Take Your Aim
by Em Jaye

Summary

She reached out and put a hand over his wallet and crossed the few feet between them, bending down to put her lips close to his ear. “I think you should go home, Captain Rogers,” she exhaled, hoping the hair tumbling over her shoulder would obscure his face. Steve looked up in confusion. “I’m not...I mean...you’re not going to get into trouble...if that’s what you’re worried about.” She inched closer and dipped a knee into the mattress, leaning in close enough to smell his cologne. Darcy took a hold of his hand and slid it under her dress, carefully keeping it to the outside of her leg, made sure he could feel the gun that was strapped to her thigh as she reached into her cleavage with the other hand and flashed her badge for one brief moment. “That’s not what I’m worried about, sir.”

Notes

The idea for this fic was inspired by watching a whole lot of Dexter and realizing I'd never seen Darcy portrayed as a cop before. It's darker and much less fluffy and very different from what I'm used to writing, so please be gentle, but honest. Much, much kudos go to: LittleRoma, itslivibitch, gisellecatalinaflowers, Darcy_Coulson_Barton, and dianathehuntress for their help and support of this idea.
One

The woman they discovered on Thursday night couldn’t have been older than nineteen, twenty at the most. She hadn’t been in the water long—just long enough for her skin to wash out into a dusty gray and her lips to turn blue and plump up. Her clothes were gone, her hair a tangled mess of leaves and garbage found in the East river. She had thin wrists that bore angry red marks with purple bruises on her knees and legs.

It wasn’t until they turned her over to fish her out of the river that they saw it. The long scratches down her back. They were deep and started between her shoulder blades, the soft flesh dug out in five, uniform claw marks that trailed all the way down to the base of her spine.

The officer on scene exchanged a look with the medical examiner. “How many does this one make it?” he asked with a frown that deepened the lines on his face.

The medical examiner shook her head and waved the investigators over to photograph. “Three,” she said with a contemplative hum. “Three in two weeks.”

“All with those claw marks?” the officer asked for clarification.

She nodded. “All the same.”

“Three in two weeks…” the cop shook his head.

“Yeah,” his companion exhaled and pushed back her bangs with her wrist. “I’m afraid he’s just getting started.”

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“Three, Jane,” Darcy said as she tucked her phone between her shoulder and her ear and entered her username and password on her work computer. “Do you know what that means?”

On the other end of the line, she heard Jane take what sounded like the last sip of something with ice cubes. “I hope it has nothing to do with how excited you are.”

“It means there’s a serial killer in Brooklyn,” Darcy said, ignoring her friend’s wary tone. “Two points make a line, not a pattern,” she paused and peered around bullpen furtively, pleased to see it still buzzing with police officers and civilians who didn’t care what she was saying on her cell phone. “You taught me that. But three? Three is a pattern. Or at least the beginning of a pattern.”

“Three could also be a coincidence,” Jane reminded her. “And I’m not sure why you’re so excited about this anyway. It’s a little unsettling.”

“I’m excited because of who the victims are,” she dropped her voice needlessly under the din of the office. “Or rather, what they did for a living.”

“And what is it they did, Darcy?” Jane asked in a remarkably patient tone.

“They were hookers,” she said triumphantly, running a quick search to see if anything new had been reported in the last few hours.
“Okay…?”

“And what am I?”

Jane let out a sound of uncertainty. “You’re a police officer, Darcy.” There was a pause. “You are still a police officer, aren’t you?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Yeah, a police officer who has been getting the shaft and stuck doing nothing but skeezy undercover prost round-ups for months.”

“Ah,” her companion finally nodded with understanding. “But now, you want to stay undercover as a hooker so you can catch the killer before the detectives do and…”

“Finally get out of vice and into homicide where I belong.” She stopped and glanced at her watch. “Ooh, speaking of, I’ve gotta go. Afternoon debrief starts in five.”

There was another long pause from Jane’s end of the line. “Y’know, there’s a ton of things you could do, working for Stark.”

“Jane…”

“More fun, more money, considerably less dangerous than trying to catch a murderer on your own…”

“Um, I recall almost getting killed at least three different times while I was working for you without ever collecting a paycheck,” she reminded with an affectionate roll of her eyes.

Jane sighed. “Just please be careful. I really don’t want to read about you washing up along the East River.”

“I’m always careful,” she said with a shrug as Eddie walked past and motioned to the conference room where the rest of the team was gathering. “Don’t worry so much and say hi to Thor for me.”

Jane’s warning was all but forgotten by the time Darcy took her seat in the front of the room.

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It wasn’t the assignment she wanted. If she was going to catch the guy killing hookers on her own, she was going to have to pretend to be one. Whoever was dumping girls by Pier 6 wasn’t looking to pick them up in a hotel bar with a doorman.

At least, she didn’t think he was. His victims so far were definitely from the darker corners of the borough. And she had to imagine they hadn’t started out their night shifts in dresses that fit this well.

Darcy looked at herself once more in the mirror and put the finishing touches on her dark red lips. She smoothed her hands over the crisp fabric of her dark blue dress and wondered what it said about her that she was more annoyed than nervous.

“It says you’re a goddamn professional,” Eddie had said that afternoon as they’d shoved burgers in their faces on the edge of her desk. “Just try and class it up this time,” he’d added with a grin full of lettuce and onions. “Since they’re finally upgrading you from hooker to call-girl.”
And they had. She’d traded up from her pleather skirts and tube tops to this navy chiffon number and a room at the Hilton. A room that was wired and tapped and ready for the monthly round up of Brooklyn’s bottom-feeders who were unlucky enough to try to pay a police officer for the pleasure of her company.

“Looks like your little one-woman investigation is going to have to wait, Lewis,” Eddie had said with sympathetic pat of her shoulder while he’d selected and packed his surveillance gear for the night. “Sarge is looking for some big fish tonight.”

But the problem was that Darcy wasn’t really supposed to be the one fishing…she was the bait. If she went looking for a mark there were only so many ways it could blow up in her face. She had to wait and be patient and see if anyone came to her.

And just like clockwork, one did. She knew he knew what she was doing there—their plant behind the bar was always a good sport about subtly pointing the girls out to anyone inquiring—but she almost appreciated the way he stumbled through the introductions, like it mattered what their names were. He was Steve. She was Darla.

If she were honest with herself, she would have admitted she was a little surprised when he turned out to be her first catch of the night. Men like him weren’t normally in need of a professional. Tall, blonde, built, handsome. It seemed unlikely to Darcy that he’d have any trouble getting laid for free.

But, she reminded herself with a voice in her head that was much too cynical for her twenty-six years, it didn’t matter what kind of guy he looked like or acted like or seemed like. He was the kind of guy she was going to arrest that night. And those kinds of guys were really all the same when you got down to it.

Even if this one did look kind of familiar, she conceded as she opened her hotel room door and ushered him inside with a smile she hoped was seductive. Familiar, and with the kind of sad eyes and thoughtful expression that—under different circumstances—would have made her want to make him a cup of tea and ask what was wrong.

But that doesn’t matter because you’re a goddamn professional, she reminded herself and shoved her feelings of sympathy out of her mind.

“Make yourself at home, handsome,” she said with the light Brooklyn accent she’d finally perfected enough to use in the field as she motioned toward the neatly made king-sized bed.

Predictably, he sat on the edge, right in the middle where, if he would just turn his face to the right, one of the department’s hidden cameras could get a full capture of his face. But he didn’t look right. He looked down at his hands and fidgeted, looking so uncomfortable and out of his element that Darcy almost felt bad for him.

“So, are you looking for anything in particular? Or just…” she turned away coyly from adjusting her appearance in the mirror and raised her eyebrows expectantly.

He looked up, surprised at the question. “Oh, um…” he frowned and glanced down again. “I just…I’m just trying to distract myself for a while.”

She forced herself to smile, trying not to feel guilty for making this guy’s night even worse. “Well, distraction is my middle name, sweetheart. But I do like to settle first,” she said, loud enough so her cameras would hear her and batted her eyelashes. “Business before pleasure.”
“Oh, right.” Distracted, he reached into his pocket and removed his wallet. “Of course.” He looked up, looking lost. “I don’t know...” he appeared flustered for a moment before he finally just offered her the wallet. “How much?”

It only took a second for Darcy to see it. The interior of his wallet was home to a Stark Industries ID badge on one side and a New York state driver’s license issued to a Steven Rogers on the other.

Steven Rogers.

Stark Industries.

Darcy felt her eyes widen and her heart stop. She reached out and put a hand over his wallet and crossed the few feet between them, bending down to put her lips close to his ear. “I think you should go home, Captain Rogers,” she exhaled, hoping the hair tumbling over her shoulder would obscure his face.

Steve looked up in confusion. “I’m not...I mean...you’re not going to get into trouble...if that’s what you’re worried about.”

She inched closer and dipped a knee into the mattress, leaning in close enough to smell his cologne. Darcy took a hold of his hand and slid it under her dress, carefully keeping it to the outside of her leg, made sure he could feel the gun that was strapped to her thigh as she reached into her cleavage with the other hand and flashed her badge for one brief moment. “That’s not what I’m worried about, sir.”

His eyes went wide as he pulled his hand back. “You’re a cop?”

She felt his whole body tense; she could almost see his heart pounding through his shirt and felt her own heart sink. Dedication to the job only went so far.

“Calm down,” she said, keeping her voice low, her lips by his ear. “I’m going to get you out of this.”

“How are you—?”

“There’s a camera to your right, just above the picture frame,” she cut him off. “And one on the dresser, beside the TV. Just keep your face away from them and no one’s going to be able to tell that it’s you.” She took a deep breath. “Just follow my lead.”

“Follow your—?”

Darcy pushed away from him and worked her face into one of disgust. “You’re joking right?” she asked, raising her voice back to a volume where she’d be picked up. “Nobody rides for free, pal.” She grabbed a handful of his jacket and hauled him to his feet. “I don’t give a shit how pretty you are.” She dragged him to the door and yanked it open, throwing him unmercifully into the hallway. “Come back when you can afford me!” she added for effect before she slammed the door in his confused face.

She dropped her forehead against the door and waited to exhale until she heard him retreat down the hall. “False alarm, guys,” she told anyone who might be watching the footage. “No dime, no crime.”

It took the rest of the night for her heart to stop pounding.
By three-thirty her shift was over and there were three unlucky gentlemen awaiting bail in
the basement of the precinct. Darcy’s eyelids were drooping as she climbed the four flights of stairs
to her apartment, her make-up long gone and her hair had long since lost its glossy curl. She
dropped onto her bed, thrilled that her roommate was nowhere to be found.

If someone had been home, she might have been tempted to dissect out loud the fact that
she’d almost busted Captain-fucking-America for soliciting a prostitute.

But she pushed the idea out of her head almost as soon as it arrived. She had gotten him
out of her hotel room undetected, after all, she reminded herself. She had kept her mouth shut at the
station. If her discretion meant that people had one less thing to talk about, then so be it. After
everything he’d been through, he deserved at least that much.

But by the time she woke up, anyone from the night before was shoved to the very back of
her mind. The police had found another body and the only thing people were talking about was that
Brooklyn had a real-life serial killer on their hands.
He did go home after he left the hotel, but only for a minute. With his head spinning and his face burning and his stomach in knots, Steve had only been able to pace the length of his apartment a few times. He’d thrown on his running clothes and was back out on the street, his feet slamming into the pavement, his heart pounding as the last few hours played over and over again in his mind.

With every lap he made through Central Park, Steve found himself remembering something different about the woman who had just thrown him out of her hotel room.

Her eyes; dark blue and sparkling beneath a fan of thick, dark lashes.

Her full, wine-colored lips.

The way her breath against his ear had felt like it had restarted his heart for a moment.

The expanse of smooth, soft skin she’d dragged his hand against underneath her skirt.

Calm down, she’d said and leaned in close enough that he could smell something minty in her hair. I’m going to get you out of this.

Steve stopped just before Strawberry Fields and let out a deep breath. Why had she gotten him out of that? She didn’t have to, he reasoned with himself. He’d been guilty of exactly what it looked like. She could have arrested him. Should have arrested him.

He ran a hand over his face and let out another long exhale. That would have been a nightmare. The whole thing was already a nightmare; the perfect end to one of the worst days of his life.

If he thought too hard about any one moment of the day, he would feel that familiar shortness in his chest; the way he used to get when he had asthma and overexerted himself. It had all been enough of a reminder of what he already knew: that he still didn’t belong here. That he wasn’t ever going to belong here.

He started running again. He didn’t stop this time until the sun was up.
“You look like shit.”

Steve looked up from taping his hands, surprised to find Barton studying him with a deep frown. He blinked. “What?”

“You look like shit,” he repeated, not unkindly. “I kind of thought being on ice for eighty years made you immune to ass-dragging but seriously man,” Barton shook his head and sat down next to him on the bench. “Are you okay?”

“Seventy,” Steve corrected almost automatically before he ripped off the piece of tape he’d been working with.

“What?”

“I was on ice for seventy years,” he clarified. “And I’m fine.”

“Well you don’t look fine,” Barton said needlessly, getting up to follow Steve to the speed bag.

“Thanks, Barton,” he rolled his eyes and raised his hands to the bag. He waited for a moment before he slid his gaze to the right and gave his teammate an expectant look. “What?”

“Nothing,” Barton held up his hands. “Nothing, I’m just—”

“Clint!” Natasha’s voice cut through the gym, giving both men cause to jump and turn in the direction of the doorway. “Hill’s back,” she called with a jerk of her head. “You got a minute?”

Barton gave Steve’s shoulder a friendly swat. “Buck up, Rogers,” he said. “But I’m around if you want to talk.”

“Thanks,” he huffed and returned to his workout.

“Hey,” Natasha appeared next to him, undetected.

Steve jumped and dropped his hands again. “What?” he demanded as his patience officially met its end.

She didn’t even blink. “Where’ve you been?” When he didn’t immediately offer an answer, she continued. “I stopped by your apartment last night—I was worried about you.”

He shrugged and began working the speed bag in earnest. Natasha wasn’t going anywhere. “I was out.”

“I know,” she said patiently, moving out of his way. “You went out. You. Out. On a Friday night.” When he glanced over again, she was looking at him expectantly. “Forgive me for being a little shocked. I’ve only been begging you to attempt socialization for months.” She waited again for a response. “I stopped by your apartment last night—I was worried about you.”

He shrugged and began working the speed bag in earnest. Natasha wasn’t going anywhere. “I was out.”

“I know,” she said patiently, moving out of his way. “You went out. You. Out. On a Friday night.” When he glanced over again, she was looking at him expectantly. “Forgive me for being a little shocked. I’ve only been begging you to attempt socialization for months.” She waited again for a response. “I stopped by your apartment last night—I was worried about you.”

“I guess I figured after…” she trailed off and glanced down at the canvas. “I figured you’d want to be alone.”

“I’m fine,” Steve repeated himself, switching up his rhythm. “I was just out.”

Natasha studied him for a long moment, her arms crossed over her chest. She opened her
mouth and closed it once before she tilted her head to the side. “Did something happen last night?”

“*No,*” he slammed his hand into the bag once more, nearly sending it flying across the room. “I went out, I came back, now I’m here. End of story.”

Steve felt her gaze follow him back across the gym to the weight rack. Her eyes narrowed as she watched him select his weights and load up his barbell. He could still see her in the mirror as he dropped down onto the bench. She took a few careful, measured steps in his direction while he worked through his first set of presses. “What’s her name?” she asked finally, when the bar was back in place.

He blew out a deep breath and took the bar down again. “Who?”

Natasha rolled her eyes and looked down at him. “The girl who put you in this funk.”

“I’m not in a funk,” he argued, feeling like a broken record. “Can we just drop it?”

“Fine,” she held up her hands. “I was just going to suggest that whoever she is, you’d probably feel better if you talked to her about what happened.”

“Something tells me she wouldn’t appreciate that,” he grumbled.

“Oh, c’mon,” Natasha didn’t revel in the iota of information he revealed. “Didn’t you at least get a number?”

“No,” he told her, focusing his eyes away from her face and back on the barbell over his chest. “I met a girl, we had a drink, she turned out to be a cop who almost arrested me for soliciting and goddamnit, Natasha,” he crashed the bar onto the rack. “I told you I didn’t want to talk about this.” He sat up and rubbed a hand over his face.

“Whoa.” Natasha crossed her arms over her chest and raised her eyebrows. “I was just mad you missed the briefing this morning,” she admitted. “It was your turn to bring the bagels.”

Steve glared at her as she dropped down on to the weight bench beside him. “I wasn’t exactly in the mood for Stark this morning.”

They were quiet for a long moment while Steve contemplated the rudeness of getting up and returning to his apartment before Natasha could make another comment.

“A cop, huh?”

He sighed. So much for that idea.

“Yeah.”

“Badge and gun and everything?”

“And everything,” he echoed joylessly.

“And she thought you were soliciting her?”

He sighed and kept his eyes on the floor. “Yeah, I guess so.”

“You?” she repeated incredulously. “She thought you were soliciting her?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Yeah. It’s hilarious.”
“Man,” she let out a chuckle. “It really has been a long time since you played the field.”

He wasn’t going to correct her—she didn’t need to know any of the specifics. She didn’t even need to know as much as he’d just told her. “Look, I really don’t want to talk about it, okay?” he asked, giving her what he hoped was a look that would stop her meddling. “So can you stop trying to read me and just let me forget about yesterday and finish up here?”

Natasha shook her head. “I wouldn’t be reading you if you weren’t such a billboard, buddy.” She gave his shoulder a nudge. “I’m not telling you how to live your life—”

“Yes you are,” he sighed tiredly.

“But you’re obviously still thinking about whatever happened between you and this girl,” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “And since I like to think I know you a little bit, I think you might feel better if you went and talked to her.” She nudged him again. “At least thank her for not hauling your ass off to jail over a misunderstanding.”

“Yeah,” he mused to himself. “A misunderstanding.”

That sounded so much better than the truth.

“And hey,” Natasha got to her feet and drove her fist into his shoulder. “You owe me a bagel.”

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Darcy’s phone was ringing as she made her way back from the fax machine, coffee in hand. “Vice, this is Lewis,” she said, leaning onto the corner of her desk.

“Lewis?” Kristina in reception always said everything like a question.

“What’s up?” Darcy asked, taking a sip of her coffee.

“There’s a guy here to see you?”

“A guy? For me?”

At the desk beside her, Eddie’s head shot up. “A guy?” he mouthed around a wide grin. “For you?”

Darcy raised her middle finger in his direction. “You’re going to have to be more specific. Can I get a name?”

“Didn’t give me a last name,” she said, sounding like she was smiling. “But he said his first name is Steve? That you met a few nights ago?” Her stomach dropped to the ground. “Tall, blonde… really good looking?” Kristina paused while Darcy tried to remember how to produce saliva. “Any of this ringing a bell?”

“Oh, yeah,” she said finally, ignoring the look Eddie was giving her. “Sure.”

“Want me to send him up?”
“No,” she said a little too forcefully. “Uh, no,” she ran a hand over her hair and needlessly smoothed down her blouse. “I’m on my way down anyway. Just keep him in the lobby.”

He wasn’t in a suit and tie this time. Just a plain white t-shirt and a pair of jeans, still managing to look way too good to be sitting in her precinct lobby waiting for her. He gave her a little embarrassed smile as she approached him. “Uh, hi,” he said, looking nervous.

Darcy frowned and grabbed a hold of the sleeve of his jacket. She led him around the corner and away from Kristina’s inquisitive gaze. “What are you doing here?” she asked before she stopped and felt her frown deepen in confusion. “And how did you even know I worked here?”

“I saw the precinct number on the badge you showed me,” he said as if it were obvious. “And I looked for a name that was closest to the one you gave me.”

She could tell her face wasn’t doing anything attractive with the confusion painted all over it. “I only showed you my badge for a second.”

He shrugged innocently. “I have a photographic memory.”

Darcy sighed. “So…what are you doing here?”

“I uh…I didn’t know how else to get a hold of you.”

She felt her eyebrows huddle together. “Why would you need to get a hold of me at all?”

He swallowed hard and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I wanted to—uh—thank you? For what you did the other night?”

“That was half true. It was the shittier half of the truth, and she didn’t have to sound so bloodless when she said it, the little voice in her head reminded her, but if it would make him leave faster, that’s the half he was going to get.

“No, I don’t—” Steve huffed out what looked to be a frustrated breath. “Look, I don’t normally.”

Darcy held up a hand. “Don’t take this the wrong way,” she said, a little kinder than before. “But they all say that, sir. Respectfully, I’d rather we just both get back to work.”

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“No, but I really don’t—”

“I know,” she cut him off again. “I could tell.” She gave him a brief smile before she hardened again and continued. “Look, you’re a nice, handsome national icon, Captain. You could get a million girls for free. As far as this girl’s concerned, you don’t owe me any explanation outside of ‘I learned my lesson’ and ‘I’ll never do it again’.”

“I did learn my lesson,” he assured her emphatically. “And I really won’t ever do it again."

“Good,” she gave him another small smile. “It was really nice of you to come down here, but I’d be a lot more comfortable if we just went our separate ways.”

And the sooner the better, she thought, glancing around nervously. The last thing she
needed was for someone to recognize him and start asking her to call in favors to Stark Tower.

Steve looked taken aback. He blinked twice before he shook his head and returned to a look of professionalism. “Yeah, of course,” he said with a terse nod. “Of course. Sorry to bother you, Officer Lewis.”

Darcy watched him go, wondering how it was possible to have saved a guy from a jam the way she had and still wind up feeling like the bad guy.

She buried herself in paperwork for the rest of the afternoon, not raising her head until her lieutenant bustled past late in the afternoon and dropped a file in front of her. “Hilton again, Lewis,” he said without a glance in her direction.

Darcy jumped up, shoving thoughts of the Hilton and Steve Rogers as far out of her mind as they would go. “Uh, sir?” she asked, jogging to keep up with him as he moved through the bullpen. “Lieutenant Driscoll?”

Her commanding officer stopped and turned around. “What is it, Lewis?”

“I was wondering if…um…” Darcy pursed her lips together and swallowed hard. “I was wondering if I might have a corner assignment again?”

He blinked. “Come again?”

“It’s not that I didn’t mind the change of scenery on Friday,” she rushed on, resisting the urge to fidget with her fingers or her clothing. “But I would just rather be back…”

“On the street,” Driscoll finished for her, looking skeptical. “Sorry, Lewis, I’ve just never had anyone turn down an upgrade like I gave you.” He studied her for a minute. “Did something happen at the Hilton?”

“No, no,” she insisted hurriedly. “I just…” she blew out a frustrated breath. “I mean, I just figured you could let Rodriguez take the upgrade for a few weeks—while she’s easing back into work,” she added with a glance in the direction of her fellow officer, returning from medical leave. She smiled. “I don’t mind it.”

Driscoll studied her for another few long moments. “Sure, Lewis,” he said carefully. “Give Rodriguez the heads-up about the switch. I’m sure she’ll appreciate it.”

“Thanks LT,” she called to his retreating back.

When she turned around, Eddie was standing in front of her, his arms crossed over his chest. He eyed her carefully with his dark eyes. “You know he’s going to see right through that, right?” he asked with a smile that was all white teeth against his dark brown skin.

“Eventually, sure,” Darcy shrugged and fell into step with her friend on their way back to their desks. “But if I bag a murderer before he does, it won’t matter.”

Eddie rolled his eyes. “So who was the guy in reception?”

“Um,” Darcy swallowed hard. “No one,” she said finally.
“No one? No one was looking for you and had Kristina call up for you?”

She rolled her eyes. “No,” she said, faking an exasperated sigh. “I’m sure he’s someone. He just had the wrong girl.”

Eddie let it go at that and Darcy couldn't help but feel relieved. The more she could focus on the case at hand, the less likely it was that her thoughts would wander back to Steve Rogers and the inconvenient way her stomach had flipped when he smiled at her.
Darcy was starting to get anxious. There had been four bodies in two weeks and since then, nothing. Not a hint or taunt or even a whisper that there might be more, or that there had been a purpose to the killer’s madness. For three weeks, Darcy had been undercover, rounding up johns and keeping her head down, waiting to grab a hold of something her friends in homicide had missed.

But there had been nothing. Nothing but blisters on her heels and thongs that rode up her ass and too many mornings waking up and washing off raccoon eyes from too much makeup the night before. The late nights were starting to get to her.

“You look like hell, Dee,” Ginger said offering her a bite of the slice of pizza she’d been picking at for the last ten minutes. Darcy passed, but Kitty took a bite before she grinned in Darcy’s direction.

“You been working too hard, honey,” she joked in her thick Puerto Rican accent. “You could be charging more,” she added, more seriously with a nod to Darcy’s chest. “You’ve got the tits for it.”

Darcy laughed. “Of course they are.” Ginger said with a careless shrug. “I’m a classy motherfucker, Ginge.” She waited for them to laugh before she shook her head as an idea occurred to her. “No, it’s my sister—she’s had me up late on the phone every night this week.”

Kitty’s dark eyes narrowed. “Something wrong?”

She shrugged again. “She’s worried about me…worried I’m going to end up like those girls they found a couple weeks ago?”
“The ones all scratched up?” Kitty clarified.

Darcy nodded. “She’s just…y’know, she’s just being a sister, I guess. I mean, it’s pretty freaky shit though, y’know?”

Ginger spit at the ground. “Fuckin’ woman hater,” she said with a shake of her head. “Probably some religious prick who thinks he’s doing God’s work or some shit.”

She tilted her head to one side, willing herself not to look so interested. “What do you mean?”

“You see that shit all the time,” Ginger said with a shrug. “Juiced up on Jesus, thinking that less whores mean more room in heaven or whatever.” She rolled her eyes. “If it ain’t one thing it’s another.”

Kitty nodded in solidarity and lit a cigarette. “Is always something around here, you know?” She studied Darcy for a moment, looking concerned. “You not thinking about leaving us, are you Dee?”

“Nah,” Darcy waved the suggestion away. “Can’t say it doesn’t freak me out a little though, y’know. I mean, my sister just likes to worry…but I’m not going anywhere.” She shoved back her hair and looked between Ginger and Kitty. “You guys aren’t even a little scared, being out here with someone like that running around?”

Ginger kissed her teeth and took a hit off Kitty’s cigarette. “I ain’t closing my shop for nobody,” she added on her exhale before she gave Darcy a toothy grin. “You tell your sister you’re safe with us, baby. We won’t let nobody scratch you up unless you’re into that shit.”

“That’s right girl,” Kitty punched her shoulder playfully and headed off in the direction of a Buick slowing down a little ways down the block. “We look out for each other out here.”

Darcy watched her get into the car and smiled to herself, more resolved than ever to catch the man responsible for killing these women.

Lieutenant Driscoll’s gray eyes slid from Darcy to Sergeant Nowicki and back again. “What do you think, Charlie?” he asked finally, after he’d digested what Darcy had offered him.

Nowicki shrugged. “I think it’s an angle we haven’t had time to look into,” he said finally, with a small smile in Darcy’s direction.

She willed herself not to beam with pride. The cross-reference she’d done with national unsolved murders and clawed victims had only brought up the most recent crimes and animal attacks; but once she’d added in religious significance, a whole new list of unsolveds had appeared and among them, three murders that had been committed within one block of a Russian Orthodox church in DC. Three more prostitutes that had been carved and dumped in the Potomac river.

“These are from just over a year ago,” she spoke up, moving closer to Driscoll’s desk and opening the first file she’d pulled. “And it just looked like…” she unearthed a grim crime scene photo, “There are similar markings on this victim here,” she said, pointing to the carving that began between the victim’s shoulders. “But they look…deeper, I guess. Messier.”
“Like he was experimenting,” Nowicki mused, nodding his head.

“I actually thought it seemed like he was angrier here,” Darcy said, looking up. “Like maybe there was a personal connection? I think this woman—this…” she flipped to the next page, “Natalia Rusakov?” She shrugged. “I think he knew her and whatever made him kill her and carve her up…” she moved her shoulders again. “That’s what started this spree. And he got less angry and turned it into a signature over the next few girls…but he’s still targeting the same kind of women.” She closed the case file and looked between her commanding officers. “I’d start by looking into that first victim again…” she pursed her lips. “If it were my case.”

Driscoll processed this with another long, slow nod, his closed fist held under his nose in thought. “Well, Lewis, it looks like you really did your homework on this one,” he said finally.

Darcy’s heart soared. “Thank you, sir. I just want to help.”

“I’m keeping you in Vice for now,” he said, not looking up to see her disappointed expression. “But I want you to keep an ear out while you’re talking to your hookers. If anything comes of this lead, we’ll talk about transferring you to homicide.”

It was all she could do not to dance out of his office.

***

All told, it was shaping up to be a pretty run-of-the-mill Tuesday for Steve. He was up at dawn, had finished his run and his workout by six-thirty, checked in and coordinated some new direction for Sam and the team who was looking for Bucky, and had made it to the morning briefing on time, bagels in hand.

He’d even sprung for lox because, what the hell. It had been almost a month since his last disastrous encounter with Officer Lewis, no one had tried to end the world recently or open a wormhole that would destroy the human race. Everything was just kind of settling into a routine that almost felt like normalcy.

And then, a little after one in the afternoon, a pawn shop in Gravesend exploded with the help of a stolen Chitauri weapon.

There was panic to calm and civilians to move out of harm’s way, but generally speaking, it was pretty tame. The man responsible wasn’t much more than a kid who claimed he didn’t know what he was dealing with.

“Cap, anyone injured on your side?” Stark’s voice was in his ear as Steve finished escorting a woman clutching her toddler to the police perimeter.

He did a quick visual sweep. The weapon had been confiscated, the pawn shop employee was in handcuffs and there didn’t appear to be much left to do but clean up. “I’ll check the rest of the building,” he said with a look in the nearest officer’s direction. The cop nodded and gave him a grateful smile. “But I think we’re probably okay to pack it up.”

Only the ground floor of the building had been effected by the explosion—the windows blown out and the walls scorched from the blue, unearthly flames. Steve moved quickly through the rubble, about to head up the stairs when he noticed it. A small door that was almost completely
obscured under a pile of felled store racks. It was in the very back, tucked away from the rest of the store and he would have missed it entirely if not for racks shifting and falling against the door as he moved past them.

He had a sinking feeling in his stomach as he moved the twisted pieces of metal and plastic out of the way. With a glance up, he saw that this alcove had been hidden before the blast by a burnt curtain that had been pulled down by the falling debris. Steve debated calling for backup for only a moment before he raised his foot and kicked in the door.

Whatever he’d been expecting, it wasn’t this.

The room was tiny—no more than a large closet—and with space for only a twin sized, steel frame bed and a bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. The woman chained to the stained mattress was only in her underwear, her mouth stuffed with fabric and taped over, and her eyes black with the makeup that had been cried off, staining her pale cheeks with thick, black lines.

She started screaming as soon as she saw him, thrashing and pulling on her restraints, spurring Steve into action. “It’s okay,” he assured her, crossing to the bed in two quick strides. “It’s okay, you’re okay now.” He tapped his earpiece once before he cracked through the chain around her left foot with the edge of his shield. “Guys?” He narrowly avoided getting kicked in the teeth by her wild limbs. “We’re going to need a medic.”

They had to sedate her in the ambulance. It was twenty-four hours before she was awake and lucid enough to talk to anyone. By then they’d discovered that her name was Alexandra Cohen, she was eighteen and lived in Manhattan Beach. The nurses had washed off her makeup and shampooed her hair. She looked much younger in her hospital gown that was too big for her. Her thin arms crossed protectively over her chest. But she gave him a faint smile when he knocked on the door to her room.

“It’s okay,” she said quietly, fiddling with the end of her long, blonde braid. “You can come in.”

Steve gave her a smile in return. “I don’t want to bother you,” he said, ducking the rest of the way into the room. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.” He offered her the potted gerbera daisy he’d just purchased from the gift shop. “And bring you this.”

Her face brightened instantly as he set the gift on her side table. “Thank you,” she said, sounding genuinely touched in a way that almost broke his heart. He didn’t want to think about how long it had been since someone was nice to this little girl. “I’m sorry, by the way,” she said, her voice still hoarse and stuck in her throat. “I think I almost kicked you in the face.”

Steve smiled and nodded. “You did,” he assured her. “But don’t worry—I’ve survived worse.”

She opened her mouth to respond, but was interrupted by another knock at the door. One of the nurses in her pale purple scrubs popped her head inside the room. “The police are here, honey,” she said with an apologetic smile. “They just need to get a statement from you. Okay if I send them in?”

Alexandra looked nervously at Steve. “I guess I should get this over with, huh?”

He gave her a nod. “Yeah, that’s probably a good idea.”
She glanced back at the nurse. “You can send them in.”

He was still looking at Alexandra when the officers entered the room, studying the track marks on the inside of her arms, the red welts on her bony wrists. He barely noticed the two people who had joined them.

“Alexandra, I’m Darcy,” a familiar voice cut through his musings on the victim like an ice cube down the back of his shirt. His head shot up and turned toward the door where Darcy stopped, dead in her tracks, her eyes wide as they met his. She recovered faster than he did and turned her attention back to the girl in the hospital bed. “I, uh, I’m a police officer,” she said, walking past him to shake her victim’s hand. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

The man who’d come with her didn’t seem to notice any tension between them as he muttered an excuse me on his way to the other side of Alexandra’s bed.

“This is Sergeant Nowicki,” Darcy continued, her voice warm and nonthreatening. “We were hoping you’d be alright with answering a few questions for us?”

Alexandra’s large brown eyes found Steve’s for just a moment. “Can he stay?” she asked, her voice small and nervous.

Darcy looked back at him for only a second before she glanced at her sergeant, who shrugged. “Sure,” she gave a shrug that was almost careless. Almost. “We’ll only be a few minutes, okay?”

“You can call me Alex,” she said, looking just a little more relaxed. “And I don’t know how much help I’m going to be. He kept me knocked out, most of the time.”

“Whatever you can give us,” Darcy said encouragingly. “What’s the last thing you remember, before that room?”

“I was working…” Alex said, her brow furrowed in concentration. “I don’t know…I think it was Thursday night? Regular night, regular guys. I was walking home and someone grabbed me from behind.” She frowned. “I woke up a couple times, I guess, but I felt loaded. I don’t know what he was giving me but it was good shit,” she glanced up at Steve with a blush. “Sorry,” she said. “Good stuff.”

He gave a little chuckle. “Your language isn’t going to bother me, ma’am.”

“Did he keep you blindfolded?” Darcy asked, after another glance over her shoulder in his direction. “Or were you ever able to see who he was?”

“Sometimes I was blindfolded,” she said, drawing her eyes back down to her hands. Her fingers twisted together in her lap. “But sometimes…I don’t know. I could hear him talking sometimes—but it was a language I didn’t understand. Maybe Russian?” she frowned. “Or Polish—I don’t know. They kind of sound the same.” She shook her head. “Everything’s so fuzzy…I can’t…”

“It’s okay,” Nowicki broke in, his voice calm and steadying like Darcy’s. “It’s okay. The doctors are running a tox screen on you right now so we can find out what kind of tranquilizer was used to keep you out. That’ll give us a place to start.”

Alex put a hand to her forehead and squeezed her eyes shut. “The things I’m remembering don’t make any sense,” she admitted. “I remember being on my stomach and something on my back.” She looked up, her face twisted in confusion. “It felt cold—but like
fingers. Like a metal hand? Does that make any sense?"

Steve didn’t hear what Darcy or Nowicki said next.

He felt the breath sweep out of his lungs in one, swift punch to the gut.

He couldn’t hear anything over the pounding of his heart, the blood rushing in his ears as he managed to get himself outside. He didn’t even remember if he said goodbye to Alex or even excused himself.

He took a few gulps of fresh air, his mind spinning until his thoughts converged on only one thing.

Bucky.
Four

Chapter Summary

Assignments given, hands shaken, let’s get to work.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Her feet slammed unceremoniously against the treadmill belt, her heavy breathing was almost drowned out by the hum of the machine, and her eyes were almost entirely trained on the trashy daytime talk show that was muted on the mounted television in the corner.

Almost.

“What’s Captain America doing here?” Eddie asked, breaking her concentration.

Darcy almost lost her footing and nearly tumbled off the treadmill. “What?”

Eddie gave her a look and pointed upward to the window into Captain Morrison’s office, where Steve had been standing for the last twenty minutes.

Not that she’d noticed or had been keeping track or anything.

“How should I know?” she asked, shutting off the treadmill and grabbing her towel. Beside her, Eddie did the same and followed her over to the water fountain.

He gave her a confused look. “I figured since you both came from the hospital…” he said, bending to get a drink. “And were visiting the same victim…” he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Call me crazy, but I thought you might know something about why he’s here.”

“Well, I don’t.” Darcy said shortly, stretching her arms over her head and tugging on her elbows, trying to pop her shoulders. “I would assume he’s giving our Captain a rousing speech about honor, truth, and the price of freedom.”

Eddie smiled up at the window. “Yeah,” he said with the shining eyes of a little boy. “Probably.”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Your fanboy is showing,” she commented.

“Don’t even care,” Eddie responded without missing a beat. “You can take away a lot of things, but nothing will ever make me stop loving Captain America.”

“That’s good to know,” she bent and sipped at the water fountain. When she straightened up, her eyes fell to the shelves of boxing gear. “Can I punch you for a while? I’m feeling restless.”

It was Eddie’s turn to roll his eyes, but he followed her over to the corner without argument. He let her practice her jabs and uppercuts against the focus mitts for a few minutes before he started coaching her. “You’re dropping your left shoulder again.”
“No I’m not,” she argued before she could even think about it.

