered. "Hawkeye, can you get to ground?"

“Not without breaking some bones,” she could see his hand like she was playing a first-person shooter as he fired off a couple rounds from the backup pistol he usually kept strapped to his leg.

“All right, hang in there for a second.”

“Funny, Ops.”

Chapter Notes

I have pretty much been waiting for this chapter to happen since I started posting this fic. This one, and the next, is when all the shit goes down.

Enjoy.

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 125: “Do you hear that faint screaming sound?”

“You mean the dulcet tones of probable cause? Indeed I do!”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In retrospect, Darcy realizes that she made a huge mistake when she agreed to help Steve and JARVIS cover the Avengers and Bucky during their first mission in the era post-SHIELD Is Actually Full Of Nazis.

Because, two weeks later, Steve asks her to do it again.

Unmanned aerial incursion in the park.

And let’s be real—no matter what the Latverian Embassy ever-so-politely insisted—they were totally Doombots.
“Widow, you’ve got five more bogeys coming in from the southwest,” Darcy flips the view on the satellite, gray dots flashing as they neared the Black Widow’s flashing ID marker—an hourglass, because Stark thinks he’s so damn clever.

Her Russian expletive, followed by a round of gunfire, echoes on the speakers in the small operations suite she’s ensconced in, and Darcy winces as the Captain’s ID marker—a shield—moves in, and two of the angry red triangles flicker before they disappear.

Leaving the pair to JARVIS to monitor, Darcy turns her focus to the video feed from the camera attached to Hawkeye’s vest in time to see him fire off a volley of arrows at an incoming Doombot.

They each hit the target, and Darcy watches as it drops from the sky before Thor intercepts it with a well-placed swing of Mjolnir that sends it careening into a nearby building.

Wincing again, Darcy shoots a quick text to Pepper to let her know that the major’s office is probably going to call demanding answers sooner, rather than later.

At a break in the action, Captain America’s voice echoes through the room. “How many more?”

“I’ve got five,” Iron Man’s repulsors fire off twice. “Make that three.”

Thor times in that there are four more in the air and that Banner—the Hulk—is dealing with two more on the ground.

Something explodes, and Hawkeye’s video feed does a sickening flip, one of his grappling arrows arcing through the shot before it anchors a part of the building that used to be his roost.

Darcy looks back at the screen that’s monitoring the bogeys, and one hand flies to the comm. in her right ear, “Thor, redirect and clear the skies over Hawkeye. Hawkeye, can you get to ground?”
“Not without breaking some bones,” she sees his hand like she’s playing a first-person shooter and he fires off a couple rounds from the backup pistol he usually keeps strapped to his leg.

“All right, hang in there for a second.”

“Very funny, Ops.”

She holds back a snort and types a code into the computer so his feed sways a little less and makes her feel a little less like she’s going to throw up all over the millions of dollars of equipment built into the wall, “Thor, pick him up once you’re clear.”

“Momentarily, Ms. Darcy!”

Captain America pipes back up, “Ops, call out the remaining bots.”

“Sixteen confirmed,” she scoots her chair back as she rattles off their locations. “Burn them up and head back home. I’m going to put the screws to the Latverian consulate and tell Doom where he can suck it.”

“Don’t you dare!” Cap orders.

At the same time, Iron Man chimes in with, “Make sure JARVIS gets it on video!”

Through her laughter, Darcy hears the swish of the door opening behind her, and she spares a glance over her shoulder to see Bucky inching his way inside, his eyes glued to the monitors, “How are they doing?” He asks when he notices she knows he’s there.

“The unmanned aerial incursion of Latverian construction isn’t as squishy as a Hydra agent,” she rolls her eyes at the mouthful the local policemen are spewing over the radio. “But they’re totally toast.”

Bucky nods and steps up behind her, his eyes focused on the Hawkeye cam’s view of Captain America as he throws his shield with enough force to bisect the bot bearing down on him.
She mutes her comm., “You itching to get out there?”

From the side, she sees him swallow and shake his head, “They’re not Hydra. Told Steve if it’s not, that I’m not,” he breaks off and gestures at the monitors, shakes his head again. “I’m not that.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that,” she pats his arm, eyes flaring when she realizes it’s the metal one, but Bucky just looks at her with a lopsided smile and shrugs.

He stands for a few minutes, flinches each time Steve takes a hit, and Darcy tracks the situation until Bucky finally shakes his head, brushes his hand against her shoulder, “I just wanted to check in.”

Nodding, she tries to force away the feeling of his hand on her shoulder because there are things of importance currently happening, and she spares a glance at his back as he rushes out, “I’ll have JARVIS call you when they’re on their way back.”

His muttered thanks is muffled by the hall, and Darcy keys her comm. back on to get the feedback from the Black Widow as she rips one of the bots’ arms off and disables it with her Widow’s Bite.

“Hey JARVIS,” she mutters out of the side of her mouth. “Keep an eye on him. Let me know if he decides to bolt, or get drunk again. Or something.”

“Of course.”

Twenty-three minutes later, Darcy watches Thor fry the last bot out of the skies, and it lands in the middle of the street with an electrified crash, “Eye in the sky reads all clear,” her fingers fly over the keyboard as the team confirms. “I’d call in a cleanup team, but Hill says they’re still a work in progress, so you guys are kind of on your own.”

Captain America looks into Hawkeye’s camera, one hand adjusting his cowl, “Let the local cops into the perimeter, but tell them their priority is to keep spectators and the media out the outside. We’re going to see what we can salvage and bring back to the lab.”

“That long, and you’re going to have to go to air to get back to the Tower,” she glances at the clock as she sends a one-handed order to NYPD dispatch. “I’m going to run over and pick up the Kid.”
Pepper’s on call if you need anything. Back in forty-five.”

“Thanks Ops.”

Courtesy of the incident, traffic is worse than the usual-bad, so Darcy darts off to Constance on foot, makes it to the gates with minutes to spare.

Amidst the clusters of parents, Serena stands off to one side, tapping away on her phone, and her brow twitches when she sees Darcy rush over, “Busy morning?”

She winks, because obviously the fight was already all over the news, “You know how it is: go team go,” she stretches her arms back and pops her shoulders, the crack loud enough to echo over the din on the street. “How’s your day been?”

“Busy too,” Serena laughs like their two definitions of busy are the same. “Prepping for a photoshoot for Nate at the office. He needs new promos for the newspaper.”

City darling Nate Archibald, who owns the New York Spectator in spite of the fact that he still looks like he’s twelve. Everyone, Darcy included, knows he’s edging his way toward the mayor’s office, likely the youngest in recent history.

Chuck and Carter may or may not have asked Darcy and Jane to put in a good word with Tony for his and Stark Industries’ endorsement.

“Of course,” Serena goes on as she slips her phone in the back pocket of her designer jeans and tosses her long hair over one shoulder. “He’s on my shit list right now.”

Darcy’s brow ticks, “What did he do?”

“Eric is in town this week and Nate wrangled him, Chuck, and Carter into a pickup game yesterday, try to relive the glory days of high school, or something,” Serena rolls her eyes. “Carter sprained his ankle and my brother elbowed Chuck in the face, so Blair is livid. He was supposed to take her to a benefit tonight, and she refuses to be seen in public with him until his eye stop swelling.”
Letting out a park of a laugh, Darcy shoves her hands in the pockets of the windbreaker she threw on as she sped out of the Tower, “And that is exactly why Pepper didn’t let Tony bring his boxing ring to the east coast, or let him rebuild the old one in the Malibu house.”

Serena shakes her head, and they share an amused look, “Men,” they echo one another as the doors to the preschool open up.

They scan the crowd of tiny heads, and it doesn’t take long for Charlie and Mo to emerge, the duo walking hand in hand and chattering brightly on Meg’s heels. Serena flips her phone out of her pocket and snaps a picture seconds before the girls notice that they’re there.

“Mommy!” Mo cheers and she tugs Charlie behind her. “Mommy, can Charlie come over?”

Charlie nods along and, once again, Darcy realizes that it’s Bucky’s great-granddaughter who wants a playdate, and she really needs to talk to Steve and figure out how they’re going to explain this whole mess.

Serena turns to Darcy for consent, and Mo turns her big, earnest eyes to Darcy too, and she knows it must be hell for Serena and Carter to say no to her.