“Yes, you are. I can tell what you’re going to do before you do it.”

“Just let me do this,” she grumbled, trying not to let her eyes wander back to Morrison’s office window.

“Fine,” he shrugged. “But when you can’t land a decent hit because your attacker sees everything coming, don’t come crying to me.”

“I never do,” she assured him with a huff.

They were quiet for a few moments, her fists smacking against the mitts in a rhythm she was trying to switch up.

“So speaking of the hospital…”

“What about it?”

“You said it was weird,” he reminded her.

“It was,” she jabbed his right hand twice and swung her arm into an uppercut. “I don’t know what set him off but he faked out. The victim was in the middle of giving us a statement and he just bolted for the door. Didn’t say anything.”

Eddie dropped his hands and tilted his head to one side. “Bolted like…like guilty bolted? Or bolted like, oh shit I’m late to save the world bolted?”

Darcy’s swiped at her sweaty brow and frowned. “I don’t have a lot of experience with the second kind,” she admitted. “All I know is that he was gone.”

“And you didn’t chase after him?” Eddie asked, looking disappointed.

“I stayed and finished up with the victim,” she said as he raised his mitts again. “Nowicki went out to see if he was okay, but he’d peaced out by then.”

“And now he’s here,” he glanced back up at the window.


She jabbed a few more times while the words hung in the air between them.

"So Men In Black was on last night,” Eddie mercifully changed the topic, moving his hands subltly in an attempt to keep her on her toes.

“Which one?”

“All three, but I’m talking about the first one.”

“Why didn’t you text me?” Darcy asked, not taking her eyes off her intended targets.

“I figured you were working,” he shrugged. “Anyway, you know at the beginning? When Will Smith goes, ‘NYPD—means I will—’”

“It occurred to me, while I was watching it, that like, 97% of the time I say NYPD, I want to follow it up with that line.”

She laughed, despite the breath she was struggling to keep and considered it for a minute. “I wouldn’t say 97%, but probably 75-80% of the time I have to stop myself from saying it too.”

Eddie grinned and opened his mouth to respond.

“Lewis!”

They stopped their grinning at the sound of Captain Morrison’s voice, barking her name from the doorway. Darcy dropped her fists and stood up straighter, pushing her hair away from her sweaty brow. “Yes, sir?”

“Clean up and meet me in my office in ten minutes.”

“Yes sir,” she echoed with an assertive nod. She waited until he had left before she turned to Eddie with a grimace. “Think I’m in trouble?”

Her best friend shrugged. “Probably.” She slug his arm hard and he grinned again. “I actually knew you were going to do that,” he swatted her left side. “Quit dropping that shoulder.”

The captain’s office was neat and smelled like furniture polish. He had his accomplishments and awards—city, state, and national—lining the walls and his bookcases and a large desk, behind which he was waiting when Darcy knocked on the door.

Her hair was still wet and pulled into a tight bun at the nape of her neck. A little too tight, actually. She felt like her eyes were being pulled back into a permanent look of shock.

Or.

It could have been a genuine reaction to the news that her boss dropped on her as soon as she walked in the door.

“Come again?” she blinked, feeling her brow furrow.

“I’m putting you on the Carver case,” he repeated with the same gruff tone he always used. “I want you to work with Captain Rogers on the lead he just gave us.”

“Captain Rogers?” she repeated slowly. “As in…”

“As in Captain Steven Rogers of the United States Army, Lewis. Is this going to be a problem?”

“I thought I was working on the religious angle,” she said, trying a different approach. “I mean…as much as I can be from vice.” She cleared her throat. “That’s what Driscoll and Nowicki told me last week.”

“I’ve already informed them of the change.”

She pursed her lips. “With all due respect, what business does Captain America have assisting a police investigation? Doesn’t he have a full time job avenging and saving kittens in trees or something?”
“For one thing, he’s got intel, he’s got resources we couldn’t dream of, and he’s offering us unlimited access to both. He’s got plenty of business.”

Darcy resisted the urge to roll her eyes at the idea that her commanding officer just might be a Captain America fanboy too. She sighed. “But sir—”

“But nothing, Lewis,” he cut her off. “This is the real world—sometimes you work with people you don’t like. But sometimes it pays off.” Her ears perked up as he continued. “If this pans out with Rogers, we’ll talk about moving you to homicide. Understood?”

She blinked. “Uh, yes sir.” She coughed again as a very important clarification occurred to her. “Just one more thing, sir.”

“What?”

“There’s no…” she bit her lip before she tried again. “I know he’s a captain…but that’s just in the army, right? I mean, I’m still reporting to you, right?”

There was a ghost of a smile in the corner of Morrison’s mouth. “He’s assisting in a civilian capacity, Lewis,” he shook his head. “You’re to show him the courtesy and respect he deserves…but if you’re asking if you have to salute him…”

“I am, yeah.”

There was a fondness to the way he rolled his eyes. “No. You don’t have to salute him.”

“Great!” she said, a little too enthusiastically.

Morrison raised his thick eyebrows. “So we’re good here? You understand what I’m asking?”

“Yes sir,” she said with a definitive nod.

“Good,” he pushed a file across his desk in her direction. “You leave for DC in the morning. Kristina made all the arrangements for you.”

She grabbed the file and flipped it open, narrowing her eyes at the first page. “We’re driving?” she asked, studying the impound release form. “That’s like a six hour drive.”

“It’s four and half on the turnpike—save your receipts.”

She willed her sigh into something a little less dramatic by the time it escaped her lips. “Anything else, sir?”

“Everything you need’s in there,” he pointed to the folder in her hand. “Any questions can go to Nowicki or Driscoll.”

He didn’t say she was dismissed, but she was definitely dismissed. Darcy closed Morrison’s door behind her and dropped her head backward against it. She forced herself to examine the positives of what had just happened. She was working a homicide case. She was being trusted to work with a high-profile civilian consultant. And there was the promise of a transfer in her future.

Darcy almost smiled as she pushed herself away from the door and opened the folder again, looking for Captain America’s contact information. That star-spangled puppy dog was her
ticket into homicide.

***

Steve hadn’t gotten very far when Darcy caught up to him. He’d made it as far as the lobby before two rookies and a seasoned beat cop asked for his autograph. The oldest of the three at least had the decency to pretend it was for his kid.

He’d almost reached the door when he heard his name—well, no, Captain was not his name—and he turned around, surprised to see Officer Lewis tearing through the lobby to reach him. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was down in frizzy curls that were halfway between wet and dry. He stopped and waited for her to reach him. She had that look in her eye again—that look that was somewhere between determination and intimidation. He had a sinking suspicion that she wanted to yell at him about something. He put his hands up before she could open her mouth. “I’m just leaving, ma’am. I only came to talk to the captain and now I’m leaving.”

Her brow furrowed. “Why are you leaving? We have to figure out our plan for tomorrow.”

He mirrored her confused expression. “…We have a plan for tomorrow?”

She turned her head to give him a sideways glance. “For DC?”

“You’re going to DC too?”

“Yes,” she said as if it were obvious. “With you.”

“Wait—with me?”

Her eyes narrowed. “What did Captain Morrison say to you before you left?”

“That he appreciated my input and he’d put me in contact with the officer I’d be working with.” Steve watched as her eyes rolled back in her head and she looked thoroughly annoyed. “Which is apparently not the answer you were looking for.”

“So you didn’t ask to work with me?”

He frowned. “Why would I ask to work with you? You don’t even like me.”

Darcy opened her mouth for an immediate response and then closed it again. She pursed her lips. “I don’t…” she stopped herself. “That’s not…” She tried a third time. “Look, I guess I’m the officer you’re working with,” she said, holding up the file folder in her hand. “The captain wants us to head out for DC tomorrow morning and follow a lead I dug up last week.” She looked up at him through a thick fan of dark eyelashes. “Does that work for you?”

“Oh—yeah. Sure,” he heard himself stammer out before he could even think about it. There wasn’t much to think about. He didn’t report to anybody; he didn’t have to check with anyone. The only question was did he want to add Darcy Lewis and the rest of the police force to the team of people who were helping him find Bucky?

And that answer was simple.
Yes. Yes, he did.

Because she might have been witness to one of the more humiliating moments of his adult life, but he could tell right away she was a good cop. And more importantly, a good person. The kind of person he wanted to work with.

“Good,” Darcy gave a nod and stuck out a hand. “Then I’m sure it’ll be nice working with you, Captain.”

“You can call me Steve.”

“Okay then,” she said with that tone that he could tell was trying too hard to be professional. He found himself wondering what the captain had told her about working with him. “Steve,” she echoed, trying it out. “You can call me Darcy.”

They shook hands.

“Okay, Darcy,” he said with what he hoped was a friendly smile. “Let’s get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't own Men in Black or Will Smith but they both make the world a better place. So go watch them.
Chapter Summary

"You don't pick your parents and you don't pick your partner..." It's time for a roadtrip.

The early Manhattan sun was bright and orange and shining directly into Darcy’s eyes as she pulled into the underbelly of the Avengers tower. She got out of the car and flashed her badge to the security guard on his approach. "Officer Darcy Lewis," she said around a yawn. "I'm here for —" she stopped as Steve appeared in the doorway of the stairwell. "Him, actually," she said, blinking in surprise.

"Morning," he greeted cordially, his leather valise and blue jacket in one hand, his trademark shield in the other.

Darcy raised a hand. "Morning." She bent and unlocked the door for him, motioning for him to toss his things in with hers on the back seat. She eyed the shield suspiciously. "That's coming too, huh?"

He grinned. "Never leave home without her." He did and stopped to take a look at the car, a small smile still tugging at the corner of his lips. "So this is our car, huh?"

She rolled her eyes around a smile of her own. The vehicle released to her that morning was not cool. A forest green Subaru hatchback with a missing hubcap and three bullet holes in the driver’s side. The back windshield wiper didn’t work and, as far as she could tell, neither did the air conditioner.

Darcy shrugged. "Of all the cars in impound, apparently she was the winner today."

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Darcy shrugged. "Of all the cars in impound, apparently she was the winner today."

Steve grinned in earnest and gave the roof an appreciative rub of his palm. "Hey, it’s what’s on the inside that counts," he said, looking like he was talking to the car itself.

Her phone rang from her back pocket before she could comment. "Lewis," she answered without checking the screen.

"Hey, have you left yet?" Jane asked, sounding far too awake and perky for this hour.

Darcy’s brow furrowed. "Uh, no," she glanced across the roof of the car at Steve. "We’re still in the parking lot."

"Okay, don’t leave yet. We’ll be right down."

She frowned in confusion and stared at her phone after the call ended.

"Something wrong?" Steve asked, pausing with the door halfway open.

"We just have to hang on a second," she said, shaking her head and pocketing her phone again. "Apparently Jane needs to..." she trailed off as the elevator doors chimed open and Jane—still in her fuzzy slippers and bathrobe—and Thor—dressed for battle and carrying a Coleman cooler—arrived on the scene.
Steve looked over his shoulder and appeared to be fighting a grin. “Are they coming too?”

“No,” Jane answered quickly as they approached the car. “We just haven’t seen Darcy in a while so we wanted to come down and wish you good luck in Washington.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and came around to the passenger side of the car, allowing herself to be hugged by her former boss. “See, this is why I don’t tell you things,” she reminded, the words directed into Jane’s messy ponytail.

“Why?” she looked hurt as she pulled away.

“Because you show up like Mom and Pop Rogers, sending their baby boy off to summer camp,” she said, looking between Jane and Thor, who only smiled. She sighed. “What’s in the cooler, big guy?”

“Though Jane is correct, and we have missed your wit and your heart around the tower,” he presented the small cooler to her. “I came to offer you a gift of sustenance for your journey ahead.”

Darcy’s eyes moved from the chest in his hands to his face. “You packed us snacks?”

He smiled. “It’s tradition to send warriors off into battle with food and drink to sustain them for their endeavors. Jane was most helpful in the selection.”

She couldn’t help but mirror his grin. “Just kidding,” she said to Jane as Steve took the cooler with a shake of his head and slid it into the backseat between their bags. “This is why I’m always going to tell you everything ever.” She gave them both a hug and yanked Thor down to eye-level to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Thanks guys.”

“Yes, thank you,” Steve offered them both a handshake. “That’s very sweet.”

“But we’ve gotta get going,” Darcy looked at her watch. “We have about fifteen minutes before traffic gets sticky.” She dropped into the driver’s seat and watched as Steve slid in next to her.

It was only a moment before Thor’s head appeared in the open passenger side window and his mighty hand clamped down up Steve’s shoulder. “I also wanted to remind you that Darcy is very precious to Jane and to me,” he said, his voice low enough that Jane wouldn’t hear him.

“Thor…” Darcy warned, giving him the eye.

“And though she is a fierce and capable warrior,” he continued with a quick smile in her direction, “know that should any harm befall her—though you and I have fought many times together—I will not hesitate to remove your spine.” Steve grimaced as Thor tightened his grip on his shoulder for a moment before letting go.

“Understood,” Steve said with a nod.

Thor smiled again. “Drive safely,” he said and gave the car a fatherly tap.

They pulled out of the parking garage and into the pre-rush of early morning traffic in moderately uncomfortable silence. Her cheeks were still burning when she spoke. “That was mortifying.”

Steve smiled. “Nah, he’s just looking out for you.” He glanced over his shoulder and into
the backseat. “Pretty swell of him to pack us road snacks, though.”

Darcy grinned, her embarrassment tamped down. “Helluva guy, that Thor. No wonder he was almost a king.”

***

They were out of the city before the gridlock hit; coffees in cup-holders and mutually agreed upon music on the stereo. They talked about the case—the unpleasant way ‘Brooklyn Carver’ sounded when the media said it, the plan for DC, their itinerary for their time there, and who might be able to help them once they arrived.

And that was all before they reached New Jersey.

After that, an impressively uncomfortable silence settled between them, leaving Darcy with almost three and a half hours to think about just one thing.

It was somewhere near the New Brunswick exit that Steve finally spoke up. “We should probably just get it out of the way,” he said, studying the map he’d found in the glove box a little too closely.

She jerked the wheel instinctively, righting her alignment before he could comment. “Get what out of the way?”

He looked over and gave her a look that was so Captain America she was convinced he must have practiced in the mirror. “This car isn’t big enough for you, me, and this giant elephant, Darcy.”

She sighed and refused to look over at him. “If you’re trying to get me to say that I’m thinking about that time I almost arrested you for soliciting a prostitute, then yes. That’s exactly what I’m thinking about.”

“Good,” he said. “That’s what I’m thinking about too.”

“And I’m also concerned that us working together might be weird because of that exact thing and because I made you put your hand under my dress and that’s pretty personal for two people who don’t know each other.”

When she finally glanced over at him, he was nodding thoughtfully. “I’d agree.”

“But here’s the thing,” the more she spoke, the more the words seemed to be lining up to fall off her tongue. “I respect what you do and I appreciate that you’re willing to help us catch a killer and all that other stuff aside, I’m sure you’re a decent person.”

“Thanks…”

“No, really,” she said, glancing in his direction again. “Look, shit happens to everyone and it’s none of my business why you were at that hotel that night. The point is, we’ve got a job to do, right?”

“Absolutely.”
“And since you don’t pick your parents and you don’t pick your partner, there’s really no point in us letting any weirdness get between us and the job. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather just pretend I met you this morning and forget everything else.”

He looked surprised for a moment before he answered. “Yeah, that’s alright by me.”

“Good,” she said with a bob of her head. “Then it’s nice to meet you,” she tossed her hand over to his side of the car. “I’m Darcy Lewis.”

Steve looked at her hand and smiled. “Hi, Darcy,” they shook hands for the second time in two days. “I’m Steve. I’m looking forward to working with you.”

She gave him a real smile that time as the knot of tension relaxed from her stomach. “Likewise. So tell me, Steve,” she began conversationally. “How do you feel about cracking open that cooler and giving me an inventory of what Thor packed us for this road trip?”

“I feel pretty good about it.”

They were halfway through a bag of cheese-and-cracker Combos when Steve glanced over and smiled. “And just so we’re clear, I’m pretty sure I wasn’t the one Mom and Pop were sending off to summer camp.”

Darcy felt another blush rise to her cheeks. “Shut up, Rogers. Eat your Combos.”

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The motel they checked into was a two-and-a-half star place off the highway. Not the greatest, but it did have free wifi and mini-fridges in each room, so they divided what remained of Thor’s cooler and retired to their adjoining rooms to unpack.

At a half past one there was a knock on Darcy’s door. She pulled it open, expecting to find Steve, surprised to see a pair of DCPD uniforms on the other side, each carrying a familiar brown evidence box. She raised her eyebrows. “What can I do for you boys?”

“Are you Officer Darcy Lewis, NYPD?” the younger of the two asked, looking down at the requisition form stapled to the top of the box.

“That’s me.”

“Our LT sent these over for you—he said if you have any questions to give him a call.” They shuffled the boxes into her custody with little ceremony. She filled out their required forms and they were on their way after a moment. Darcy set the boxes on the bed she wasn’t using and knocked on the door that connected her room to Steve’s.

He opened it after the second knock. “What’s up?”

“We’ve got evidence to look through if you’re interested,” she motioned with her thumb over her shoulder. “DCPD sent it over. I was going to order a pizza.”

He smiled. “Pizza sounds good.”

One extra-large, extra-cheese and sausage pizza later, they had separated all of the
evidence into manageable piles and started where Darcy’s instincts had initially led her.

“Natalia Rusakov,” she read aloud, taking a bite of her remaining pizza crust. “Twenty-four, Russian immigrant, picked up twice for prostitution before she met her untimely end in…” she squinted at the date stamp at the top of the crime scene photographs. “April of last year.” She glanced up and waited for some kind of reaction from her companion. “Any of that sound useful to you?”

Steve blinked and looked up from the initial report he was flipping through. He looked thoughtful for a moment. “Just her name, I guess. It sounds like…” he shrugged. “I mean, it’s only a few letters difference from Romanov.”

“And right around the time you dropped those giant jet things into the Potomac…”

“Helicarriers,” he said, turning his eyes back to the report in his hands.

“Right,” she said with a nod. “Helicarriers. Anyway… would there be any reason to tie…” she stopped for a second and pursed her lips. “Just so I know going forward—are we calling him the Winter Soldier or are we calling him—”

“Bucky,” Steve said with a little more bite than she was used to hearing. “Or James.”

She nodded again and swallowed. “Bucky,” she said carefully. “Is there any reason to tie Bucky to someone who might remind him of Romanov?”

Steve was quiet again and rubbed a hand over his chin. “She doesn’t talk about…” his frown deepened. “About anything she did before she met Barton. I think…I don’t know, the way she talked about him last year… the way he went after her…” he shook his head. “It wouldn’t surprise me if there was a connection she didn’t tell me about.”

Darcy pursed her lips again and took a cautious step in the direction her gut was pointing. “Do you think it’s possible he was projecting onto this girl?” She turned from the crime scene photos to Natalia’s mugshots from years past. “She is a redhead,” she mused. “And smaller…”

“I don’t know,” Steve said shortly. “There’s nothing that even says that this girl knew Bucky.”

“You’re right,” she agreed with a sigh. “I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s keep digging.”

At the first mention of Bucky, the playful, comfortable banter they’d had in the car vanished. Darcy found herself missing it.

Izolda Rusakov was a few years older than her sister, a little chubbier and with dark brown hair that suggested Natalia’s was a bottle job. She looked confused when Darcy showed her her badge and asked for a few minutes of her time the next morning.

“I don’t understand,” she said in her thick accent as she welcomed them inside her small apartment. “Police say no new leads—there’s no more…” she paused for a moment, searching for the right words, “trail to follow.”

Darcy pursed her lips. “Your sister’s case was never officially declared a cold case,” she began delicately, taking a seat on the faded plaid couch where Izolda had motioned for them to sit. “We’re chasing a bit of a long shot that what happened to Natalia might have something to do with a
Izolda’s face folded in confusion for a moment. “So there might be chance?” she asked, raising her eyebrows. “Might be chance you find who killed my sister?”

“There might be,” Steve interjected with a kind smile. “We were hoping you could give us some more information about her.”

By the end of the afternoon, Darcy had six new pages of notes in her notebook, a list of Natalia’s friends and fellow hookers, and a thick, leather journal, fat with use.

“You take this,” Izolda had said, pushing it into her hands as they were getting ready to leave. “May be useful to you. Help you…” she frowned again, choosing her words carefully, “get inside Talia’s head?”

Darcy had flipped through it quickly, disheartened to find it written entirely in Russian. “The police didn’t take this as evidence?”

Izolda shrugged. “Police say it takes too much time to translate,” she said with a thoughtful, hurt expression. “I think they don’t care about Talia. Don’t care what happened to her or who did it.”

Darcy’s heart sank a little more and she found herself putting a hand on Izolda’s shoulder. “I care about what happened to Natalia,” she said sincerely. “And I’ll make sure you get this back as soon as I’m finished with it.”

She waited until they were safely back in the car before she let out a heavy sigh and rubbed her eyes. “Good to know police indifference towards call girls isn’t just a New York thing.”

From the passenger seat, Steve frowned. “Not all police officers,” he said quietly.

Darcy glanced over and offered him a small, tight smile. “You don’t happen to speak Russian, do you?”

“Speak it?” he repeated. “Not exactly. I have been translating it for the last year though,” he shrugged. “Might not be the fastest in the world, but I’ll take a look.”

She turned the ignition and navigated them out of the cramped side street. She chose her next words carefully. “I know we’re after different things here, Steve,” she said with a thoughtful frown. “But there’s a chance that what’s in the diary could implicate Bucky in these murders.”

Steve was quiet for what felt like a long time. It wasn’t until they were almost to the station that he finally spoke. “I just want to find him,” he said, his jaw tight with concentration. “And I want to help you catch your killer.” He looked her way. “Even they turn out to be the same guy.”

As the silence lapsed back over the car, Darcy’s thoughts fell to Natalia’s diary and the look of worn grief on Izolda’s face. Steve’s words hung in the air between them.

Even if they turn out to be the same guy.
Six

Chapter Summary

Making headway with the help of the champagne of beers and a little Stark tech from home.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve’s eyes were beginning to cross and the throbbing in his head had been slowly growing worse over the last hour. Darcy was bent over Natalia’s diary, squinting between the book and her laptop screen while she painstakingly tried to match up what her internet translator was telling her. He watched her for a minute before she sat up and scrubbed at her eyes.

“This is a nightmare,” she groaned. “Is there any language on this planet of Earth that is more difficult to translate than Russian?”

“Mandarin Chinese,” Steve said before he could stop himself.

Darcy looked over and pursed her lips. “I knew you were going to say something like that,” she said. But he caught the hint of a tired smile trying to escape.

“Translate anything good lately?” he asked, setting aside the pages he’d been working on.

“Why did I think it was a good idea to start at the beginning of this poor girl’s diary?” Darcy moaned dramatically, dropping backward onto her bed, her hair fanning out across the ugly floral bedspread.

“You muttered something about it being a very good place to start,” Steve reminded. “Which—before you ask—is a reference I do understand.” He rubbed at his temples. “So nothing useful yet?”

“She’s a little long winded,” Darcy admitted, sitting back upright. “Right now, she’s talking about her brother, Gorya’s wedding and the best man who—if I’m reading this correctly—is a bartender at a place in their old neighborhood? I have no idea how that’s supposed to be helpful.” She wrinkled her nose and dropped one of the hotel business cards between the pages of the diary and set it carefully on her bedside table. “Any luck on your end?”

Steve shrugged. “This is from about six months before she was killed,” he said, holding up a handful of the copied pages they’d made that afternoon. “She’s talking about fighting with her sister, her new shoes, a group of new girls on the block where she normally works…” he shook his head. “Nothing to suggest anything fishy so far.”

Darcy rubbed at her face again and got to her feet, stretching her arms overhead. “I have to get out of this hotel room,” she said, sliding her feet into her shoes. She turned her attention toward him. “I’m going to get a drink,” she decided out loud. “Want to come?”

He swallowed hard and reminded himself that her invitation was nothing to get excited about. He was here assisting her in a professional capacity only and she was just throwing out a line
to be courteous. It didn’t matter that she was smart and funny or how delightfully chaotic he found her curly hair, they were just working together. And it certainly didn’t matter that the way she was throwing herself into tracking down these leads was downright inspiring and made him think of—

“Yo, Steve!” Darcy waved her hands. “Drink, yes or no?”

He blinked and got to his feet. “Yeah, sure,” he said with another swallow. “A drink sounds good.”

She drove their battered and beaten Subaru back to the neighborhood they’d visited that morning. He followed her into a dimly lit bar with sticky floors, strung with lights in the shape of chili peppers, complete with well-played pool table and tired jukebox in the corner. Darcy glanced up at him with expectant eyebrows. “You drink beer?” Steve nodded and watched her pull a twenty from her back pocket. “Good; I’ve got the first round.”

He found them a booth where he could keep an eye on the exits and watch Darcy toss her hair back and smile at the bartender while she waited for their drinks. He tried not to think anything about that smile at all—except that it was a nice one—and wait patiently for her to return to the table. When she did, she was tucking a slip of paper into the front pocket of her jeans and sliding a frosty bottle of Miller High Life in front of him.

“Drink up, soldier,” she said, slipping into the booth.

Steve twisted off his cap easily and held up his bottle. “Cheers.”

“To…”

“Natalia Rusakov?” he suggested.

Darcy clinked her bottle with his and nodded. “To Natalia and to Izolda—hopefully we can get her some answers.”

They drank in companionable silence for a few swigs before Darcy set her bottle down and gave him a hard stare. “Okay,” she said after clearing her throat. “Question time.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Okay.”

“When I picked you up and Thor came downstairs—not to see you, but to see me—”

“Yeah…”

“You didn’t even blink,” she assessed, studying him closely. “Like, not even a double take. What’s that about?”

He smiled. “I’ve just kind of accepted that I’m immune to coincidence,” he said with a shrug.

Darcy shook her head. “No way. City of nine million people and the person you end up —” she coughed and glanced away for a second, “y’know, working with—just happens to be buddies with your own personal God of Thunder? And that doesn’t even merit an eyebrow raise? C’mon, dude. Nobody’s that cool.”

He considered making a tasteless frozen-in-ice joke for a moment before he took another

Her blue eyes narrowed. “Go on.”

“I told Thor I was heading out of town for a few days and he saw your card in with all my things,” he smiled at the memory. “I was regaled for the next hour about the fierce comrade of Lady Jane’s who felled him with tiny lightning and has helped to save the world many times.”

Darcy almost choked on the beer she was swallowing. “Goddamn,” she muttered, looking impressed. “I guess I know who I’m getting to write my eulogy someday.”

Steve laughed. “He’s very fond of you.”

“And this coincidence,” she motioned to the air between the two of them. “Doesn’t strike you as even a little weird?”

He laughed again. “I think you’re underestimating my tolerance for weird.”

She grinned. “You’re telling me.”

“Alright,” he said, enjoying the easy going flow of conversation that had returned. “My turn to ask a question.”

“Shoot.”

“Why the police department?”

It was Darcy’s turn to raise her eyebrows. “Well, the initial plan was law school,” she admitted. “But then a god fell out of the sky and then a few years later his brother showed up with an alien army and tried to wipe out my favorite city in the world and then a few years after that, there was a hole in the universe and some freaky Lord of the Rings guys charged through it and I just thought—fuck it.”

He grinned. “Fuck it?”

Darcy shrugged. “I’m not a superhero—by any stretch of the imagination or definition of the word—but I can’t pretend I don’t know what’s out there anymore. I wanted to help people. I wanted to be in a position to make a difference when the shit goes down again—because I know that it will—and the police academy seemed like a good place to start.” She gave another modest shrug and pushed back her hair again. “Plus, Coulson owed me a letter of recommendation for stealing my ipod back in New Mexico. I was a shoe-in.”

Steve watched her take another swig from her bottle and felt his smile unwilling to fade. “That sounds like a pretty great reason for change of careers to me.”

“Yeah,” she moved her shoulder again. “It’s not bad. Plus, having your own badge and gun? Exactly as badass as it sounds.” She smiled. “But then who am I talking to—I’m sure the shield is not without its perks.”

“Nah, it’s really just like a big metal Frisbee. Nothing special.”

Darcy snorted once before she covered her mouth and nose. “That’s a lot less impressive when you put it like that.”

“Hey,” he stood up and reached for his wallet. “If you can’t be honest with your partner,
what’s the point, right?”

“Slow down, brother,” she said, holding up her bottle. “I’m not even close to done with the first round.”

“Who said anything about another round?” Steve asked, heading for the bar. “I’m hoping they’ve got fries.”

He’d turned back around by the time her reply, “Now you’re talkin’, Rogers,” reached him, making him smile as he placed their order.

“So what’s your favorite thing about living in the future?” she asked, an hour later as she watched him line up a shot at the pool table. They’d made their way through a few beers and two baskets of fries by the time she’d suggested a game of pool. Steve took his shot and scattered the pool balls, sinking one of the two stripes he had intended. When he looked up, Darcy—who, it turned out, could not play pool to save her life—looked impressed. “Nice,” she commented easily, leaning on her cue. “So fess up,” she said, tapping the stick on the ground. “What’s tickling your fancy these days?”

Steve smiled at her turn of phrase. “I like the music,” he said, straightening up.

“What music?”

“Um,” he felt shy for a moment under her curious gaze. “All of it, actually. There’s so much more to choose from, so many different ways to listen to it—” he glanced down at the table. “Before I...” he stopped and started again. “We used to scrape our money together and try to buy a new record every few months. I think Buck and I had maybe ten records between us.” He shook his head and held up his cell phone. “Now, I’ve got the entirety of recorded musical history in my pocket at all times.”

Darcy nodded as the corner of her lips lifted into a half smile. “So what you’re saying…” she started carefully, coming around the corner of the pool table while he bent in half again, poised to shoot. “Is that Captain America has listened to Justin Bieber.”

He let out a bark of a laugh and missed his next shot. “Y’know, a couple of his songs are kind of catchy…”

Darcy doubled over to rest her forehead on the smooth wood of the table. “Oh my God. Stop. If the boys back home knew you just said that—”

“It’d tarnish the image, I’m sure,” he said dryly, shaking his head. “Which is why I’m prepared to deny it—vehemently—if it ever comes up.”

“I mean, I say that,” she considered, standing up again. “But honestly, there’s nothing you could do to dull the sparkle Eddie gets in his eyes whenever your name comes up.”

Steve smiled. “Your buddy’s a fan?”

“Oh yeah,” Darcy said emphatically. She took another long gulp of her beer and surveyed the arrangement of balls on the table. “I mean, he’s completely straight and engaged,” she moved around to the opposite side and positioned tilted her head to one side. “But I’m pretty sure he’d—” she stopped herself and glanced in his direction, a faint pink blush staining her cheeks. “Y’know what? I’m not going to finish that sentence.”
Steve smiled. “No?”

“No,” she repeated. “And while we’re on the subject,” she held up her nearly empty bottle. “I think I’m cut off. I’m getting a little too talkative.” She made a lazy attempt to sink the red ball into the nearest corner. When she didn’t come close, she stood up and sighed.

“And your pocketing skills are actually getting worse,” he commented with a chuckle. “Which, after our first game, I’m not even sure how that’s possible.”

“Oh, is that how it is, Captain Sassafrass?” she asked, dropping her cue stick onto the table.

He grinned. “I think that might be how it is, Officer Lewis.”

She came back around to his side of the table and stood in front of him, hands on her hips. She was probably just a little too close, her eyes a little too bright, her expression daring him to do something stupid. She poked him in the chest and raised her chin defiantly. “Did they give you Super Sass along with your super speed and super attractiveness and super strength too?”

Steve felt the smile slip from his face. He could smell her shampoo from this distance and see the little blisters she wore into her lips when she bit them. “Super what?” he asked making sure he’d heard her right as he gave a hard swallow.

Darcy blinked and took a step back, relaxing her stance from flirtatiously confrontational to something more casual. “Y’know,” she cleared her throat. “Was the sass and the one-liners all part of the superhero package or do you just come by that honestly?”

He felt his heart slow back down, their moment of tension all but gone. “Oh, uh, that’s all me, I’m afraid. Never did know when to keep my mouth shut.”

She shoved her hair away from her face and gave him a tight smile. “Yeah, I know the feeling.”

A swift and almost painfully awkward silence befell them after that until Steve had shuffled his feet and avoided looking up for long enough. “So we should get going?”

“Yes,” Darcy answered almost immediately with a sound nod. “Let me just cash out.”

He followed her to the bar but hung back while the bartender who’d been openly staring at her chest all night ran her credit card. “Heading home?” he asked while she signed his copy of the slip.

“Sure am,” she nodded again and slid his pen back to him.

“By the way,” he reached behind the bar and produced another piece of paper—a list of names. “I thought of a few others who might’ve known Natalia,” he said, his mood taking a significant turn for the somber. “On top of the one I gave you earlier.”

Darcy smiled and folded the paper, tucking it carefully into the same pocket as the other. “Thank you,” she said sincerely. “That’s really helpful.”

“Hey,” he shrugged. “Anything to help the good guys.” He gave Steve a wary glance over Darcy’s shoulder and raised a hand. “Have a good night, man.”

Steve mirrored the gesture. “You too.”
Darcy slung her purse over her shoulder and tossed him the keys. She waited until they’d reached the door before she gave him a look. “What?”

“Was that the best man—the one you were talking about earlier?”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I took a chance that he might still work here and hey!” she held up the papers he’d given her. “It paid off. We have hookers to talk to.”

“What if he didn’t still work here?”

She shrugged. “Then we would have still had the champagne of beers to keep us company.” She watched while he gave a faint chuckle. “And you thought he gave me his number before, didn’t you?”

Steve opened his mouth and closed it again. “I…didn’t think anything.” He said, which wasn’t entirely a lie. “But it wouldn’t have been any of my business if he had.”

“Pfft!” Darcy rolled her eyes. “Please. He’s a bartender—their hands always smell like citrus.” She waited for Steve’s laugh before she continued. “Besides, who’s got time for that shit? I’m working.”

Any thought of that anxious, stomach-flipping he’d felt before was rightfully squashed back into its box as he slid into the driver’s side of the Subaru and adjusted the seat and all the mirrors. Darcy was right, he reminded himself.

They were working.

***

Darcy awoke to the sound of someone knocking on her hotel room door. She stumbled to her feet and shoved her glasses on her face, shuffling to the source of the noise. “Who is it?” she asked, wetting her lips and crossing her arms over her chest as an early morning chill prickled her skin.

“It’s Steve,” he said, making her wince. “I have coffee and—”

She threw open the door and ushered him inside without a second thought but to take the Starbucks cup her offered her. “Thank you,” she said between grateful gulps as the rest of the world began to return to focus.

He smiled at the floor and gave her a hopeful look. “I get the order right?”

“Yes,” she assured him, despite having only ordered it in front of him once. “Your memory is amazing.” She took another sip and pushed her glasses back from where they’d slipped down her nose. “So what’s up?”

“Oh, I uh,” he cleared his throat. “I had Stark overnight this,” he held up the cushioned mailer in his other hand. “It might help us translate Natalia’s diary.”

“Great,” she said brightly, now feeling fully awake and ready to get back to work. Steve, on the other hand, didn’t look quite so raring to go. He seemed intent on avoiding looking at her.
“Plug it in,” she said, motioning to the crowded desk in the corner. “Or, y’know, give it permission to spring to life, or whatever it is you do with it.”

“I will,” he said, finally looking up to meet her eyes. “I just figured you’d want to put on some pants first.”

Darcy felt her eyes widen as she glanced down at the oversized NWA t-shirt she’d fallen asleep in. No pants. No bra. She wrinkled her nose and let out a grievous sigh. “Come back in twenty minutes.”

Steve smothered a smile between his lips. “Take your time.”

She closed the door behind him and leaned her head against the fire escape plan. “Get your shit together, Lewis,” she muttered.

Twenty minutes was more than enough time for her to brush her teeth, find her pants and a bra and pull her hair back into something that resembled a bun before she knocked on the door that connected her room and his and welcomed him back in.

“No, it’s my fault,” he shook his head. “I didn’t realize what time it was when I was out getting coffee.”

“So, No-Pants-Darcy aside,” she motioned to the device that looked like an iPad with a pane of clear glass where the screen usually was. “What’s this new toy Stark sent you?”

Steve was studying the note that had accompanied the delivery. He took a minute to follow the instructions and turned it on. “I think…” he said, his brow furrowed in concentration, “all we have to do is…” he stopped and glanced up. “Can I see her diary?” Darcy handed it over from its place on her night stand and watched as Steve held the frame over the handwritten pages.

After a moment, the words began to shift and change, the letters turn from Russian to English until the whole page was translated in front of them.

“Holy shit!” Darcy exclaimed, unable to help herself. “That’s the coolest thing I’ve ever seen!”

Steve grinned. “Yeah,” he said with a nod. “Looks like Stark’s good for something after all.”

Darcy became addicted to the new tool in minutes, perusing page after page of Natalia’s diary, looking for something useful. The narrative was still overwritten and flowery and went into a lot of detail about things in which Darcy had no interest. She skipped most of the middle section after a few cursory glances over the translated pages.

The sun was beginning its afternoon descent toward the Potomac before she found something that made the hair on her arms stand up.

_I think I’ve got a crush on one of my regulars_, Natalia had written, three weeks before she was murdered. _He won’t give me a name, but he’s been to see me three times since last week. I like him, whoever he is. He speaks Russian but it doesn’t always come easily to him. I’ve asked him where he’s from, but he never talks about himself. There’s something different about him—something broken. I like that too. I like that he’s tarnished._
Whatever broke him must be something to do with his arm—I’ve never seen anything like it. All metal, all the way to his shoulder and all attached somehow. He won’t touch me with that hand and he won’t talk about that either.