Because Margo Baizen may be separated from Bucky by decades and quirks in genetics and whatever came from Carter’s mother’s and Serena’s sides of the family, but Darcy has the same kind of trouble she has when Bucky looks at her like she’s the only thing in his world.

Especially when he doesn’t realize he’s doing it.

“Another day,” she says as she drops to a knee so she’s at their eye level. “Charlie and I have some things to take care of this afternoon.”

Their tiny faces fall in near-comedic unison, “But Darcy-” Charlotte whines.

She cuts her off with a firm look, “Not today, Kid. I promise I’ll call Serena and we’ll figure something out, but I need your help today.”
“With what?”

Darcy smiles and puts her hand on Charlotte’s shoulder, uses it as leverage as she stands, “Things, Kid. Now say goodbye to Mo,” she looks at Serena and shrugs apologetically as the girls hug. “Gotta go.”

“You should come to brunch next Sunday. We had a great time with you and Jane the other night.”

“We did too. I’ll call you.”

“I’ll be around.”

--

As expected, her attempt to get Steve to talk to her about the Bucky-Baizen situation is met with a wince, a hand on her shoulder, and an, “I know Darcy, we just have a lot going on right now with the team. We’ll figure it out soon.”

Darcy isn’t about to hold her breath, and she glares hard at his back as he flees.

--

A few days after the Avengers took care of those Doombots and Pepper talked the mayor off a cliff about all the property damage the fight caused, the first thing Bucky sees when he comes to the lab is Jane sleeping on her desk with her face mashed against an overturned box of Kashi cereal.

“Uh, Doc,” he’s cut off with a quick hushing sound, and sees Darcy at her own desk, using the foot propped against the drawers to rock her chair back and forth as she presses a finger to her lips.

“Is she really sleeping?”

Darcy rolls her eyes, but there’s a fondness there. “She can literally sleep anywhere, which is a skill I’d kill to have,” she grins. “She insisted on taking a power nap as the data collates, but if she goes much longer, I’ll call her knight in shining armor and have him take her to bed.”
He steps in before the doors have a chance to chirp at him and rocks on his heels as he stuffs his hands in the pockets of his cargos—some of his decades-old habits are harder to break than others, especially when it comes to his wardrobe choices—his gaze falling to the toes of his scuffed boots.

Darcy arches a brow when he stays quiet, not that he’s all that much more talkative on any other day, “What’s going on?”

“We’re not—are we going to, uh,” he gestures at Jane.

The sleeping woman lets out a timely snort and curls around the cereal box, and Darcy presses her hand over her mouth to suppress a laugh, “She’s been power-napping for an hour, and I’ve officially given up on getting any work done today. We’re good.”

Bucky nods, his eyes still focused on Jane, and Darcy’s brow arches further as she stops rocking the chair and props her chin on the palm of her hand, “So?”

He’s still silent, and then his hands leave his pockets so he can make some sort of gesture that probably makes sense to him, and he mutters in Russian under his breath before saying, “Well, I was sitting with the Kid earlier, and—”

“And?”

Finally, he looks at her, and there’s something swimming in his eyes that makes her still, her feet falling to the floor with a quiet thud, “And what?”

“’m worried?”

“About what?”

“Charlie.”

Pressing her fingers to her mouth, Darcy stares up at him, sees the concern and even some nervousness in his eyes, like he’s barely resisting the urge to pace, “You are worried about her,” she tried the words aloud after repeating them a couple times in her head.
Still tastes kind of strange.

His shoulders drop a fraction and her nods once, swallows thickly, “She’s missing her mom something fierce, you know.”

Darcy sighs, spares a glance to the far side of the lab where Dum-E and U were tinkering with one of the freestanding units that removed Tony’s Iron Man suit, “She’s been having tantrums,” she murmurs, looks down at the tips of her fingers and rubs them together. “Pretty much every night. I haven’t been able to do anything to calm her down.”

“Are you okay?”

Waving a hand, she shrugs, “Thankfully, she’s got Mo to keep her distracted when she’s at school or she’d be shitting bricks left and right,” she rubs her eyes, pushes the hand through her hair. “Not that it helps me all that much.”

She shakes her head and her brows furrow, “How did you figure it out?”

“She was asking me about how words in Russian change when parents talk to their children,” his voice is stilted, like he’s still not sure she’s okay with it, even after the weeks of after-dinner language lessons. “It’s different from the way I talk to her, how you would talk to her, how Tasha would.”

“So, she’s getting in on the action now too?”

“Better than when she was looking at the Kid like she was an alien.”

Darcy snorts, “Glad I’m not the only one who noticed that.”

“Tasha doesn’t really know what it means to be a child like Charlie,” Bucky sounds like he’s considering each word so he doesn’t reveal too much of Natasha’s origins. “She doesn’t know how to relate to the Kid. The language helps, I think.”

“I am,” she considers the thoughts rampaging through her mind. “Not going to ask you how you know that.”
“You should not,” he scratches the back of his neck and looks from one end of the room to the other, like he’s checking if Natasha is going to jump out at him. “Anything I can do to help?”

Darcy blinks at the abrupt segue, “With Charlie? You already are.”

“Anything else?”

“You want to?”

He shrugs, looks away like he’s embarrassed, and it hits Darcy that he really might be, “I do like the kid.”

Nodding slowly, she taps her chin and hums, “You know what would make her feel better?”

“Her,” Bucky clears his throat. “Mother?”

She mirrors his wince, “Something in the category of things I can realistically produce.”

“Like.”

“An ice cream party while wearing those obnoxious glittery princess costumes JARVIS got us when you broke our apartment.”

Bucky blinks, “What?”

“You heard me,” Darcy slings her bag over her shoulder, hops off her chair and tugs his hand. “You’re totally partaking.”

“I will not wear a costume.”
Darcy’s eyes glitter as she looks up, “Try telling that to Charlie and get back to me.”

They’re in the elevator when Bucky coughs, “What about Jane?”

“Right,” she flips her phone out of her pocket with her left hand, and only then realizes that she’s still holding Bucky’s in her right, and she shakes her head and taps out a message to Thor. “I’ll let the Big Guy know. And hey, if she wakes up in the meantime, she’ll already have food. It’s a win-win.”

“You are bizarre,” the elevator continues to descend, and he looks down at their joined hands. “And I am not wearing a costume.”

“Yes, you are. It’s going to be fine.”

--

If ever asked, Bucky will categorically deny—under pain of torture if he has to, because there is absolutely nothing worse in the world than anything Hydra every did to him—that:

1. A) He participated in whatever Darcy did in the privacy of her apartment to help cheer Charlotte up.

Or

1. B) That he had anything to do with the security camera blackout both in the apartment and the hallway outside during that very same span of time.

And no, he has no idea where all that glitter came from, Steve.

No idea, whatsoever.

He did, however—and thus proving that he’s definitely weaker-willed than Hydra expected him to become—let Darcy keep the selfie she took of them wearing matching glittery flower crowns, on her fervent promises to never show anyone.
Especially not Steve.

Charlotte appreciated the effort, and that’s really all that mattered.

--

The good and bad thing about Darcy Lewis is that everything she does, she does well.

It’s something she knows she can trace back to her mother’s ability—or technically, that is *inability*—to make a half-ass attempt at whatever *she* needed to do, before Carissa Lewis would ultimately give up and move on to half-ass at something else.

Darcy still isn’t sure what the current ‘something else’ is that Carissa had moved on to since unceremoniously dumping one daughter off on another, but *whatever*.

The point is that, whether it’s raising Charlotte, keeping Jane fed, her phone charged, and her desk sort of organized, or if it was being the human mind that monitors the Avengers when they’re on assignment, Darcy gives it her all, because what’s the point of giving anything else?

So, Steve keeps asking her to play eye-in-the-sky more and more often, whether it’s to be the calm voice in Bucky’s ear when they were tearing down Hydra cells courtesy of that mystery source of Natasha’s, or dealing with *not* Doctor Doom or AIM or Roxxon’s shenanigans.

And in the days and weeks that follow, it evolves into a full-time job, especially since Maria—on behalf of *whatever* she does at Stark Industries—is *still* stuck upstate with the fledgling Avengers Initiative Training Camp, taking the former SHIELD agents that SI managed to scoop up after the fall and turn them into agents for an organization that *isn’t* a beard for a bunch of Nazis.

Which means that Darcy gets her own office in Operations—with four walls *and* a door, huge upgrade from the days of Jane finding whatever tech-free corner to squeeze an extra workplace into—and her workload grows *exponentially*.

After a long night on headset, she’s buried in paperwork—because if there’s one thing this new Avengers Initiative is going to be, Steve insists, it is *accountable*—and she hears her phone ring from, well, *somewhere* under the mountain of everything piled on her desk.

“It’s Serena Baizen,” JARVIS intones before she thinks to ask.
Darcy rubs the bridge of her nose, “Thanks J, can you answer and put it on speaker?” An answering beep sounds through the room. “Hey Serena, how was drop off? Any entertaining temper tantrums from the Terror Twins? Or their mother? Honestly, sometimes I can’t believe her behavior.”

There’s a long pause, and Darcy thinks for a second that she beat JARVIS to the punch, before Serena finally says, “Have you seen the news at all today?”

Something sounds off in her tone, but Darcy can’t quite make sense of the tentative concern, especially coming from someone like Serena.

She casts a glance around her desk at the neat-but-towering piles of paperwork and tablets that cover every inch of the large surface, only bigger than usual because the team just got back from a mission in Moscow three hours ago, and they’d had plenty of time to write up their AARs on the flight.

“Honestly Serena, I’m going to be too buried to check Twitter until tonight. What’s up?”

On the other end of the line, Serena hums, “Well,” her voice is slow as she considers her words. “It looks like someone managed to get pictures of the Avengers’ last mission, and they’re popping up online. I was watching the news this morning and they mentioned some unconfirmed reports on it.”

Darcy freezes, then flips the file she was working on to the side, so far that it falls off her desk and scattered all over the floor, but she ignores it in favor of digging for her phone, taking it off speaker, and pressing it to her ear, “What did you see?”

She rocks her chair to the side so she can get to the monitor that’s on one side of the massive, mahogany desk, but gives up when she realizes the keyboard is still buried, and leans back instead.

“I’m really not sure,” Serena sounds so uneasy.

Dread pools in Darcy’s stomach, because she knows exactly what’s going on.

“There was a man with the team, fighting next to Steve, I mean, next to Captain America. I don’t think anyone knows who he is, but Darcy, he—he looks like, and I mean just like-”
“Carter,” she finishes for her, takes off her glasses and rubs her eyes, mind flashing a mile a minute, because damnit, she knew this was going to happen. “Serena, has Carter seen any of this?”

“I don’t think so. He’s flying back from Dubai right now. He said he was going to get some sleep after his meetings and was going to meet me at home when he gets in.”

“Okay, okay,” Darcy tries to plan through the way her head has started throbbing. “Look, if you can get him and bring him to the Tower as soon as he lands, we’ll explain everything. I really need to talk to Steve first.”

“His flight doesn’t land for a couple hours.”

“Great. Text me the details and let me know when you’re on your way. I’ll see you soon.”

She’s about to hang up when Serena goes on, “But Darcy, what is all this? Why does that Avenger look like Carter? Is that man an Avenger? No one’s seen him before and I’m just so confused.”

“Look,” she squeezes her eyes shut and takes a deep breath. “I just need to talk a couple things over with Steve before I can tell you anything. Even if I could, it’s better if we explain it to you in person. I promise.”

She hears the hesitation in Serena’s voice when she says, “Okay, I’ll see you soon.”

Throwing her phone back on her desk, Darcy drops her head in her hands and groans, drags her fingers through her hair once the forces herself out of the moment, “JARVIS, I need you to track everything the news is saying about Bucky,” she grabs her tablet and leaves her office. “Let me know when they make the connection to D.C., because they’re too smart to miss it.”

“Of course.”

“And while I talk to Steve, fill Pepper in and have her get SI PR all over this shit and get a statement prepared on his and Bucky’s behalf. We have to put as much spin on this in our favor that we can.”

“Shall I have them make arrangements for a press conference?”
“I don’t want it to come to that, so yes,” she mutters as the elevator doors open as soon as she turns the corner. “Do it quietly. I trust Pepper’s judgement on which media entities to bring in. Even Everhart. Actually, tell her to call Everhart first.”

“Yes, Ms. Lewis.”

She falls against the side of the car and lets her head smack against the metal wall, “Today of all fucking days.”

--

“Hi, I need to talk to Steve,” she says before Bucky opens the door all the way.

Something shutters over the light in his eyes, but Darcy doesn’t have time for that, especially when the man in question steps out of his bedroom, hair still wet from a recent post-mission shower, “Darcy?” He asks. “What is it?”

“I need to talk to you,” he says again, her eyes pointedly flicking in Bucky’s direction as he stands at her shoulder and looks on at the exchange with curiosity replacing whatever it was that had been on his face. “And you don’t get to run away from me this time. I’ll have the Hulk sit on you if I have to.”

It doesn’t look like Steve is getting the hint, and while he waits for her to go on, Darcy’s headache grows to a blinding throb, “Serena just called me,” she growls through clenched teeth. “About Moscow.”

Bucky lets the door fall from his hand, and Darcy jumps when it clicks shut, but other than that no one moves from the entryway. “How does Serena know about Moscow? We’ve been back hours,” Bucky tilts his head. “Who is Serena?”

His voice barely registers as Darcy watches realization finally flicker across Steve’s face before he pales, “How much does he know?”

“Right now, that there’s something to know. Someone got pictures of the mission and put them up online. I have JARVIS and Pepper working on a response, but Carter’s on his way back from Dubai and he and Serena are coming over as soon as he lands to get an explanation. So, you know what we
need to take care of before that happens, and I’m not letting you run away this time.”

Her phone lets off a timely chime, and she finds a text from Serena on screen, “And we have just under four hours to get our shit together. Less if Carter decides to wake up from his nap and check the news midflight.”

Steve’s frown deepens, and Darcy feels the curiosity radiating off Bucky in waves, “That’s not a lot of time.”

“Well it’s out of our hands now,” she mutters, resists the urge to snap at him or chuck her tablet at his head. “If we had done something about this sooner, we wouldn’t be having this problem, but there’s no use arguing about it now.”

He looks at her pointedly, “You know why we decided not to.”

“Yeah, two months ago.”

Finally, Bucky steps up, somehow manages to glare at them both at the same time, “What the hell are you two going on about?”

“I don’t want to do this in the hall. Darcy, come in.”

“No.”

They both look at Bucky, whose arm is starting to make some really uncomfortable whirring noises, “What is going on?”

Darcy swipes her hand across her forehead, “It’s nothing bad,” she winces. “Okay, so that’s not entirely true, since your face is about to be plastered just about everywhere, but the whole point right now is that Steve and I have something we need to tell you.”

“You’re not making any sense.”
Groaning, Darcy shoulders past both of them and flops onto the living room couch, “Because I’m fucking exhausted,” she snaps, looks up as the ceiling and waits for them to follow. “Your job ends when the mission does. You debrief, shower, eat your weight in carbs, and pass out. I don’t. Hell, I never do, but that’s also not the point right now.”

“Then what is the point?”

She drops her head in her hands, digs her fingertips into her temples until something cool presses against the side of her right hands, and she looks up to see Bucky holding a glass filled with amber liquid, “Thanks,” she mutters and takes a long drink.

It’s five o’clock somewhere.

The Middle East.

Cairo, maybe.

The part of the world Carter’s coming back from. Fuck.

Eventually, she looks at Steve, who is perched on the recliner to her left, while Bucky takes up the space in front of the entertainment center, his hands fisted at his sides, and Darcy flicks her free hand in Steve’s direction to get him to—for the love of all that is holy—start explaining already.

“Buck,” Steve rubs a hand through his hair, sending wet spikes in all directions. “What do you remember about the night you shipped out to London?”

“I remember that not five minutes after I left you at the fair, you went and signed up to be some goddamn science experiment,” he spits. “You were always so fucking reckless. Really, a grenade?”

Usually, Darcy thinks it’s hilarious that Bucky is never going to let Steve live that down, because Bucky’s the most himself when he’s giving Steve shit for all the reckless things he did, especially in the pre-serum and early-serum days, and she loves the way Bucky’s eyes light up when he remembers those things.