But there’s something kind about him too—something gentle. Something that makes me wish I’d met him some other way, some other time; that I was in a position to ask him where all those shadows in his eyes came from. But I can’t say any of that to him. Because while he can be kind and gentle, I can tell he could be dangerous too.

Darcy stopped reading and swallowed hard. She hit a button on the side of the Stark pad and screen-capped what she’d just read, emailing a copy to herself.

Across the room, Steve looked up from witness reports he’d been perusing. “Everything okay?”

She took a deep inhale and stretched her arms over her head. “Uh, yeah,” she said, faking a yawn. “I’m just getting a headache from staring at everything through this screen.”

Steve wasn’t buying her lie, she could tell right away. Still, he nodded and set down the paperwork in his hands. “Want to switch?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I think I need a real break.” She leaned over to her night stand and retrieved the list of names from the night before. “Want to come with me and try to track down some of Natalia’s co-workers?”

“Sure,” he agreed easily. “I could use a change of scenery.”

It was almost five solid minutes of readjusting the driver’s seat before Darcy felt comfortable enough to pull out of the parking lot. “This car needs a name,” she said after a few moments on the freeway.

“She certainly is distinctive enough for a name,” Steve commented with a smile.

“What about Betty?”

He wrinkled his nose. “I’ve known too many Bettys who did not look like this car.”

“Janis?”

“Janis makes me think of a pick-up truck.”

Darcy was quiet for a minute, running her fingers lightly over the worn faux leather of the dashboard. “How about Marla?”

Steve considered this. “I kind of like Marla.”

“Yeah, it’s the name of someone who’s seen some shit,” she agreed with a nod.

“But when I think of Marla, I also think of someone who isn’t going to put up with any shit,” Steve added.

“Oh, definitely,” Darcy nodded. “Marla has seen some shit—as evidenced by her bullet holes—but will be having none of yours today.”
When Steve laughed, it was almost enough to make her forget what she’d read in the hotel room, and why she was avoiding telling him.

Marla got them to the seedier part of the Russian community. The opposite end of where they’d been the last few days. Darcy parked the car on the curb and surveyed the block the bartender had led them. There were a few groups of women, clustered in a way that might have been unassuming if they had been dressed differently. But as it was, there was no mistaking what they were doing.

No one in the first group knew Natalia, but a girl with stringy black hair and large, hooded gray eyes pointed them in the right direction, telling them to look for a girl named Destiny.

Darcy would have rolled her eyes if she wasn’t so used to such ridiculous names. Steve trailed after her, alternating between looking determined and uncomfortable. They approached another gaggle of women a half block from the first.

“Hey,” Darcy said on the approach. “Anyone know a girl named Destiny?”

There was a ripple of nervous chatter. “Who’s asking?” The nearest blonde asked, her green eyes darting between Darcy and Steve. “Cause I don’t think she does two at once,” she looked over her shoulder at her friends with a cheeky grin. “But if the price is right—”

“Natalia Rusakov,” she said, dropping into Officer Lewis mode and silencing the prattle. “Pretty girl, worked this block, murdered last April. I’m a friend of her sister’s and I’m looking for someone who might have known her.” She reached into her bra for her emergency fifty and held it up, trying to pretend she didn’t notice the way Steve’s eyebrows rose with a glance in her direction. “I’m not really feeling like fucking around right now, so whoever can tell us where Destiny is has one less blow job to give tonight.”

The bill was snatched out of her fingers almost before the words left her lips. “She’s over at Choice,” the closest brunette said, flicking her gaze across the street. “Said she needed smokes.”

They crossed the street at a brisk pace, Darcy taking two steps every time Steve took one. “By the way,” she muttered, “feel free to jump in with the intimidation any time you want.”

“If I thought you needed my help I would have,” he replied. “You’re kind of terrifying.”

Darcy smiled to herself as she pulled open the door of the convenience store. Destiny—whose real name was Diana—would only talk if she could smoke so they stood outside and let her blow smoke in their faces while she shifted her weight from one platform boot to another.

“I told the police when she was killed, Natalia didn’t have any enemies—everyone liked her.”

“Was there anyone specific that you remember?” Steve asked, finally speaking up. “Anyone giving her trouble?”

Diana shrugged. “I guess there were some new girls that she was worried about losing business to…” she exhaled. “But that’s just life. It’s not like they were going all West Side Story about it, y’know?”

“Any johns that were a little too rough?” Darcy asked, trying not to let anything she’d read that afternoon color her interrogation. “Or anything in the other direction? Anyone she liked or was
interested in?"

Diana’s eyes shifted from Steve to Darcy and studied her for what felt like a long time. The corner of her pink lips turned up in a small smile. “It was a long time ago,” she prefaced, her face resuming its bored scowl. “But now that I’m thinking about it, I feel like I remember her talking about a guy.”

“A trick?” Darcy prompted. “Or someone else?”

“No,” she shook her head. “I think he was a customer…but she really liked him.” Diana rolled her eyes. “Said she liked how—shit, what did she used to say—she liked that he was…not damaged…”

“Tarnished,” Darcy finished for her softly, ignoring the way Steve gaze refocused on her.

“Yeah,” Diana gave a sad smile. “She was kind of poetic,” she gave another affectionate roll of her eyes.


Diana’s shoulders moved again. “I don’t know; he was really fucked up, she was kind of fucked up—they were fucked up together.” She took another long drag of her cigarette. “I mean, sometimes. It’s not like they were a thing.”

“Did you tell the police any of this?”

“Tell them what? I think she liked a guy I never saw? It’s not exactly an eye witness testimony.”

“Is there anything you can remember that might help us?” Darcy asked, shoving her hair back.

“Hey,” Diana held up her hands. “Don’t get shitty with me because I can’t remember the details of my friend’s life from a year ago.”

“Your friend who was murdered,” Steve reminded, her jaw set in a hard square of determination. “You don’t think any of this information might have been useful?”

“Sure,” she huffed. “A year ago, when the police acted like they gave a shit about Natalia for a whole minute. But then they stopped asking and trying to do anything. So I forgot some stuff—sue me.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for your help,” Darcy rolled her eyes. “Let’s go, Steve,” she turned and grabbed his arm. “This is waste of time.”

“His arm,” Diana called to their retreating backs. They stopped walking. “I remember her talking about his arm.” They turned around together, slowly. “She said he was an amputee or something—it was a prosthetic.”

Steve had the longer stride and reached Diana first, grabbing her by the arm before Darcy could stop him. “What about his arm? What did she tell you?”

“Just what I said, dude,” Diana made a move to wrench herself free. “Can you back off please?”
“Steve—” Darcy warned, catching up.

“Where did she meet him? Did he live around here?”

“Steve!”

“I don’t know!” Diana exclaimed, twisting out of his grasp. She rubbed at her elbow. “What the shit? What is your problem?”

“Sorry,” Darcy apologized quickly, grabbed a hold of Steve’s arm again. “I’m sorry. We’re going.”

They made it around the corner before she let go of him and gave him a shove that did little more than bend her own fingers back. “What is wrong with you?” she demanded.

Steve looked taken aback. “What’s wrong with me? You’re supposed to be investigating this girl’s murder and you weren’t even listening to what she was saying!”

“She wasn’t telling me anything I didn’t already know,” she assured him, her eyes narrowed. “And even if she was, she sure as shit isn’t going to give us anything now. You can’t just go around assaulting people until they give you information. You’re not with your band of superheroes anymore.” She let out a breath in an angry huff before she continued. “And while we’re talking about work—why don’t we just stop pretending that you have any interest in what happened to these women.”

“What are you talking about? I told you I’m here to help you—”

“No, Steve,” Darcy shook her head. “You’re not here to help me. You’re here to look for your best friend. And when you find him, you just want to take him home and wrap him in a blanket and make him a cup of cocoa.”

“That’s not—”

“He could be a murderer, Steve! A serial killer who seems to enjoy killing women and you haven’t even considered that, have you?”

Steve opened his mouth to respond, his nostrils flared in anger. Before he could fire off a response, Darcy’s phone began to ring. She shot him a glare and held it to her ear. “Lewis.”

“Get back to New York,” Sergeant Nowicki said, his voice gruff and without any room for argument. “We’ve got another victim.”

She felt her anger from moments ago draining as her brow furrowed in confusion. “Another victim?” she repeated.

“Just get back here, Lewis,” Nowicki cleared his throat. “I’m pretty sure you know her.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to LittleRoma for the beta love (psst: go read her Dr. Who/Darcy crossover fic.)
It's wondrous! The translation tech is really available as an app on my husband's new phone. It's BANANAS and I had to include it here. So there's that. And Miller High Life really is the champagne of beers, I don't care what anyone says. :) Love you all; I'll try to be quicker with an update next time! Let me know if you're still on this ride.
Kitty’s face was so much smaller and looked so much younger without her fan of rhinestone-studded eyelashes and bright pink lipstick. The ME had washed out her hair so it curled loosely on the steel table around her head instead of in one of her usual elaborate updos and two of her neon pink nails had been broken.

Darcy’s breath caught in her throat when they moved the sheet to reveal her. She put a hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to let her emotions bubble as the sound of Kitty’s nasally laugh echoed in her ears. She replayed the feeling of her bony fingers pinching Darcy’s cheeks, trying to add some color to her translucently pale skin while the memory of the last time she’d seen her came rocketing back.

*We look out for each other out here,* she’d said with a playful punch to Darcy’s arm.

“Yeah,” she said out loud, finally. “Yeah, I know her.”

Why had no one been looking out for Kitty?

Why hadn’t *she* been looking out for Kitty?

Nowicki put a hand on her shoulder for a brief moment. “Do you happen to know her name, Lewis?”

“Yeah, it’s uh—” Darcy took a deep breath and forced herself to look back at Kitty’s face. “It’s Tina Salazar. Her file’s in my desk I’ll uh,” she took another inhale. “I’ll get it for you.”

Nowicki gave a tight, sympathetic look. “Take your time. We’ve gotta notify next of kin.”

She shook her head. “They’re all in Chicago,” she said, squeezing her eyes tight before she managed to look up at Nowicki. “They don’t know what she... she huffed out another exhale and crossed her arms protectively over her chest. “Fuck,” she muttered. “She’s been saving up for a trip home to visit…they’re going to be devastated.”

The sergeant was still looking worried. “You gonna be okay?”

Darcy looked down and scrubbed at her eyes for a moment, gathering herself and shoving thoughts of Kitty’s bad puns and love of Swedish Fish out of her mind. “Would you mind if I was the one to notify them?” she asked finally, looking back up in the worn lines of concern on Nowicki’s face. “It’s just...I knew her and she’s—she was—”

“It’s fine,” Nowicki gave her another sad smile. “I’ll talk to Driscoll and let him know.”

She felt her lips twitch into a quick, grateful smile. “Thanks Sarge,” she said softly, shifting from one foot to another. She took another deep breath and forced her eyes to stay dry. “I’ll uh, I’ll go grab you that file.”

“The file can wait,” Nowicki said, waving her words away. “It’s the middle of the night, after all.”
She glanced down at her watch in surprise. He was right. It was just after midnight. “Right,” Darcy bit her lip and nodded, feeling suddenly useless. “I guess I’ll just be back in the morning.”

She made a move to turn from the morgue and get safely away from any of her coworkers before the tears that were stinging the back of her eyes made their way down her cheeks. “Lewis,” Nowicki called, turning her around. “We’ve got at least a five hour post on this girl, not to mention the tox reports and forensic analysis…” she raised her eyebrows, waiting for him to make a point. “Why don’t you take the day off,” he said finally, taking a few steps in her direction.

“I don’t need—”

“Look,” he said with a hand on her shoulder again. “We’ve all been there. Doesn’t get any easier, but you don’t forget the first time you lose someone on the job.” He gave her a fatherly pat. “Just take the day. Come back on Wednesday and we’ll debrief on DC. Okay?”

She didn’t want to admit that she was grateful for his suggestion, that she needed the day he was recommending. She wanted him to think that she was strong enough to lose a friend and keep right on working.

And maybe someday, she would be.

But not that day. That day, she was tired and heartsick and her mind was whirling with everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours and all she really wanted to do was cry and maybe drink and soak in a bubble bath.

“Yeah,” she exhaled the word with a nod. “Yeah, okay. I’ll do that. Thanks, Sarge.”

She stopped at her desk to grab Kitty’s file before she made her way back downstairs at a shuffle. With her head bent, digging for her metro card, Darcy would have missed him completely if he hadn’t stood up and called her name as she reached for the door.

“She was your friend?” he asked, glancing in the direction from which she’d just come. “The woman they found?”

Darcy swallowed and tucked her hair behind her ear. “No, not my…” she frowned. “I
knew her when I was working undercover.” She felt a faint grin play on her lips. “She used to call me Double Dee.” When she glanced up, Steve had mirrored her sad smile. “She was a good person,” she said as her smile slipped away. “Too good for something like this to have happened to her.”

“I’m sorry,” he said with a heavy sigh. “For her, and for what happened in Washington.” He looked down, a pensive expression etched on his face. “I didn’t mean to imply that you weren’t doing your job and I know…” he cleared his throat. “I know I reacted badly when I thought that girl might know where to find Bucky.”

She took a deep breath and gave him a tight smile. “Apology accepted. I uh,” she looked down at the metro card in the hand that clutched Kitty’s file. “I’ve got tomorrow off and I need to get home and see if I can get to Chicago and back by Wednesday morning.”

He looked surprised. “What’s in Chicago?”

“Kitty’s family,” she said with a knot of dread already twisting in her stomach. “She talked about them a lot and I don’t…I don’t want to tell them what happened over the phone. I’m going to call and see if there’s a chaplain that can meet me.” She paused and pulled her phone from her purse. “It’s…what? Eleven there?” She bit her lip again. “Someone should pick up.”

His look of surprise hadn’t faded. “So you’re going to fly yourself there to tell them in person?”

“Well, yeah,” Darcy shrugged again. “I’ve got some room left on a few of my credit cards, I think…and I can’t exactly expense it to the department. But I think I’ll butcher this if I don’t do it in person—” She stopped herself at the contemplative look that had come over Steve’s face. “What?”

“I might be able to get you there with a little less hassle,” he looked up and gave a bounce of his shoulders. “If you’re interested.”

***

When he made the offer to Darcy, Steve hadn’t really figured out how he was going to get Tony to let him borrow his plane. He wasn’t even sure if anyone else in the Tower would be awake at one in the morning when he returned home.

Still, Steve pulled out his phone and fired off a text, figuring it couldn’t hurt to try.

-Tony, are you still up?

-If this is a booty call, Cap, came the immediate response, making Steve roll his eyes, I’m a little busy.

-I was hoping I could ask you for a favor.

-Personal or business?

-...Business, I guess?
Within moments JARVIS was connecting him to Pepper’s personal line and he found himself apologizing for calling so late and wondering if Tony had JARVIS monitoring absolutely everything that went on in the building.

He had planned to offer to pay for the plane—for the fuel and a rental fee if necessary (turns out sixty-six years of unpaid pension from the US Army was a nice little lump sum if paid out all at once) but Pepper was hearing none of that. As soon as he explained it was to help a friend she dropped any trace of CEO tone from her voice and told him it was no problem. Steve was left wishing that every interaction with Tony could go so smoothly.

Darcy’s eyes were puffy from the lack of sleep when she met him at the air field at six am. Her movements sluggish, lethargic and Steve had to remind himself that she was not a morning person on any day of the week. She paid her cab fare and turned to face him; Steve could see her eyes widen as she took in the private plane that was awaiting her.

“Are you kidding me?” she asked, glancing around as if expecting someone else to pull up and board the plane instead.

Steve shook his head. “On loan from Stark Industries,” he said. “Guaranteed to get you to Chicago and back by dinner time.”

He followed her up the stairs and introduced her to Amal, the pilot and Audrey, the flight attendant, and made sure she was situated in one of the plush leather seats before he gave a satisfied nod. “Okay, so…”

“Steve?” Darcy looked up from her seat, chewing her lip nervously. “It’s okay if you’ve got stuff going on but I uh…” she glanced down at her hands and let out a little joyless chuckle. “I’m filled with dread about this trip.”

He felt his brow furrow. “Oh,” he said uncertainly, waiting for her to continue. “You want me to…”

“Nevermind,” she said quickly and dropped her eyes again. “That was stupid—it’s early and I’m not thinking straight.” She shook her head. “Thanks for arranging this for me,” she gave him a smile. “It’s…really more than I could ever repay.”

“I can—” he stumbled over the offer. “I can go with you, if you want.” He cleared his throat. “I guess I figured you didn’t really need my help.”

“Oh,” she frowned again. “I mean, I don’t,” she admitted before she rushed on. “Not with the notification… I just—”

“I can stay,” he stopped her rambling with a small smile. Because nothing he’d considered getting accomplished couldn’t wait until they returned. “Sure.” And because anything that would stop Darcy’s nervous fidgeting felt like a good plan in his book.

Darcy felt like an idiot for asking him to come with her—like she was a kid needing her hand held just to do her job. But as much as she hated to admit it, she was dreading this visit. And having Steve to sit across from her made the three hour flight not feel like such an eternity.

And the way he looked afraid to touch anything made her feel a little less like the almost-
poverty-level-earning cop she was.

“I’ve never been on a private plane before,” she said while they were flying over Rochester. “Have you?”

Steve looked up from the orange juice he was cautiously sipping and gave an embarrassed smile. “Not unless you count the plane Howard stole to drop me into Germany back in ‘44.”

“Guess those Starks know how to party in any decade,” she commented, pushing back her hair. She glanced around the interior of the plane again and back down into her own glass of juice. “I can’t believe this is how he travels all the time.” She scoffed. “The best the department could give us was Marla for four days.”

Steve grinned. “Aw, c’mon. I liked Marla.”

Darcy felt herself grinning back. “I liked Marla too.”

They drank their juice and ate the blueberry muffins that Audrey offered them and settled into a silence that would have been companionable, comfortable even, if not for the nagging in the back of Darcy’s mind. This unsettled pinprick of curiosity that, despite her best efforts, would not lie down and be quiet.

She shifted in her seat somewhere around Pittsburgh and cleared her throat. “Okay, I know we talked about this before, and I know what I said,” she glanced up to see him eyeing her with interest.

“What you said…?”

Darcy swallowed hard, forcing herself to continue—for the sake of their partnership, she reminded herself, and for the sake of shutting up the voice in her head. She ran her thumbnail over her left eyebrow. “And look, you don’t have to answer this—you don’t owe me any kind of explanation or…anything really—”

His brow had furrowed. “What are you asking me?”

Darcy bit her lip. “The night that we…” she cleared her throat. “Y’know, met.”

“Ah.”

“If I’d let you explain yourself,” she continued, willing herself not to squirm under his patient stare. “That day that you came to the station, I mean. If I hadn’t cut you off…” she bit her lip again and looked across the plane at him. “What would you have said?”

Steve blinked and raised his eyebrows. He sat back in his seat and took a deep, measured breath in and let it out. “Well,” he frowned thoughtful, tilting his head to one side. “I guess I would have said that I had spent that morning at the funeral of a woman that I loved.” He shifted in place before he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees. “That I was feeling lost and lonely and had run so short on comfort that torturing a cliché felt like the best way to go.” Steve glanced down at the ground for a moment before he looked back up at her. “And since we’re being honest, I might as well add that you happen to look like the kind of girl I would have loved to take out, back in the day.” He gave her a sad little shrug. “And I’m sure you still would have held that hand up and told me you’d heard all of that before but—”

“Was it Peggy Carter?” Darcy cut him off before her courage to finish this conversation ran out.
He blinked again in surprise. “What?”

“The woman…the funeral…” she swallowed again. “Was it Peggy Carter?”

“Uh,” he shifted and sat back again. “Yeah,” he said after a moment. “Yeah, it was Peggy.”

Darcy nodded with the sad sense of understanding she had been expecting. “I read about it in the paper,” she said, looking down at her hands. “I uh,” she coughed again. “I met her once, y’know.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “You did?”

She nodded, feeling suddenly shy at her confession. “She came to Culver when I was a sophomore. She was in town for work and stopped by for this big International Women’s Day event we were hosting.”

“Oh yeah?”

When she raised her eyes again, Steve was sitting up straighter, looking genuinely interested. “She gave this really incredible speech about how important it was for women to remain true to themselves. To not feel like we had to change or to be anything other than ourselves to make a difference in the world.” Darcy smiled to herself and thought to the words she’d scribbled down on the corner of her Comparative Politics textbook—the page she’d ripped out and stuck to her mirror for a reminder. “She said that it’s the easiest thing in the world to be what everyone wants you to be. But that when the mob and the press and the whole world tell you to move, your job is to plant yourself like a tree and tell the whole world—”

“No,” Steve took the word from her, a smile playing on his lips. “You move.”

Darcy looked up in surprise. “She said that to you too?”

His smile turned bashful. “She stole that from me, actually.”

She looked down again and tucked her hair behind her ear. “She was a really remarkable woman, Steve,” she said softly. She could still remember the way Peggy had held her hand in both of hers, her skin thin and wrinkled as tissue paper. How, when Peggy had said it had been wonderful to meet her, Darcy had felt like she’d really meant it. “Actually, she’s the reason I signed up for Jane’s internship,” she admitted. “She made me want to go outside of my comfort zone.”

Steve smiled to himself, his eye still cast downward. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “She was good at that.”

“I’m sorry,” she said finally, making him look up at her. “I’m sorry that you lost her,” Darcy clarified. “That you didn’t get to have what you should have had together.” She swallowed again and added, “And I’m sorry I was so rude to you the first time you tried to talk to me.”

His smile was directed at her this time. “Nah,” he said, waving the last part of the apology away. “You were just trying to do your job.”

They were quiet for what felt like a long time before Darcy spoke again. “Steve?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for coming with me.”
“Anytime, Darce.”

***

Darcy had prepared herself for almost every aspect of her impromptu trip to Chicago. She expected the wails of Kitty’s mother, the predictable quiet rage of her father, the tears welling in the four identical sets of brown eyes of her younger sisters. The way they clung to each other in a wet, weeping pile as she was leaving.

She had expected that it would be hard, and it was. It was awful. Having to tell Kitty’s mother that she knew her daughter from the coffee shop where she told them she’d worked. Remembering to call her Tina instead of Kitty, a name that sounded heavy and unfamiliar when she said it aloud. Swallowing back tears as the youngest of the little girls started crying that she hated her older sister and wished she’d never moved to New York. Letting the chaplain from Chicago PD do most of the heavy emotional lifting while she sat there, useless to comfort these people and wishing she was the kind of person who could have just done this over the phone.

She hadn’t expected it to wipe her out the way that it had. By the time she reported for work on Wednesday morning, she felt like she’d been gone for weeks, awake for days.

“You okay Lewis?” Driscoll asked gruffly as she passed him Kitty’s file. “You look like hell.”

“I feel like hell, LT,” she admitted, stifling a yawn. “Don’t worry about it,” she waved away his concern. “I’ll be fine.”

He looked down at the file she’d given him, flipped idly over the list of Kitty’s priors, and glanced up again. “That’s good.”

“Something in particular you needed?” she asked, taking in the way he was lingering over her desk. “Other than her file, I mean.”

“Yeah, I’m gonna need to see you in my office later. Now that you’re back from DC, we’re going to need you to go back undercover.”

Chapter End Notes

Why yes, that *is* a quote from comic book!Captain America that I used in his conversation with Darcy. I am 100% certain that I don’t know which comic book it comes from specifically, but I’ll leave that to far better fans than I. I know it wasn’t much of an update, but that felt like a good stopping point for the moment. Things inside of my head have been dark and full of angst about my life, and writing this fic brings me joy. I hope you’re all still enjoying it too. Much love --MJ
Chapter Summary

"I'm not going to keep putting these women in danger without letting them know someone's looking out for them." Darcy goes back undercover with some help from her pals.

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to LittleRoma for the beta :) Have you read her Dr. Who/Thor crossover yet? DO IT.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve looked uncomfortable as he climbed out of the car. He rubbed the back of his neck and frowned as Darcy got out and adjusted her blazer. “Darcy, I really don’t think this is the best idea.”

“You know,” Darcy clipped her badge onto her belt and covered it with her jacket. “You mentioned that.” She gave him a quick smile. “And then I replied—all six times—that I appreciated your input, but that I don’t care.”

“But what makes you think that these girls are going to want to tell you anything once they find out who you really are?”

Darcy let out a steadying breath and came around to the sidewalk. She put her hands on her hips and looked up at him. “Look, I have a responsibility to these women, okay? What happened to Kitty? That’s on me.” She took a quick glance down the block to where Ginger’s flaming red hair could be spotted near the corner. “I’m not going to keep working with them, putting them in danger, without letting them know who I am.” She looked back up at Steve. “They should know that someone’s looking out for them.”

“I just think—”

“Steve?” Darcy cut him off, impatient to get to work before anyone hopped in a car for the night. “Your concerns are understood, okay? And I appreciate the thought, but I’m fine. If you really want to help me, just hang out and watch my back. Sound good?”

“No, Darcy, I—”

“Kay, good,” she gave him another smile and tossed him the car keys. “I’ll be back in ten.”

Her badge was still safely hidden as she made her way down the familiar block and to the cluster of women awaiting her. Ginger noticed her first and let out a wolf whistle that could be heard a mile away. “Look at you, Double Dee!”
Her assessment was met with catcalls and laughter from the other girls as she approached. “Who’d you fuck, Dee?” Cherry Pop asked, reaching out to run her fingers over the sleeve of Darcy’s jacket. “Dolce or Gabbana?”

Darcy laughed and pushed back her hair. “Both,” she joked back. “I let ’em run a train on me.”

“Where you been, girl?” Ginger asked, stuffing her hands in the pockets of her black pleather jacket. “We ain’t seen you in a minute.”

She felt the smile slip from her face. “I uh, I have a confession to make,” she admitted, looking down at her shoes. “I haven’t been entirely honest with you guys.” When she looked up, Cherry and Sadie exchanged a nervous look. “I’m not who I said I was.”

“Yeah,” Ginger scoffed. “And this is my real hair color,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

“No,” Darcy laughed at Ginger’s joke and pursed her lips together. “I mean I’m, uh…I’m a cop.” Before she could say anything else, Sadie took off at a sprint down the block. “Sadie, wait!” she called, feeling the group ready to scatter. “No, guys, seriously! Nobody’s getting busted—I promise.” They felt instantly on edge, their looks full of betrayal. “I’m here because I need your help.” She swallowed hard. “And I swear, anything you say can only going to help us—no one’s going to get in trouble.”

“The fuck should we trust you?” Cherry asked crossing her arms over her leopard-print bustier.

“You shouldn’t,” Darcy sighed, shoving back her hair and hoping Steve’s super-soldier hearing couldn’t pick any of this up. “But I could’ve arrested all of you weeks ago, okay? I’ve been working on a case and I could really use your help.”

“That’s bullshit, Dee,” Ginger said, her full lips jutting forward in a pout. “You been lying to us this whole time and now you think we’re just going to help you?”

“I don’t expect anything,” she said “But this is serious, guys. This guy we’re chasing—” she stopped and gulped down a hard swallow of air. “He got Kitty.”

Ginger’s face changed. Cherry dropped her hands back to her sides.

“Kitty?” Amber asked, bringing up a lock of her silky blonde hair to rub between her lips. “No, that’s not possible.”

“No Kitty—” Cherry said softly.

“Yeah,” Darcy nodded. “A few nights ago. He carved those lines down her back just like the other girls.”

“But I just seen her…” Amber trailed off with a thoughtful expression her face.

“Look, I like you guys, okay? I respect you…I appreciate you,” she sighed. “I just didn’t want to lie to you anymore,” she admitted, unclipping her badge from her belt and showing it to the small group that was left. “I’m going to be back undercover and I’m doing my best to catch this prick but…” she bit her lip. “It’ll be a lot easier with your help.”

Ginger’s pout was a little less severe as she moved a piece of hair out of her eyes. “You swear you’re not gonna bust us?” she asked, eyeing Darcy with just enough suspicion to make her
insides twist with guilt.

“I swear to God,” she held up her right hand. “I just want to catch this guy.” Darcy sighed. “And make sure he can’t do this to anyone else.”

The other girls were looking to Ginger for a cue. The redhead took Darcy’s badge from her hand and ran her thumb over the raised crest and numbers. She took in a deep breath and let it slip out of her slowly through her nose. Darcy counted twelve steady beats of her heart before Ginger finally raised her eyes to her and asked, “What do you need?”

The relief rushed over Darcy with a heavy sigh. “Thank you, guys,” she said, locking eyes with Ginger.

“I’m not saying we’re cool, Dee,” Ginger warned her, raising a heavily stenciled eyebrow in her direction. “Maybe if you catch this cocksucker…” she sniffed indignantly. “Maybe then.”

Darcy gave her a small smile. “I’ll take what I can get, Ginge.” She cleared her throat and refocused her gaze on the whole group. “I need you guys to think about the last time you saw Kitty. Who was she with, what kind of cars were picking her up—anything you can think of, no matter how small.”

They didn’t have much to give. Cherry saw her getting into a wood-paneled station wagon, but then Amber saw her get out of that same station wagon and go for a walk with a scrawny kid in a baseball cap. Ginger remembered saying good night to her around three and Carla couldn’t remember if she saw her that night or the night before.

Darcy didn’t care. It was enough to have them vigilant, to keep them looking for things that might stick out, to be watching their own—and each other’s—backs while they got started for the night.

“This is all helpful, guys,” she lied as she tucked her notebook back into her back pocket. “I really appreciate it.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cherry looked a little less hurt by the time Darcy was wrapping up. “Just keep my ass outta jail and we’ll be square.”

“Scouts honor,” she said holding up the three-fingered Girl Scout salute.

Ginger rolled her eyes. “Get out of here, Dee,” she said, fluffing her red curls. “You’re classing up the place.”

“I’ll be back,” she promised, clipping her badge back into place.

“Just make sure you’re dressed for it,” Ginger reminded with a hint of her familiar grin.

A blonde woman who was in considerably better shape than Darcy was standing just a little too close to Steve when she returned to the car. The blonde was all tan, toned legs under a leather mini skirt and a vacuum-sealed tube top the same shiny red as her knee-high boots. If Steve hadn’t been Steve, Darcy would have been confused by how uncomfortable he looked, backed against the car.

“Eyes front, soldier,” she called with a grin, holding up her hand for the keys.

“Darcy!” Steve choked out, looking only too relieved when the blonde moved a step back with a glance over her shoulder. “Why did you take so long?”
“I was only gone ten minutes,” she said with a roll of her eyes as he tossed her the keys she’d requested. She stopped short of their shapely companion. “But if I was interrupting something,” she bit back a grin. “I can come back.”

“Absolutely not,” Steve said, the tops of his ears a charming shade of bright red.

“Oh,” the blonde turned around fully with a frown on her wine colored lips. “Is he yours?” she asked Darcy.

Darcy couldn’t suppress her grin any longer. She leaned casually against the parking meter and spun the key ring around her finger. “Oh, no,” she waved her hand. “He’s a free agent.”

“What she means,” Steve began, backing up further against the car when the blonde turned back to him, “is that we’re working and I—”

“I mean,” Darcy broke in and turned the girl’s attention back to herself. “I’m certainly not going to touch a soldier with something like seventy years of incubating STDs from a stint in the Army before condoms were a thing—” she shrugged as she watched the seductive smile slip from the blonde’s face. “But someone ought to throw him a bone.”

Darcy was still laughing as they drove back to the precinct.

“You’re not funny,” Steve assured her dryly.

“Oh c’mon,” she reached over and gave his arm a friendly smack. “I could have told her you were a ninety-five year old virgin.”

He rolled his eyes from the passenger seat. “As far as lies goes, I think I’d prefer that one,” he grumbled.

Darcy narrowed her eyes and studied him for a moment. “Which part?”

Steve blinked and glanced over at her. “Which part what?”

“Which part is a lie? The age or the virginity?”

He coughed out a little laugh. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” she raised her eyebrows imploringly. “Partner to partner.”

“Both, if you’re so intent on knowing all my secrets.” He looked back at her, waiting for a response before he continued. “I’m ninety-seven.”

“And…not a virgin?”

He laughed again. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“No,” she said a little too quickly. “No, of course not.”

They were quiet for another block before Steve cleared his throat. “And I’ve really never been one for blondes.”

“Good to know,” Darcy said with a cheeky smile, happy when he gave her one in return.
Eddie looked up from the report on his desk and stared at Steve. “Get the fuck out,” he said boldly.

Steve blinked and felt his brow furrow in confusion. “Excuse me? I was told I could—”

“No, no,” Eddie stood up and offered his hand for a handshake. “No, I’m sorry, man. You can stand wherever you want. I just…” he shook his head and smiled. “I’m Eddie Kimball—I just couldn’t believe you were standing in front of me.”

Steve shook his hand and mirrored his smile. “Steve Rogers,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you, Eddie. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Yeah,” Eddie’s smile was wide, his teeth brilliantly white against his dark brown skin. “Yeah, I’ve heard a lot about you too.” He coughed. “From Darcy, I mean. Obviously. Not from anywhere else.” They were quiet for what felt like just a little bit too long before Eddie coughed again. “So you’re joining the surveillance party, huh?”

Steve nodded. “If that’s okay with you.”

“If Captain America wants to hang out in my van,” Eddie grinned and reminded Steve a little bit of Sam. “I’m sure as hell not going to say no.”

He chuckled. “I’m not here in Captain capacity,” he reminded. “I’m just a civilian assistant.”

“Still—” Eddie stopped what he was going to say as his eyes shifted from Steve to a point just behind him. He grinned again. “I don’t know why, but this never gets old.”

“Laugh it up, Kimball,” Darcy grumbled as she ambled over to them, clumsy in her stilettos. “One of these days it’s your turn to put on the hot pants.”

Steve willed his jaw not to drop. She was clad in a black halter top that showed off more than enough of her ample cleavage and a denim mini skirt with a hemline that stopped just short of being completely irrelevant. The skirt sat low on her hips and revealed the straps of a black lace thong. Her eyes, usually hidden behind her glasses, were lined in heavy black liner and her full lips were a shade of red Steve had thought was reserved for the fire department.

He wouldn’t have recognized her if she hadn’t shot him with a very familiar glare. “And I don’t want to hear it from you.”

Steve pressed his lips together, smothering a smile. “That’s your usual uniform for this kind of thing?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “Well, if you want to pass for a hooker you’ve gotta look like a hooker,” she reminded him. “And cut the giggles; I’m still armed, y’know.”

Steve frowned and gave her another once over. “Wait—”

“Don’t ask,” Eddie said, covering his own smile with his hand.

“Where do you keep your gun?”
“Don’t ask,” Darcy repeated, shifting from one foot to another, uncomfortably.

Steve laughed out loud, triggering another glare from Darcy and a hearty laugh from Eddie. “I’m sorry,” he said, holding up his hands. “I’m sorry. You look great.”

“Shut up,” she grumbled and pulled her hair up and off her neck, revealing a long, gracefully pale stretch of skin and shoulder that Steve found more appealing than anything else. “Wire me up,” she demanded of Eddie and waited patiently while he fixed a receiver inside her ear and handed her a mic to tuck in between her breasts.

Not that Steve watched her do that.

Because he definitely didn’t watch her do that.

Just like he didn’t take in the expanse of her legs or the planes of her back and shoulders. Didn’t begin cataloging freckles and scars that were suddenly on display. Didn’t notice the top of an intricate design of a tattoo that began at the base of her spine and disappeared beneath the waistband of her skirt.

Nope. Didn’t do any of those things.

He did his best not to let his eyes wander while she and Eddie ran over their plan, which officers were going to be stationed where, who all was on point and who all would be standing by as back up. He wanted to pay attention because this was important.

But Darcy hadn’t moved her hair back over her shoulder yet. And all his mind was letting him focus on was the wonder if she sprayed her neck with the same citrusy perfume that clung to her clothes. If he’d be able to feel her pulse thrumming against his lips if he pressed a kiss just below her jaw.

Steve swallowed hard and shook that very dangerous train of thought out of his head. He forced himself to look away and tune back in, just as a detective walked past them and let out a laugh.

“Hey Lewis,” he said, doing a double take on the way to the coffee maker. “What’s your tramp stamp say?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. “It says, ‘Stop looking at my ass, JT.’”

The detective grinned. “No it doesn’t.”

Steve let out a long exhale. It was going to be a long night.

Only it wasn’t just one long night. It was four long, drawn-out nights of sitting in Eddie’s surveillance van listening to Darcy trading dirty jokes with her working girls, eating microwave burritos and trying to remember why he had asked to come along on this part of the investigation.

Eddie seemed like a decent guy though, and Steve had spent the last four nights getting to know him, hearing all about his fiancée Becca and their son Shawn, swapping Army stories and pretending he didn’t notice how Eddie’s eyes sparkled like a five year-old’s when he brought up any time spent as Captain America.

It wasn’t until the fourth night, when it was junior officer Patrick’s turn to go for coffee,
that their usual companionable silence felt a little heavier than usual.

“So you and Darcy…” Eddie began, fussing unnecessarily with the audio tools in front of him.

“What?” Steve looked up a little too quickly from the profiles he’d been perusing.

“Spotted a station wagon,” Darcy’s voice cut between them, crackling over the intercom. “Matches the description of the one Cherry Pop saw Kitty get into.” She coughed. “I’m taking a look.”

“Be careful,” Steve said, his finger pressing the microphone before he could stop himself.

Her smile was audible through the speaker. “Aye-aye, Cap.” He looked down with a small smile.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Eddie’s voice brought his gaze back up.

“What?”

“You and Darcy,” Eddie repeated with a roll of his eyes.

Steve felt his brow furrow. “There’s no me and Darcy—” he shook his head. “We’re just working together…and honestly, I’m not really even sure she likes me all that much most of the time.”

Eddie chuckled and pushed himself far away from the mic button. “Nah, she likes you,” he said. “She’s seen some shit the last couple of years,” he added. “I think it made her a little trigger-shy. But she likes you…I can tell.”

He glanced over, trying his hardest not to appear too hopeful. “Yeah? She said something?”

His companion laughed again. “No. Christ, no. Darcy and I are going to talk about our feelings the day she learns how to walk in those fucking heels.”

Steve laughed in response. “Well then I won’t hold my breath,” he said, shaking his head again. “And anyway, there’s really nothing going on,” he added, sobering.

“Of course there isn’t,” Eddie nodded with a smile. “Don’t worry,” he said as the van doors opened again. “I’m not saying anything.”

“Hey guys,” Patrick greeted as he clambered back into the van and handed out the steaming Styrofoam cups. “I miss anything?”

“Not a thing, rookie,” Eddie assured him, sitting back in his chair.

Patrick’s phone vibrated; he looked down with a frown. “Uh, Rodriguez lost visual on Lewis,” he reported, showing them the text he’d just received.

Eddie matched his frown as his own phone lit up with a text. “So did Charlie.”

Steve felt a knot form in his stomach while Eddie leaned forward again and turned on the mic. “Hey, Lewis? You there?”

In the silence that followed, Steve’s mouth ran dry.
“Darce, do me a favor,” Eddie continued. “Just tap your com if you’re okay. Give me something.”

There was nothing but static coming through the radio. And by the time they’d stormed out of the vans and onto the streets, there was no sign of Darcy anywhere.

She was gone.

Chapter End Notes

This is a mandatory stopping point if you're reading this story all in one go. Get up, take a stretch and get some water. Go to sleep if it's bed time and come back later. It'll all still be here, I promise. But there's a lot going on and you need a break.

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PS: I stole that 'Dolce and Gabbana' line directly, 100% from Dexter. But it's too good to only exist once in the entertainment universe. So there.
Not again.

It was the only conscious thought Steve could process as the search for Darcy unfolded around him. There were commands called into radios and flashing blue and red lights as other units joined them and swarmed the streets, combing for clues and leads.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but Darcy’s trampled ear piece and microphone, found a block apart and damaged beyond repair. No witnesses, nothing out of the ordinary, and no one who had even seen the station wagon she’d approached before they’d lost sight of her. It was like she had simply disappeared.

Not again.

Only, Steve reminded himself, it wasn’t again. Last time, he’d been the one who disappeared; he’d been the one they’d searched for in vain. He’d been the one they had all moved on without.

And as his stomach twisted tighter and tighter, he rather preferred it that way. Because Darcy hadn’t just disappeared. She hadn’t gone down in a blaze of glory. She was in trouble and they needed to find her before it was too late.

“We’re going to find her,” he heard himself say out loud before he could stop it. “She’s going to be fine,” he finished with a sideways glance at Eddie. Darcy’s partner had joined him moments earlier, leaning against the surveillance van with shaking hands that kept reaching toward his pockets in a way that made Steve wonder when he’d quit smoking.

“I know,” Eddie scoffed, not quite sounding like he believed that. “She probably shot a guy for copping a feel and is just hiding out until she can figure out how to make it look like an accident.”

Steve managed a weak smile as Eddie swiped a hand over his face and crossed his arms over his chest. “So…what do we do now?” he asked finally.

Eddie shook his head. “I’m gonna go back to the station and try to get something from what we recorded,” he focused his gaze forward on the officers who were wrapping up with their witness statements. “Rodriguez, Pat, Charlie—the rest of the guys,” he nodded in their direction. “They’ll finish up here and we’ll have to debrief and regroup, I guess.”

He felt his brow furrow. “That’s it?”
“Until we get something,” Eddie sighed. “Look, I don’t like it either, but there’s only so much we can do until we have something to go on.” He rubbed at his eyes and glanced up before his face twisted into a grimace. “And Lord, here we go…”

Steve followed his gaze to see a woman with fire engine red hair and a skintight mini-dress to match striding purposefully toward them. Steve wanted to focus on the furious contortion of her face, or the way her hands were curling into fists as she approached them, but his attention kept drifting to her feet and the strappy gold high-heels that he felt should have made it impossible to stand, let alone approach like a lioness on the offensive. “Which one?” she said, her voice loud enough to be heard over the din of traffic and the crowd of useless witnesses. “Which one ‘a ya’ll was supposed to be watching her?”

Steve and Eddie exchanged nervous looks as she reached them, her nostrils flared in anger, a dangerous glint in her dark brown eyes. Steve swallowed hard and stood up a little straighter. “Uh —I was—”

“We were,” Eddie interjected, straightening up too. “We all were.”

The woman jutted her jaw out and studied them both with a critical glare. “Uh-huh. So they got the whole goddamn NYPD down here butting in to my business, and ya’ll can’t even keep an eye on the girl who’s supposed to be working for you?” She kissed her teeth in disgust. “If I ever paid my fucking taxes you can bet I’d be stoppin’ today.”

Under different circumstances, Steve might have found that funny.

“Look, ma’am,” Eddie made a move toward her, but she backed away and held up a hand. “Don’t you touch me,” she snapped. “I just wanna know what ya’ll were doing that was more important than making sure nothing happened to Dee?” She raised her heavily penciled eyebrows and studied them both before she continued. “And why the fuck does it look like ya’ll are packing it up for the night?”

Eddie opened his mouth again and then closed it, apparently reconsidering his answer. Steve cleared his throat. “There’s evidence to sift through,” he said, trying to make what he was saying sound more promising than it was. “We’ve got to…” he stopped and glanced at the ground. “They’re going to…”

“To what?” she stared at them imploringly for another long moment before she stepped back and let out a humorless laugh. “You know what? You all sit back, have a doughnut. I’ll find her myself.”

She had stalked away before either of them had formed a suitable response. Steve crossed his arms and leaned back against the surveillance van with a thoughtful frown. “She seems friendly.”

“I think that’s…Ginger,” Eddie assessed, tilting his head thoughtfully to one side.

Steve rolled his eyes and watched her fluff her outrageously red hair. “What gave it away?”

“Kimball!” A gruff, urgent-sounding voice cut through whatever response Eddie was going to give and gave them both cause to stand at attention again. It wasn’t the captain with whom Steve had spoken before. It was another middle aged man with steel-streaked black hair and a name plate that read Driscoll.
“Just waiting for instructions, LT,” Kimball said, rubbing his palms together anxiously.

“I want you back at the station—we’ve got to start running any surveillance we’ve got from the last three nights. Mulligan’s with you,” he nodded to Patrick the Rookie who’d been standing around waiting to be useful for the last hour. “Rodriguez and Blake are going to wrap up witness statements and compare with Nowicki and Young once they finish with the hookers.”

“You can tell them to cross Ginger off their list,” Kimball said with a cautionary glance in the direction Ginger had just stormed off. “We—uh—already got her statement.”

Driscoll acknowledged this with a lift of his eyebrows but said nothing until Steve cleared his throat. “Lieutenant,” he began. “How can I help?”

The commanding officer offered a quick sweep of his eyes before he shook his head. “This is police business, Rogers. No room for civilians when one of our own is missing.”

“But sir, she’s—”

“She’s NYPD, Rogers,” Driscoll cut him off. “We lost her; we’re going to find her. When we do, we’ll give you a call. End of story.”

It wasn’t until later, when they’d packed up and headed for the station, dropping him off at the tower out of professional courtesy, that Steve realized what it was he had almost said aloud. That Darcy was one of his own too.

***

It was lucky for him that none of his teammates actually kept normal hours. He was lucky that Tony didn’t even blink when he knocked on the door of his lab at three-thirty in the morning, that Bruce happened to be shuffling by with a fresh pot of coffee, and that an hour later, when Natasha normally got up to start her morning workout, she wandered past the pow-wow in the lab and happily offered her own opinions to the mix.

Because even though the situation was bordering on hopeless and exhausting, Steve had always found it better to be exhausted and hopeless among friends. It helped him think.

“I still don’t have a way to track her since she left her phone with the fuzz,” Tony was saying as the sun began to rise on an early morning of failed hacking and patching attempts on the hardware Darcy had been wearing. “But I can send everything I copied from her phone to yours so you can see if she’s been storing anything useful away from the eyes of her bosses.” He stopped his furious typing and smiled to himself. “And that makes me feel better about me, honestly.”

Steve rubbed his eyes and frowned. “Wait—how did you copy her phone if you’ve never…”

Tony did not take his eyes off what he was doing. “I hacked it remotely.”

“When?”

“When you were in DC.”

Behind them, he heard Natasha and Bruce sigh in unison. Steve felt his eyebrows narrow
again. “Why would you hack Darcy’s phone while we were in DC?”

“He honestly didn’t mean to,” Bruce piped up.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Thanks, punkin,” he said, finally stopping what he was doing to turn his chair back to face Steve. “Alright, Cap, I admit, I was a little curious about this dame you were squiring about the capitol—” Steve was grateful that Tony gave a long enough pause so that he could roll his own eyes. “And while I was looking her up—she’s very pretty, by the way—I happened to stumble upon her contact number through the police and before I could even realize that her police line and her personal line were the same phone, she’d linked up with that StarkPad I sent you and I was in.”


“Tony can connect to anything as long as it’s interacted with any form of Stark Tech,” Bruce explained in his usual, patient cadence. “Which he usually doesn’t do,” he shot Tony a warning look.

“No,” Tony rolled his eyes again. “Not usually. Usually, I’m too busy but in this case,” he paused as Steve’s pocket buzzed. He reached for his phone and was surprised to find that an animated Ironman had appeared on his screen with a speech bubble saying, “File Transfer Complete” before rocketing away. When he looked up, Tony was smiling. “You’re welcome. I hope it’s helpful.”

Steve still wasn’t convinced. “But Darcy didn’t use her phone with the translation thing—she only used the pad you sent us.”

Tony spun back to the computer screen. “Well she must have at some point,” he said, flicking his finger through the air to scroll through the screen. “Here,” he splayed his fingers to expand the list. “She did a screen-cap and emailed it to herself.”

As Steve squinted at the screen, his phone vibrated again and a copy of what Darcy had emailed appeared in his palm. He studied it with a frown. “Uh, thanks, guys,” he said, distractedly.

He barely realized he’d left the lab until he felt Natasha’s almost undetectable presence at his heels. He stopped and looked up from the screen, unsurprised to see her looking at him expectantly. “What’s up?” he asked in an attempt at casual.

She pursed her lips. “I’m just thinking that maybe you want to reconsider immediately invading Darcy’s privacy by looking at everything her phone has done in the last few weeks.”

He frowned again. “It’s just one e-mail, Natasha—and whatever’s on her phone might help us find her. They’re doing the same thing at the police station.” He hated that it took him all of five seconds to become defensive and hated even more that Romanoff could see right through anything he was about to say.

“It’s just one e-mail she sent to herself, Steve. Not to you. There’s probably a good reason she wasn’t ready to share whatever she sent with you just yet.”

He exhaled slowly through his nose. “You’re probably right,” he admitted carefully. “And in any other situation, you know I wouldn’t do this. But I need to know if what we’ve been investigating can shed any light on what might have happened to her.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows and gave him a long look. “Okay,” she said finally making him feel even guiltier that she wasn’t going to take his phone away and delete the email before he
could look at it, or stand around arguing with him any longer. “Just don’t be surprised if you don’t like what you find.” She left him with another quirk of her eyebrows and a friendly pat of his arm. “Oh,” she paused and turned around. “And you might want to think about what you’re going to tell Thor when he and Jane get back from Asgard—not that you’re not going to find her by then”—she added quickly, before she grimaced. “You know how he about his—”


“Call me if you need me,” she said over her shoulder as she restarted her retreat. “I’m around.”

He exercised enough restraint to consider Natasha’s warning all the way back to his apartment. He set his phone on the kitchen counter and managed to make himself a pot of coffee and weighed the pros and cons of taking a shower before he reached for the device and opened the file Tony had sent him.

He recognized Natalia Rusakov’s flowery prose almost immediately and swallowed hard while his eyes scanned the translated words, rearranging them to make better sense of the description of her admirer.

Steve clenched his jaw and continued reading about this man and his dark, shadowed eyes and his metal arm. He tried to push back the anger that had begun to simmer in his stomach. That Darcy would keep this from him—that she didn’t trust him enough to share this when she’d first read it—was almost enough to push Natasha’s warning right out of his mind.

He exhaled slowly and dropped his eyes to the last line on the page: *Because while he can be kind and gentle, I can tell he could be dangerous too.*

Steve’s fingers curled into his palm, his nails digging into the skin. Even if he’d never heard of the Winter Soldier, that would have reminded him of Bucky. His best friend in the world; the one who’d saved him more times than he could count. The same man who so effortlessly picked off his enemies with a sniper rifle, who could always handle himself in a fight, who was never the same after Steve brought him back from behind enemy lines, whose eyes were dark and full of those shadows Natalia was so drawn to.

This diary was all but saying that Bucky killed Natalia—or at the very least, was one of the last people to see her alive. It was a big arrow—a win for the police; a major block in the case they were building against his best friend.

He set his phone down and pressed his hands together, leaning his forehead against his steepled fingers. So why hadn’t she sent it to her lieutenant? Was it simply because she hadn’t had time between DC and Chicago and everything that happened with Kitty? Why hadn’t she told him, at least? They had been sitting right across from each other in that motel room when she’d read it. Had Darcy thought he’d destroy this entry if he’d found it first? That he’d risk her job and his own freedom to keep Bucky safe?

Steve let out a joyless laugh. It wasn’t that far off, considering how he’d reacted thus far. He dropped his head into his arms and let out a groan of frustration. He was exhausted and confused and, if he was going to admit it, terrified. Despite why she’d hidden this from him, Darcy was out there somewhere, relying on her friends and on him to help her.
And he was in his apartment, trying to talk himself out of being angry with her.

He was just about to get up and go back on the street when his phone vibrated and Sam’s face appeared on his screen. He picked it up and answered around a sigh. “Uh, hey, can I—”

“Nope,” Sam cut him off, surprising Steve enough that he pulled the phone away and checked the screen again, making sure he was speaking to the right person.

“Sam?”

“Oh, so you do remember me!” Sam exclaimed. “Thank God, because I thought maybe something happened to wipe your memory.”

“Uh…” he fumbled, his brow furrowed in confusion.

“Which would really be the only acceptable excuse for coming to my city and checking into a shitty motel with some brunette and not even bothering to call and say hello.” Sam sighed and Steve allowed himself a brief flash of guilt. “Honestly, Rogers, what would your mother say?”

He rolled his eyes for the second time that morning. “She’d be disappointed,” he said obediently. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you, Sam. I really am.”

“Yeah, yeah…”

“But there’s a situation happening and I can’t—”

“Listen,” Sam cut him off again. “This isn’t a social call. I mean, I am pissed that you didn’t want to introduce me to your girlfriend. But that’s not why I’m calling.”

He couldn’t stop himself from sighing again. “She’s not my—”

“Bucky’s in New York.”

The phone almost fell from his hand. “What?”

“Every lead I’ve been able to pick up, every trail I’ve been following is all saying the same thing: he’s in New York. I just wanted to give you the heads up. There’s a plane headed your way in about an hour, so I’ll check in with you when I’ve got a game plan.”

Steve felt his mouth open and close, the words sucked from him before he could even form them. His breath caught somewhere in the back of his throat. “Are you—” he tried to inhale before starting again. “Sam, are you sure?”

“As sure as I’ve been about anything in the last year,” Sam said seriously. “He’s there and I’m on my way and we’re going to find him this time.”

He was gone before Steve could choke out another word.

The phone slipped out of his grasp for good this time and clattered to the floor. He dropped into the nearest chair and sat down, his heart hammering somewhere between his chest and his throat.

The words from Natalia’s diary echoed in his mind.

Bucky was back in New York.
And if what the evidence was saying was true…

If Darcy wasn’t dead yet, she was going to be very, very soon.

***

She was aware of the pounding in her head before she could peel open her swollen eyes. Her mouth was full, stuffed with salty tasting cotton jammed between her teeth and secured with duct tape that pulled at her skin and lips. The steel cutting into her wrists were from her own handcuffs, pulling her arms above her head and locking her in place.

*Handcuffed*, she catalogued, struggling in vain to move her hands. *Gagged*, she decided, taking a deep inhale through her nose when even swallowing proved to be almost impossible.

*Head trauma*, she noted with a groan muffled against her gag. *Possible concussion.*

She managed to move her head to one side, rough fabric rubbing against her tender, bruised cheek. Her feet felt dead and equally useless when she tried to kick them. She bent her knees, trying to tug her legs up toward her chest when she felt the harsh bite of rope against the skin of her ankles.

*Fuck.*

It was the first conscious thought Darcy was able to process as the world began to swim back into focus. She inhaled again and forced herself to remain calm, to keep making lists of what she could use to aid her in her escape, to not start panicking or crying or really acknowledging how well and truly fucked she was.

Because if she started that shit, she knew she’d never be able to get back in control.

Darcy was focusing on keeping her breathing steady, trying to take stock of the side of the room she could see, waiting for something that would jump out as a saving grace. She almost didn’t hear the man approach her blind side.

She couldn’t see him, couldn’t make out anything except the nearly imperceptible shift in the air as he crouched on the floor beside her. If he hadn’t started speaking, she might have missed him all together.

There was no mistaking the crispness of Russian words. He spoke with a tenderness she hadn’t been expecting, his voice faint and almost calming. He almost had her believing he could help her—that he was there to keep her safe.

It wasn’t until she felt five cold, metal fingers along her back that the heavy weight of fear dropped into her stomach and one thought rose above the frantic din inside Darcy’s head:

*I’m going to die.*
Chapter End Notes

This took a lot longer than it probably should have, but I was dealing with work garbage and then the death of a very special person in my life. So real life sucked just hard enough to take me away from fic-writing, but I hope you enjoy this chapter, which is not as long as I was hoping but...y'know. All that stuff I just said.

Oh, and if you're still reading, I love you. Come say hi on tumblr: idontgettechnology. I love making new friends.
Ten

Chapter Summary

This fic, and Darcy are still alive. That's all I'm saying.

Chapter Notes

I LIVE! I know, this took WAY WAY WAY too long. But life is an ever-loving bitch and never ever ever goes according to plan. A lot of things and dreams and people died in the last six months and this is the first time I've felt even remotely like working on this little fic. So if you're still with me, rage on. I'm sorry I left you. And I'm sorry this isn't longer. Or better. Or...whatever.

When Darcy’s eyes fluttered open next, it was to an almost blinding light that stung her senses. She closed them again, turning her head away from the source—the window to her left. Darcy groaned again, surprised to find her mouth free of its gag; her lips chapped, but no longer stuck painfully to the silver patch of duct tape. Her hands, unbound and resting at her sides, came up to swipe cautiously over her face, feeling for bruises and bindings she knew should still be there.

Somewhere, just beyond what she could make out, she heard the rise and fall of voices. Muffled, as if someone had stuffed her ears with cotton. When she finally cracked an eye open again, she was surprised to find she was not in the dimly lit crawlspace where she’d passed out. Everything was clean, white, sterile. She waited for the medicinal hospital smell to invade her nose, but nothing came.

Vaguely, she wondered why no machines were beeping or humming with white noise.

“I don’t want her to be the next girl I load up in body bag,” a familiar voice was saying, pulling her momentarily away from assessing her surroundings. “Do you want her to be the girl who dies weeping and begging for her life? Or would you rather she has the courage to wrench the knife from her attacker’s hand and stab him in the throat?”

Her head still swimming, Darcy pulled herself up to sitting and forced her eyes open all the way, surprised to find her parents standing at the foot of her bed. They looked younger—her mother’s hair was still dark brown, missing its liberal streaks of silver. Her father was still wearing his uniform—the patch on the sleeve reading Stamford Police Department. He paused, arms still crossed over his chest, and turned his attention to her. “If that ever happens, Bumblebee, it’s stab and twist. Got it?” He stabbed an invisible knife into the air and rotated his wrist. “Stab and twist.”

“Stab and twist,” she repeated numbly.

This wasn’t happening.

This couldn’t be happening because this already happened. When she was six and found
herself the center of the neighborhood bully’s attention.

Her father had come home and bandaged her skinned knees, argued briefly with her mother about whether or not they should call the boy’s parents, and then taken her into the garage and given his six year old daughter a crash course in self-defense.

“What weren’t you doing, Bumblebee?” her father asked her now, moving to sit on the bed beside her. He looked older now—like he had the last time she saw him. No more uniform, wire-rimmed glasses, wrinkles around his blue eyes. “What did I tell you to make sure you’re always doing? No matter what the job?”

She wet her lips. “Protect myself,” she said softly.

“Can’t help anybody if you’re dead, babe,” he shook his head sadly.

“No…” she said. “Guess I can’t…”

They were quiet for a few, long moments before he clapped his hands to his legs and cleared his throat. “So, I guess it’s a good thing you’re not dead yet.”

Darcy blinked and tilted her head in confusion as her father stood and offered her his hand. “Yeah…” she said, wishing she could really feel his hand clasped around hers, pulling her to her feet. Wishing he was there to save her, to help her. “Yeah, that’s good…”

“You don’t believe me?” he asked, looking almost amused.

“I don’t know what to believe right now,” she admitted as her feet hit the floor and she stood up.

“Well,” he weighed this in his mind. “That’s understandable. But if you can’t trust yourself, trust your old man. You’re not dead and you might even be okay.” He raised a hand and Darcy thought he might touch her cheek with a dash of his usual tenderness. “But,” he said seriously bringing his index and middle fingers together to press firmly between her eyes, “you need to wake up.”

Her eyes flew open and the accompanying sharp inhale sucked the cloth between her teeth even further down her throat. She tried gagging against the duct tape still covering her lips but was rewarded with a running nose and watering eyes.

The room in which she’d found herself was quiet, no creaking floorboards or muffled voices from the next room. Darcy twisted within her restraints, trying to get a glimpse of the man who’d snuck up on her before.

The one who’d brought her here.

Who’d dragged his metal fingers down her back and disappeared again without another word.

Darcy struggled against her restraints for another moment, cringing as the ropes and metal cut sharply into her skin. *I’m going to have ligature marks just like the other girls,* she thought before she could stop herself. Unwelcome thoughts began to flood her mind. Images of her body, ashen and bloated being dredged from the river. Her hair tangled with leaves and garbage. Her mother—her sweet librarian mother, who cried over just about everything—would be devastated. Her father too.
Her friends, her roommate, Jane, Thor, Eddie.

Her…Steve.

The thought of Steve brought another sting to her nose and the uninvited rush of tears to the back of her throat.

Steve and his sweet, bashful smile. His ears that turned red at the tips when she said something that made him laugh. Things she’d been pushing away for weeks began drifting back to the surface of her memory. The sound of his snores penetrating the thin wall that divided their hotel rooms. The way she’d fallen asleep upright on the plane ride home from Chicago, but woken up laying comfortably on her side, covered with a thick blanket. The way he so deliberately kept his eyes on her face when she was dressed for undercover duty. The conversation she’d overheard between him and Eddie before she’d felt that blow to the back of her head.

Her eyebrows narrowed.

Hit.

She’d been hit. Not drugged. Her eyes flew to the exposed skin of her inner arms. Nothing to suggest a puncture. Not like Alex Cohen, or Theresa Blackwell, Ruby Lawrence or Kitty. They had puncture wounds, injection sights.

Darcy swallowed hard again and moved her wrists against the sharp metal of her cuffs. If she could just get her hand free, she could check her neck for evidence of an injection there. She wiggled her right hand again before she stopped and almost laughed.

_No, Darcy_, a voice that sounded alarmingly like her father’s said in her head. _If you can get your hands free, you can get out of here. You can worry about your neck later._

Right.

She huffed out a breath of frustration and pulled her neck upward, straining to see how they’d configured her hands above her head. Nothing out of the ordinary, she decided. Just through a bar of the headboard.

From the other room, Darcy thought she heard a sound—possibly a window opening. She stopped her struggling and held in a breath, waiting for her captor to come closer. Waiting for the muffled cadence of voices again. Waiting for some indication of how long this nightmare was going to continue.

But there was nothing. She waited a few more moments before she turned her attention back to the handcuffs. It could have been from the next apartment over, she told herself. They might not even be coming back.

A chill ran up her spine. That happened sometimes too. Last year in Queens two traffic cops had been abducted, chained in a basement and abandoned. It took more than a week to find them and by then, only one of them was alive; starved and dehydrated and never the same again.

Would that be better or worse than the picture her imagination was painting?

She shook her head again. _You can get out of this, Darce._ It was Steve’s voice whispering to her this time. _You can get yourself out of here._

She wiggled her fingers again, keeping the blood circulating to give her better motion. She
pulled her fingers together and tried to slip the heel of her hand through. It was pointless, she decided after a few moments of trying. But she’d had to try—had to test how tight they’d made them. Darcy huffed again through her nose. There was one way to get out of her restraints, of course. But it wasn’t exactly an attractive option.

If she did it, she reminded herself, she’d have to do it with her left hand—she needed her right hand in working order.

A floorboard creaked.

She stopped again, her heart pounding in her throat. She was certain she’d heard it that time.

You’re running out of time, Steve’s voice reminded her firmly. Get back to work. She worked the filthy rag in her mouth between her teeth and prepared to clamp her jaws down hard in case she couldn’t contain her shriek. There was the distinct sound of footsteps on the stairs and the metallic rattle of keys in the door.

Now or never, Bumblebee.

Darcy waited one more moment for the sound of the door swinging open before she smashed the edge of her left thumb against the headboard. The pain was sharp and instant, black dots blossoming behind her eyes as she screamed against her gag. She forced herself not to look up at the sight of her mangled hand. The blood had begun flowing down her arm from the bite the cuffs took out of her dislocated joint. She squeezed her eyes shut, breathing heavily through her nose. It took only a moment for her to realize that the screaming hadn’t stopped.

In fact, it was only getting louder.

Glass shattered in the room next door and the structure rumbled with the sound of something heavy crashing to the floor. Her heart lodged somewhere high in throat and she began scrambling, taking a few rapid, steadying breaths in and out before she shut her eyes again and yanked her hand through the sharp metal handcuff, clamping her jaws around another howl of pain.

It didn’t matter, she told herself. Her hand would heal. But right now, her hand was free, which meant the rest of her could be free if she was fast enough to escape what was going on beyond her crawlspace. Her arms felt dead and heavy as they swung down from over her head and she was able to sit up. The pain shooting up her left side was blinding—it kept her from focusing on the anguished, panicked confusion she could hear; kept her working to pick apart the knotted nylon rope around her ankles. Bits of skin from her lips flew off as she ripped off the duct tape and spit out her gag.

She was lightheaded by the time she was able to put her feet on the ground and stand with shaking knees. Her gun was gone—her badge too. Darcy’s eyes scanned the room, searching for something she could use as a weapon—something she could jam into the neck of her attacker. 

Stab and twist, she repeated like she had when she was a child. Stab and twist. The only thing she could find was a cracked, plastic yellow comb, wedged between the floor and the wall beside the bed. The knuckles of her right hand turned white as she gripped her pathetic weapon.

The world was tilting as the blood rushed to her head and she made her way forward, toward the door. She clenched the comb between her teeth as she tried the door, surprised when it popped open without a struggle. With her weapon back in her hand, held in front of her in a trembling arm, Darcy took a step into the hallway.
The noises she’d heard—the cries and crashes—had stopped. It was quiet again. Eerily quiet. Her mind began to race again. They might have heard her moving around, might be waiting around the corner to haul her back and finish her off this time.

Her heart thrummed so loudly in her ears, Darcy was sure they could hear it in the next room. Her eyes fell to her cracked comb again. Pitiful, she declared and considered dropping it. But that would make a noise too.

What had happened? Why had they gone quiet?

The hallway opened only a few feet ahead of her. Even with her shuffling, unsteady footsteps, she reached the edge of the doorway in moments. If they were smart, she diagnosed, they’d be waiting for her on the other side of this wall. They’d grab her as she made her way to the door. She’d have to be faster—have to have enough strength to jam the broken plastic edge into an artery and hope the surprise bought her enough time to escape.

It was, in fact, a terrible plan.

Darcy took a deep breath and tried not to think about her father, or Steve, or wish that someone was going to burst through the door and rescue her at any moment. No one knew where she was—no one could track her anymore. No one was coming.

One more breath. One more thought spared for her father’s advice. She took a step around the corner and dropped her comb on the ground.

Two bodies lay sprawled on the ground. Men. Big, burly men. The kind who could have easily knocked her out and dragged her up here. Their necks were broken. Heads twisted to impossible angles that turned her stomach. They’d died with their eyes open, faces contorted in horror and confusion.

The glass she’d heard shattering earlier had been from a spotted mirror that lay in shards beneath their dead bodies.

She could have run—should have run—but the sight of the carnage rooted her in place, mouth open and running dry. Stomach churning. Bile rising in her throat.

It wasn’t until a floorboard creaked that she realized she wasn’t alone.

He was bigger than she would have thought—bigger even than the stories Steve had told her made him seem. His hair brushed the tops of his shoulders in dark, dirty waves. He was standing at the open window, facing away from her. She wouldn’t even have thought he knew she was there if he hadn’t looked back, over the glinting silver of his left shoulder and locked eyes with her.

“Bucky?” she breathed, awash with confusion.

In the moment she took to blink, he was gone. Like he’d never been there at all. She wanted to go to the window and follow him—try to make sense of what she was seeing. But the bodies in the way. The glass against her bare feet. She made for the door instead.

She’d stumbled down a flight and a half of the rickety stairs before she heard it. Her name. Someone was calling her name.

“Dee?”
No, not *her* name. The name they gave her.

“Dee? Baby? Is that you?”

Her knees gave out just as Ginger reached her at the bottom of the stairs. Amber was rushing up the stairs behind her, her blonde hair suddenly the most beautiful thing Darcy had ever seen. “How did—” she managed before she felt them wrap her arms over each of their slim frames and balance her weight between them.

“We’ve been looking for you for two days, baby girl,” Amber said, grunting with effort.

“Searched every crack house and shit hole this side of the river for you,” Ginger said, unaware that her words brought a fresh rush of tears to Darcy’s eyes. She stopped their awkward shuffling and tightened her grip on Darcy’s waist. “You’re okay, sweetheart,” she said quietly. “We got you now.”

The adrenaline had dissipated, leaving just dark spots in front of her eyes again. The throbbing in her wrist and hand felt like nothing compared to the effort it was taking just to keep her feet shuffling.

“You’re okay,” Amber was saying over and over again. “You’re okay now.”

“I’ll tell you this much,” Ginger added with a little laugh as they reached the bottom level. “You are one lucky son of a bitch, Dee. Somebody’s lookin’ out for that great ass of yours.”

“Bucky,” she managed to choke out the name again as the world began to darken. “It was…” she couldn’t keep her knees from buckling. “It was Bucky.” She wanted to go back, explain what she’d seen. What she was trying to piece together about what had happened, but the stairwell was darkening.

“Dee, c’mon, honey, stay with us,” she heard Amber plead just as everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

I was too impatient and ashamed to ask my beta to read over it. So any and all mistakes are mine.
Oh, and "stab and twist" is from this little beauty:
http://violentacres.com/archives/64/how-to-fight/

Follow me on tumblr at idontgettechnology. Darcyland friendships are the greatest.
Eleven

Chapter Summary

Wherein everyone's got something to say about what happened to Darcy.

Chapter Notes

Wow. Wow wow wow WOW! I was so overwhelmed by love and support...I couldn't have expected that. Seriously, Darcyland. I love you guys so much, not just for your kindness and understanding, but for giving me the inspiration and encouragement to keep writing this story that I love and giving me a platform on which to play.

I can't say it enough. My cup runneth over.

Steve had waited forty-three hours for news about Darcy. It seemed outrageous that he had to wait any longer to be given the go-ahead to enter her hospital room. Still, he forced himself to remain calm. The doctors and police officers were right, he reminded himself over and over again as he traded pacing his apartment for pacing the hospital hallways. He wasn’t a doctor, wasn’t a cop, and he wasn’t family. He had no right to see her before anyone else.

His eyes were beginning to burn from lack of rest. It wasn’t the longest he’d been without sleep, but it was close. Eddie had been the one to call him from the station with news that Darcy had been found—by her hookers, no less—and was being treated at Brooklyn Hospital. Eddie had been barred from visitation too. Eddie wasn’t a pacer though—he was sitting with his elbows dug into his knees, resting his chin on his folded hands.

Her room was being watched by two rookie officers Steve didn’t recognize. “You’d think fucking Captain America would get you bumped up higher on the rescue list,” one of them said with a chuckle to the other, when they thought he had paced out of earshot.

He bristled, but kept his mouth shut. They hadn’t meant anything by it, he told himself. There was no point in contradiction—they’d already drawn conclusions and arguing would only make him seem guilty. Better to just—

“Excuse me?” Eddie’s voice snapped Steve’s attention in his direction. In the time it had taken Steve to deem this argument pointless, Eddie had gotten to his feet and crossed the hall to Darcy’s door; he crossed his arms over his broad chest. The two rookies fell silent as Steve approached, pretending to not have heard anything. “What did you just say?” Eddie asked the one who had spoken—a kid who couldn’t have been more than twenty-one with olive skin and a large nose.

“Oh, nothing,” he coughed and looked down at his feet. “Sir.”

“Because it sounds like you were making a fairly uncouth statement about your fellow
officer,” he continued, taking a step closer. “Your fellow officer who, I shouldn’t need to remind you, was almost killed today.” He waited for another long, calculated moment while Steve felt a rush of affection for Darcy’s partner. “I also shouldn’t have to remind you that who Officer Lewis chooses to spend her time with is none of your business—”

“No, sir.” The other cop shook his head, and swallowed, keeping his eyes down at his shoes.

“But that in this instance, she was being assisted by Captain Rogers, in a professional capacity and to imply anything else is disrespectful to the character and reputation of both your fellow officer and Captain Rogers.” He paused again. “Do you understand?”

They both nodded quickly. “It’s just—” the olive-skinned one stammered. “I heard her say—”

“You heard her say what?” Eddie asked quickly, reminding Steve a little of Fury in the moment.

His throat bobbed with another hard swallow. “I just heard her say that Captain America snores like a motherfucker…” he coughed again, a deep blush forming under the collar of his uniform. “Sir.”

The hard line of Eddie’s frown faltered for only the briefest of moments as his eyes flickered to Steve for a second. “She did say something like that, Cap,” he said with an apologetic shrug.

Steve felt his own features betraying him with the urge to laugh. He settled for a shrug that mirrored Eddie’s. “It’s not the worst thing anyone’s ever said about me.”

Eddie’s gaze fell back on the two rookies as he cleared his throat. “You wanna gossip like a buncha middle school cheerleaders then you can go back to the station. If you actually want to work and make sure that whoever did this to Officer Lewis can’t do it again, then shut your mouths and get back to it.”

They were walking together to get their second cup of bad hospital coffee before Steve finally forced himself to bring up what had stuck out most about Eddie’s impassioned speech. “Fairly uncouth?” he asked when they were far enough down the hall that the rookies couldn’t hear them.

The bounce of Eddie’s shoulders was almost defiant as they rounded the corner. “My mother’s an English professor and my father’s a prosecutor,” he said with a sideways glance in Steve’s direction. “A strong vocabulary’s a very valuable thing.”

Steve couldn’t help his grin. “Thanks for calling me,” he said after they’d acquired their coffee and returned to their uncomfortable plastic chairs.

Eddie nodded as he took a grimaced sip of his Styrofoam cup. “I figured you’d want to be here when she wakes up.”

“Where are her parents?” he asked, realizing that Darcy had never told him anything about them.

“They were visiting family in Portland when I talked to her dad this morning—they should be back by tomorrow.”
He felt his brow furrow. “Do they know what happened to her?”

Eddie shook his head. “Look,” he said before Steve had a chance to point out how unfair that was. “I’m not sure if every cop does this, but Lewis and I have an agreement. She doesn’t call Becca unless there’s proof that I’m either definitely alive or definitely dead and I do the same for her. There’s nothing worse than an MIA notification.”

Steve nodded with a thoughtful frown. “Just so long as they know she’s okay now.”

Eddie hummed with agreement. “She couldn’t tell them what she was getting into anyway, y’know?” he glanced sideways. “Why make ’em worry?” The corner of his lips twitched into another smile. “That’s what we’re here for.”

“Right,” Steve leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees again.

It was only another few long, quiet minutes before the door to Darcy’s hospital room opened and two doctors and Sergeant Nowicki exited. They spoke briefly to one another before the doctors went in one direction and Nowicki looked at the two of them. “She’s awake,” he said gruffly, nearly knocking Steve out of his chair with relief. “Kimball.”

Eddie stood up. “What’s up, Sarge?”

“She asked you to call her parents and someone named Jane Foster?” he raised his eyebrows. “Said you know who that is?”

Eddie was nodding. “Sure thing. I’m on it.”

Nowicki waited until Eddie had taken off down the hall on his phone before he turned his attention to Steve, who had abandoned his coffee in favor of standing at attention with his hands at his sides. “Rogers,” he extended a hand which Steve was more than happy to shake, despite how he’d been brushed off at the initial crime scene. “I mentioned you were here. She’d uh,” he coughed. “She’d like to speak with you.”