But right now, she kinds of wants to curl up in bed and sleep for a week.
Smiling ruefully, Steve nods, “But do you remember what happened before that?” He flinches when Bucky frowns. “It’s all right if you don’t. It is.”

Bucky rubs his forehead, and his eyes flick to Darcy for a second, just long enough for her to notice, “Took you to the World’s Fair. Stark, Howard Stark, demonstrated his flying car. We were with a couple gals.”

Steve looks at Darcy, hesitating, and she rolls her eyes and takes another sip of whatever’s in that glass, frowns when it empties far too quickly.

Leave it to the Star-Spangled Man With A Plan to make her rip the Band-Aid off.

Darcy resists the urge to throw a Charlotte-level tantrum in his general direction, takes a deep breath, and asks, “The girls,” she swallows hard to force the words out. “Do you remember their names?”

His gaze drops to his feet, but Darcy knows he’s not seeing his toes or the floor he’s standing on, “I think they rhymed,” he pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a deep breath. “It was Connie and Bonnie? Yeah. Connie and Bonnie.”

“Yeah,” Darcy nods and looks at Steve, who is resolutely staring down at his hands, and he doesn’t even look up when she sighs pointedly.

“Why is it important?” Bucky demands, looks between them. “What the hell does this have to do with that Serena woman?”

Darcy waits for Steve again, but he still doesn’t look up, and she flexes her fingers around the glass, forces herself to not chuck it at his head, and drops it on the coffee table, but the resounding clang it makes does nothing to rouse him from his thoughts.

“Because.” Darcy gnaws on her lower lip to keep from saying what she shouldn’t have to tell him, but then there’s Steve who refuses to look at either of him, so she doesn’t have much of a choice. “Because nine months after that night, Connie gave birth to a little boy. Your son.”

Bucky’s jaw drops.

Darcy’s fingers tense into fists while she waits for him to do something, deny it, run away flip out, but all he does is stand there.
And he should have been told *months* ago.

“Are-are you sure?”

His voice is pained, a raspy whisper, and it makes Darcy want to throw up the alcohol roiling around in her stomach.

“Bucky,” Steve’s voice—and fucking *finally*—is gentle. “Your grandson could be your clone.”

Slowly, his mouth works around the words, “My,” Bucky’s eyes narrow to slits. “You *know* who he is?”

Darcy rubs the back of her neck with both hands, “You know the kid that Charlie won’t shut up about? Margo Baizen?”

“Why does that matter?”

“Because Mo’s father, Carter, is the CEO of Baizen International. And he’s Connie’s grandson. *Your* grandson. I did some digging after we found out, and after she found out you,” she coughs. “*Fell,* Connie married Walter Baizen to, among other things, avoid the stigma of being an unwed mother. Matthew Stevens was eighteen months old at the time. Walter gave him his name, made him heir to his empire.”

Bucky shakes his head, “How long have you known?”

Flinching, Darcy looks at Steve for help, and Bucky repeats in a low growl that almost startles her, “*How long.* Have you. *Known*?”

“Serena, that’s Carter’s wife, introduced me to him at the parent-teacher reception at the Empire, so right after school started,” Darcy winces as the words come out in one big ramble. “*September.* We’ve known since September. I’m so sorry Bucky.”

The admission is enough to get him pacing back and forth in front of her and Steve, muttering under
his breath in a flurry of Slavic languages too quickly for Darcy to keep track of, “You didn’t tell me,”
his voice is barely above a whisper. “Why didn’t you tell me as soon as you knew?”

Finally, finally, Steve gets up, intercepting Bucky on his circuit and placing his hands on his arms,
“Because when we got back to the Tower that night, something triggered you so badly you thought
you were back in Russia working with the Red Room, and we had to bring Tasha in to track you
down. After that, we decided to wait until you were more stable before we told you that you have
family here.”

Bucky smacks Steve’s hands away, “And I’ve been stable,” he goes back to pacing. “I’ve been on
fucking missions with you. I’ve been here for months. How much more like Bucky do you want me
to be, because I’m not going to get much closer to him. Not ever.”

“Bucky.”

“No!”

He whirls around, slams his left hand against the wall and leaves a fist-sized hole in it, “You
shouldn’t have kept this from me! How am I supposed to accept this when they’re going to be here
in hours demanding answers I don’t have?”

“Listen, Buck-”

“You had months to accept that Peggy grew up, grew old, and I only have hours to accept that my
night with Connie and Bonnie led to—led to a future I can,” he presses a hand over his eyes and
takes a harsh, shuddering breath before his shoulders drop a fraction. “Fuck, I don’t even know. I’m
not ready. Not for this. Not this soon.”

Resisting the urge to cry because she’s sad and exhausted and criminally overwrought, Darcy stands
and steps in Bucky’s path, holds her hands out.

He glares and tries to walk around her, but she sidesteps back in front of him, “We fucked up, and
that’s one us,” she waves her hands, waits for him to take them, and he finally does, scowl firmly on
his face as he looks just over her shoulder. “If you’re not ready to meet them, then you don’t have to
meet them today. We can handle this.”
“It’s not your job, Darce.”

She squeezes his fingers, and their hands hang between them as Steve looks on, “Trust me, if it wasn’t, it is now. We would have never figured this out had I, that’d be me, not decided to send Charlie to Constance. So, I will help Steve, because he’s apparently forgotten how words work, and we’ll figure this out.”

Frowning down at her, Bucky flips his grasp on her left hand and curls his fingers around her wrist, the tips pressing against her pulse, “You should get some rest.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead. Or when Jane needs me to collate paperwork in the lab. It’s fine.”

With a final squeeze, she drops his hand, extricates the other from his loose grip, and spins around, “Now,” she claps her hands. “I am going to prep for Serena and Carter, you are going to, I don’t know, hide,” she turns to glare at Steve. “And you sir, are going to pull the stick out of your ass and beat yourself with it. I am a thousand percent done with you right now, mon capitan. Be ready to talk when they get here, I am not doing this alone.”

Steve winces and looks at his toes as Darcy spins again, this time in the direction of the hallway, and she’s halfway to the door when she turns back and pokes her head into the living room where Bucky is still gaping at all of this, “Hold on. Connie and Bonnie?”

A pained noise claws its way from Bucky’s throat and his ears turn read.

She puts her hands up, “I’m not judging. Go you from the forties.”

“Darcy,” Steve sounds appalled.

It’s probably more because of her timing than it is a discussion of threesomes.

Probably.

She rolls her eyes, “Fine, fine. I’m out.”
In the middle of the hall, she pauses, hears muffled voices from inside their apartment before a door slams.

Pressing a hand to her forehead to try to stop the incessant throbbing, Darcy sighs and shuffles to her own door.

This can’t possibly end well.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, not sorry, for the stopping point.

Thoughts?

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Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 125: “Do you hear that faint screaming sound?”

“You mean the dulcet tones of probable cause? Indeed I do!”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

And we're back!

I know it's been, well, a very long time since I touched this, but life happened. I also thought I lost a few chapters worth of text, so that was also a bit of a bummer (that turned out not to be one, because I found it). I also kind of fell out of love with this side of the fandom a little bit, so it took some time to get that motivation and love for it back. And I do love this story and the universe I've created and just needed to find my way to finish it. I also needed to teach myself how to write again, and that's where all the Star Wars fics I've been posting lately have been coming from.

But one of the things about the time between my last post and now is that I write differently from how I wrote back then, and it just...wouldn't have made much sense to go and start updating with Chapter 9, in a completely new style from this rest of this.

So, yeah, I'd HIGHLY recommend going back to the beginning and re-reading, if you care to, since A) it's been two and a half years and B) it's a bit different now.

The other thing you may have noticed is that I've updated the number of chapters that this fic is going to have by the time it's complete. And rest assured, 95 percent of that has already been written and is all almost ready to post. We're not going to have another two-year gap this time, promise.

Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 207

“I hate you.”

“Why? I'm lovely.”

Darcy enters her blessedly empty apartment and makes a bee-line into the kitchenette for a beer, cracks it open as she sits and considers her reflection in her darkened tablet.

And for five minutes, she can’t manage much more than just breathing in and out.

What the hell is she going to do?