“Is that alright with you, sir?” he asked. “I’m fine waiting until Kimball gets back with some news about her parents.”

The sergeant scoffed. “Oh hell, I’m not going to be the one to tell that girl she can’t see whoever she wants after the shit she’s been through…” he shook his head. “Just go in and say hello, Rogers. She asked for you.”

The room was dimly lit with the late afternoon sunlight still shining through the closed blinds. Darcy’s bed was in the shadowed valley of the curtains and machines beeping and humming with her vital signs.

He took a few slow, cautious steps in and let the door close behind him before he took a deep breath and approached the side of her bed. He forced himself to focus on the tired smile that had come over Darcy’s lips so that he wouldn’t stare at the dark, angry ligature marks on her right wrist or the cast that encased her left hand. He didn’t want to look at the bruises on the side of her face, the welt on her lip that looked like it had only just stopped bleeding.

“You look like shit,” she said when he finally reached her bedside.

Steve felt the breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding slip out of him in a whoosh. “You’re one to talk,” he joked back, pleased when she was able to grin back at him. Their smiles were short lived. Darcy reached her good hand out and squeezed it hard around Steve’s fingers. He
squeezed back and reached his other hand up to brush her hair out of her eyes. “It’s okay, Darce,” he said around the lump that had risen in his throat.

Her own eyes grew tearful for a moment before she managed a small, wet smile. “I’m really glad to see you,” she said in a tight whisper.

Steve turned his wrist and let the back of his finger brush delicately over the bruise around her right temple. “I’m really glad to see you too,” he echoed, bending down to kiss her forehead. He couldn’t help but smile as he dropped his chin and looked her in the eye. “And I do not snore like a motherfucker.”

He heard Darcy breathe out a smile as he kissed her forehead again. She moved her hand against his so she could tangle their fingers together. “Yes you do.”

***

“I really feel like you’d be more comfortable if we could do this down at the station,” Rodriguez was saying when Steve stopped by on the third day of Darcy’s hospital stay.

There had been waves of visitors the first forty-eight hours she was conscious. Cops and parents and Jane and Thor and friends and roommates had descended upon Darcy’s hospital room. Hugging and crying for offering flowers and balloons and baked goods all at once before her doctors had declared her officially on the verge of being overwhelmed. He insisted on a schedule that included daily visits from everyone at different times.

The afternoon was for friends and neighbors. Ginger had been by every day and on this particular day, she was seated in his usual chair beside Darcy’s empty bed. Rodriguez looked up when he walked in and registered the confusion on his face. “She had to go for a CT scan,” she said before turning her attention back to Ginger, who only crossed her thin arms over her chest.

“Sure,” she said with a flippant shrug. “I go down to the station, you pat me down outta protocol and the next thing I know my black ass is sittin’ in jail when I was just here to visit my girl and make sure she’s okay.”

Rodriguez narrowed her dark brown eyes. “Are you implying that if I were to pat you down I’d find something that would give me cause to arrest you?”

Ginger was entirely unafraid as she sat back in her chair “Well you sure as shit ain’t gonna search me and find out,” she asserted and directed a devilish smile in Steve’s direction. “Hey soldier boy,” she purred with a wiggle of her talon-like fingernails.

Steve was proud of himself for not blushing. “Ma’am,” he said with a nod and pressed his back against the wall beside the door, wondering if he’d be better off coming back later on.

“If you wouldn’t mind giving me your full attention,” Rodriguez cleared her throat. “We were talking about your statement.”

Ginger kissed her teeth in irritation. “You already got my statement when I rescued her, remember? And you’re welcome, by the way.”

Rodriguez rolled her eyes. “You’ve been thanked, Ginger.”

“Then what else do you need from me?”

The officer looked down at the papers in her hand. “How did you happen to find the
house where Officer Lewis was being held captive?"

It was Ginger’s turn to roll her eyes. “Like I said, we’d all been out since she got grabbed. I figured if someone was really grabbin’ girls off our block then someone wouldn’a been talking about it. So I asked Skinny and Dirty Joe if they knew something and they sent me to E who said that she heard that someone knew there was a cop sniffing around.”

Rodriguez scanned her papers again. “So someone knew Officer Lewis was there undercover and specifically went after her?”

Ginger shrugged. “I don’t know. All I know is that E sent me and Amber over to Drake who thought that Ignacio and Fuzz—”

“Stop,” Rodriguez held up a hand. “Do any of these people have real names?”

“Oh, sure,” Ginger said, turning her eyes wide and innocent, her words suddenly crisp and with clear, mocking diction. “I also have copies of their social security cards and photo IDs for you too if that would help.”

Steve was certain that both women were going to leave this interview with headaches after all the eye-rolling they were doing.

“Go on,” Rodriguez said with a heavy sigh.

“So Fuzz thought he remembered Roof talkin’ about gettin’ with some girl who sorta sounded like Dee,” Ginger became a little more animated at this turn. “And Roof’s a real piece of shit, y’know? Like it totally didn’t surprise me to hear that he would’ve picked up some girl and tied her up ‘cause he’s too cheap to pay, y’know?”

Rodriguez was still scribbling. “Roof? As in…Roofies?”

Ginger’s face twisted in confusion. “You think we all walk around with nametags or something? I don’t know why he’s called Roof. He’s just Roof.” She stopped and frowned. “I mean, he’s dead now…so who cares, right?”

The police officer sighed again. “Not really, Ginger.” She shuffled her papers. “Just one more thing. When Lieutenant Driscoll asked if Officer Lewis gave any indication as to the nature of her capture or make an effort to identify her attackers, you said she didn’t say anything. But later, when Amber Vincent was interviewed, she made the statement: She said something like ‘Lucky’ and then passed out.” She looked up. “Do you remember that?”

Steve’s heart stopped in his chest. The mild amusement with which he’d been observing the interview faded instantly.

“I remembered that she mumbled something and then blacked the fuck out,” Ginger repeated.

“Do you think she could have been saying ‘Bucky’?” Rodriguez asked, not noticing the shift in Steve’s posture and attention across the room.

Ginger shrugged again. “Maybe,” she admitted. “She could’ve been saying anything. She was fucked up.”

“Who was fucked up?” Darcy asked, surprising the three occupants of her room as she was wheeled back in by a nurse in minty green scrubs. She shot Steve a quick smile before she
frowned in confusion at the two women. “Rodriguez, you’re not interrogating her again, are you?”

“I’m just trying to get a sense of what happened, Lewis,” Rodriguez said tiredly.

“What happened is she saved my life,” Darcy reminded firmly. “That’s all you need to know about her.”

Despite Darcy snapping at her, Rodriguez helped the nurse get Darcy back into bed and covered her up with the quilt her roommate had brought from her apartment. “How are you feeling, anyway, Lewis?”

“Less like I got hit by a train than I did yesterday.”

“She’ll be back to normal in no time,” the nurse chirped encouragingly before she added, “You need anything else, just call. Okay, Darce?”

“Thanks Fatima,” she smiled around a grimace as she accidently put too much weight on her cast.

“Anything coming back to you?” her fellow officer asked gently, shuffling her papers back into a tan folder and tucking it all into her large leather purse. “Anything you might have forgotten to tell us?”

Darcy swallowed and shook her head with a frown. She stretched her neck from side to side and rolled her shoulder. “I wish,” she admitted with a heavy sigh.

Steve frowned from his place by the door and watched with interest while Darcy rubbed her earlobe and fidgeted in place until Rodriguez looked up from digging in her purse.

“Everything’s kind of a blur,” Darcy continued. “I honestly don’t even remember all what I was able to tell you guys to begin with.”

Her colleague looked sympathetic. “Sarge says it’s all stress related,” she assured her with a great deal more compassion than she’d shown Ginger. “Don’t worry about it; we can talk more when you’re cleared to go home.”

“Thanks J-Rod,” she said with a smile as the two women tapped knuckles. She waited until the officer had left the room before she cleared her throat. “Ginge, can I ask a favor?”

“Bitch I already saved your life; I’m outta freebies where you’re concerned,” Ginger joked and unfolded herself from her confrontational stance. She got to her feet. “I know, I know,” she glanced over in Steve’s direction. “Don’t say anything to anybody. Play dumb. Stick with the statement.”

His frown deepened with confusion as Darcy accepted her brief hug. “Just until I can figure out a game plan.”

Ginger grabbed her purse and sauntered toward the door. She stopped a few inches from where he was standing. “I know I said I was outta freebies,” she said, dropping her voice down into that seductive purr again. “But if you ever wanted to thank me properly for getting your girl back in one piece,” she ran her claws over his forearm and winked. “I’d consider a military discount.”

“Ginger!” Darcy exclaimed, throwing up her hands.

They could hear Ginger cackling to herself all the way down the hall as Steve shut the
door behind her and shook his head. “She’s something else.”

“It was Bucky.”

His eyes shot up from where he’d looked down at his shoes. Darcy’s whole demeanor had changed from the happy-to-be-alive jokester she’d been a moment ago. Her teeth pressed into her bottom lip and a fine line of concentration had appeared between her dark eyebrows.

“What did you say?” he asked, not ready to believe her while he took a few uneasy steps toward her bed.

“I didn’t mean to say that,” she said, looking distraught. “I was going to lead into it. I was going to tell you to sit down and that I know you know I was lying to Joz just now,” she motioned in the direction, Rodriguez is just left. “But that this was important and I had a good reason for lying and that’s—”

“Bucky,” Steve repeated cautiously, taking a seat on the edge of her bed.

“He…” she pressed her lips together while Steve prepared himself for the worst. Bucky had drugged her. Beat her. Made her break her own wrist to get free. “He saved me, Steve.”

When he looked up again, she’d been watching for his reaction. “Are you…” he swallowed hard. “Are you sure?”

“I knew if Ginger told them the truth about what I said—” she shook her head. “I love my job,” she reiterated, “but sometimes they get tunnel vision. I wanted to tell you first, before I told them anything.”

“In case they thought you meant he was the one who attacked you,” Steve finished for her. “How can you be so sure that he wasn’t?” He wanted to believe her. He hated that it was his voice raising doubts about Bucky. *His* Bucky, who might be the only reason Darcy was sitting alive in front of him today.

“Unless those guys he killed were working for him and he was just cleaning up the trash,” she said with a roll of her shoulders. “But why not kill me too? Why not drug me like the other girls? None of the MO was the same.”

“You think those guys were planning a copycat?”

She shrugged again. “I don’t know. But he could have killed me a million different ways while I was in that room,” she insisted. “He didn’t.” She waited a few long moments before she spoke again. “I don’t know what that means, Steve, but I don’t think he’s the man we’ve been looking for.” She sighed. “I know the way Driscoll works. Between the case they already had against him and Amber’s statement about what I said—” she shook her head. “We don’t have much time before they decide he’s the one responsible for what happened to me too.”

“But if we tell them it’s not him—”

“It’s not that easy,” she shook her head. “We can’t just discredit their best suspect without evidence. We need proof if we want them to believe us.” She hooked him with a very serious look. “We need to be able to offer a clear, credible alternative narrative to explain what’s been happening since last April.”

“If it’s not Bucky that’s been doing all this…”
“That means there’s someone who wants us to think that it is,” Darcy finished for him, nodding grimly. “Which means we really need to find him before this all goes south.”

His mind whirled as he took a long, steadying breath in and let it out. His mouth set into a firm line. “We’re going to need some help.”

Chapter End Notes

All mistakes and typos are mine.

Come and find me on Tumblr at idontgettechnology. Darcyland friendships are the best.
Twelve

Chapter Summary

Let's get this show on the road, hmm?

Chapter Notes

Oh God this is just getting out of hand. I'm sorry to keep you all waiting for updates, but life is life. I'm also sorry that more doesn't get accomplished in this chapter. I got waylaid and...well, here we are. Hope you enjoy anyway and as always, I remain eternally grateful to those who are still with me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Darcy didn’t like having to ask Jane for favors. In her eyes, Jane had done more than enough for her for ten lifetimes—including almost getting her killed more than twice—and she had enough on her plate without Darcy showing up asking for help.

But desperate times call for desperate measures, she reminded herself as she rode the elevator up to the thirty-ninth floor of Stark Tower. And Jane had offered her help before Darcy had even had to ask for it.

“Sweetheart, are you sure you should be thinking about going back to work so soon?” Her mother’s voice interrupted her mental pep talk. Darcy looked up from her phone into Georgia Lewis’ kind green eyes and willed herself to be patient. Her parents loved her, after all. Only wanted the best for her.

But they had been in town for seventeen long, smothering days and she could only take so much. Something had to be done.

Darcy held up her casted wrist. “What, this old thing?” she scoffed. “It’s nothing. And anyway, that’s what the appointment is for,” she lied, resisting the urge to fidget. Surely, her guilty conscience hissed, her mother was going to know she was being dishonest. “I’ve gotta see what my timeline is.”

“We could go with you,” Georgia was offering before her daughter had even finished her sentence. “You know two pairs of ears are always better than one.”

“Mom,” Darcy steadied her mother with a raise of her eyebrows. “I’m twenty-six years old,” she reminded gently. “I can go to the doctor’s by myself.”

“Just don’t get smart on your psych eval,” her father piped up from the other side of the elevator.

Her brow furrowed. “What?”
“If you get shitty with your shrink,” he said as he finished polishing his glasses and slid them back onto his nose. “They’ll keep you on desk duty for God knows how long.”

“It’s a physical,” she reminded. “Not a psych eval.”

“I’m just sayin’…”

“Well, I wouldn’t get shitty with my shrink, Dad,” she argued wearily. In truth, she didn’t want to think about her psych eval and how she was going to lie her way back into the field. If she started thinking about that, she’d have to think about the fact that she hadn’t had a full night’s sleep since she left the hospital and its sweet supply of sleeping pills.

“You know, it wouldn’t kill her to take some time behind the desk, Will,” her mother insisted, making Darcy roll her eyes again.

Mercifully, the elevator slowed to a stop with a musical bell; the doors opened and all thoughts of her post-leave medical evaluations slipped from her thoughts. She’d never wanted to kiss Jane Foster on the mouth as much as she did in that moment.

“Mr. and Mrs. Lewis,” Jane exclaimed as the three of them stepped from the car. “Hi! I’m so glad you’re here!” She gave each of Darcy’s parents a quick hug and a big smile.

That was her Please-Fund-My-Science smile, Darcy noted with a grin of her own. Jane only broke it out for special occasions.

“Jane, it’s so nice to see you,” Georgia said, distracted from meddling in her daughter’s life for a moment. “How have you been? I read your interview in *Scientific American*; I had no idea there were still so few women in STEM fields. The grants you’re working toward funding with Stark Industries are going to be just a godsend to some lucky young women.”

Darcy stopped briefly, momentarily forgetting her ulterior motives for bringing her parents to Jane’s lab that day. Her mother truly was amazing in her ability to remember details and recall exactly the right fact or anecdote to make someone’s day.

Jane’s smile had turned genuine, abandoning the cheese it had held before. “Thank you, Mrs. Lewis. That’s so sweet of you to say; I really hope you’re right.” She softened and turned subtly away from Darcy, directing the Lewis’s attention toward the lab. “I’m glad Darcy was able to spare you for a few hours so I can show you what we’re working on. There’s a whole subdivision of trauma-proof equipment we’ve been developing that we never would have dreamed up if she hadn’t dropped so much of my stuff during her internship.”

“Ha! That’s my girl,” William Lewis declared proudly with a wide grin.

With the tips of her ears turning pink, Darcy clapped a hand to one shoulder of each parent and leaned in between them to plant a kiss on the cheek of her mother and then father. “Enjoy the science, guys. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” She locked eyes with Jane for a quick moment. “And thanks for giving them a tour, Jane.”

“Good luck, Bee,” her dad said, swatting after her affectionately before he turned back to the doors to the R&D department. “Lead the way, Doc.”

Darcy waited until the elevator doors closed before she let out a heavy sigh of relief. *Good morning, Miss Lewis!*

She startled from her relaxed stance against the wall and cleared her throat. “Good
morning, Friday.” Darcy bit her lip. “How…um…how are you?”

Still just a software interface, Miss Lewis, and therefore without feeling, the computer’s voice chirped cheerfully, But thank you for asking. Darcy smiled and reached for the phone in her back pocket. I’ve already alerted Captain Rogers of your arrival; he is waiting for you.

She willed any flipping that those words caused her stomach to stop as she returned her phone to her pocket. It’s not just him that’s waiting, she reminded herself. It’s him and the rest of the team.

But it was only him that was waiting for her outside the elevator; and only him who smiled when she looked up and hitched her purse over her shoulder again. Darcy stopped as he took a step toward her. It had been a week since she’d seen him; since she’d last been able to sneak away from the watchful, loving, suffocating gaze of her parents. And that had only been for twenty minutes when she ran out to get them coffee before they’d woken up. The rest of their communication had been through texting and she didn’t know what to do with the flutter of nervous, awkward excitement she felt, standing in front of him now.

He stopped walking when she did—they’d ended up only a foot apart. Darcy took a moment to assess the abruptness of his halt and the nearly embarrassed look he was trying to disguise before she let herself smile again and reached out to give him a quick hug. “It’s good to see you, Steve,” she said, patting him twice on the shoulder before letting go.

“How’s the hand?” he asked, looking considerably more at ease when they began their walk down the hall.

“It hurts a hell of a lot less than getting chopped into little pieces and fed to the fish in the East River,” she said with a shrug, noting his smile with a mental high-five for keeping things light before she dropped her eyes to examine the minty green on the cast. There were names inked in black magic marker swirling around the plaster. Eddie had let his five year-old draw a picture of what was supposed to be a cat on the outside of her wrist. “Still missing some pretty important signatures, though,” she reminded, looking up at him through her eyelashes.

Steve laughed as they approached the door. “I’ll make sure we pass the pen around before you leave today.”

The ‘team’ that Steve had been able to assemble to help find Bucky was not vast or even full of all of the Avengers she recognized. In fact, despite knowing the names of the whole Avengers Initiative—and even some embarrassing facts that Jane liked to share when she’d had one martini too many—the only person Darcy knew in the room was Steve.

He was quick with introductions after he cleared his throat and grabbed the attention of their other teammates. “Guys, this is Darcy Lewis with NYPD,” he pointed people out as he introduced them. “That’s Natasha Romanoff and Sharon Carter,” he motioned to the pretty blonde woman sitting opposite Natasha on the black leather couch. “Carter’s on loan to us from the CIA.”

Sharon smiled as she pulled her thick hair back into a ponytail. “Technically, Rogers, I’m on vacation from the CIA. And if anyone ever asks, I’m in the Hamptons for a week and couldn’t possibly know what’s going on down here in Manhattan.”

Natasha smiled without showing her teeth. Dressed in all black and with her legs curled under her, she reminded Darcy a little of a jungle cat. Maybe a panther that had just been fed: not immediately dangerous, but not one you wanted to turn your back on anytime soon. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Darcy,” she said, looking up from the file in her hand. “Glad to see you’re out of
Darcy raised her good hand and smiled nervously. “You and me both. It’s nice to meet you both. Thanks for helping us out.”

“Anytime,” Natasha said swiftly, turning her attention back to the words in front of her.

Steve surveyed the living room of his apartment and frowned. “And Sam is…”

“Sam is getting more chips and waiting to make an entrance,” Sam Wilson’s rich voice interrupted anything either woman on the sofa was about to say. Darcy glanced over in the direction of the kitchen and smiled at the man coming toward her. He was handsome and grinning as he set down the bowl of tortilla chips on the coffee table. “Darcy Lewis, NYPD,” he shook his head at Steve’s introduction and wrapped her in a quick, surprising hug. “We know all about you, girl. How’re you feeling? How’s the hand?”

Darcy blinked and laughed in surprise as he let her go. “Uh, the hand’s fine.” She said after a moment’s pause. “Thanks for asking—”

Sam shook his head again. “I bet Cap hasn’t told you a thing about any of us, huh?” She bit her lip as he laughed and dropped an arm around her shoulders, steering her toward the living room with such an air of hospitality that Darcy forgot to be nervous in the presence of these heroes. “Look, I’ve heard enough about you in the last two weeks I’ve been here to fill one big ass book, and I’m gonna tell you right now that you and I are going to get along just fine.”

They sat down on the remaining sofa, leaving the armchair for Steve as Darcy looked over her shoulder to find her colleague shaking his head with a smile. “And that’s everybody,” he said with an almost apologetic smile.

“Damn right that’s everybody,” Sam commented. “Darcy, how long do you think you’ve got to spare today?”

She looked at her watch, still not used to wearing it on the opposite wrist. “Two—maybe three hours at the most? My handlers think I’m at a doctor’s appointment.”

Natasha looked up at that and raised her eyebrows. “Smart,” she decided in her soft, throaty voice. “Midday traffic? They probably assume you had to get uptown or even back to Brooklyn to see a GP?” Darcy nodded. “Smart,” she repeated and returned to her work.

“You know she means her parents, right?” Sam put in, looking amused. “Not actual handlers.”

Natasha shrugged. “A good strategy is a good strategy, no matter who it gets you away from.”

“Cap,” Sam called over his shoulder. “Get the guac; this girl’s got a schedule to keep.”

“Keep the guac away from my files,” Sharon warned as she looked up apprehensively. “I can only explain away so much.”

Darcy wanted to be amused as she listened to the playful banter Steve and his teammates tossed back and forth, but she found her attention drawn to the coffee table and the mountain of file folders, loose sheets of paper, case reports, surveillance photos and anything else connected to the Winter Soldier for the last fifty years. Her heart sank.
This was going to be so much work.

“No time like the present,” she said under her breath and leaned forward to grab the first document she could see that was written in English.

It was an hour and a half of very little progress, a lot of sniping back and forth—particularly between Sam and Natasha—and a lot of heavy eye rolling between Steve and Sharon. Darcy might have enjoyed herself a little more if her wrist wasn’t aching and there wasn’t a strong headache blooming steadily in her temples.

Still, Sam was hilarious and Sharon and Natasha were a wealth of information and she would be outright lying if she said she didn’t notice the way Steve kept shooting her glances from across the room when he thought she wasn’t paying attention.

He followed her into the kitchen the second time she got up for a refill. She noticed the line of concern that folded his forehead as she returned the water pitcher to the top shelf in the refrigerator. “What’s up, Steve?” she asked, the corner of her lips twitching into a nervous half-smile.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked, leaning casually against the opposite counter. He had his arms crossed over his chest, his shoulders hunched a little. Darcy had begun to notice he did that when he was anxious; she couldn’t help but wonder if it was a habit left over from before the serum, a way to try to make himself as small as he’d been before, trying to disappear when he was uncomfortable.

She took a sip from her water glass. “I’ve just got a headache,” she said, deciding again that she didn’t need to bog down the investigation with her own personal baggage. He didn’t need to add worrying about her to his already exhaustive list of concerns, after all. “And my hand starts hurting after a while,” she added, wiggling the visible tips of her fingers inside her cast. “It’s nothing,” she continued before he could say anything. “I’ll be fine.”

“I don’t just mean…” he paused and started again. “Just because it wasn’t—” he cleared his throat, “you know, Bucky, that did that to you…” Steve’s lips turned down into a frown. “It doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

Darcy suddenly found it difficult to swallow. “Steve—”

“I know I’m not…” he shifted again against the counter. “I know you don’t need me to take care of you,” he said, still stubbornly looking at the ground just in front of her feet. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t feel—”

“What?” she cut him off, ducking her head to capture his gaze. “Guilty?” she guessed. “Responsible?” She shook her head. “No way, Steve. I knew what I was doing; what kind of neighborhood I was in. I’m the one who approached that car. I could’ve waited for backup,” she shrugged. “But I didn’t. So this?” she held up her cast again. “This is on me. Along with anything else that happened—or happens—from here on out.” Her shoulders rolled in another shrug when he finally looked up. “It’s what I signed up for when I decided I wanted to be a cop,” she reminded him. “Bones are surprisingly easy to break,” she looked down at her hands. “And they can take a long time to heal.” She let out a deep breath. “One of the less-than-sexy side effects of not being a superhero, I guess.”

Steve allowed himself a small smile at that. “Takes more than a broken hand to disqualify
you from superhero status.”

“Oh no,” she shook her head, happy to have turned his frown around. “That’s your world, pal. I’m perfectly happy in mine.” She took another sip of her water and couldn’t help her own grin. “I am curious, though.”

“About…?”

“What you told your little super friends about me.”

The tops of his ears and turned red immediately. “I didn’t—” he crossed his arms again. “Sam just…he just likes to… He didn’t mean—”

_Captain Rogers, you have a guest approaching_, Friday’s voice interrupted them, cutting off whatever Steve was going to say.

His brow furrowed in confusion. “A guest?”

_I’m sorry, sir. I misspoke. You have two guests approaching. Shall I take security measures?_

“Are they armed?”

_Security scans from the lobby detect no immediate threats, Captain._

He and Darcy looked at each other. She shrugged. “Pizza guys?”

She couldn’t help but follow him through the living room and toward the door, noting the way Natasha and Sharon were scrambling to stuff as many of the file folders and stacks of paper into boxes and CIA branded briefcases while Sam’s fingers moved quickly over the keys of his laptop.

Subconsciously, she reached toward her back pocket, feeling naked and unprepared when her hand grasped for a gun that wasn’t there. Steve waited until most of the flurry of activity in the living room had settled before he peered through the peephole and his frown deepened. Darcy swallowed hard and took and instinctive step back as he pulled open the door. He was blocking her view of their intruders for only a moment before anyone spoke.

“Hello, Captain America.” Darcy’s heart plummeted to her stomach at the sound of a voice too mortifyingly familiar to be anything but real. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but I’m Will Lewis and I believe you know where I can find my daughter.”

***

She just wasn’t going to tempt fate anymore, she decided, shaking her head as her mother took stock of their files and reports. In the kitchen her father, Steve and Sam were discussing the latest mental health funding addendum to the veterans’ benefits package and Darcy was just done assuming her life couldn’t get any weirder.

“I’m so sorry, Darcy,” Jane said for the hundredth time, looking sufficiently horrified as she covered her face with her hands and she headed back toward the door. “I didn’t know how hard it would be to lie to your parents.”
“Ask my daughter for tips,” Georgia commented, not looking up from the spread of papers before her. “Apparently she’s an expert.”

Darcy sighed and closed the door behind her former boss. “Mom…”

“Honestly,” her mother turned from the coffee table back to Natasha and Sharon and shook her head. “How were you ladies expecting to make any headway without any kind of system of organization? I thought you were professionals.”

Natasha seemed taken aback by the accusation. Sharon opened and closed her mouth a few times before she finally said, “We have…a…system,” she cleared her throat. “Sort of.”

“Well I’ve simplified it as much as I can,” Georgia continued as if she hadn’t heard anything. She tilted her head thoughtfully, a dark curl streaked with silver slipped from behind her ear and fell in front of her glasses. “I’ve organized everything chronologically, of course, and then subdivided by case files from the CIA and mission reports from SHIELD,” she looked over her shoulder. “Agent Carter, would it make sense for me to copy your files so you can keep the originals safe?”

Sharon blinked. “Uh, yeah. Actually, that probably makes more sense than carting around the original case files.”

“I’ve just seen one too many rare manuscripts end up with coffee stains not to be a firm believer in backups.”

They shared a friendly laugh while Darcy contemplated pinching herself and praying she woke up at home. When she looked up, her mother was looking at her over the tops of her glasses and holding out a stack of file folders. “Darcy, please copy these for Agent Carter.”

“You can call me Sharon,” the blonde piped up.

Georgia smiled over her shoulder before she returned her displeased glare to her daughter. “Darcy? Please. Make a copy of these for Sharon.”

Darcy waited to roll her eyes until her back was turned. Nope, she thought to herself, definitely not going to challenge the universe and say her life couldn’t get any stranger.

To say her parents were angry when they stormed into Steve apartment would not be accurate. Her parents never got angry. They got concerned. They got disappointed. In this case, they were hurt. Stung. Feeling left out.

And, if Darcy had to admit it, that was so much worse than anger.

“Honestly, Bumblebee, what kinda morons do you take us for?” her father had asked after she’d stepped out from behind Steve with her head hung in defeat. “You think you’re gonna conduct a full scale investigation a few floors away and not even let your old man offer to help?”

“I didn’t mean to—”

“To what?” her mother had asked, not to be outdone by her husband’s disappointment. “To lie to us? To drop us off with Jane like we wouldn’t figure out what was going on?” She’d paused in her diatribe and turned back to Jane, who’d come trailing after them, looking more helplessly apologetic than Darcy had ever seen her. “Not that we didn’t appreciate spending the time with you, of course, Jane,” she said, offering her best, gracious smile before she turned back to Darcy. “Darcy, I just don’t understand. I know I’ve been hovering a little bit since you’ve been out
“Smothering, babe. You’ve been smothering her,” Will had put in gently, his hand on his wife’s shoulder. “I don’t blame her for wanting some time to herself but—”

“Well if that’s all you wanted then why not say so?” Georgia demanded. “What reason could you possibly have for not even telling us what you’re doing down here?” She had frowned and finally acknowledged the other people in the apartment. Natasha and Sharon and Sam who had all come to hover with guilty looks in the doorway from the living room. “Are you all with the police department? I thought Darcy hadn’t been cleared to return back to work yet.”

Jane was right. It was incredibly hard to lie to her parents. So hard, apparently, that no one could do it. Introductions were made without cover stories or false names, Sam quickly laid out what they were working on and Darcy’s role in their case and before she knew it, Will and Georgia Lewis were full-fledged members of the team working to figure out who wanted to lure the Winter Soldier out of hiding.

She popped her head around the corner of the kitchen and held up Sharon’s files. “Uh, Steve? Do you have a copier? And also a minute for a heartfelt, embarrassed apology?”

“I’ll show you,” Steve agreed a little too quickly.

“I’ll take one of those heartfelt apologies, too,” her father called after them. “If you’re handing them out, Darcy.”

She sighed and shook her head. “Yeah, yeah,” she waved a hand in his direction. “You’ll get it.” They were quiet until they reached the small office and Darcy could let out the cavernous sigh that had been building in her chest. “Dude,” she breathed through the hands she brought up to cover her face. “I don’t even think ‘I’m sorry’ could begin to cover it right now.”

“It’s fine, Darce,” he said, running Sharon’s documents through his desktop copier with a dexterity Darcy could not have managed.

“I knew it was stupid to think they wouldn’t figure it out,” she looked down at the framed photo on his desk. Howling Commandos, she recognized them from the newsreels and the action figures Eddie kept on his desk.

“I hope you know you don’t have to stay,” he said, nearly piling the copies and originals separately. “I don’t want to make things worse between you and your parents.”

She shook her head again. “No, no, it’s not that. I probably should have just waited for them to go home before I jumped back into this mess but…”

“But?”

Darcy pressed her lips together and rubbed at a knot in the grain of his desk. “I don’t know,” she looked up with an embarrassed shrug. “I feel like we’ve wasted enough time and there’s so much to go through and I…”

“You…?”

She shoved her hair back. “I guess I missed working with you, Steve. We’re uh…” she cleared her throat. “We’re actually a pretty good team sometimes.”

“Darcy,” her father’s voice preceded his presence in the doorway. Despite his malcontent
with his daughter, he had the decency to look contrite for just a moment. “Sorry,” he glanced between the two of them. “Didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You’re not interrupting,” Steve assured him graciously.

Just as Darcy said, “It’s fine, Dad. What’s up?”

“Do you have your medical records on hand?” he asked, taking a few steps into the small office.

Her brow furrowed. “Not on me,” she shook her head. “Why?”

“Do you know if they ran a full tox screen on you when you were admitted?”

She shrugged. “I would assume so,” she reasoned. “But they wouldn’t find anything—I wasn’t drugged like the other girls.”

Will nodded pensively. “And what do we know about the men found at the crime scene?”

Darcy took his cue and followed her father down the hall, Steve trailing after them. “Run of the mill hustlers,” she said, much preferring this kind of shoptalk to the Disappointed Dad speech that was waiting for her when they returned home. “The only part of the M-O that matches is that they tied me up.”

“But they didn’t tie you up, Bee,” Will reminded. “They used your handcuffs.”

“Well yeah, but that’s more a means of opportunity, don’t you think?”

“Oh,” he nodded. “I definitely agree with you; and if we’re thinking alternate narratives to present to your LT, we’ve got to be prepared for every angle they might use to discredit you. What theory are we working with? That your attackers were simply trying to get rid of a UC so they could keep running their small-time rings?”

She shrugged. “From what I’ve heard from the girls and the files we have on them both, yeah. I mean, they weren’t exactly kingpins, but they had a decent game between drugs and girls. Actually, Mulligan and Francis had been looking into them for the last few months.”

They were back in the living room by this point. Darcy sat down on the couch next to her father. He had that pensive look again as he rubbed his chin. “Gonna be a hard sell to convince them that this was a coincidence and not part of some bigger scheme.”

“But it was a coincidence,” she insisted. “Bucky wouldn’t—” she stopped herself. “Why would he pay two guys to take me out and then not kill me when he had the chance?”

“To throw off the investigation?” Will challenged. “To make the police think they were dealing with a copycat killer?” When she opened her mouth to rebut, he held up a hand. “I believe you, Bumblebee,” he assured her with a half-smile. “I’m just making sure you know what you’re going up against when you talk to Driscoll.” He shook his head ruefully. “He’s a hardass, kiddo. And collaring the Winter Solider would be the highlight of his career. He’s not going to give it up that easily.”

“If that’s even to say that he’s completely innocent,” Natasha piped in from her corner of the room. “I’m just playing both sides here,” she said, deflecting Steve’s look of disbelief. “We haven’t determined anything other than he could have killed Darcy and he didn’t. But not killing Darcy doesn’t unkill all the other girls from the last year. That all could still be him.”
“Goddammit, Nat,” Sam groaned from his end of the couch. “If that’s what you really think then what are you even doing here?”

“I’m just saying!” she exclaimed, holding up both hands. “I want him to be innocent just as much as the rest of you, but we have to look at the full body of evidence.”

“She’s right,” Will agreed solemnly.

Darcy sighed. “Fine,” she huffed stubbornly. “Then let’s look at the whole body of evidence. Aside from the ligature marks and the carved lines down their backs, what do all of the victims have in common?”

“Prostitutes,” Sharon said.

“Skinny,” Natasha added with a shrug.

“Girls who wouldn’t be missed,” Steve said, not uncrossing his arms as he leaned in the doorway.

“Skinny…” Darcy said under her breath as the wheels began to turn.

“Nat already said that,” Sam reminded.

“No,” Darcy shook her head. “They were all skinny, weren’t they? Alex, Ruby, Kitty—” she stopped herself. “They were all short and skinny. Really little.”

“Yeah,” Sharon said, raising her eyebrows. “So?”

“So why does two hundred and forty pounds of pure, human weapon muscle need to be drugging a ninety pound heroin addict to get her to do what he wants?” she looked from her father to Steve and finally over to Natasha and Sharon.

“Because that’s what he knows, sweetheart,” Georgia said quietly from her place on the armchair.

They looked over, surprised as though they’d forgotten she was there. While they’d been playing out the holes Driscoll was going to punch in their case, Darcy’s mother had gathered a small stack of files around her and had begun perusing all she could get her hands on.

“What do you mean, Mom?”

“I have four different instances of the sedative found in your victims being used in other attacks linked to the Winter Soldier.”

Natasha tilted her head to one side. “Where did you read that?”

Georgia blushed modestly. “I thought I’d start with the files written in Romansh,” she said. “Didn’t seem like anyone was fighting over them.”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. “And you…read Romansh?”

“And speak it,” she admitted. “But not as fluently as I used to.”

“What about the sedative, Mom?” Darcy asked, not wanting to step on her mother’s moment to shine.
“It’s not his most common method of…” she glanced up at Steve for a moment before she cleared her throat and continued, “target elimination, but it is one he’s used in the past. And not exactly something that’s been scrubbed from the records if it’s something I’m able to find this easily.” She looked over to her daughter. “I’m sorry, honey, but your father’s right. You’re going to have a heck of a time convincing anyone of this man’s innocence.”

Darcy rubbed at her temples, willing away the throbbing behind her eyes. She wished she had been sleeping. Or that the hand trapped inside her cast wasn’t pulsing with a pain to match that in her head. Her mother’s words sank her spirit, but there was no denying she was right. Still, no part of this was adding up. Her gut was nagging at her, telling her to keep pulling on the threads until the right one started to give. “I think we need to go back to where this all started,” she said out loud before the idea had even fully formed in her mind.

When she looked up, Steve was looking back at her incredulously. “I hope you’re joking, Darce,” he said, finally straightening up to his full height. “We don’t have time for another road trip to DC.”

She shook her head forcefully. “Not where it started for him,” she said. “Where it started for us.” Her fingers were carding through the police files from the pile her mother had organized for her. After a moment, she stopped rifling and pulled out a photo of a skinny blonde with large, brown eyes. “I want to talk to the only girl who’s walked away from this monster.”

Alexandra Cohen.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks as always for your patience. Come find me on Tumblr @ Idontgettechnology.
Darcyland friendships are the bestest.
Thirteen

Chapter Summary

Sometimes you've gotta fall apart before anything can fall back together.

Chapter Notes

Hello...*taps mic* um, hi. Is this thing on? I forget how this works. There's no apology for the lateness of this chapter--I just have had a very, very rough and hectic few months. But things are looking up, for me and for Darcy. SO. I wanted to get at least one more chapter posted before NaNo because there won't be anything else happening in the month of November.

There's stuff borrowed from Fringe because it's great.

Any and all mistakes are mine. I just wanted to update. I also don't know what's up with the formatting. Apologies for that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Darcy took a deep breath and one final sudsy swig of the dark green beer bottle. Her heart hammered in her throat. Her palms were sweaty and her face flushed.

“You can do this,” she told the empty room. “You’ve done this a million times.”

Her 9mm lay in pieces on the coffee table before her.

Bullets.

Magazine.

Body.

She inhaled again and gripped the magazine tightly in her good hand. She grit her teeth, grinding her jaws together in concentration and reached for the first bullet.

“So far, so good,” she muttered under her breath when her fingers allowed her to grasp one before she was seized with a strong tremor and the bullet clattered to the ground.

Shit.

She tried again, begging her shaking hands to be steady enough to hold the bullets with her good hand while she braced the magazine between her knee and her cast. Her teeth pressed so
deeply into her bottom lip that she tasted blood.

This time, she managed to load two rounds before her fingers slipped again and the bullets and magazine both went flying.

“Fuck!” she cried, banging the hollow gun body against the cheap wooden table. She pushed the box of ammo and the gun away from her and dropped her head into her hands.

Five weeks since they’d set her wrist in that cast.

Five weeks since she’d been able to sleep through the night.

Five weeks since her hands had been steady.

Since she’d felt safe.

Since she’d felt like herself.

Darcy took another deep breath and reached for her beer, dismayed when she remembered the bottle was empty. She got to her feet and carefully picked up the scattered bullets and painstakingly emptied the rounds she’d loaded into the magazine. She left the bottle where it was, knowing that if she went into the kitchen, she’d have to walk past the calendar. And if she walked past the calendar, she’d have to see the bright red square she’d drawn around tomorrow’s date and read the message she’d left herself in big, blocky red letters:

OKIE PSYCH EVAL.

Dr. Yancey’s office wasn’t a place Darcy had ever intended to spend much time. It was nothing to do with the doctor herself; she was pleasant enough and made these mandatory psych evaluations a little less miserable. All told, if she’d chosen to seek psychiatric help on her own, Darcy had to admit that Dr. Yancey would have been an excellent choice. She was in her mid-fifties with smooth brown skin, an encouraging, friendly smile, and a long braid comprised of thousands of tiny braids that she wore over her shoulder. Her office smelled like apples and spices.

She leaned forward toward the table between the couch and her armchair and held up the small recorder in her hand as she had in all four of these mandated sessions. “I have to ask,” she said apologetically, her dark blue thumbnail poised on the side button. “Okay to record?”

Darcy nodded and willed herself to relax. She unclenched her good hand and flexed her fingers against her leg before tucking her fingers between her crossed knees. “Okay by me.”

“Allright,” the therapist sat back with an easy smile. “How are you doing today, Darcy?”

“Today?” she repeated with a laugh she hoped didn’t sound too forced. “Today, I’m a little nervous, to be honest.”

Her doctor smiled again. “Feeling nervous is okay,” she assured her. “That’s normal. Other than that, how are you feeling? How is your hand?”

Darcy wiggled the fingers poking out of the top of her cast. “Little less painful than yesterday, not as good as tomorrow.” She felt herself relaxing a little more, pleased that she hadn’t had to begin lying immediately. Her hand was feeling better. The pain usually remained dormant until the later part of the day.
“Excellent,” Dr. Yancey made a quick note on her reporter’s notebook. “And how have you been sleeping? At our last session you had alluded to some difficulty staying asleep,” she reminded gently before Darcy could blurt out a quick Great!

She pursed her lips. “It’s been better,” she said carefully. “I’m trying not to get too dependent on the sleeping pills.” There, she thought, that’s true.

Her therapist nodded again. “Well, you should feel comfortable taking them if you need them,” she began thoughtfully, “but if you’re sleeping well without them, that’s great too.”

*Just put me back to work,* she thought through another nod. “Yeah, I’ve just been trying to relax more before going to bed.”

“That’s good.” Another nod before a pause. “And your parents?”

She let out a nervous laugh. “Home, finally,” she pushed back her hair. “Not that I didn’t love having them here—”

“My parents live in North Carolina,” the doctor said with a laugh. “I completely understand the need for your own space,” she sobered. “Especially when you’re trying to heal and get things back to normal.” She paused and looked back down at her notepad. “I know those relationships can be sticky, especially in adulthood, but how was their visit?”

“It was fine,” she said with a shrug. *Full of grisly crime-scene photos and lectures on Russian methods of assassination.* “My mom likes to smother.”

“You were concerned last time we spoke about people treating you differently since the incident,” Dr. Yancey shifted in her chair. “Especially your co-workers and your friends. Have you experienced any of that?”

“Um, no, actually,” Darcy said, sounding surprised. “Everyone’s been really normal.” She allowed herself a pause. “Although, I’m pretty sure we’re all ready for me to get back to work.”

To her great relief, the therapist did not laugh. “I can tell you’re anxious to be cleared for duty again,” she assured her. “And overall, I think you’ve made a great recovery.”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “But…?” she prompted, her stomach giving a nervous twist.

“But I’d be remiss if we didn’t talk about the reason you’re here. I’m worried you haven’t fully processed what happened to you.”

Darcy’s eyes dropped to her cast as she swallowed hard. “I’m not really sure how to answer that,” she said honestly. “I mean, I guess I can’t say that I’m *better,*” she admitted. “Or—y’know—*fixed* or anything.” She kept her gaze on the visible tips of her fingers, afraid that if she looked up, Dr. Yancey would see just how not-better she really was. That she’d be able to tell that when she was *wasn’t* sleeping at night, it was because she was swallowing back the memory of the certainty of her own death. That most nights, even when she did get to sleep, she was haunted by the images of her attackers and the gruesome way they’d died. That when she was awake and alone, she couldn’t help but wonder if Bucky was somewhere nearby, watching her, keeping track of her for reasons she couldn’t quite understand.

“So,” Dr. Yancey encouraged, coaxing Darcy’s eyes up to meet her own, “what *would* you say?”

There was something about the patient empathy Darcy could see in the doctor’s dark eyes that chased away her instinct to lie or force herself to make a joke and laugh it off. “I guess I’m still
scared,” she said, surprising herself again with her honesty. “Not—” she backpedaled for a moment, “Not of those guys, since I know they can’t hurt me anymore. But um…of what…almost happened? I guess?” She pressed her lips together in concentration. “Of what I almost lost.”

More than anything, that was what had kept her tossing and turning each night. The haunting thoughts that had followed her around for the last month and a half. A downward spiral of what could have happened. What might have happened if she hadn’t been able to get herself free. Or if Bucky hadn’t intervened. Thoughts of missing Jane and Thor’s wedding, of never getting to play Tickle Monster with Eddie’s son again, of never getting to hear Steve laugh or feel his fingers intertwined with hers.

If she was honest, it was these thoughts of Steve that kept her up more than anything else. The things that had kept her company, had motivated her to get out of her restraints and scramble to freedom were now poking at her in her sleep, lingering in her waking hours. That Steve had somehow managed to mean a lot more to her than she’d ever expected. That these feelings were beginning to turn into something she could no longer ignore.

Dr. Yancey was quiet for a moment while the words hung in the space between them. Darcy bit the inside of her cheek and began to panic that she’d tipped her hand too much. The corner of the doctor’s lips turned up into a half smile that was almost sad in its sympathy. “That can’t have been easy for you to admit, Darcy.” She paused and folded her hands over her notebook. “And I know—especially in your line of work—it’s never easy to admit you’re anything less than a hundred percent. Especially in a situation like this one, where you want to get back to work and you’re expected to be at a hundred percent.” She took a careful measured inhale. “But, y’know, I think fear gets a bad rap. Fear stimulates adrenaline—fear makes you run faster and fight harder and heightens your senses.” She shook her head. “I’d rather be afraid than overconfident any day.”

Darcy couldn’t help but crack a sardonic smile. “Tell that to my lieutenant,” she said, thinking of the sign he liked to tap in the bull pen. The one that read ‘THIS IS A NO FEAR ZONE’ in large, bold letters.

“Don’t worry about your lieutenant,” Dr. Yancey said with a smile. “That fear that you’re so afraid to admit—it’s not a weakness, Darcy. It’s what’s going to keep you cautious—keep you safe. It’s going to make you a better officer. And it’s the reason,” she paused and scribbled something down in her notes, “that I am recommending that you be returned to active duty.”

Darcy felt her breath leave her in a whoosh of relief. “Really?”

Dr. Yancey’s smile doubled. “Really-really,” she assured her. “On one condition,” she held up a hand.

Darcy’s face fell. “What?”

“If, in three months, you don’t feel any better or—and I hope this doesn’t happen—if you start to feel like this fear isn’t something you’re able to work through, I want you to come and see me. Off the record,” she added before her patient could protest. “Nothing’s going to show up on your personnel file—just come see me and we’ll work through it together. Deal?” She raised her neatly sculpted eyebrows and extended a hand across the coffee table.

Darcy took a deep inhale and leaned forward to clasp the doctor’s hand in hers. “Deal.”

Dr. Yancey gave her a firm handshake. “In that case, welcome back to the force Officer Lewis.”
“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Driscoll looked up from his half-eaten Welcome Back Lewis cake and paused, half a blue frosting rose poised on his plastic fork. “Excuse me?”

Darcy dropped her assignment on his desk, narrowly missing his paper plate. “Surveillance review?” she repeated in disbelief. “I was cleared for active duty.”

That had been Thursday. Friday she’d spent an incredibly long morning sitting in doctors’ offices and in the department conference room with fast-talking HR suits rambling about insurance and liability and updating her will. The weekend was spent buried in research and trying to locate Alexandra Cohen and on Monday she’d been greeted with a cake and bouquet of balloons and enough welcome-back slaps on the back to make her wonder if she was going to have a bruise.

It had been shaping up to be a pretty sweet day, honestly, until Driscoll had strolled through the bull pen distributing weekly assignments and she’d found herself squaring off in his office.

He rolled his eyes and slid his cake to the side, away from her aim and blew out a heavy exhale. “You were,” he agreed. “But you were cleared to return to my department, where I can give you whatever assignment I want.”

“This is as in-active as it gets!” she exclaimed. “I could’ve done this shit while I was off.”

“No, actually,” he said, handing the file folder back to her. “You couldn’t have. Not according to the union.”

“Jesus Christ—”

“Not to mention,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “You’re still down a hand,” he motioned to her cast with the folder she had not yet accepted.

“Only until tomorrow!”

“Well then tomorrow you can show me how well you passed your range test and prove that putting you back on the street isn’t going to put you in even more danger.”

Darcy sighed and snatched her file back. “This is bullshit.”

He seemed unfazed. “This is the job, Lewis,” he said, returning his attention back to his cake. “If you don’t like it, I’m sure they could use another body down in files and records.”

She narrowed her eyes at him and took a deep, measured breath. “How long do I have to do this?”

He shrugged. “Long as it takes to get through fifty-seven hours of aggregated surveillance footage. So…” he looked back in her direction. “I’d say about fifty-seven hours.”

A flash of rage and frustration boiled fast and hot in the back of her throat. “Remind me never to be taken hostage again,” she muttered, opening the file and looking down to hide her inconvenient bubble of emotion. “Didn’t realize how low it drops you on the totem pole.”

She was almost to the door when Driscoll responded. “If you need a reminder not to be held hostage,” he said, causing her to glance back over her shoulder, “I’m going to reconsider keeping
that therapist on county payroll.”

Darcy’s foot caught the cage of the nearest trashcan just outside of Driscoll’s office, upending the can and sending crumpled balls of paper and take out cups flying. “Goddamnit,” she shoved back her hair and kept walking.

“Whoa!” Eddie declared when she nearly walked headfirst into his chest. “Easy, Lewis,” he said with a good-natured swat to her arm.

“Sorry,” she muttered, keeping her head down.

“Hey,” Eddie grabbed her elbow before she could wrench and move away. “Hey, Darce, you okay?”

Stubbornly, and swallowing back that rush of frustration and panic she’d felt in Driscoll’s office, Darcy nodded and made to move past him. “Yeah,” she said with a scoff that didn’t come close to casual. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Eddie studied her for a long moment before he narrowed his eyes. “I’ve gotta pick up something from evidence,” he said, not letting go of her arm, but loosening his grip. “Want to be my escort?”

She sighed. “Can’t you get Mulligan to babysit you?”

He gave her a grin. “Sure,” he said easily. “But I like you better.”

She didn’t take it as a compliment as she followed him on the well-worn path through the bullpen and down the back hall toward the evidence locker. The clerk on the desk barely looked up when they signed in and were buzzed back. “So what’s the case?” she asked once they were inside. “What are you working on?”

Eddie had stopped at the start of the stacks and turned back to face her. “That’s a good question,” he said, crossing his arms over his chest. “What are you so upset about?”

Darcy rolled her eyes and pushed back her hair. “Nothing,” she said before she repeated, “I’m fine. Let’s just get whatever you came in for and get back to work.”

Eddie shook his head. “You’re what I came in here for, Lewis.”

She sighed. “Oh for fuck’s sake…”

“You’re not fine, Darce,” he insisted, blocking her path when she tried to brush past him. “You can’t be.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “Why can’t I be? Why can’t we just move on and forget—”

“I ever tell you about my partner who got killed?” Eddie asked, cutting her off before her argument could lose steam on its own.

Darcy opened her mouth to demand a new topic before she closed it again, giving up. “Yeah,” she said. “You named Shawn after him.”

“I ever tell you how he died?”

She shook her head. “Killed in the line of duty?”
“We’d been on patrol together about a year and half,” he continued as if she hadn’t spoken. “One night, we get this callout for a domestic. Not the first time we’d been to this place,” he added quickly before he continued, not quite looking at her. “We get there and there’s only one person—this girl who couldn’t have been more than nineteen. Little girl,” he emphasized, shaking his head. “Scrawny, beaten little girl in the front room.” Eddie pursed his lips and took a quick inhale. “The place was trashed,” he continued. “There was broken furniture and garbage and shit all over the place. But just this girl. No boyfriend. So,” he tilted his head to one side. “We hear a noise from the kitchen. Shawn calls for backup, just in case, and I tell him to stay with the girl while I went and checked it out.”

Darcy frowned. “What was it?” she asked, her voice much smaller than she would have liked. “What was in the kitchen?”

Eddie’s lips twitched to a quick, joyless smile. “Raccoon,” he said. “Back door was wide open and there’s this big, fat raccoon helping himself to the food in the garbage can.” The knot twisting into Darcy’s stomach didn’t relax. “So I drop my gun, ready to call off the back up and call in the EMTs instead, and that’s when I hear the gunshot.” He shook his head. “And I froze. I couldn’t figure out what Shawn could’ve been shooting at. I thought maybe the boyfriend came back—maybe I should run around the side and come in the front door to block the exit but…” he swallowed hard and crossed his arms tighter over his chest. “But what I didn’t know—what I couldn’t have known—is that that little girl in the front room…that brutalized little girl…” he shook his head again, “had a gun buried in all that mess. And she just killed my partner.”

“Eddie…”

“And when I finally got it together—when I finally figured out how to help Shawn—I came in through the front door took her next shot right in the chest.” He let out a deep exhale and rubbed a hand over his stubbly chin.

Darcy was quiet for a moment before she cleared her throat. “So what happened to…to the girl, I mean.”

He shrugged. “According to the report, she killed herself before our backup arrived.”

“Jesus—” She shook her head. “How come I’ve never heard this story before?”

He scoffed. “Probably, ’cause I don’t like to fucking talk about it.” He took another breath. “Anyway, I spent four days in ICU and three weeks in the hospital after that. Just trying to get back to work, trying to forget it. Telling everyone I’m fine. Telling Becca I’m fine. And I wasn’t fine, Darce,” he finally raised his eyes and looked at her. “I wasn’t okay. Okay?”

Darcy swallowed hard and felt another lump form in her throat. “Okay,” she said, no longer resenting the tremble in her voice.

Eddie took a step closer and placed a hand on either shoulder. “You can lie to Driscoll, and Steve, and your parents, kiddo,” he gave her a sad smile. “But don’t lie to me.”

The sleepless nights, the nightmares, the panic and frustration came rushing back, blurring her vision and stinging her nose. “I can’t—I can’t load my gun,” she admitted. “My hands won’t stop shaking. And if I can’t load it, I can’t shoot it and I can’t…” Darcy tried taking a deep breath, but the fears and worries she’d been swallowing back kept bubbling to the surface. “And I don’t…I don’t know how I let this happen. I don’t know why I didn’t see them—I don’t know why I couldn’t stop them and what if—” her breath caught in her throat. “What if I didn’t—”
Eddie wrapped her in a tight hug and effectively disrupted her panicked train of thought. The hand he placed on her hair was soothing and parental. “It’s good that you’re not okay yet,” he said, letting her go when her breathing returned to normal. “But you’re going to be,” he promised, patting the side of her head. “Just take your time, alright? Do the lowball assignments Driscoll gives you and work out whatever you need to in the meantime.”

It was her turn to scoff as she swiped at her eyes and felt her heart rate slow and regulate. “Yeah, starting with this bullshit surveillance review.”

“If that’s what it takes to get you back, then yeah,” he smiled. “You review the fuck outta that surveillance.”

Darcy took another deep breath in and nodded as she wrapped her hand around his and gave it a quick squeeze. “Thanks, pal,” she said softly. “I appreciate it.”

He dropped his arms to his sides. “You wanna get back to work now?”

“Yes,” she pushed back her hair. “Yes I do.”

“Good,” Eddie smiled and reached into his pocket. “I got you a present.”

She accepted the folded piece of paper he offered and tilted her head to one side. “What’s this?” she asked, not recognizing the address and phone number he’d scribbled down for her.

“Alexandra Cohen’s last known contact information,” he said. “Heard you might be looking to talk to her again.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and tucked the paper into her own back pocket. “Steve tell you?”

He held up both hands. “Hey, if you don’t want my help on your little one-woman-vindication mission—”

“I never said that!” she assured him, feeling almost good enough to laugh when he did. “I need all the help I can get.”

They were out of the evidence locker and halfway back to the bull pen when Eddie threw an arm around her shoulders and knocked his head against hers. “You know, I really am glad you’re back, Lewis.”

She gave him a smile and a light, friendly jab to the ribs. “Yeah,” she decided out loud. “Me too.”

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Despite Eddie’s offer to go with her, and Steve’s suggestion that it could wait until he returned from the Czech Republic, Darcy tracked down Alexandra Cohen on her own. She caught up with her on Tuesday after work; it was disheartening, but not remotely surprising, to find she was back working on the street.

She looked older with her hair pulled up in a high ponytail and her eyes heavily painted with glittery blue eyeshadow and thick, black liner. Her brown eyes darted to the plastic watch on her bony wrist
as she dropped down into the red vinyl booth of the diner on her block.

Darcy sighed and slid a hundred-dollar bill across the table. “That get me an hour?” she asked while Alex tucked the bill inside her bra with a nod and a grin.

“It gets you two and blowjob on Tuesdays,” she said, laughing at her own joke.

Darcy chuckled too. “You can owe me one,” she assured her easily, pleased when she made her laugh before they continued. “Glad we got that out of the way.”

“You’re the lady cop who came to see me in the hospital, right?” The nineteen-year-old shifted her eyes from her chipped nail polish up to Darcy’s face. “With Steve?”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “I’m surprised you remember Steve,” she admitted. “He wasn’t there very long.”

Alex’s bony shoulders moved in a shrug. “I can count on one hand the number ‘a guys who’ve brought me flowers,” she admitted. “Not hard to remember their names. Plus, I planted the one he gave me in my window box.”

She felt her lips twitch into a half-smile. “Speaking of names,” she said, clearing her throat. “You can call me Darcy,” she held out a hand.

“Alex,” the younger girl said needlessly, wrapping her twig-like fingers around Darcy’s and giving her a quick shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” she said, reaching into her bag for her file and notebook. “Now I know it’s probably something you’d rather try to forget, but I need to ask you some questions about what happened to you in that storage closet.”

She shook her head, a piece of blonde hair falling into her face. “I don’t have to try to forget,” she said with another wave of her shoulders. “I really don’t remember all that much.”

“I know that’s what you told me before,” Darcy said delicately. “But I need you to really think about it and see if there’s anything you maybe didn’t tell us before.”

Alex let out a deep breath that blew a raspberry between her pink lips. “I don’t know…I pretty much told you guys everything back when it happened. I was drugged, he tied me up and talked to me in Russian, and then Steve broke in and saved me.” She shrugged a third time. “Pretty lame witness, I guess.”

Darcy sighed. “You’re not a lame witness. But please, just think about it. Did you ever see the face of your attacker? Did he ever speak to you in English? Say anything you could understand?”

“No really? I mean, maybe…I don’t know,” her fingernails scratched absently at the back of her left hand. “I don’t know what he was saying, but it sounded like he said one thing over a couple times.”

“Do you remember what it was?”

“I don’t speak Russian,” she reminded flatly.

Darcy tried to make her disappointment less audible this time. “Okay,” she said, trolling through her meager interrogation techniques and tried something else. “Sometimes, if you shift the focus of your memory, you can unlock pieces you missed before. So tell me about something else. Tell me about the room you were in.”
“Room?” Alex scoffed. “It was barely a closet. I don’t know how all three of us—” she stopped, looking surprised at the words coming out of her mouth. Darcy raised her eyebrows again, willing her to continue. “How we would have…”

“How you would have what?” Darcy asked gently.

“How we would have all fit in there at the same time,” Alex finished slowly, the words and memories dawning in her expression. “He wasn’t…” she frowned and wrinkled her nose in thought. “He wasn’t alone…the Russian guy, I mean.” She raised her dark eyes to lock with Darcy’s. “I don’t think he was alone.”

“Did you ever see anyone else?” she pressed, hoping Alex couldn’t tell that her palms had begun to sweat and the back of her throat had run dry.

Alex shook her head. “I was…y’know, they had me blindfolded for most of it. Usually the injections.”

“So what makes you think…”

“The hands,” she said, her gaze having drifted down to the backs of her own pale hands. “They weren’t…they were different. The ones with the needles,” she clarified. “I don’t think he was the one who…” she rubbed her arms up to the bruised undersides of her joints. “Y’know.”

Darcy swallowed hard and nodded, making notes on her yellow legal pad. “This is good,” she assured Alex with a quick glance. “What you’re remembering, I mean. Is there anything else? Anything at all.”

“It was just a thought,” she reminded Darcy. “I don’t know if it’s true. I never saw anyone else—I only ever saw him. And that was just a glimpse…and I think that was only once. Maybe twice. I don’t know.” She frowned and looked down again. “Not really helpful,” she muttered before she looked up. “Sorry.”

Darcy shook her head and tapped her pen on her notes. “No, no, this is good. This is something no one else has been able to give us.” She smiled. “This is a lead, Alex. It’s a good one.”

It was a lead, but it wasn’t a good one. But Alex didn’t need to know that. She’d been more helpful than anyone Darcy had spoken to since D.C. and the least Darcy could do was make her feel appreciated.

“Can I buy you a cup of coffee?” she asked, flagging down the server she’d waved away earlier.

Alex nodded. “Sure,” she said, and placed an order for a mocha with extra whipped cream when the server arrived at their table.

They made quiet conversation while they sipped their drinks. Alex asked Darcy if she’d had any Netflix recommendations; Darcy wrote down the website where Alex bought her eyeliner for cheap.

She was just about to pack it up and start her walk home when Alex reached across the table and put a hand on the open notepad. Darcy raised her eyes. “What’s up?”

“He didn’t sound mean,” she said, pressing her teeth into her bright pink bottom lip. When Darcy raised her eyebrows, she continued. “The guy…the Russian guy. I don’t…I mean, I don’t know what he was saying. But it didn’t sound…”

“Dangerous,” Darcy finished softly, wondering if she should reveal that she’d felt the same way.
That whatever Bucky had whispered to her hadn’t sounded threatening at all. That he’d sounded calm and almost soothing.

Alex moved her shoulders again. “It’s probably nothing,” she said, not sounding too optimistic. “But…y’know.”

Darcy shook her head. “No, it’s definitely not nothing. Thanks, Alex,” she glanced at the watch she was still wearing on her right wrist. “I’ll let you go,” she said, closing the notebook and tucking it into her purse.

Alex started to get up before she paused and focused her gaze on Darcy’s left wrist. The ace bandage wasn’t as obvious as the cast, but she still tried to hide it. She thought she’d feel better once the doctor had sawed the cast in half and freed her freshly healed hand; but seeing the atrophy of the muscles and the pale, sickly skin tone made her feel worse, somehow weaker than before.

Subconsciously, Alex touched her own left hand with a frown. “The guy who did that to you,” she pointed to the ace bandage and startled Darcy with her directness. “It wasn’t Steve, was it?”

“Steve?” Darcy repeated, nearly choking on his name. “No,” she assured her, almost laughing at the implication. She didn’t laugh though. Because in Alex’s world, it was second nature to assume that if an injury was sustained, there was a man responsible. And even though he’d shown her nothing but kindness, Alex wasn’t dumb enough to assume he couldn’t be at fault. Darcy shook her head. “No, this was…an occupational hazard,” she said, giving the back of her hand a gingerly tap.

“Good,” Alex said with a quick nod. “Because if it was Steve that hurt you,” she sniffed, “Id’a thrown his flowers away.”

Darcy smiled. “Well thanks,” she said, sliding out of her side of the booth. “But it’s not necessary.”

“Okay,” this time, the bounce of Alex’s shoulders seemed happier, more upbeat. “Hope you catch some bad guys,” she said, offering her hand for Darcy to shake again.

Darcy’s smile stayed where it was. “I hope you catch some good guys,” she echoed before Alex walked out of the diner and into the fading sunlight.

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The surveillance review hadn’t started out as the worst job in the entire world. Sure, she’d been pissed at the initial assignment, but had relented and resigned herself to a week of boredom. She’d brought her ipod and her laptop and finished up some outstand paperwork in between flicking her eyes back and forth from her computer to the tv screen in the review room.

The review lounge, Eddie had been correcting her all week. Reminding her that while the detail itself might have sucked, at least she got to stretch out on a moderately comfortable couch and no one cared if she was wearing shoes.

The novelty of that had worn off by Wednesday.

By Thursday, she was splitting her time between focusing on the mind-numbing footage and listening to the afternoon debriefs that were happening on the other side of her windowed isolation room, texting suggestions and ideas about cases that were not hers to Eddie, hoping he’d voice her
thoughts.

By Friday afternoon, and finally nearing the end of her box of tapes, Darcy was ready to tear her hair out. The grainy surveillance footage was all beginning to run together and the beginning of a migraine was tapping at her temples. Eddie’s pounding on the window wasn’t helping.

“Lewis,” he called through the glass. “Lewis, stand your ass up and go home,” he looked at his watch. “It’s after five.”

She shook her head, not taking her eyes off of the screen. “Have a good night,” she called, waving him away.

“Lewis, seriously,” he walked a few more steps and opened the lounge door. “You’re going to go cross-eyed.”

“I have six hours left of this shit,” she said holding her head in her hand. “I’m not leaving until it’s done.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw his shoulders slump. “Are you at least going to eat something?”

She shrugged. “I’ll grab a slice on my way home.”

“At midnight?” he asked.

Darcy looked at her watch. “It’ll be like, eleven.”

He rolled his eyes. “Seriously, Lewis. You’re supposed to be taking better care of yourself.”

She waved him away and returned her attention to the screen. The gray blurs of New Yorkers scurried past the security camera while the rest of her precinct filtered out, calling goodbyes and goodnights to her through the windows. It wasn’t long until the floor had fallen silent and the motion-sensitive lights began snapping off one by one.

_Bam bam bam!_

Darcy nearly jumped out of her skin as someone rapped their knuckles on the door. She unfolded her legs from beneath her and stumbled across the room on stinging feet. “Goddamnit, Eddie, I said I’m—” she stopped and let her mouth drop open as the words died on her tongue.

Steve smiled sheepishly and held up a white plastic bag between them. “Do you like Chinese?” he asked, letting the steam and the smells drift toward her before Darcy settled on a safe answer.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, stepping aside so he could come in.

“I uh,” he set the bag on the little coffee table where all her notes lay scattered. “I thought you might need some company,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “And some dinner.”

Darcy shook her head and pushed back her hair. “Eddie call you?”

“Bout twenty minutes ago,” Steve admitted, not sounding remotely sorry. He shrugged. “But, y’know, I also haven’t seen you for a while so…” She thought she caught a slight blush on the tops of his ears before he continued. “But if you’re working—”
“Working yes,” Darcy cut him off, taking a step closer to where he was standing and letting the door close behind her. “But also hungry and happy to see you,” she added and gave him a smile. “Please stay.”

Steve brightened again and sat down next to her on the cheap vinyl sofa. He started unpacking the bag, doling out white cardboard boxes of noodles and bags of crispy egg rolls. “So what’s playing?” he asked, motioning to the television once they’d settled back with their food and chopsticks.

Darcy, desperately trying to smother her smile between her lips watching him clumsily try to tame his lo mein with his chopsticks, glanced at the freeze frame and sighed. “Surveillance detail. I guess there’s a backlog of footage they’ve been unable to sucker anyone into watching so…” she gave a fake, cheery smile. “Welcome back, Darcy! Please sit on your ass and do nothing and review fifty-seven hours of grainy, black and white footage.”

His eyes narrowed. “Fifty-seven hours?”

“Mmhmm,” she said around a mouthful of noodles.

“And you’re watching it in real time…why?”

She rolled her eyes and swallowed. “Because apparently, if you really want to piss off your LT, you get yourself kidnapped and add a broken hand to really drive home the point that you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing.”

Steve’s expression didn’t relax. “That’s the official answer he gave you?”

She laughed. “No, the official answer is that ‘you never know what those cameras could have missed, Lewis,’ she said, imitating Driscoll’s gruff voice. “‘Every moment matters.’”

“Hmm,” he considered this with a nod. “Alright then, if that’s the plan.”

Darcy shook her head. “No, Steve, you really don’t have to sit and watch with me. It’s so horribly, horribly boring.”

He shrugged. “I just spent the last ten days disabling parts of alien robots and trying to convince Tony not to keep any of them as pets.” He smiled. “I could use a little boring, after the week I’ve had.”

She smiled and felt that flip in her stomach again. “Alright,” she agreed, chasing a piece of broccoli around her takeout box. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” She stretched her back for a moment and winced. “Also, this couch sucks. So I might end up using you as a pillow.”

Steve smiled. “I’ve had worse Friday nights.”
Fourteen

Chapter Summary

“Now, c’mon,” she glanced over her shoulder and gave him an encouraging smile. “Stab me.”

Chapter Notes

Whaaat?! Two updates inside of a six-month window? What is this madness? Well, gentle readers, it's all your fault. If you guys weren't such sweet peaches about this fic, I would have abandoned it months ago. Oh, and I dedicate this update to GlynnisIsta8 who made my fanfic author dreams come true by making me a sweet sweet photoset for this fic. You are the bees knees.

I hope this doesn't disappoint. I was very excited to start getting to the meat of the case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Steve’s body never allowed him the luxury of sleeping in. He thought it probably had something to do with the serum. He fell asleep quickly and slept soundly; usually managed to get exactly enough rest before his system began to switch back on slowly, deliberately, logging any situational changes and assessing any potential threats before he even opened his eyes.

This time, the first thing he noticed was a warm weight pinning him in place. He frowned in confusion as his eyes fluttered open. A nest of dark, curly hair had fallen across his chest; somewhere beneath that was the source of the quiet snores filling the tiny lounge. Steve smiled and tried to shift from where he’d wound up stuffed into the corner of the uncomfortable vinyl sofa. He was immediately rewarded with a wave of pins and needles spiraling down his left arm. He pursed his lips and relaxed again, trying a different approach.

His right arm was still free; it had fallen across her back as they’d slept and she let out a little groan of discontent when he moved it. Momentarily forgetting the discomfort of his other arm, Steve smiled again, running his nails up and down her back between her shoulder blades. She groaned again—sounding a little less unhappy this time—but did not move. “Darcy,” he whispered gently.

Still nothing. He paused and contemplated his options for a moment before he took a deep breath and swept her hair away from her face and her ear.

Darcy wasn’t a pretty sleeper. There was no getting around that. What little makeup she wore had smeared and settled in the wells under her eyes, her mouth hung open and a soft, rattling snore accompanied the drool that had pooled on his shirt. Steve shifted ever so slightly and pushed away the hair that fell back into her face. He wished, with a pang, that this didn’t feel so normal—that they were still stiff and awkward around each other. It had been easier then, to ignore the feelings that she’s stirred up months ago when she first pressed her lips against his ear; the feelings that had only grown stronger in all the time he’d spent watching her work and making her laugh and
cataloging her quirks and habits, likes and dislikes.

The tips of his fingers ghosted against the soft skin of her cheek and let himself wish, for just another minute, that they were at his place, or hers. That they’d fallen asleep together watching a movie and not backlogged surveillance footage. That he could wake her up by covering her face and neck with kisses and tickle her ribs until she let out that hiccoughing laugh he’d only heard once before.

He shouldn’t be thinking like that, a little voice in his head reminded him. Thoughts like that without any hope of action were just going to make it harder to keep working with her. And even though he didn’t want to think about it, it was those kinds of thoughts that would make not working with her almost unbearable.

They hadn’t talked about that yet. About how long they were supposed to go on like this. No one had mentioned a timeline. And he couldn’t bring himself to think about letting her fade back out of his life—about the two of them not being a team anymore—let alone ask.

“Darcy,” he said, settling for a gentle shake of her shoulder. “Darcy, wake up.” Her eyes flew open and she sucked in a deep inhale like he’d pulled her from underwater. She sat up and almost connected with his face as her arm swung out defensively. “Hey!” he cried grabbing hold of her before she hurt herself. “Hey, it’s okay,” he assured her, dropping his voice again. “It’s just me.”

She stopped moving and stared at him with wide-eyed confusion for a long moment before consciousness fully dawned behind her eyes and her breath left her in a whoosh of relief. “Steve,” she breathed, pressing a hand to her chest. “Sorry,” she said, quickly turning embarrassed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to fall a—”

“It’s fine, Darce,” he assured her, letting go of her arms. “It’s okay.”

She blinked and pushed back her hair, still breathing heavily while she swiped at the black smears under her eyes and wiping at the corners of her mouth with the back of her hand. She swallowed hard and looked around the room. “What time is it?”

Steve looked at his watch. “A little after four,” he said finally able to sit up straight and shake out his still-tingling arm.

“Shit,” she muttered, swiping absently at her face again. The lights in the bullpen were still off and the television screen was buzzing with static and white noise. She glanced over at him and frowned at the damp spot she’d left in the middle of his t-shirt. “Sorry,” she said again.

He watched her carefully, not able to keep his thoughts from the soldiers he’d known who couldn’t sleep without a knife under their pillow, the ones who screamed in their sleep and woke up thrashing at an invisible enemy. “You always wake up like that?” he asked, trying to keep his tone light as he rubbed the knot out of the back of his neck.

“I wouldn’t know,” she said, stretching her arms over her head. “I can’t remember the last time I had a decent night’s sleep.”

Steve frowned and swallowed hard. “Maybe you should take some tapes home,” he said after a moment of quiet. “Apparently they’re an effective sleep aid.”

He was grateful when she tossed him a tired smile before she got to her feet and bent over to touch her toes. “Yeah,” she agreed, standing up and turning off the tv. “Apparently.” They were quiet again while she began shuffling around, throwing away empty containers of Chinese food and
stuffing her papers back into their file folders. “Thanks for hanging out with me,” she said, offering him another smile. “You make a good pillow.”

Steve couldn’t help but grin back. “You’re not bad company yourself.” He watched her clean-up for another few beats before he blurted out, “Buy you breakfast?”

She stopped her aimless tidying and looked up; a frizzy curl dropped into her face between her eyes. “Uh, no,” she said after a pause.

He wanted to smack himself for sounding so obvious and so not casual in his attempt to spend more time with her. She probably wanted to keep working, or go home and collapse in her own bed, or spend the weekend away from the job for a change and relax—

“You bought dinner,” she reminded, snapping his attention back to her, surprised to find her shrugging into her jacket. “You have to let me get breakfast.”

Steve stopped and reeled himself back from the downward spiral of his thoughts. “What?”

“I’m buying,” she reiterated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “Where do you want to go?”

They ended up at a little 24-hour dive close to the station that made a breakfast sandwich that marveled Tony Stark in its engineering. After a few bites of fried egg and bacon on thickly sliced sourdough toast, Steve noticed Darcy’s mood begin to return to normal.

“Has this place always been here?” she asked, speaking a crispy bite of hash brown with her fork.

Steve swallowed thickly and shook his head. “It was always a diner,” he said, glancing at the counter and letting his eyes sweep over the booths and chipped tile floor. “But this is about twice the size of the place Buck and I used to go.”

She nodded and looked around, an amused smile playing on her lips. “It reminds me of a place my dad used to take me in Stamford,” she said. “Usually after he’d been working all night.”

Steve grinned back. “Your dad seems like a good guy.”

She scoffed. “He’s the best,” she asserted. “I figured you old Brooklyn vets would get along.”

He chuckled. “Your folks are native New Yorkers?”

She nodded. “Third generation New Yorkers, to be exact.”

“So how come you grew up in Connecticut?”

She shrugged. “Mom wanted the yard and the picket fence.”

“Ahh…”

“And Dad lives to make her happy so…” she shrugged again. “We lived in a house with a yard and a tree house. I rode a bus to school instead of a subway and Dad only worked one overnight shift a month.”