Bucky isn’t ready, Steve is apparently going to be utterly useless, and the rest of the team is still recuperating from the mission and back-to-back flights around the damn world.
Today, of all fucking days.

She’s pulled from her reverie by a knock on the door, and Darcy stares at it before the sound cracks through the silence a second time.

Bucky’s standing there.

“Hi?”

“Can we talk?”

Blinking slowly, Darcy takes a step back and lets him in, pads over to the couch and watches as Bucky paces back and forth with the coffee table acting as a barrier between them.

“What is it?”

He rakes a hand through his hair and drops onto the recliner, his shoulders hunched up to his ears as he props his elbows on his knees, “About,” he clears his throat. “About Connie—Darcy, I had no idea.”

“Not like you had cell phones or email or Twitter back in the day, and I think you were a little busy trying to keep Cap’s reckless backside from being riddled full of holes anyway.”

“And then I fell off that train.”

Darcy’s eyes widen, “I wasn’t going to mention that part.”

“Don’t remember it, but I can’t pretend it didn’t happen.”

“I think that’s exactly what that means.”

Bucky shakes his head, rakes his fingers through his hair again, “I just, I didn’t want you to think that—”
“That you’re some free-wheeling, girl-crazy man-whore?” She giggles and trails off as his ears go bright read. “Don’t worry, if there’s one person I judge for past sexual histories, it’s Tony. Trust me, no one is worse than the guy who made an effort to go twelve-for-twelve with the Maxim Cover Girls.”

Groaning, he drops his head in his hand, “No Darcy, you’re not, that isn’t what I’m trying to say.”

He stands and goes back to pacing, and Darcy winces she intercepts him, carefully places her hands on his arms to stop him, “We don’t have to do this right now,” her voice is a million times calmer than she feels, and if everything wasn’t so horrible, she’d pat herself on the back for it. “You have enough on your mind.”

“That’s why I have to do this now.”

Darcy stills, her breath catching as she watches the way Bucky looks down at her, and then his hands are cradling her head and he presses his lips softly against hers.

Bucky is kissing her.

Bucky is kissing her.

Her head swims as he pulls away, his hands still on her cheeks as he rests his forehead against hers and rasps, “Do you get it now?”

Meeting his gaze, she sees the curiosity, the worry that he definitely overstepped, and Darcy wrinkles her nose as one hand holds tighter to his arm, while the other drops to curl around the hem of his t-shirt, “I think I do, but I think you should explain one more time, just to be sure.”

“You’re ridiculous,” he mutters, but he does kiss her again, harder this time, his tongue tracing the team of her lips before she opens her mouth to him and tugs him closer.

Far too soon for Darcy’s tastes, he pulls away, kissing her nose, then her forehead, before he drops his hand and slips out of her grasp, and Darcy shakes her as she tries to make sense of what just happened.
She clears her throat and takes a careful step back, “I’m sending a but,” she says slowly and his gaze falls to his feet as he nods without looking at her.

He’s quiet, and she reaches out, hesitates before curling a hand around his wrist, “Talk to me.”

Gently he shifts away from her, and she lets him go, “I don’t think I was ready for that,” he murmurs. “I’m still in pieces and I’m not safe, no matter what any of you think.”

She swallows as his hackles rise, but he doesn’t move, “That’s okay. You know where to find me when you’re ready.”

Bucky barks a pained laugh, “I screwed that up. I think I used to be better at all this.”

“We screwed up. You definitely didn’t do anything wrong,” she steps toward him, keeps her hands at her sides as she ducks her head so she can finally get him to look at her. “Long as I know you’re not angry at me because of the Baizens, then we’re good. I can wait.”

“I can’t ask you to do that.”

“You still don’t ask enough for yourself,” she smiles. “One day, I’ll explain it to you, but like you said, you’re not ready, so I can wait.”

“Darcy.”

She shakes her head, gently cutting him off, “You made your decision, and you of all people know how important choice is.”

Risking another step forward, Darcy waits for Bucky to flinch away, but all he does is sigh and nod as he settles his hands lightly on her waist. Wait eyes still focused on the floor between their feet, she runs her hands down the lines of his shoulders before she leans onto her toes and kisses the side of his mouth.

It’s quick, and Darcy feels like something is ripped away from her when she pulls back.
She knows her cheeks are dark, but she ignores it as she runs her fingers up and down his right arm, watches as he shivers, “You’re farther along than you think,” she gets confirmation when he flexes his fingers around her ships before she steps back again. “You should get out of here. I still need to prep for Serena and Carter.”

He flinches at their names, but nods, favoring her with a half-smile before he carefully flees the apartment.

Darcy stares after him long after the door swings shut.

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Later, but definitely not later enough for her sanity, Darcy meets Serena and Carter in the Tower’s lobby.

She has no idea where Steve ran off to, because according to her favorite AI, her least-favorite American icon took his bike out not long after Bucky left her apartment, leaving her to deal with this mess on her own.

It’s like very group project she got saddled with in high school.

But a hundred times worse.

“Thanks so much for coming,” she accepts Serena’s hesitant hug and looks at both, sees the confusion radiating off them in waves. “Pepper said we can hash this out in the penthouse.”

Carter rakes a hand through his hair, “I just want to know who this guy who’s all over the news is.”

Of course he checked. Damn it.

“And answering that question, oddly enough, is the only easy part of this whole mess.”

Serena curls her hand on Darcy’s elbow, “Are you okay?”
“I have had a day, so no. I mean, yeah, well, maybe. Probably. Eventually.”

The elevator doors open to the penthouse, and Pepper rushes over from the table where the senior staffers from the PR department are busy tapping away on their computers and conferring quietly while four different news channels play on a split screen on the television behind them.

Bucky’s face is plastered all over each, and the headlines are slowly evolving closer and closer to the truth.

“Serena, Carter, thank you so much for coming,” Pepper’s voice is bright, but the tension in her eyes tells them she’s just as stressed as Darcy, if not more. “It’s wonderful to see you again.”

Carter winces, and Serena’s smile is strained, “You to Pepper,” Serena says. “I just wish it was under better circumstances.”


As much as Darcy wants to mainline all of Tony’s alcohol, the Baizens settle on water, so she does too. Pepper leads them to the kitchen and they settle around the island, far enough away that they can’t hear Anderson Cooper speculating on the identity of the mysterious new Avenger.

Pepper has a small pile of folders in front of her, and she carefully rests her hands on top, looking like she’s going to take control of this meeting, and Darcy wants to kiss her for it.

Take that Steve.

“Carter,” Pepper starts. “A few months ago, Darcy and Steve informed me that you are aware that there is a connection between your grandmother, Connie Stevens, and Steve and Bucky, before they left for the war.”

He nods, arms braced against the edge of the granite countertops, “But there’s more to it.”
“Quite a bit,” all eyes turn to Darcy, and she resists the urge to clam up and let Pepper take over. “Look, apparently things of an adult variety happened between Bucky and Connie that night, after Steve left to become a guinea pig for the U.S. government. Nine months later, your father was born.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” he shakes his head. “My grandfather is Walter Baizen.”

Pepper reaches for the topmost file and slides it to Serena, who opens it and passes it to Carter, “Following Connie’s marriage to Walter, Matthew Stevens took his name, Baizen. Your father was very young at the time, and considering what your grandmother knew of the war, she likely never told him.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy sees the ancient copy of Matthew Stevens’ birth records, and she wonders how Natasha was able to break into the city and steal it so quickly.

Carter runs the hand not knotted with Serena’s over his eyes, “No, Grandmother never did say anything. All the stories she told, she never told us that.”

Serena gently nudges his side, “Walter probably wanted Connie to keep it quiet. You know how our families can be. Bucky was a war hero, and Walter,” she falters. “Walter was different. Great, but different.”

“But,” Carter sighs, shakes his head. “So, the man on the news?”

Darcy shares a look with Pepper, who shrugs, and she looks up at them, the world stopping for a moment before she says, “That would be the one and only Bucky Barnes.”

“Oh my god.”

“How?” Carter echoes Serena’s gasp.