It was Steve’s turn to smile. “That doesn’t sound so bad.”
Darcy wrinkled her nose. “Wasn’t bad,” she agreed. “Just a little too quiet for me.”

“I know what you mean,” he said with a glance out the window where the skyline was just becoming visible in the softening pre-dawn light. “No place like Brooklyn.”

She tilted her head to one side. “You miss living over here?”

He smiled. “Every day.”

Darcy shook her head with another grin. “Here I was, thinking you were helping us out because it’s the right thing to do…turns out you’re just trying to spend some time in your old ‘hood.”

He laughed around another bite of his sandwich, covering his mouth to keep from spitting food all over her. She laughed with him and held her coffee cup to her lips. “I considered the fringe benefits of offering my assistance before I took the job,” he assured her. “Trust me.”

She insisted on paying, despite his protests, and got herself another cup of coffee to go before they started their walk back toward the police station. As the building came into view, Darcy groaned and rubbed at her eyes. “Ugh,” she grumbled, dropping her shoulders again. “I forgot to fill out the log for the last tape we watched.” She looked up at him hopefully. “You don’t happen to remember the date and location stamp, do you?”

He rolled his eyes back in thought, recalling the black screen with white writing that appeared before they’d both fallen asleep. “I think it was copied from the minimart on 35th and Avenue D. I want to say…” he paused and focused harder on his memory. “April 9-11?”

She stopped walking. “April 9th through the 11th?” she repeated. “Of this year?”

“Yeah,” he said cautiously. “I’m pretty sure.”

“Shit!” she exclaimed for the second time since she’d woken up. Her coffee cup splashed to the ground as she took off running toward the police station, calling over her shoulder for him to follow her.

The clerk in files and records looked surprised to see them standing in front of her window when she looked up from her computer. “What the hell are you doing here so early, Lewis?” she asked, her pink lips curling into a smile when her gaze shifted from Darcy to him. “Hell’va place to bring a date.”

Darcy pressed her palms to the counter and rested her forehead against the glass. “There are tapes,” she breathed, still out of breath from her sprint down the block. “In the night drop,” she motioned to the locked box where they’d left their box of footage earlier. “I didn’t fill out the log for the last one,” she admitted before the clerk could scold her when she twisted a key into the lock and retrieved the tapes in question. “But I need it back.”

The woman raised a sculpted eyebrow while she brought box back from the other side of her office and set them down in front of her. “What the hell are you doing here so early, Lewis?” she asked, picking up the last one. “This the one you need?”

Darcy nodded gratefully. “I need that and everything you have on Martina Salazar,” she swallowed hard. “You’re also going to want to pull anything listed for her alias, ‘Kitty’.”
By the time Sam and Natasha got to Darcy’s apartment, Steve had almost given up and gone home. He answered the door on their first knock and ushered them inside with a look of exasperation.

“What’s going on?” Sam asked before his eyes shifted past Steve and took in the full scale of Darcy’s at-home investigation.

She’d barely spoken on the walk back to her apartment, too busy chewing her bottom lip and scribbling things into her notebook. As soon as she’d waved him into her cramped, fourth floor walk-up, she dropped to the ground and started spreading out the files the records clerk had boxed up for her. Her notes had been interspersed with the crime scene and autopsy photos and everything had been laid out neatly in chronological order on the floor.

“What is all th—?”

“Ah-bah!” Darcy sputtered and held up a hand, cutting off Natasha’s question before she could finish.

Steve shook his head. “She’s been like that all morning,” he said. “She hasn’t been sleeping,” he added with a frown. “I think it’s starting to take a toll.”

Sam chuckled and crossed the room to squat down and examine Darcy’s handiwork.

“What are we looking for, Darce?”

“Punctures,” she said, not looking up from the photos. “I need to make sure I’m right.”

“Right about what?” Sam asked gently, ducking his head and trying to meet her eyes.

She didn’t answer him, but instead got to her feet and stalked toward the television and fiddled with the thicker of two black boxes hooked up to the screen before she sat back and grabbed the remote.

“Holy shit, is that a VCR?” Sam asked, not able to keep the incredulity out of his voice.

“Shh!” Darcy demanded, pointing at the screen. “Watch.”

They watched. Sam joined Steve sat on the couch, Natasha dropped down onto the ground beside the coffee table and folded her legs beneath her.

She fast-forwarded a few frames before she stopped and pointed at the screen again. “There,” she said moving the action forward one frame at a time before a scantily clad woman appeared in the shot. “This is the last time Kitty is seen alive.” She squinted at the screen. “April 10th, 2:47am.” She paused the tape where it looked like Kitty was talking to someone. Steve hid his sigh. He’d seen this particular fourteen seconds of footage at least ten times without any indication as to why it was important. “Who do you think she’s talking to?”

Sam exchanged a look with Steve before he shrugged. “Future client?” he guessed.

Natasha shook her head. “No, look at her,” she pointed to the screen with a thoughtful tilt of her head. “She’s not working,” she declared, watching Kitty accept a cigarette from the person just off camera. “She’s just…”
“Exactly,” Darcy agreed. “She’s relaxed, she’s joking around. She’s not flirting or touching them. I’ve seen Kitty close a deal,” she added with a look over her shoulder at the three of them. “It doesn’t look like that. And then, after 2:48…” She pressed play and began fast forwarding all the way through the next few hours. “No more Kitty.”

“So you think that whoever she was talking to—” Natasha raised her eyebrows and let the end of the question hang in the air.

“Yeah,” Darcy nodded again, letting the tape play on its own.

Sam glanced between the two of them. “You guys wanna start finishing your sentences?”

Darcy got to her feet and grabbed a nearby marker. “Steve,” she tossed it to him. “Stab me in the neck with this.”

“Or just change the subject,” Sam grumbled under his breath. “That works too.”

Steve blinked, having caught the marker easily in one hand. “What?”

“From behind,” she clarified. “Like it’s a syringe.” When he hesitated, she made a sound of frustration and grabbed his free hand, pulling him to his feet. “Come on,” she insisted. “Time’s a-wastin’.”

“Why am I doing this?” he asked as she positioned herself to face away from him.

“Because you’re the same height and build as our number one suspect,” she reminded him. “Now, c’mon,” she glanced over her shoulder and gave him an encouraging smile. “Stab me. Just make sure the cap’s off.”

Sam watched with concern, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “I gotta admit, I did not see this afternoon playing out like this.”

Steve had to agree. He gave a grievous sigh and uncapped the marker. Haltingly, he grabbed Darcy from behind, wrapping an arm around her shoulders from left to right and pressing the tip of the pen to her neck. When he let her go, she grabbed her phone and took a picture of the mark.

“Natasha,” she commanded, “your turn.”

The redhead got to her feet and didn’t hesitate to take the marker from Steve and slide almost seductively behind Darcy to plunge it against the flesh beneath her jaw. She tossed the Sharpie to Sam a little too casually. “You’re next,” she said, before Darcy could give him the order.

Sam eyed them both carefully as he got to his feet and shook his head. “I’ve done a lot of group work, Darcy, and I just think you should know that trust falls are a lot easier and a lot less creepy.”

“Shut up and stab her, Wilson,” Natasha said with a roll of her eyes. “She’s trying to make a point.”

Sam stabbed her, his mark landing in the same vicinity on her neck as Steve’s had. Darcy photographed her neck again. “Thanks for the audience participation,” she said with a smile as she tucked her phone away. “What do you all have in common?”

“Right-handed,” Steve declared, having watched the others grab and stab exactly the same
Darcy tapped her nose like they were playing charades. “And you two are about the same height as Bucky—which is why your punctures ended up around the same spot.”

“But Romanoff—” Sam started, the realization dawning in her voice.

“We’re the same height,” Natasha finished, giving Darcy an appreciative nod. “Clever girl.”

“So when you guys stabbed me, you both would have hit a major vein, no problem,” she continued, poking mindlessly at the dots in the middle of her neck. “But you all did the same thing. You all grabbed with your left and stabbed with your right. Same as Kitty’s killer. But Bucky—”

“Bucky’s left-handed,” Steve said, allowing himself to feel the first real swell of excitement. “Even with his metal hand—it’s still his dominant hand. I’ve seen him fight,” he added needlessly. “He can’t shake it.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “Look, guys, I want him to be innocent just as much as the rest of you, but couldn’t he have switched it up? Grabbed with the left like we did?”

“She’d have bruising on her shoulder,” Natasha said before Darcy could answer. “Girl as small as this one,” she motioned to the screen where they’d last seen Kitty. “He would’ve left another mark.”

“That sounds pretty convenient,” Sam said, not sounding convinced.

“Natasha’s right,” Darcy insisted. “Look at Kitty’s autopsy photos. She bruised easily—she was probably anemic. If Bucky had even touched her with that weapon of a hand of his, there’d be some kind of mark.

“And his needle would’ve landed in a different place,” she continued excitedly. “Would’ve been around the same place, like both of yours.” She turned away from them and plucked the close-up of Kitty’s tattooed neck from the pile. “But look at Kitty’s neck.” She held it out for them. “She was injected in almost the exact same spot as I was. Meaning,” she wound up emphatically. “Kitty was most likely attacked by someone her own height and size. Probably someone she trusted—or at least not someone she would have viewed as a threat.”

Natasha leaned back and tucked her feet underneath her again. “That’s great, but how are you going to narrow it down? I mean, by that description and given our little demonstration here today, I could’ve been the one who killed Kitty.” Sam’s eyebrow ticked upward less than a fraction of an inch. “Oh for fuck’s sake, Sam,” Natasha rolled her eyes.

“I didn’t say anything!”

“Guys,” Steve spoke up finally, sitting forward to come between his teammates. He raised his eyes to Darcy. “How are we going to narrow it down?”

She sighed, some of the wind gone out of her sails. “I don’t know,” she admitted, looking forlornly at the files she’d brought home. “But there’s gotta be something here.”

Several hours and a pizza delivered at ten AM later, Darcy found herself staring blearily at a toxicology report, trying to make sense of the words in front of her. The early morning,
compounded with the late nights in the surveillance lounge were slowly beginning to creep up on her.

She jumped at the feeling of Steve’s hands on her shoulders. She looked up and offered him an embarrassed smile. “Sorry,” she said shaking her head. “What’s up?”

“We’ve got plenty to keep us busy if you want to go get some sleep,” he reminded gently, not moving his hands.

The next smile she gave him was a little more tight-lipped. “I’m fine,” she assured him. “Just need a little break.” She held up the report in her hand and cleared her throat. “Anyone want a tox screen? I’ll trade you for something with pictures.”

Natasha extended an outstretched hand. “I’ll take that,” she offered. “Steve’s right. You should get some rest. We’ll wake you if there’s anything—” her eyes had drifted to the report Steve had passed her. Her brow furrowed. “Ravnodenstviye?”

Darcy frowned. “Bless you,” she said, raising her eyebrows.

Natasha shook her head. “This girl was killed by Ravnodenstviye,” she repeated to three matching blank looks before she clarified, “It’s a Red Room drug.” They waited quietly as Nat sat back on her heels and stared at the paper in front of her. “Holy shit,” she murmured to herself, shaking her head. “I think we’re looking for a Black Widow.”

Chapter End Notes

Let me know what you thought? Oh, and come find me on Tumblr at idontgettechnology. Ain’t no party like a Darcyland party, after all
Fifteen

Chapter Summary

The longest day of Darcy's life, in which things come together and fall apart with equal grace and beauty.

Chapter Notes

I know what I said. I said no updates until after NaNo. But guys, my NaNo sucks right now and I needed a distraction. So, I hope you enjoy my latest installment because I could really have used those 3500 words added to my manuscript...but they wanted to about Darcy and Steve, so I listened to my muse. Hoping I don't regret it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Natasha’s revelation was not met with an overwhelming response. She looked up from the tox screen and raised her eyebrows. “What? C’mon, guys, I thought that’d be a little more exciting.”

The lines on Steve’s forehead deepened. “Romanov…you’re the Black Widow.”

“No,” she said patiently, unfolding her limbs and getting to her feet. “I’m a Black Widow.”

Darcy felt her chest collapse in a whoosh of relief. “Oh thank God,” she said before she could stop herself. “I really didn’t want to arrest you.”

Natasha smiled in her direction. “You wouldn’t have been able to,” she assured her kindly before she continued. “I’m one of many… I just happen to be the only one anyone knew about because I’m the only one who ever went straight.” She paused. “That I know of.”

“Go back,” Darcy said with a squint to her eyes, wishing she’d had more than four hours sleep before being handed this information. “You’re basing this on what information?”

“The chemical cocktail that killed your friend Kitty,” she held up the list of toxins found in Kitty’s blood. “I’ve only ever seen this particular mix once in my life.”

“In the Red Room,” Sam finished, still not looking convinced.

“Yes,” Natasha said with a nod. “In the Red Room. That’s the only place I know of where they make Ravnodenstviye.”

“How are you sure that’s what killed her?” Steve asked, barely glancing at the tox screen that had been passed to him.

“Because it’s the only thing that’s different than that girl Alexandra’s blood.” She shrugged. “Alex didn’t die, but Kitty did—so whatever’s different is what killed her.”
Her definitive statement only earned her three unconvinced expressions. She sighed and motioned back to the television. “Darcy,” she commanded. “Play the clip again.” Obediently, Darcy did as she was told, queueing the footage up to a few seconds before the last time Kitty was seen alive. “There,” she said, approaching the screen and dropping down to crouch beside the left corner. “See that?” she motioned to where another pair of hands and thin forearms were gesticulating with Kitty.

“No,” Steve said plainly before he gestured to the grainy image. “Can we——”

“If that question ends in zoom, enlarge or enhance,” Darcy said shooting her eyes over to him, “the answer is a hard no.”

“Not even a little bit?” he asked, looking dubious.

“Nope.”

Steve frowned deeply. “Sorry,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “Tony does it all the time.”

Darcy was deadpan in her response. “Not with a regular VCR, he doesn’t.”

Sam tried to smother a smile between his lips before he cleared his throat. “So if I could see anything on this fuzzy-ass tape,” he said, shifting his eyes from the space between Darcy and Steve to the television, “what would I be looking for?”

Natasha squinted at the screen again and frowned. “Guys! I bought this at a thrift store five years ago, it doesn’t—” Darcy stopped and clamped her lips together when Romanov glanced back over her shoulder and hooked her with a raised eyebrow. She looked down sheepishly at the remote clutched in her hand. “I’m sorry. It does pause.”

Darcy swore the corner of Natasha’s red lips turned up in a half smile before she regained her focus and tapped her fingernail against the screen again, seemingly satisfied with the frame on which Darcy had frozen. “Look at that dark band on her wrist,” she insisted, motioning to the unseen woman’s right wrist. “That’s a handcuff bruise.”

“Which she could have received from being handcuffed recently,” Darcy reminded, rubbing her own wrist in solidarity.

Natasha shook her head. “Let me see your wrist,” she said, stepping away from the tv and toward the arm chair. Reluctantly, Darcy held out her right wrist and swallowed hard as the redhead took hold of her arm and studied her closely. Six weeks had been enough to heal the angry bites the metal had taken from her skin, but the red marks were still there; scars and welts that would take much longer to fade. “Your hands were over your head, right?”

She gulped again, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. “Uh-huh.”

Her fingertips ghosted over what was left of the scab from when she’d pulled against the metal as she’d broken her other hand. “I bet you fought like hell trying to get free,” she said softly, a thoughtful frown on her face.

“Nat—” Steve interrupted, a faint hint of a warning in his voice. “Let’s move on.”

To her credit, Natasha dropped Darcy’s hand and returned her attention to the television
“Darcy has marks on both wrists,” she said plainly. “So would anyone who had both hands cuffed and restrained over her head. But this girl,” she pointed to the faceless arms. “Just the right hand.”

“And…when is this going to start sounding like evidence?” Sam asked, his arms still crossed over his chest.

“Red Room operatives are chained to their beds every night,” Natasha said, unaware that her words made Darcy cringe. “That bruise is a good clue, but the Ravnodenstviye is the clincher you need to be working on.”

“Wait, let’s go back,” Sam suggested from his spot on the other side of the room. “What is Ravnodenstviye?”

“It’s a nearly undetectable toxin that Hydra devised after the first time they tried to kill the Winter Soldier.”

Darcy coughed, keenly aware of the tension that stitched its way up Steve’s spine. “The first time?” she repeated quietly.

Natasha pursed her lips. “He didn’t always do what they told him to,” she said, keeping her tone even.

“And regular…” Darcy coughed again, “poisons didn’t work?”

“No,” she answered plainly. “The toxins they’d normally use to dispose of an asset weren’t effective with someone with Super Soldier Serum in his veins.” Her eyes flickered to Steve’s stony expression for a moment before she continued. “When the wall came down, Hydra got nervous—they started trying to burn any loose ends they had. They tried everything they had on…on Bucky. And when that didn’t work, they put him back on ice and moved him to Siberia.”

“And you’re sure that’s what killed Kitty?” Darcy clarified, blinking the burning out of her tired eyes.

Natasha nodded. “Without a doubt.”

“How come no one else noticed it?” Sam asked.

“They wouldn’t be looking for it,” she answered with a shrug. “Hydra only discovered it as a fluke. It’s not a chemical itself, just a reaction.” She looked down at the tox report once more. “A very, very finicky reaction to get right.”

When she looked up, she met Darcy’s dubious gaze. “And…you know how to make this…Radnostav—whatever it is? And what does that word mean, anyway?”

“It means ‘equinox’, ” Steve said suddenly, startling Darcy as he moved away from the armchair. “How many other Black Widows are there?”

She pursed her lips in thought. “It’s hard to say,” she said after a few moments. “It’s not like they initiate a new one every year.”

“So she’s not like…the Red Room Valedictorian?” Darcy asked, quirking an eyebrow.

“No,” Natasha said plainly. “There’s a very strategic selection process. And it only happens when there’s a need.”
“Ballpark figure?” Sam asked.

She moved her shoulders. “Maybe…ten? Maybe…I don’t know, maybe a hundred. All I know is what I was taught when I was there and I couldn’t possibly know what the Red Room looks like now.”

“Why would a Black Widow know how to engineer Ravnodenstviye?” Steve asked, not stumbling over the word as Darcy had. “Why not someone else?”

“Because they wanted to balance the scales between the Winter Soldier and the Black Widow. He trains her—he knows every move before she can make it, so if she gets out of hand, who would they send to eliminate her?” she raised her eyebrows and continued before anyone could answer. “But if he slips the chain, who better to take him out than his best student? He’d never see it coming.” She frowned. “At least, that was the idea. Everyone’s equal,” her lips twitched into a joyless smile. “Even the monsters.”

Darcy shook her head. “You wacky communists,” she mused with a touch of her usual sense of humor. “That’s why I love ya—you keep me on my toes.”

“So you’re sure it’s a Black Widow,” Steve repeated. “There’s no one else who might know about this? A scientist…higher level Hydra agents…anyone?”

Natasha shook her head.

“What about when you dumped all of Hydra’s secrets?” Sam asked. “Couldn’t someone have stumbled upon it then?”

She shook her head again. “It’s not something they ever wanted written down.” She pointed to the screen again. “Trust me guys, whoever Kitty was talking to—that’s your girl.”

Her words settled heavily over the room for a few, long moments before Steve spoke. “So what now?”

Darcy got to her feet, shaking out tingles radiating up her calf. “Now we figure out how to prove it,” she said, before tucking her nose under the collar of her t-shirt and pulling a grimace. “After I take a shower.”

She heard Sam chuckling as she made her way down the hallway. The door to the bathroom clicked quietly behind her, the sound barely registering as she turned on the water and shucked off her clothes.

There was too much to think about; too much had happened in the last six hours to fully unpack her thoughts as she stepped beneath the weak spray of the shower and set about the arduous task of soaking and cleaning her hair.

She’d always been a shower thinker. More than once at Culver she’d been seized with a brilliant idea mid-scrub and had to race back to her dorm in a towel to jot it down. By the time she was writing her senior thesis and following Jane all over the world, she’d started keeping a notepad and pen somewhere in the bathroom, just in case.

But if any brilliant breaks in the case were lurking in Darcy’s cluttered mind, they were taking their sweet time floating to the surface. She had worked her conditioner through her curls and grabbed her blue-handled razor before she could let herself try to remember how long it had been since she’d last shaved her legs.
The soap felt good sliding over smooth skin again. The muscles in her neck and shoulders started to relax the longer she stood beneath the water, rolling her head from one side to another. She hadn’t considered how uncomfortable it was to sleep on that couch at the station; how badly it might have fucked up her neck and her back.

In fact, the only thing she’d thought about that couch at the station was how nice it had felt to fall asleep curled up next to Steve. She’d woken up once around midnight to the sound of him snoring (like a motherfucker; he could deny it all he wanted, she knew the truth). There’d been a moment where she’d considered waking him up, or at least getting up to turn off the television, but that urge had fluttered out of her mind when he’d draped an arm over her back and pulled her in to cuddle closer against him.

And he’d been so warm and so safe and it had been so long since she’d had a good night’s sleep. So she’d closed her eyes, expecting to wake up before he did and extract herself before anyone could accuse her of an inappropriate workplace entanglement.

But that hadn’t happened. And now he was one thin wall away, trying to help her catch a killer and vindicate his best friend while she wasted time in the shower, trying to forget how good he smelled.

Because goddamn. He smelled really, really good.

Darcy shook her head and finished rinsing her hair. With her legs shaved and the smell of an all-nighter at the station scrubbed off her skin, there was no reason to keep hiding in the bathroom. She shut the water off and grabbed her towel. Her wet feet soaked into the cheap, fuzzy bathmat for only a second before she noticed the blinking blue light of her cell phone.

She sighed and unlocked the screen, surprised to find three missed calls from the station and four texts from Eddie, each increasing in demand for her to get in touch as soon as possible.

***

Darcy had thought she’d seen Driscoll angry before. Apparently, she decided, with a hard swallow as she closed the door behind her, she’d been mistaken.

“What’s up, sir?” she asked, wondering what it was that had set the lines in his face so firmly. He wasn’t sitting, so she didn’t either.

Driscoll crossed his arms over his broad chest and narrowed his eyes. “You want to tell me what you’ve been doing?”

The question took her off guard. She felt her brow furrow in confusion. “Working, sir. What am I supposed to have been doing?”

He didn’t seem impressed with her answer. “I didn’t give you that surveillance review so you could take a week off to track down your own leads and leave the rest of us out in the cold.”

She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “No,” she said, trying to gauge how long she was going to be lectured before she could get back home to her evidence. “You did it to prove that you can give me any bullshit assignment you want.”
He ignored her tone. “And to make sure you’re not running off and putting yourself in any danger.”

Darcy’s eyes felt to his desk. Alex Cohen’s file was spread out along with her notes. Beneath it was the file they’d cobbled together on the Winter Soldier. She swallowed hard. “Talking to a witness isn’t putting myself in danger.”

“It could be if you’re putting yourself back in the line of fire for someone who wants to hurt you.”

“Bucky doesn’t want to hurt me.”

“Oh, we’re calling him Bucky?” Driscoll’s scoff almost sounded disgusted. “Since when?”

“Since he saved my life.”

“You mean since he murdered two of his own accomplices to cover his tracks?”

She’d resisted her eye roll before but it was impossible to stop herself this time. “Those idiots weren’t his accomplices! Do you hear yourself?”

“I hear plenty, Lewis. I hear you’ve been checking a whole bunch of things out of evidence, setting up one-on-ones with victims,” he was ticking things off on his thick fingers. “You’ve been using this department like your own personal base of operations. I want to hear from you. What have you been doing?”

Darcy opened her mouth and closed it again. She had to be careful, her father’s voice warned in her ear. If she was too mouthy, too brass, there was a chance she could leave this office without a badge at all. “I’m…” she paused and pursed her lips. “I’m tracking down alternative leads in the Brooklyn Carver case.”

“Jesus Christ…”

His immediate dismissal ignited her need for validation. Everything she’d discovered in the last day came bubbling back to the surface; the words lined up to fall out of her mouth. “The injection site from the poison that killed Kitty is not in the right place for someone with Bucky’s profile.”

“Lewis—”

But Darcy couldn’t stop now. Not when she was so close to something tangible “Her wounds are consistent with a smaller attacker, someone who would have come from behind and taken her off guard.”

Driscoll remained unfazed.

“He spent sixty years killing people for the Soviets, Lewis. He’s probably got a few tricks up his sleeve.”

She threw up her hands. “The Brooklyn murders are completely inconsistent with anything associated with the Winter Soldier. I have eye-witness reports that say there was more than one person at the crime scene and—”

“Who?” he looked back at his messy desk with a scoff. “Alexandra Cohen?”
He practically slapped her in the face with the contempt in his voice. “What’s wrong with her?”

Driscoll gave a joyless laugh and reached behind him to grab her file. “Where to start?!” he asked, flipping directly to her list of priors. He shook his head. “You’re going to railroad my entire investigation on spec? On the fuzzy testimony of a nineteen-year-old heroin addict?”

Her blood was dangerously close to boiling. “A nineteen-year-old heroin addict whose testimony you had no problem using as the basis for your entire investigation! Why are you so quick to dismiss her now that her narrative has changed?”

“I’m not dismissing anything!” He tossed the folder back on the desk, sending a mugshot and a blurry newspaper clipping of Bucky fluttering to the floor. “Find me the evidence that proves he’s not guilty! Find me something that tells me who else—specifically—we’re looking for. Can you do that?”

She stumbled for the second time in only a few minutes. “Right at this moment, no,” she admitted as everything inside of her cringed. “But give me more time and—”

“And nothing!” Driscoll threw up his hands and gave a heavy sigh. “Look, you’re out in left field on this one. You’ve been conducting your own investigation, you’ve been withholding information and honestly, I’m not sure that you’re viewing this case with anything resembling objectivity anymore.”

Her eyes widened. “Objectivity,” she repeated, not believing her ears. “Like you?” she asked before she could stop herself.

Driscoll narrowed his eyes in her direction. “Careful, Lewis. You are bordering on insubordination.”

“And you are ignoring evidence to shape this case into something that feeds your ambition!” she fired back, aware that she was moments away from jumping over the line she’d been toeing with him for the last few months.

“Excuse me.”

“I know it would be the biggest collar of your career if you were the one who caught the Winter Soldier, and you should know me well enough to know that I want whoever is killing these girls behind bars but they’re not the same guy!” The way she said it sounded almost like an apology for her earlier accusations. It bought her a few moments of consideration from Driscoll.

He crossed his arms over his chest again. “You’re sure about this?”

Her heart sailed somewhere up into her throat. “I’m a hundred and ten percent sure about this,” she said, wondering how long it would take to get Sam and Steve and Natasha down to the station and have them help her get everyone up to speed. “Just give me some time to look into it—”

“No,” he cut her off swiftly and the air punched out of Darcy’s lungs. “You’re off this investigation.”

“WHAT?!” she asked, the word coming out as more of an exhale that she had to heave to get off her chest.

“If what you’re saying is true, we’ll catch our killer and you’ll get all the credit and your promotion into homicide. But right now? The way you’ve been acting? Absolutely not. You’re in
Vice. Stay there until I say otherwise.”

She really couldn’t breathe. Her thoughts had started to swim and blur behind her eyes. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

He shook his head, undeterred by her impending panic attack. “It’s Vice or administrative leave, Lewis, take your pick.”

There was some stupid, hopeful part of her that had dug in its fingernails, refusing to let go. This was her case, after all. “But I’ve brought you all the best leads you’ve had so far—”

“Yeah,” he said in that same, even and infuriating tone, “and we’re grateful. And we’re taking it from here. Trust me, I’ve been saying the same thing since the beginning. If this pans out, we’ll talk transfers. Until then—”

“Stay home and knit,” she finished numbly.

“You do whatever you want,” he said with a shrug. “Personally, I could use a sweater.”

His joke was tasteless and it died swiftly on the tile between them.

“And what about Steve?” Darcy asked when the silence became too much.

Driscoll cleared his throat. “The relevance of Captain Rogers’ role in this investigation will be discussed and evaluated once we explore the avenues ahead of us.”

It was her turn to offer a joyless chuckle. “I’ll tell him not to hold his breath.”

They were quiet for a few more long moments before her lieutenant softened just a little. “Lewis, come on. You’re not the first cop I’ve had to reign back in and you won’t be the last. Take the rest of the weekend off and get your head on straight. I’ll see you back in here on Monday, ready to work.”

But Darcy didn’t want that, either. She didn’t want to be treated like a confused rookie or like she needed kid gloves. Not after everything. Not after all she’d been through. “Sir—”

Whatever she had planned to say, Driscoll was having none of it. He straightened his back and looked toward the door once before he snapped his eyes back to hers. “That’s all, Officer Lewis.”

Chapter End Notes

Eee gads. Fair warning: I have no idea how police stuff works. If it’s not CSI or Law and Order, I got nothing. So please don’t be too mean. I hope you liked it. As always you can follow me on Tumblr at idontgettechnology because, as we all know, there ain’t no party like a Darcyland party.

And yes, that VCR bit was a direct rip of Buffy. My original fandom.
Sixteen

Chapter Summary

It's about to go down.

Chapter Notes

So. There's a really good reason this chapter took two months longer than I anticipated. You'll see. I bet you can guess what kept me biting my nails and in constant rewrites.

Also, big wet kisses to anyone still reading this and those mystical unicorns who leave reviews months after a chapter is posted. You guys keep me going.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve was still at her apartment when she returned. The living room was cleaned up, the files packed away and ready to be returned to the station on Monday. He stood from his place in the center of her couch as she pulled her phone away from her ear and pushed back her hair. His face folded in concern.

“I think my phone’s dead,” he said by way of greeting, breaking the silence. Darcy looked up, confused, before he motioned to the phone in her hand. “If you were trying to—”

“Oh,” she shook her head and tucked her phone away. “I was just leaving my dad a message,” she said, her voice sounding numb and far away, even to her. She let her purse slip off her shoulder and hit the ground with a heavy thud. “What are you still…”

Steve looked sheepish as he glanced around her cramped, messy space. “Sam and Nat headed back to the tower but…I didn’t have a key to lock up,” he said, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I didn’t want anyone to…”

She nodded and absently reached behind her to twist the deadbolt back into place. “Thanks,” she said after another moment of quiet.

He crossed his arms over his chest and swallowed. “What happened?”

Darcy did her best to school her expression. She pursed her lips and forced herself to look up. “I’m off the case,” she said with a shrug of her shoulders that wasn’t even in the neighborhood of casual.

“What?”

She rubbed her nose and moved her shoulders again. “You probably are too,” she added, almost as an afterthought. “They didn’t really give me any details on you.”

“What did they say?” he asked, taking a cautious step toward her.
“Just that,” she said simply. “And that I was out in left field and I was putting myself in danger and told me to stay put until they tell me otherwise.”

She didn’t want to look at the shock on Steve’s face, or the sympathy that was coming through in his gaze. He looked helpless around the apartment for a moment before his eyes fell on the files he’d boxed up. “And what about…” he gestured for a moment before his arm dropped to his side. “You’ve been doing so much—”

“It doesn’t matter, Steve,” she rubbed her nose again. “It doesn’t make one fucking bit of difference.” She gave a violent kick to the shoes she’d just slipped off and headed toward the kitchen.

Nothing in the fridge was hers, she assessed with a sigh. Not even the beer. “Sorry Jess,” she said aloud to her absent roommate. “I’ll pay you back.” The refrigerator door slammed shut as she twisted off the top and took a long swig from the bottle.

“So that’s it?” Steve asked, darkening the doorway of the kitchen. “You’re just going to quit?”

“It’s that or be fired,” she snapped, moving to where the countertops met in a corner and hopped up to sit and swing her legs back and forth. “I’m lucky he didn’t fire me on the spot.”

“But what about—” Steve stopped himself and took a deep breath. “Did you explain what we’ve been doing? About the leads?”

Darcy let out a little harsh laugh. “Trust me, Steve, he knows what I’ve been doing. He didn’t want to hear what I think about Bucky.” She shook her head. “But if it pans out, don’t worry. He’s going to be more than happy to take all the credit for all our hard work.” She paused for a second and took another swig of her beer. “Could you please stop looking at me like that?”

He frowned. “Like what?”

“Like I’m a disappointment,” she said brusquely. “Like I’m letting you down because, believe me, I know that, okay?” Her eyes dropped to the cheap linoleum. “I tried so hard to make a difference and now I’m letting you down and Bucky and Natalia and Ruby and Kitty and—”

“Darcy,” when she looked up, Steve had crossed the kitchen to stand in front of her. “You haven’t let anyone down,” he said quietly. His throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. “You’ve done more for those girls than—” he shook his head. “You’re not a disappointment,” he said, reaching out to push her hair behind her ear so he could look her squarely in the eyes. “You’re amazing.”

The lump in her throat that she’d been swallowing back since she’d left the station rose again and she felt her vision blur. She blinked quickly and looked down again. “Steve…”

“I mean that,” he said ducking his head to try to get her to look at him. “But you can’t give up now. You’re Bucky’s best chance.”

She scoffed and shook her head. “You are Bucky’s best chance,” she corrected, surprised that he had moved close enough to poke him in the chest. “I’m unlikely to be helping anyone from my desk in Vice.”

“We’ve just got to regroup,” he said, sounding so sure of their ability to do so that it made her chest hurt. “We’re just going to have to—”

“To what, Steve?” she challenged, fighting an urge to roll her eyes as his optimism.
“Whatever comes next, I’m not…” she shrugged. “I told you before, I’m not a superhero—I’m quite limited in how I can help you.” She gave a sad chuckle. “If I can help you at all. In case you haven’t noticed, everything I touch turns to suck.” Her gaze focused on a spot on his shirt, just below the collar. A small, red spot. Could be blood, she considered, forcing herself to think about this tiny detail for a second. It also could have been ketchup from their visit to the diner that felt like it was months ago instead of hours.

The curve of Steve’s lips slid in a small grin. “Not everything,” he said with a little shrug. “Don’t get me wrong,” he continued, his hands falling to the counter on either side of her hips, “you’ve got terrible taste in music and you might be the worst pool player I’ve ever seen but—”

Darcy let herself smile as she rolled her eyes. “Shut up.”

“I’m serious,” he said and sobered again. “You don’t know how important you are to…” he swallowed. “To this whole thing. I know you’re upset…and that it’s probably easier to just let go and do what you’re told for a while,” he assured her before he smirked again. “But the Darcy Lewis I know doesn’t do anything the easy way.” He waited until she smiled again before he continued. His voice was softer, more serious. “We’re still in this together. And I don’t care what happens, we’re going to figure out a way to make your department see this case through your eyes.” He took her face gently in his hands and raised her eyes to meet his. “Okay?”

The air swept out of her for the second time that day. All her reasons for keeping Steve at arm’s length, all the professional bullshit she’d been slamming into her own head had started melting away the longer he stood in front of her. All the feelings she’d been pushing down for months came roaring right back to the surface and try as she might, there was not one good reason Darcy could think of to stop her from leaning forward and pressing her lips to Steve’s.

It was less than a second’s worth of hesitation before he relaxed into her and slid one of his hands into her hair, pulling a hum of contentment from the back of her throat. She had meant for it to be a quick kiss—one that she could pull back from and wait for him to make the next move—but that idea flew out the window the second she realized just how soft his lips were. They were perfect, actually, in the way they fit against hers. In the way they moved slowly, insistently, hinting at a desire for more.

She slid forward on the counter to wrap her legs around his hips and pull him closer until he broke their kiss and pulled away, keeping his hand tangled in her hair. “Darcy,” he breathed her name between them with his cheeks flushed and his eyes a darker blue than she’d ever seen them.

“What?” she asked, searching his expression for something that would tell her she’d made the wrong choice, that she’d crossed a line she shouldn’t have crossed. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, it’s just…” he let out a deep breath and looked up again, looking almost nervous. “I don’t want…”

Darcy frowned and sat back. “You don’t want what?”

Steve swallowed hard and shook his head. “If this is just…you having a bad day,” he motioned to the space between them. “I can’t—”

“Steve,” she placed a hand on his chest. His heart beat was steady beneath her palm. “I’ve had a lot of bad days since I met you,” she said, meeting his gaze. His mouth quirked into a half-smile and she bit her lip. “Like, a lot of bad days,” she repeated, returning his grin before she grew serious. “And I’ve gone back and forth a million times about whether or not I was ever going to do anything about these…really inconvenient feelings that I’ve developed.” She relaxed the hand she’d
placed over his heart, letting her fingernails curl against his white t-shirt. “But I’ve run out of reasons why it’s a bad idea. The truth is, I’ve wanted to do this for a very long time and I’m tired of pretending that I don’t.” She let out a heavy sigh. “It’s exhausting,” she said and dropped her eyes. “But look, if this isn’t what you want—if this is going to end up being some roundabout rejection then just—”

She didn’t get to finish her thought. Steve’s hand curled against the back of her head as he pulled her forward to crush his lips to hers. She surged forward again and slid her arms around his neck. His other hand traveled slowly down her neck and over her shoulder, setting her skin ablaze with each featherlight touch of his fingers, trailing down to rest on her hip.

Darcy didn’t know how long they stayed like that, his hands tangled in her hair and gripping at her hip possessively, hers fisting the material of his shirt. It had been too long since she’d been kissed like that—slowly and hungrily and made to feel like she was something sweet and delicious. Steve traced his tongue tentatively along her lower lip before she opened her mouth and welcomed him inside. He still tasted like the coffee they’d been drinking all morning.