Sighing, Darcy shrugs, “From what we’ve been able to figure out, which isn’t much, science. Very dangerous science,” she swallows, picks at her nails. “Bucky was taken prisoner not long after he was drafted, that’s all part of the history, but what most people don’t know is that one of Hydra’s top scientists experimented on him. To this day, we don’t know what exactly was done, just that they were trying to make a serum that would turn a man into something like Captain Rogers. When Bucky famously fell from that train a year later, whatever they did to him ended up saving his life.”
She winces, continues, “Unfortunately, Hydra and a host of other terrorist organizations that I probably don’t have the security clearance to know exist, used him as an assassin for the next seven decades, keeping him in cryo-sleep when they didn’t need him. We only just figured out he was still alive and were able to get him back.”

“Is he here?” Serena’s eyes are wide as she casts a glance around the penthouse like she’s waiting for him to pop out of one of the few shadows cast by the mid-afternoon sunlight.

Pepper arches a brow as she looks at Darcy in askance, and she winces, tears off a piece of her cuticle, “Bucky wasn’t prepared to find out about you today,” she looks up and his blue eyes—and how with genetics did he and Mo have the same damn eyes as Bucky—boring into her. “He’s been recovering since Steve brought him in this summer, but he only found out about his connection to you today. It wasn’t exactly my idea, but it couldn’t be helped.”

“So, he doesn’t want to know us,” Carter slips from Serena’s grasp and makes his way out to the balcony.

Flinching, Darcy turns to Serena, who watches as the glass doors slide shut behind him, and when she turns, a sad smile twists her mouth, “Connie and Walter passed away last year. Carter was always closer to him than he was with Matthew and Victoria, especially after Matthew died when we were kids. Cancer. I remember my parents took me to the funeral.”

“Sorry,” Darcy winces and Pepper makes an agreeing hum, “I know it’s probably not the answer he’s looking for, but Bucky is still trying to figure himself out and who he wants to be now that he’s free. He wasn’t prepared to find out that he still has living family.”

“And that’s why you’ve been avoiding having Mo over,” Serena adds, a little sardonic.

Darcy tilts her head apologetically, “Charlie and Bucky are very close, and we’ve been trying to keep the number of people who know who he really is and that he’s here to a minimum. Obviously, that’s gone out the window now.”

Serena nods and slips off the stool, “I’ll see if I can help Carter make sense of this. Can I take these?”

“Take your time,” Pepper nods, and Serena scoops them up, makes her way out to the patio.
Darcy watches as she approaches Carter, places a hand on his back as she steps to his side.

She jumps when a hand curls around her wrist.

“Are you all right?” Pepper asks, like the reaction wasn’t answer enough.

She sighs and looks down at the countertop, traces the veins with the pads of her fingers, “I’ll be fine.”

Pepper looks down at her for a long minute—Darcy knows she doesn’t believe her, but whatever—and then she goes back to the PR staff, listens as they fill her in on the plan for Steve and Bucky.

Darcy can’t bring herself to pay attention to any of it.

And where the hell is Steve?

--

“So, now that we know,” Serena murmurs a half hour later, after she and Carter come back inside. “What do we do now?”

Darcy spares a glance to Pepper, who is standing with Tony on that same patio, explaining the situation to him now that he’s returned to the land of the living and wants to know why the hell so many people are in his penthouse.

He throws his arms up and starts pacing, which means she probably just told him that Christine Everhart is coming to this evening’s presser.

“The world is about to find out that not only is one of its greatest heroes from World War Two is still alive, but is also the man responsible for countless assassinations and the falls of a handful of major and minor governments, not to mention everything that happened last year with SHIELD,” she winces. “Not that Bucky wants to leave the Tower on a normal day, he’s probably not going to want to even more for a good long time.”

Serena nods earnestly, “Just tell us what we can do.”
“It’s probably in your best interests if you don’t mention your connection to him to anyone,” she winces. “And Carter, you should probably lay low for a while. When I saw you at the reception, I almost freaked out because I thought you were Bucky.”

His brow tilts, “We look that much alike?”

“Other than the hair, it’s freakishly uncanny,” she grins. “But on the plus side, we’ve made sure we’re the only ones who have access to files relating to your ancestry. Sorry if that’s invasive, but had to be done. The fact that Connie and Walter did most of the legwork for us already is a huge help.”

“Okay, yes. We can do that,” he murmurs and turns to Serena. “I should go visit Victoria for a while. She’s at the house on Tuckernuck.”

She nods, “Mo and I will come up this weekend.”

“Things really should calm down soon,” Darcy says, feeling more than a little guilty for disrupting their busy lives. “But it’s a good idea for now. Thanks for being willing to work with us.”

Serena hops off her stool, rounds the island, and wraps her long arms around Darcy’s shoulders, “Hey, Bucky is family, and you and all these people are his family. We’ll do whatever needs to be done.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, tears stinging at her eyes.

The Baizens leave not long after, so they can focus on getting their stories straight before the press conference, and Darcy leaves a concerned Pepper with Tony and heads up to the rooftop patio, coming full circle to the time she took Jane up there and told her about Bucky’s connection to the Baizen family.

She tries to not think about how she’s basically bookending one fucked up chapter in her life with a new one as she curls up on one of the chairs by the fire pit, stares blankly up at the sky.

Despite the coldness in the air, the sun is hot on her skin as she rolls to her side and focuses on her
breathing—in and out, in and out, like Bruce tried to teach her—until sometime eventually, she feels the pressure of eyes on her back.

Rolling over, she blinks at the man perched on the chair on the other side of the pit, and narrows her eyes.

“Darcy.”

Her scowl turns into a full-fledged glare, “Don’t you Darcy me, Steven Grant. I can’t stand to look at your face right now.”

He sighs, hangs his head, “Darcy, I just-”

“No!” She snaps. “You don’t get to legitimize your internalized shit fit with me. You made me tell Bucky about Carter, and you left me and Pepper to explain everything to him and Serena. Carter, who is basically your family too, because Bucky love you more than he has sense. End of the line my ass!

“I don’t know what the fuck your hang-up is,” she barges ahead after taking a wet, heavy breath. “And quite frankly, I don’t give a shit. You need to support Bucky, especially now that the world is minutes away from putting two plus two together and figuring out that he basically blew up part of D.C. You know it’s going to be just as ugly as it was when SHIELD fell in the first place!”

Her chest is heaving by the time she finishes, and she squeezes her fists around the edge of the chair and waits for Steve to explain himself.

And waits.

And waits.

“Darcy. I can’t lose him again.”

She blinks.
“What?”

His head drops further, and he runs and hand over the back of his neck, “Peggy’s all but gone. I can’t lose Bucky too. I just didn’t want the news about the Baizens be the thing that makes him flee New York. I can’t survive that.”

She sighs so hard, for a second she worries she’s going to deflate a lung, “Good god, Steve, you can’t just lock Bucky away in your apartment every time you think he’s going to go on a runner. You’re no better than Hydra if you do. Face it Steve, the Bucky you’re clinging so damn hard to is dead.”

“Darcy!”

“No!” She snaps and sits all the way up. “This Bucky had his ability to choose stripped from him for long than he’s been alive by Hydra, by the Red Room, and by god knows whoever else in between. If there’s one thing we must do, it’s let him live his damn life the way he chooses. I’d more than love for it to be in New York, with you, with us, but if it’s not, then we just have to be happy for him and give him our blessing. Holy shit, it’s not about you!”

He sighs again, “Darcy, you don’t-”

She resists the urge to roll her eyes, pushes off the chair so hard it scrapes across the deck, “I don’t give a shit. I am too tired and emotional and so many other things to give a shit about how you’re acting right now. Just do me a favor and don’t fuck him up any more than he already is. I’m going to go, I don’t know, drink all of Tony’s wine and pass the fuck out. Or something.”

Darcy stalks away before he says anything else, but she sees him clutch his head in his hands as the elevator doors slide shut.

By the time she reaches her floor, she remembers her needy little sister and remembers that drinking all the wine, ever, is probably not going to lead to a happy night for anyone.

But then, like a shining beacon, she finds a cheery note from Charlotte—curiously in Natasha’s neat handwriting and signed by her sister—tacked to the door stating that they’ve gone out for the afternoon.

If Natasha wasn’t pretty much at the top of her list of best people, ever, she definitely is now.
Darcy gives all the things to all the gods, including Thor’s somewhat douche father, and grabs her bag before she pivots out of the unit and goes upstairs, knocks on Clint’s door instead of Jane and Thor’s.

And rather than the bleary-eyed archer she expects to see after the whirlwind of the last day and a half, a Clint who looks like he’s on his way out opens the door, “Darce? What’s wrong?”

God, she really must look like shit.

Try as she might, she can’t stop the tears that finally break through the wall she’d been trying to hold up since Serena’s phone call, and she mutters a curse as she swipes them away, “Clint, I need to get out of here,” she sniffs wetly. “Can you help me?”

“Jesus, Darce,” he curls his arm around her shoulders and tugs her into his side. “What happened?” He shifts them into his apartment as she wraps her arms around his waist.

“Oh, everything,” she noses against his shoulder and sniffs again. “I just need to get out of here.”

In his free hand, Clint juggles his keys before he drops them in his pocket and squeezes the back of her neck, “You can stay at the apartment, unwind without any eyes on you. I’ll tell Tasha to have Foster help her handle the kid.”

Darcy narrows her eyes when she realizes she’s getting snot all over his one semi-decent purple t-shirt, and she pulls back, “You’re on your way out,” she purses her lips. “Meg’s meeting you there, isn’t she?”

He squeezes her tighter, “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” she doesn’t try to stop from whining, because she’s so damn tired of being the one damn adult in the entire fucking building. “You’re always so busy and then you have to hide your relationship from the tabloids and the Constance board. And Tasha,” she snorts as his chuckles vibrate through his chest and against her side. “You need your alone time with her.”

“Darcy, shut up and let me help you.”
Leaning back, she wrinkles her nose at him, “You’re my favorite.”

He keeps her close to his side and leads her down the hall, “And don’t you forget it.”

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The air in the Bed-Stuy loft is a little stale, and Darcy wrinkles her nose at the mess of plates in the sink as she flips the lights on, Clint a few steps behind her as he picks through an armful of unopened mail.

Shuffled through the open space, she drops her bag and toes off her shoes, leave them by the three-legged dining table before she stumbles over to the overstuffed couch tucked up against the far wall.

She flops on her side and stares off at the television on the other side of the room, at her reflection in its dark depths, and thinks about reaching for the remote and using some crappy reality television to drown out her thoughts.

But she doesn’t.

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Distantly, Darcy listens to Clint as he pads around the loft, washes the epic pile of purple dishes and cleans the mountain of crap off the dining table while muttering quietly to someone on the phone.

It doesn’t sound like he’s talking to Natasha, so maybe Jane?

It’s all she could do to keep her breathing even as she lets her mind drift.

At one point, Clint’s legs pause in front of her, breaking her eye line from her reflection, and she feels the light pressure on her head before he drapes a violently purple blanket across her body.

“Thanks,” she manages and curls up into a ball under it, one arm curling around her legs.

Clint sighs, and she vaguely hears him go for his phone again before he sits down by her feet, turns
on a DVR’d episode of Dog Cops, the volume low as he goes back to his phone.

Eventually, though Darcy isn’t sure how long it is before the pressure between her eyes starts growing to a dull ringing in her ears, which muffles the sound of the front door clicking open.

“Oh Darcy.”

She blinks, and there’s Meg perched on the coffee table, elbows resting on her knees, “Hi,” she coughs, and then tries again. “Sorry I interrupted your quality time with your,” she trails off and frowns. “Person.”

Meg shakes her head and reaches across to pat Darcy’s arm, “Don’t worry about that. Clint told me you had a rough day.”

“Week, month, year. I’m just tired.”

She lets her eyes close, and time slips away from her again as she listens to Clint and Meg as they talk in the kitchen.

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Meg crosses her arms over her chest and looks down at Clint, who sits on the floor, trying to reattach the fourth leg to the dining table, “Clint, you didn’t tell me it was this bad.”

Rolling a screwdriver between his fingers, he spares a glance at Darcy, “She’s in the middle of a massive mess. I can’t really talk about it.”

“Oh please, I already saw the news.”

“And then there’s that.”

She spares another glance to the woman curled up on the couch, “It’s going to start affecting Charlie too, more than it already has. Darcy mentioned she’s having some issues with their missing mother.”
Clint smacks the tablet leg back into place and rolls off the floor, reaches out and takes Meg’s hand, “We’re looking out for them. We’ll get them through this.”

“I know you will, but don’t forget I’m there for them too.”

She squeezes his fingers, and he sighs, “I’m sorry we couldn’t have a night to ourselves.”

“It’s okay. I kind of knew what I was getting into when I asked you out.”

“Hey, I thought I asked you out?” He smirks, shifting into her space and dropping her hand to rest both of his on her waist.

She settles her arms on his shoulders, links her fingers at the nape of his neck, “Because I let you think that.”

Resting her forehead against his, Meg lightly brushes her thumb over the bruise blooming on his jaw, “I’m just glad you got through Moscow all right,” she whispers, pressing her lips against the mark.

Clint intercepts her as she pulls back, kisses her on the mouth, but keeps it short for Darcy’s sake, if she even notices, “Never been a huge fan of Russia, but it could be worse. Other than us getting tagged. There’s going to be a lot of heat on us once everyone connects the dots tonight.”

“About that man in the pictures?” She tilts her head and glances at Darcy over Clint’s shoulder. “Steve’s roommate?”

“Yeah.”

“I know what you’re not saying,” Meg arches a brow when he trails off. “You and I will be fine. I know what I’m getting into, and I know I can handle this.”

She tucks her forehead against his neck and holds her tighter, one hand trailing lightly up and down his arm, “I’m glad Darcy threw me at you,” he whispers against her hair. “I was thinking about bringing you around the Tower soon.”
“I know you can’t yet, and that’s all right, for now,” she straightens and kisses his cheek. “First things first, you and Darcy need some serious comfort food right now.”

Clint grins, and Meg watches him shake off the melancholy that creeps up every time they remember how they have to hide their relationship, especially from everyone at Constance until their not-so-minor conflict of interest is resolved by way of Charlotte moving classes next year.

“You’re so damn smart.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she smacks a kiss to his mouth and heads to the drawer stuffed with takeout menus.

She watches him watch her rifles through it, and Clint leans a hip against the table, “You know,” he says quietly as he watches her ponytail slide off her neck to hang over her shoulder. “There’s nothing that says we can’t sneak you into the Tower one day so you can meet everyone. I am a spy, after all.”

She stops short, spinning around and strides across the kitchen, kisses him hard, “You can’t just say things like that,” she whispers against his mouth as she pulls back, her hands buried in his hair.”

“I’m sorry I’m not sorrier.”

Meg snorts, “No, you’re not.”

--

“You know you don’t have to do this, right?”

From under a heap of blankets on Jane and Thor’s couch, Darcy rolls her eyes and accepts the mug of tea Jane holds out to her, “Like I’m not going to watch Steve remind billions of people why Hydra is the worst ever and that Bucky needs seven decades of hugs and cuddles and grilled cheese instead of being taken in for questioning by the spooks of the world.”

Jane snorts and perches next to Darcy, folds her legs neatly under her, “Please tell me you didn’t have any input on his statement.”
“Pepper is the most responsible person in the building for a reason,” she snorts right back. “Where’s the big guy?”

“He offered to sit in the Hold with Bruce for the broadcast.”

Nodding slowly, Darcy steals a sip of tea and curls deeper into the layers of blankets, a down comforter and—is that Thor’s cape?

After choking down dinner and drinking her weight in shitty beer with Clint and Meg—and she has to pat herself on the back for making that call—the archer dragged Darcy’s half-asleep backside back to the Tower and dumped her off at Thor and Jane’s.

Charlotte is already there and fast asleep in the guest room after an afternoon at the park with Natasha.

Hopefully it was just a fun afternoon at the park, and Natasha wasn’t teaching her tradecraft, or something.

And now, all the havey to do is wait for the press conference.

Something buzzes deep in the mass of warm surrounding her, and Darcy digs through it, lets out a quiet *ha* when she finds her phone and sees a text from Serena asking, “Are you watching?”

“From Jane’s,” she taps back. “Couldn’t bring myself to go down to the press room. Is Carter with you?”

The text-pending bubble pops up.

“Chuck’s here, they’re getting shitfaced. I just got off the phone with his mother, let her know that he’s going to come up tomorrow.”

Darcy can’t hold back a snort, but while she’s drafting a reply, the bubble pops up before, “How do
you think this will go?"

“Good enough that we might be able to leave the Tower from the front door by the end of the month. Steve’s good at rallying people around him, and Pepper’s speechwriters are probably better than President Ellis’. We’ll see.”

“Well, we have a house in the Hamptons if you don’t want to use Stark’s. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve gone up there to hide.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks.”

Jane is by her side, tapping away on her tablet, and Darcy drops her phone back into the mass of blankets and leans over, watches Jane bring up a copy of the script everyone was working off of tonight.

There’s finally a flicker of movement on screen, and Darcy sees Maria—fresh off the plane from upstate wearing a crisp suit, and yep, there’s definitely a pair of Pepper’s power shoes on her feet.

“So, I think we all know why we’re here,” she begins, blue eyes flinty and features completely impassive. “But for those of you living under a rock, I’m Maria Hill, Stark Industries liaison and representation of the Avengers Initiative. And no, we’re still not answering questions following any remarks.”

“So that’s her title,” Darcy murmurs, and Jane snorts, jabs at the pile of blankets with the point of her elbow.

“At oh-six-hundred hours yesterday morning, with approval from the Kremlin, the Avengers set out to Moscow to dismantle a forty-man Hydra cell trafficking illegal weapons and intel in and out of the European Union. The mission was deemed a success, and all further details have been classified Top Secret.

“But that’s not what you’re interested in,” the corner of her lip ticks up, and Darcy snorts.

Maria goes on, detailing the identities of each member of the team—not that that’s actually news—ends with a reminder for everyone that Bruce’s presence in Stark Tower is still not up for discussion.
Maria looks down at the file resting on the podium, allows it all to sink in before she continues, “Per the files released by intelligence specialist Romanov, the identity of Captain America has been confirmed to be Steve Rogers, the same Steve Rogers who founded and led the special operations group codenamed the Howling Commandos during World War Two.

“Joining Captain Rogers and the Avengers in dismantling the remains of Hydra’s organization, and yes, I am referring to the man in those pictures spreading around the Internet as we speak, is Sergeant James Buchanan ‘Bucky’ Barnes,” Maria pauses again as a flurry of murmurs break out in the press room. “This is a very good time to remind each and every one of you that Barnes was honored posthumously for his efforts following his supposed death in action following World War TWO. Captain Rogers will now say a few words on Barnes’ circumstances. No questions.”

Steve steps up and Maria nods once before she steps back to stand just over his shoulder, “Good evening everyone,” he clears his throat. “Thank you all for coming on such short notice.”

Darcy shifts closer to Jane, “Here we go.”

“On November 3, 1943, I successfully rescued nearly four hundred men from an Austrian weapons facility, including Sergeant Barnes. During his capture, he had been experimented on by one of Hydra’s top scientists, Arnim Zola. Due to the experimentation he was forced to undergo, he was able to survive the six-hundred-foot fall from a train in the Swiss Alps a year later. He was recovered by Hydra agents, tortured, brainwashed, and forced into their service for the next seventy years. He has since begun to recover.”

“And can we assume that he, like Doctor Banner, is hiding in Stark Tower?” Christine Everhart pipes up.

“Right on time,” Jane murmurs as she scrolls through the script. “She is good.”

Eyes glued to the screen, Darcy nods slowly as Steve bristles, but goes on.

Unfortunately, it’s the exact moment where he goes off script, and Darcy is definitely going to murder him.

So much murder.
“Bucky is perfectly safe at the Tower, and even with his skills, there is no safer place for us. For the Avengers, for Doctor Jane Foster, our staff, and even for our operations specialist Darcy Lewis and her little sister Charlotte.”

Jane drops her head in her hands and Darcy gapes at the screen, the buzzing in her ears drowning out whatever else Steve says.

“Son of a bitch!”

Her phone flies through tense fingers and crashes into the television, creating a large crack through the middle of the screen before the device drops to the floor with a resounding clatter.

“Jesus fucking Christ!” Darcy flails as she tries to throw the nest of blankets off her body and gets tangled even worse. “Shit!”

Jane grabs her arm and tugs her back before she falls on her face, “You need to calm down.”

“He wasn’t supposed to mention her!” She snaps. “Telling the world that a four-year-old is living in the building doesn’t actually help our case!”

She sighs, “I know that! But we can’t go back in time and change things—don’t even think about asking Tony—so now we just have to figure out how to move forward.”

Raking a hand through her hair, Darcy flops back against blanket mountain, “Yes, but no. Ugh, I can’t believe that!” She narrows her eyes at the screen, where Steve is still talking, the crack perfectly bisecting his face. “He did that on purpose.”

“What?” Jane looks at her like she has three heads. “What in the world are you going on about?”

She huffs, crosses her arms over her chest, “I called him selfish earlier,” she mutters with a dark glare at the man in question. “Because of his shit fit about not telling Bucky about the Baizens.”
“Oh Darcy.”

“His selfishness will do nothing to help him recover! I don’t care if he’s not ready to hear that, I had to say it.”

“Okay, okay,” Jane sighs, pulls the blankets aside and drags Darcy out of the cocoon. “But that still doesn’t mean he did it maliciously. He’s trying to make an effort to prove Bucky’s safe to be around.”

“Of course he is.”

Jane nudges her side, “You know that, because he likes to eat your food and sleep on you, but the rest of the world doesn’t. You know that too.”

She drops her head in her hands and groans loudly, “I am a million times a thousand percent done with this. Could he not like, clear it with me first? I mean, of my god!”

“He was probably getting a read on the room.”

“Read on the room,” she scoffs, but it’s softened by the grin on her face. “Who even are you, Jane Foster?”

She smirks, “I’m not the only one spending too much time around people who have to deal with politics.”

“You’ve picked up on Thor’s attitude, too,” she snorts and makes her way to her phone. “Sorry about your TV.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Darcy sees Jane wave her hand in dismissal as she goes back to her tablet, and Darcy grabs her remarkably unharmed device—perks of Stark Tech—and finds a text waiting from Serena, “Well, that was…interesting. Like I said, let me know if you want to hide out at our place in the Hamptons.”

“I can’t even right now,” she taps back. “Jane calmed me down before I could actually go down
there and murder America’s favorite person.”

“That’s nice of her.”

Darcy groans, “I don’t even know.”

With a roll of her eyes, Jane crosses the room and snatches Darcy’s phone from her hand, replaces it with a beer, “Shut up and drink. Everything is going to be fine when this blows over.”

Snorting, she does as ordered, “At the rate this week has gone, my liver’s going to look worse than Tony’s.”

“I’m sure he’ll buy you a new one.”

“I’m not sure what’s worse, the fact that he’d be down for that, or the fact that he’d probably just offer to have Bruce grow me a new one.”

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“Darcy, I hope you realize this makes you one of us now. There’s really no way around it.”

She rubs her eyes and groans, tucks her phone to her ear as she flops across her couch, “I still feel sick. This morning, I went down to the lobby and looked outside and oh my god that was a terrible idea. I don’t even know what to do.”

“Ignore the paparazzi, they’ll go away eventually,” Serena laughs, and then hums. “Hey, have you ever heard of Gossip Girl?”

“No. Should I?”

Serena’s hollow laugh echoes over the connection, “Probably not. It was a gossip site about the rich teens of the Upper East Side. It’s not active anymore, but all the archives are still online. Search Serena van der Woodsen and the summer of 2009.”
“Wait, it’s about you?” Darcy flops, rolls over, and drags her tablet off the coffee table by her fingertips. “What happened?”

“So many things. Just take a look. I got hounded for a while, especially after I came home that fall, but eventually they got tired of me. The same thing will happen with you.”

“We can only hope,” Darcy says, eyebrow cocked as she taps the search out one-handed, and when she opens the link, both her brows fly to her hairline. “Oh my god! Is that you with Prince Harry?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! Thanks to everyone who's stuck with this fic all this time, and kept sending me those messages about how much you miss this universe.

As always, I love hearing from you.

Prompt of the chapter from The Fake Redhead.com

Number 207

“I hate you.”

“Why? I’m lovely.”

End Notes

You know the drill, I love hearing from you.

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Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!