She slid her hands up his chest, itching to get her fingers in the blonde hair he always kept so carefully combed back from his face. His hair was thick and soft to the touch and just long enough to curl between her fingers, earning her a quiet moan of pleasure she could feel rumble from the back of his throat. She heard the whimper of disappointment that escaped her lips when he pulled away, breathless until he began a trail of kisses that meandered over her jaw and down her neck before he found the sensitive spot just below her ear.

“You shouldn’t take this as a rejection,” he breathed against her skin.

Darcy’s eyes fluttered shut as a rush of heat blossomed in her belly. “I wasn’t going to,” she murmured, squeezing her legs tighter around his hips. She felt him smile into the crook of her neck before he resumed his soft and gentle kisses.

The spark she’d felt at their first kiss had kindled into a slow burn that was spreading from her belly to the tips of her fingers and toes the longer she kept Steve locked against her. Each press of his lips and brush of his skin against hers was only stoking her desire for more. She dragged her hands down his neck and over his arms and back; she pulled gently at his shirt until she shifted to slip her hands beneath the fabric. He returned his lips to hers with a fresh, greedy fervor and pulled another groan from the back of her throat when he swept his tongue against hers.

Before she could make a move to pull his shirt up and over his head, Darcy felt Steve’s grip on her hips tighten and he slid her off the counter, picking her up like she weighed nothing. She let out a sound of surprise and tightened her legs and arms around him, hooking her ankles around his hips. Steve broke away breathless. “Where is your—”

“End of the hall,” she answered with a giddy giggle.

Her bedroom wasn’t more than a few quick strides of Steve’s long legs away from the kitchen. It was only seconds between him kicking her door closed behind them to her back hitting the unmade bed. She resumed her mission to relieve him of his shirt and had to stop herself from licking her lips when he pulled away to toss the white cotton away from them. Steve dropped back down on top of her, caging his arms around her as he bent and captured her lips with another kiss.

This time when his kisses began to wander, they were accompanied by his hands. His fingertips trailed lightly over her shoulders and chests, exploring the curve of her waist and scraping over her ribs before they finally slipped beneath the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head. Steve stopped for a moment; he pushed her hair away from her face and let his gaze drift and linger
on her breasts spilling over the top of her blue cotton bra. She felt her cheeks grow red under his attention. “Had I known this was how my afternoon was going to turn out, I would have worn something sexier,” she joked, trying to remember if this was the bra with the broken hook or just the one with the frayed elastic and trying not to remember that she’d paired this particular bra with the pink and white polka dotted panties she usually only wore on laundry day.

But if her choice in lingerie was a problem, he didn’t let on. Steve pushed her hair back again and sank back down, brushing his nose against hers as his hand roamed freely over her belly and waist. “You are so beautiful,” he said, his voice just above a whisper before he sealed the words against her with another kiss.

Darcy swallowed hard. It wasn’t an original line by any means. And it wasn’t the first time a man had murmured it against her neck while pressing hard and insistent between her legs. But there was something in Steve’s eyes, something in the way he was ghosting his touches over her that almost made her believe him.

“So are you,” she breathed, running her nails down his back. His hands stilled for a moment at the clasp of her jeans, waiting for her nod of approval before he unbuttoned them and slid them down her legs, tossing them aside to join her t-shirt on the floor.

She reached for his belt then, her heart fluttering with anticipation, and was dismayed when he brushed her hands away. “Steve…” she tried to grumble but her words came out as a sigh.

Darcy felt him smile again against her. “What’s your hurry?” he murmured into her collarbone. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Her hurry, she wanted to tell him, was that she’d already been waiting for months. That his desire to go slow was killing her. That she’d been thinking about this exact thing—this exact moment—since the first time she’d brushed her lips against his ear and the idea of waiting any longer was killing her.

But she couldn’t seem to articulate any of that. Especially when he slid the straps of her bra down and kissed each newly discovered inch of skin. He reached behind her and fumbled with the clasp for a few long moments before he exhaled an embarrassed smile and pulled away with pink cheeks. “Little help?” he asked, laughing when Darcy was unable to help herself.

“I like a man who’s not afraid to ask for help,” she assured him with a grin. She reached back and unhooked the clasp with one hand while Steve’s other hand drew lazy circles on her belly and down the side of her thigh. It all felt so impossibly good that Darcy could do little more than arch against him and nod her approval when he glanced up with a look that asked permission before he removed her bra entirely. He tossed it to the ground with her discarded clothes and propped himself up on one arm to look at her fully. Darcy was grateful they were doing this in the daytime; she couldn’t miss anything. She could catch the dark intensity of his eyes, the little tug of a smile on his lips when looked at her. She reached up and pushed his hair back, smiling when he turned his head and kissed her wrist. “Beautiful,” he repeated softly before he dropped his lips to hers again and circled his tongue around hers while his hands moved upward to squeeze her breasts and his thumbs brushed over her hardened, sensitive nipples.

He took the moan she made around his tongue as encouragement to continue and pulled another delighted squeal from her when he pinched and rolled the sensitive tips between the thumb and forefinger of each of his hands. Darcy arched her back and pressed herself harder into his hands when he broke away from her lips, breathless, and dragged his tongue from her bottom lip to the valley between her breasts. He swirled his tongue around the pebbled tip of one nipple and matched his attention on the other with his thumb. When he felt his teeth graze her skin, Darcy hooked her
legs around his waist, suddenly desperate for some relief of the maddening ache between her thighs.

Steve scraped his nails down the outside of her thighs as he kissed his way back up her chest and met her lips again. She reached for his belt again—this time growling in frustration when he moved her hands away and gently pinned her arms above her head.

A sudden flash of panic splashed over her, yanking her out of the moment and back to the crawlspace where she'd been kept and cuffed. Steve pulled away, looking concerned. "Are you okay?"

"Not above my head," she laced their fingers together and moved them lower. "Here's good though."

Steve nodded and kissed her again. Softer, this time. More tentative. "Are you sure?"

She mirrored his nod and squeezed his hands with hers. Her moment of panic had subsided as quickly as it had come. "Don't stop, okay?"

Still holding her arms in place, Steve shifted his hips to press into her, letting her feel just how hard he was. Darcy bit back her groan of anticipation as her blood stirred and began racing again. "Wouldn't dream of it," he said against her ear. He trailed his hand down her belly and made a deliciously satisfied groan against her lips when he slipped underneath the barrier of her underwear and slid his fingers between her wet folds. She cried out and bucked her hips against his hand, already feeling too desperate to continue to allow him to set the pace.

Darcy missed him the moment he moved his hand away before she realized he had hooked his thumb under her waistband and was sliding the polka-dotted fabric down her legs until it too joined her bra and her jeans on the floor. Her eyes widened when he began peppering her chest and belly with kisses, moving lower and lower until he was centered between her legs and pressing kisses to the inside of her thighs. She squirmed. "Steve, you don't have to—"

He looked up with a wicked grin and teased her with another kiss, this one below the dip of her belly. "You had a bad day," he reminded, his breath hot on her skin. "I'm on a mission to make it better."

If she'd been less distracted, she could have offered a comeback or a snappy joke in response; but her words died swiftly as Steve dropped his head and placed his mouth directly against her and drag his tongue over her sensitive and throbbing center. Darcy's hips arched off the bed again with another ungoverned moan from somewhere in the back of her throat. Steve's hand flattened against her belly, pressing her down and her pinning her thighs open while he continued his unbearably slow exploration with his tongue.

With her heart pounding and her stomach clenching the closer and closer he inched her to the edge, Darcy threaded her fingers through his hair and held him against her. Finally taking the hint, Steve thrust his tongue inside of her once more before he circled and sucked on the swollen bundle of nerves. Darcy's back arched all the way off the mattress as her release snapped up her spine and sent waves of pleasure rolling through her from her lips to the tips of her fingers and toes. She blinked slowly as her breathing slowed down and the spots disappeared from her vision.

Steve kissed her belly button once before raising his eyes to her with another smile, looking quite pleased with himself. Darcy took another deep breath and narrowed her eyebrows. With limbs that still felt like jelly, she pushed herself up and took his face in her hands, pulling him in for a deep kiss. She could still taste herself, clinging to his tongue as she moved hers insistently against his. "Take your clothes off," she demanded against his mouth.
“Yes ma’am,” he smirked. She climbed into his lap and ground her hips down over his, pulling a groan from between his lips as she kissed him again, reaching between them to work on his belt. They were a clumsy tangle of limbs and jeans before he’d shucked the rest of his clothes and returned to the bed, pulling her toward him again. He stopped suddenly and pulled away again, distraught. “Darcy—wait. I don’t have a—”

“I’m on birth control, Steve,” she said impatiently. “It’s fine.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive,” she promised. She was desperate for more of him, wanting nothing more than to make him feel as good as she did. Swinging her leg over his to straddle him again, she raked her hands into his hair again, sucking his bottom lip between hers nibbling gently. She pulled away after a moment and pinned her forehead against his. Her heart pounded in her ears as she brushed her nose against his. “Still with me?” she whispered, locking her blue eyes with his.

His throat bobbed as he swallowed and ran his hands up and down her back. “I’ve always been with you, Darcy,” he said softly.

He grabbed her hips and positioned himself at her entrance and let out a deep, rumbling moan as she slid down on to him. Darcy placed her hands on his shoulders and paused for a moment, acclimating to the stretched fullness of him inside of her. Steve wrapped his arms around her waist; he pulled her close against him and buried his face in her hair. He pressed kisses against her neck and shoulders. “You feel so good,” he murmured into her neck. Steve slid his hands down her sides and grabbed her hips to keep her legs locked around him as he eased her onto her back again and drove himself even deeper inside of her with another moan.

They started out slowly again, with deep kisses and long, slow movements between them that drew low and satisfying sounds they passed back and forth between their lips. It felt like a blissful sort of torture for him to still be going so slowly. Darcy squirmed beneath him and wrapped her legs tighter around him. “Please?” she begged in a whisper beside his ear.

He took the hint and sped up his thrusts while Darcy rolled her hips to meet him each time, making him cry out in pleasure as he hit in her just the right spot. It wasn’t going to take long for her to come undone again and in the small space between them, Steve reached down and deftly stroked his fingers against her, swallowing the whimpers and moans she was trying to smother against his lips. “Steve, I…” was all she managed to choke out before he felt her clench and spasm around him and he joined her with a moan into the crook of her neck.

She felt stretched and empty when he pulled out of her and rolled to lay beside her. Darcy felt her heartbeat slowing as her breathing returned to normal and she flipped over onto her side so they could lay face to face. Steve reached out and tucked her hair back, grazing his fingers over the shell of her ear. A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “I’ll be honest,” he said playing with the ends of her messy curls, “I wasn’t expecting this when I woke up this morning.”

Darcy giggled and reached blindly for the sheets to pull over them both. “I’ll be honest,” she echoed. “I’m really glad I shaved my legs this morning.” He chuckled and moved onto his back, shifting around so Darcy could bring the sheets with her and cuddle into his side. She looked up at him with another, mildly embarrassed smile. “But next time, I’ll shoot for sexy lingerie…or at least something that matches.”

Steve kissed the top of her head. “I didn’t even notice.”

She rolled her eyes. “You liar.”
“Okay,” he caught her eye when she looked up with a grin. “I noticed. But it didn’t take away from your appeal.”

Darcy stretched her neck and brushed her lips against his. “You really are a gentleman.”

Steve grinned. “Speaking of…can I take you out to dinner?”

She frowned. “What, right now?”

He laughed. “No, I mean…” he shrugged. “Later. Tomorrow or next week or…sometime soon. I’d like to take you out on a real date.”

Darcy narrowed her eyes and studied him for a moment: his almost nervous demeanor, his sudden fidgeting. She smiled. “I think that’d be okay.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Yeah?”

She nodded. “Yeah…but in the meantime,” her smile widened. “I think I might send you for burritos from the taco truck next door.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I think I can handle that.” They were quiet for a few long moments before Darcy found herself unable to stop staring at him. He offered her a nervous half-smile. “What?”

She shook her head. “I’m waiting for the bubble to burst,” she admitted sheepishly. “For this to get weird or awkward or—possibly worst of all—for you to jump up out of this bed and tell me to get back to work.”

She had expected him to laugh again, but he only smiled and ran his thumb across her cheekbone and down her jaw. He dropped his chin to kiss her forehead. “The only thing I’m going to tell you to do is to get some sleep.” His fingers moved lightly over her face, coaxing her eyes closed. “You need to rest.”

“Mmm,” she groaned and shifted to cuddle closer. “I’m fine.” The longer she lay there the harder it was to keep her eyes open. All the long nights and longer days and hours of sleep she’d missed in the last few months were starting to hit her all at once. “Anyway, I want to stay up…” she mused, running a hand over his bicep. “I don’t want to miss this.”

This. This thing that had changed between them that she’d been wanting and denying herself for months. This comfort and safety that had wrapped around her and was keeping her heart steady and her breathing even. This feeling that despite everything that had happened, she was okay; everything was going to be okay.

Steve kissed her forehead again. “I’ll be here when you wake up,” he promised, naming that last insecurity she couldn’t put her finger on. With her eyes closed, she could only hear the smile in his voice. “I might even have burritos waiting for you.”

She offered him a sleepy smile. “And just when I thought this day couldn’t get any better…”

She heard him chuckle again and whisper, “Go to sleep, Darcy.”

If there was anything else she wanted him to know, it would have to wait. The tide of sleep she’d been denying for so long finally took hold and pulled her all the way under.
By the time she woke up it was too late afternoon sunlight coming through her window and lengthening shadows at the corners of her room. She groaned and pushed herself up on one hand, shoving back her hair with the other. She pulled her discarded t-shirt over her head and yanked a pair of relatively clean yoga pants from the chair in the corner of her room before she shuffled sleepily out into the living room.

Steve was sitting on her couch with their files spread out on the coffee table in front of him. He looked up and offered a smile. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

Darcy grinned and shuffled over to him, tucking one leg under to sit next to him. “With your completely silent studying?” she asked, glancing between him and the paperwork. “No, you didn’t.”

He leaned over and brushed his lips against hers. “Good.”

She leaned in for another kiss, feeling greedy and giddy at the freedom to do so. She felt him smile against her lips as he set the file he’d been studying back on the crowded coffee table and dropped his hand to the small of her back. Darcy opened her mouth beneath his, welcoming him to deepen the kiss—

Her cell phone rang in the kitchen. She pulled away abruptly and let out a sound of annoyance. “Hang on,” she grumbled and got to her feet as the ringing continued, accompanied by the buzz of the phone vibrating against the counter. “I’m just going to shut it off.” She threw a saucy look over her shoulder. “Hold that thought.”

She grabbed it on the third cycle through her musical ringtone and narrowed her eyes at the display. No number, just a word: STARK.

With an eyebrow quirked, she hit accept and held the phone to her ear. “Hello?”

“Hey, I need my captain back.” A voice she’d only heard on TV and podcasts greeted her casually.

She frowned in confusion. “Who the hell is this?”

A pause. “You’re kidding, right?” He cleared his throat. “This is Darcy Lewis, isn’t it?”

“Yes…” she answered slowly. “How did you get this number?” she stopped and looked at the display again. “And how do I have your number?” She heard Steve get up from the other room. “Did you hack my phone and save yourself as a contact?”

Tony sighed. “Among other things.”

“How narcissistic is that?” she asked before she could stop herself.

“Incredibly,” he agreed amiably. “I also gave your operating system an upgrade.”

“What?”

Steve had joined her in the kitchen and leaned against the doorframe with an intrigued
expression.

“Look, we can talk shop later, Lewis,” Tony switched gears and the urgency returned to his voice. “There’s a thing going on, you have my Captain America action figure and I need him back.”

She frowned in disgust. “You weren’t like…spying on me, were you?”

Another heavy sigh. “I have better things to do, trust me. His phone is off. Sam and Nat are with me, you were my last resort. Is he there?”

She felt a little flash of relief. “Yeah, he’s here.”

“Put him on,” Tony demanded. “There’s a thing.”

Wordlessly, Darcy held her phone out to Steve. “Apparently there’s a thing,” she said in response to his confusion.

Steve took the phone from her. “Rogers,” he said in a moment of seriousness before his shoulders dropped. “For God’s sake, Tony—” he stopped and shook his head. “I don’t have—” he sighed. “Of course you do. Okay,” he said with deep breath. “Give me a few minutes to get uptown.” He hung up and handed the phone back to Darcy.

She frowned. “So much for round two, huh?”

He stepped closer and dropped his head to touch his forehead to hers. “Rain check?”

She felt her lips turn into an unwilling smile. “With interest,” she said, stretching up onto her tip toes to pull him in for another kiss. “Go save the world or…whatever.”

He chuckled and headed toward the door, sliding his feet into the running shoes he’d kicked off that morning. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She followed him and held the door for him. “I know.” He gave her one last kiss before he was making his way down the stairs with one final wave over his shoulder. She waved back and closed the door. She slid the deadbolt into place and reset the chain.

In the sudden silence of her apartment, a faint hint of loneliness twisted at her stomach. She frowned. “That jerk promised me burritos,” she remembered out loud. Her shuffling feet brought her back into the kitchen and she took one more fruitless stab at checking the fridge. Her laughter bubbled up in her chest before she could stop it the minute her eyes landed on the top shelf. Three foil-wrapped cylinders with the words chicken, asada, and pork written in messy black Sharpie on the sides. “All right,” she said with a sigh. “I’ll forgive you this time.”

***

“Hey, you’re Captain America, aren’t you?”

Steve looked up from where he’d stopped at the bottom of Darcy’s stairs to tie his shoe. There was a woman standing at the mailboxes, giving him a sideways, curious look. “Sorry?” he asked, as he stood to his full height, not sure he’d heard her right.
She smiled and he couldn’t help the feeling that he’d seen her before. Jersey accent. Big eyes. Pink lips. “Captain America,” she repeated. Her hands were full of envelopes and junk mail. “Don’t worry,” she shrugged. “I’m not going to ask for an autograph or anything. My son’s a big fan.”

He laughed when she did and tried to narrow down where they’d crossed paths. “Yeah,” he shook the thought from his head. “Yeah, on my better days I’m Captain America. But Steve works just fine,” he added with a smile.

She went to transfer her envelopes from her right to her left hand and they ended up scattered on the hallway’s cheap blue carpet. Along with her keys and a pink canister of pepper spray that rolled past him toward the stairs. “Oh Jesus,” she muttered and dropped down to pick them up.

Steve glanced at his watch. He could spare a minute to be nice, a voice that sounded remarkably like his mother’s reminded him. He bent again to help her. “So your little guy’s a fan?” he asked casually, deciding this woman couldn’t be any older than twenty-five.

She looked up with another smile. “Yeah,” she reiterated. “He’ll be so jealous I met you.” Her gaze darted to where her pepper spray had rolled. “Would you mind grabbing that for me?” she asked, giving him another apologetic smile. “I never go anywhere without it.”

“Smart,” he commented. Still crouched, he turned away from her and reached for the canister.

He didn’t hear her stand up.

Didn’t feel her come closer.

Didn’t notice anything before he felt the pinch of a needle sliding into his neck and everything went dark.

Chapter End Notes

*wince* This is the first Shieldshock smut I’ve written. So be sweet gentle lovers in the reviews, okay? It's Valentine's day after all.
Seventeen

Chapter Summary

If last chapter's status was "it's about to go down" then this chapter is like "It's...going down. Just...slowly."

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the love from the last chapter, mates. You're all so delicious.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He was moving, but he couldn’t move.

Tires rumbled beneath him and he could make out a faint hum of an engine, but that was all.

He couldn’t move.

Not his arms.

Not his eyelids.

Not anything.

It was hard to breathe, like a weight pressed on his chest. The same weight that held down his eyes and kept his arms pinned to his sides.

He was pretty sure his heart should be racing. His thoughts should be quick. He should be assessing his damages, coming up with a plan of attack.

But there was nothing. His mind was quiet. His heart was slow, but steady.

He couldn’t move.

He was cold. And it was dark.

And he couldn’t move.

***

Natasha returned to the common room with an unreadable expression on her face. Tony looked up from the control panel he was tinkering with and raised his eyebrows. “What’s the word, Comrade? Are we ready to move when Rogers gets here?”
She hooked him with a glare. “Don’t call me that.” In the corner, Sam snickered to himself before she continued. “And no. We’re not going anywhere. Rhodey changed his mind.”

Tony’s expression folded into confusion. “Just like that?”

“Yeah, well. Diplomacy’s a bitch sometimes.” She shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest. “The situation’s a little stickier than he realized and he’s asking us—politely—as US citizens to stay put and not make things worse.”

Tony took a deep breath and exhaled through his lips. He spun in his chair, looking bored. “Well there goes my afternoon plans.”

She smirked and shook her head. “I’m sure you’ll find something to do.”

“You call Steve?” Sam asked, standing up from his place on the sofa.

Natasha pulled out her phone and tapped out a quick message. *Situation in Honduras changed; Rhodey advises staying home. Will monitor from here and let you know if/when we need to get involved. “Not that he’ll get—” she stopped as her phone vibrated with an incoming message.*

_Steve: Are you sure?_ 

She glanced briefly at her two companions before she replied, _Yeah, stay on the case with Darcy. We’ll call you if we need you. :-)_

_Steve: Thanks, I think we’re making some progress._ 

Natasha frowned and tucked her phone away. Across the room, Sam noticed her expression. “Everything okay?”

She nodded. “Yeah, everything’s fine. His phone’s back on,” she added needlessly.

“Good,” Tony griped and returned his focus to the exposed wires and lights of the Ironman arm he was repairing. “I don’t ever want to have to talk to that cop of his again.”

Sam snorted. “She’s not that bad.”

“She’s mean,” Tony insisted firmly. “And she’s bossy,” he looked up. “And can’t Cap find some not-terrifying woman to spend his free time with?”

It was Natasha’s turn to laugh. “Not historically.”

“Man’s got a type,” Sam agreed, shaking his head. “And anyway, I like Darcy,” he added. “She’s allergic to bullshit.”

“Y’know, I normally find that attractive,” Tony muttered before he got up and took his extra arm with him.

***

Darcy wasn’t remotely surprised to find Eddie standing outside her door. She met his apprehensive look with raised eyebrows. “News travels fast, huh?”
He didn’t come in. “Are you mad at me?” he asked, shuffling his feet like a kid.

Darcy folded her arms. “Are you the one who ratted me out to Driscoll?”

He scoffed. “Lewis, nobody ratted you out. You weren’t exactly being discreet.” He softened for a moment. “But if you’re asking if I told him anything when he asked me about it, then no. Of course not.”

“Thanks,” she stood to one side and held the door open. “Are you here to yell at me again about taking care of myself?”

He shook his head and accepted her invitation. “I would if I thought you’d listen.” His gaze fell to the coffee table, still strewn with police files and stray rice and beans from her nearly devoured asada burrito. “But you’re really married to the idea of heart disease so I guess I’ll just let it happen and say ‘I told you so’ later.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well I know how much you love to say that.” She swept her crumbs into the greasy paper and foil and crumpled it into a ball before she tossed it into the trash and joined him on the couch. “And fuck off about my burrito,” she added. “It was a gift.”

Eddie chuckled. “Why say with flowers what you can say with beans and cheese?” He stopped himself short for a moment and studied her a little more intently. “This gift wouldn’t have anything to do with the sex-hair you’ve got going on, would it?”

She felt her cheeks grow pink with the realization that she hadn’t done much of anything since Steve left and made a quick peace with the reality that she couldn’t hide anything from Eddie anyway. She made a fruitless effort to tame her messy hair. “Whaat…?” she waved the implication away and quickly pulled her curls back into a bun with the hairband on her wrist.

When she looked up again, Eddie was laughing quietly to himself and shook his head again. “All right, all right,” he said, glancing around the apartment. “You and the Cap’n made it happen…can’t say I’m not impressed.”

She narrowed her eyes. “How long have you been sitting on that one?”

“Only since the day you met him,” he said with a cheesy smile. “You going to give me the details?”

“Absolutely not,” she said firmly. “And way to be presumptuous—I never said it was Steve.” She paused. “I never said anything, actually.”

“And if I’d seen you even look at another man in the last three months, I might not have guessed so easily,” Eddie rolled his eyes and motioned to the dilapidated armchair in the corner. “He left his jacket here.” He watched her follow his gesture and purse her lips together. “And you kinda smell like freedom and equal rights.”

Darcy snorted. “What do equal rights smell like?”

He pointed to himself. “Black man in America, Lewis,” he reminded her with an ironic grin. “I wouldn’t know.”

She punched his arm and sat back on the couch. “Fair enough.”

Eddie shifted in his seat for a moment before he rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat. “So…when I went down to the station this afternoon, Driscoll didn’t just want to ask me
about your case.”

She quirked an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

“Yeah…he wanted to talk about Arthur Gates.”

Darcy frowned. “That…kiddie porn case from last year?”

Eddie nodded and shifted again. “Yeah. I guess some of my legwork with him finally paid off and they just handed the FBI this major bust…”

“That’s awesome,” she said immediately before she narrowed her eyes. “But…why don’t you look happy about it?”

He sucked in a breath and glanced sideways at her. “Because…he offered me a promotion.”

“As he should,” she agreed, not following.

“Into homicide.”

Darcy felt her face fall. “Oh.”

Eddie’s shoulders dropped. “I can tell him no,” he said almost instantly. “We both know that should be your spot anyway—”

“Don’t even think about it,” she warned, holding up a finger in warning.

“Lewis…”

“No, I’m serious,” she insisted. “And what is this ‘my spot’ shit? You got this on your own because you’re a really good cop and you do really good work.” She stopped and sighed. “You deserve this.”

He gave her a wary eye. “You’re not happy.”

“Fuck no, I’m not happy!” she exclaimed, throwing up her hands. “I almost got suspended today and now my best friend is moving on without me!” She let out a forced laugh and covered her eyes, pulling herself together for a quick second before she sat up straight and looked at him. “But this doesn’t have anything to do with me,” she reminded them both. “I’m proud of you.”

“Thanks, Lewis,” he said and offered her a smile. “That means a lot.”

She smiled back. “You’re gonna be great.”

They were quiet for what felt like a long time before Eddie spoke again. “Y’know,” he paused. “If I told Driscoll that I’ve been helping you with your rogue mission, he’d probably change his mind about me.”

“Yeah,” Darcy nodded. “He would. Which is why you’re not going to say a word and if you do I’ll never talk to you again.”

Eddie sighed again and shook his head. “Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

She rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry about me,” she insisted. “I’ve just gotta figure out how to catch this killer and prove Bucky’s innocent and I’m right behind you.”
He gave her knee a friendly pat. “Atta girl.” He gave her a quick smile before he turned serious again. “Now go put real clothes on; Becca wants you to come for dinner.”

Darcy frowned. “You came all the way over here to ask me to come for dinner?” she asked incredulously. “What if I said no?”

“I came all this way specifically so that you couldn’t say no.”

“Eddie…”

“And before you start bitching, I’m telling you right now she’s going to make vegetables, which,” he motioned to the refrigerator, “might be a shock to your system.”

She let out a grievous sigh and got to her feet. “Fine, but you should text Bec and tell her that I’m terrible company.”

“She already knows that,” Eddie assured her as she retreated from the living room with her middle finger raised in his direction.

Darcy got to her room and dropped down onto the edge of her bed. She pinched the bridge of her nose and squeezed her eyes shut.

The weight of the day sat heavy on her chest and she wished for just a second that Steve hadn’t left. Even though he’d only been gone for a few hours, it felt like much longer. Maybe it was because everything between them had shifted, or because they’d been interrupted before they could talk about what was supposed to happen now, but Darcy hadn’t felt right since he’d left.

Some mixture of loneliness and apprehension had insisted on hovering just in the back of her throat.

She was being selfish, of course. Because having Steve around wouldn’t just mean that he wasn’t putting himself in danger halfway around the world. It would give her something else to concentrate on. Someone to distract her and rally her spirit. It would be easier to be happy for Eddie if she wasn’t feeling so alone. If she had Steve’s hand to slip into hers and remind her that she wasn’t really as stuck as she felt. If she could get back that feeling of being safe, taken care of, that reminder that things weren’t that bad, then she could just focus on being a good friend. The kind of person who was just able to be happy and excited when their partner got promoted.

She blinked back the tears stinging at her eyes and nose and swallowed hard before she got up and started moving around the room. She could cry if she wanted to later, she told herself, hoping the urge would pass on its own soon enough.

“You need a new bra, woman,” Eddie muttered when she returned to the living room, pulling a clean t-shirt down over her chest.

Darcy stopped and frowned as she looked down at her upper body. “Don’t you have more important things to worry about?”

“I’m just saying,” he said, getting to his feet. “You should splurge the next time you’re at Walgreens and get yourself something nice.”

She rolled her eyes and grabbed her jacket. “I haven’t heard any complaints,” she muttered.

Eddie was undeterred as he followed her outside. “That’s exactly my point,” he said,
watching as she locked her door. “If you’re gonna be playing capture the flag on the regular—”

“Just so I can prepare myself,” Darcy said, starting down the stairs. “How many of these little puns do you have locked and loaded?”

“Dozens,” Eddie said, following close behind her. “Hundreds. Dozens of hundreds.”

“Oh boy.”

They walked past the mailboxes, stepping over a scattering of bulk mail postcards and envelopes someone had tossed in the hallway. “And if I run out, the internet is just begging me to go looking.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she assessed.

“Anyway, if you’re going to keep…y’know…” he gave her a look, “being of service to your country—” Darcy snorted while Eddie held open the door. “You need to step it up a little bit.” He motioned for her go first and then led the way to the curb. “I’m not saying go crazy. Y’know, maybe wear more than one t-shirt a week. Put a little product in your hair every now and then. I won’t tell anyone, I promise.” She ignored him, so he continued. “Would you prefer I just say that you’re being patriotic?” He raised his arm for a cab. “Pledging allegiance? Doing the Yankee Doodle Dandy?”

A yellow car pulled to the curb and Eddie held open the door so she could hop in. “I hate you,” she said simply when he slid in after her.

He grinned. “No, you don’t.”

She sighed and gave him another punch in the arm, reminding herself that no, of course she didn’t. She was grateful he’d come to see her. Grateful he’d dragged her out of the apartment and off to do something normal. Grateful that this invitation would keep her from overanalyzing and overthinking everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

Between Eddie’s good-natured joking, Becca’s twice-baked sweet potatoes, and regaling Shawn with police stories suitable for a five-year-old, Darcy almost forgot about checking her phone. It wasn’t until she was back in the cab, heading home that she pulled it from her pocket and found she hadn’t missed anything.

The lack of messages and updates didn’t surprise her. But alone in her room, with nothing left to distract her, the sight of an empty inbox did nothing to settle the kernel of concern that had wormed its way into her stomach.

She climbed into bed and turned on the small tv in the corner of her room.

And once again, Darcy didn’t sleep.

***

The modicum of relief he felt upon realizing he could open his eyes dissolved quickly when he realized that was the extent of his mobility.
Although he could open his eyes, he couldn’t see much. He was being held somewhere dark and empty. The air was cold and crisp.

Where had they taken him?

His pulse quickened. That sense of cool detachment he’d felt earlier was gone. He swallowed hard and tried to remain calm.

His body was useless, cold and unmoving from the neck down. He could watch his chest rise with his breath but any attempt to move at all, even a simple flex of his fingers was impossible.

“It’s not permanent.”

A woman’s voice cut through the darkness and quieted the questions that were firing in his mind. He squinted and tried to see the figure lurking in the shadows. He swallowed again and tried his voice. “No?”

“No,” came the simple reply. There was only the tiniest trace of an accent. Not the tumble of New Jersey he’d picked up earlier. Something different. Her words now were crisp and direct with only the faintest lilt.

“Where’d you bring me?” he asked. He sounded stilted. It was a chore to speak; like a heavy weight sat on his chest.

“Research facility,” the woman said, keeping just far enough away that he couldn’t make her out.

He huffed a small laugh. “Listen, if your plan is to try to make your own batch of super-soldier serum, I should warn you, that doesn’t usually turn out so well. Ask my friend Bruce.”

She didn’t laugh at his joke. “That is not why you’re here, Captain Rogers.” He made another attempt to move before she spoke again. “Don’t fight it, please. The paralysis is temporary, but only reversed with the antidote.”

He let out a strained breath. “And I suppose you’re the only one who has that?”

He almost heard her smile. “You don’t need to fight.”

His eyes had adjusted enough to make out the outline of her thin frame. She was perched on the edge of what looked like a countertop or a table. Steve swallowed hard. “Unfortunately, ma’am, fighting’s all I do. So I hope you’re planning on giving me an order I can follow because otherwise…”

“Fighting isn’t all you do, Captain Rogers.”

He resisted the urge to roll his eyes. “No, you’re right. Sometimes I do watercolors.”

“Sometimes you save the world,” she continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “Sometimes you get takeout for your little cop girlfriend.”

At the mention of Darcy, Steve’s blood ran cold. He clenched his jaw. “I swear to God—”

“And sometimes,” she raised her voice over his. “You walk right into this perfect little trap I set for you without me barely having to lift a finger.” She paused and he saw her feet kick back and forth. “You have no idea how long I’ve been wanting to meet you.”
He sucked in another breath. “You make a hell of a first impression…”

“So did you,” she said, sounding almost wistful, dreamy. “Just like the newsreels. Kicking down the door, cracking those chains with one bounce of your shield.” She sighed. Steve felt a deep, sinking dread dragging down the back of his throat and settling in his stomach. “Quite the hero.”

“What are you…” he said softly, the pieces finally clicking together as she stepped from the shadows, an indulgent smile playing on her lips. “I know you…”

“I should hope so, Cap,” she said, taking a step closer. “After all, you’re just about the only guy who’s ever visited me in the hospital.” Alexandra Cohen reached out her long, thin fingers and pushed his hair back into place. “You even brought me flowers.”

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for this filler, but it had to be done. Hopefully it wasn't *too* painful.

I love all of you crazy kittens. Hope you stay with me!

Oh, and before I forget, thanks to all of the hilarious souls that left comments on my "I need a pun for Captain America sex" post on Tumblr. If you see your contribution here, know that I am eternally grateful.

There's also a line I borrowed from Sicario because that's an amazing film. So there.
Eighteen

Chapter Summary

Some off the clock police work, some villainous monologuing and a surprise cameo from a perpetually absent roommate.

Chapter Notes

Oh my kittens you are all so so wonderful. We're getting close to the end now, friends, so keep your hopes high and your expectations low and we might all get through this together. :.*

The clock beside Darcy’s bed burned the numbers 3:45 into her eyes when she rolled over for what felt like the millionth time. She squinted and flipped onto her back again; kicking off her blankets, she brought a hand to her face and covered her eyes. She did the math quickly in her head, figuring she’d managed to get about three hours of sleep since she shut off the Golden Girls reruns around eleven.

Her feet hit the floor and she found herself shuffling to the mirror hanging on the back of her door. She stared blearily at her reflection in the dark and catalogued what she could of the bags beneath her eyes and pale, sallow look to her cheeks. “You need a vacation, Darcy Grace,” she muttered before she pulled down her messy bun only to re-affix it at the top of her head. A vacation had been sounding just a little too tempting lately. Briefly, she allowed herself to imagine a week somewhere warm and sunny. Maybe somewhere where she could sleep in and listen to the ocean while she got a tan. Maybe somewhere Steve could join her and they could pick up where they’d left off earlier.

She shoved her glasses onto her face and pushed the ideas of margaritas and midafternoon orgasms out of her mind. There’d be plenty of time for vacations, she reminded herself, once this killer was off the streets.

To her surprise, there was a light on in the living room and she could just make out the rise and fall of voices and a laugh-track on the television. Her roommate, Jessica, was tucked in the corner of the couch, her knees drawn up to her chin as she flipped through the channels. “Hey,” she said, her voice a little more hoarse than usual. “I didn’t wake you, did I?” Her stringy black hair fell into her face when she looked up.

Darcy shook her head and sat down on the opposite end of the couch. “No, I haven’t been sleeping.” She remembered the time and frowned. “Are you just getting home?”

Jessica was actually the perfect roommate. A private investigator with her own business, she was smart, blunt, and an unflinchingly honest workaholic. She didn’t care if things were messy because she was hardly ever home and as long as Darcy paid her share of the rent and utilities, they got along famously.
Between Jess’s hours and Darcy’s erratic schedule in Vice, they hardly ever saw each other. Jane had been the one to find the ad on Craigslist and texted it to her. It had included pictures of the space they now shared and only two sentences that told Darcy just about everything she needed to know about her new roommate: *Roommate needed to share uncomfortably small Brooklyn apartment. Thieves, partiers and other assholes need not apply.*

Jessica shrugged, and returned her eyes to the screen. “Nobody cheats on their wife in the middle of the afternoon anymore,” she muttered with a shake of her head.

Darcy’s eyes fell to the camera on the coffee table. “Was it worth the effort, at least?”

“It’ll add up to a payday,” Jess shrugged again. “I hope she actually leaves the piece of shit this time. This is the third time she’s paid me to follow him.”

They were quiet while Jess settled on an infomercial for Himalayan salt lamps and Darcy settled back into the couch. She slid her box of police files closer to her and picked up one from the back.

“How’s that case going?” Jess asked after a minute.

Darcy frowned. “Technically it’s not.” She opened the file she’d plucked from the box and found herself staring at Alex Cohen’s medical file from the pawn shop explosion in Gravesend. “They took me off.”

Jess made a sound of disbelief. “That’s some bullshit.”

“Sure is,” Darcy agreed, running her finger over the laundry list of chemicals found in Alex’s veins.

“Fuckin’ cops,” Jess shook her head.

“I know, right?” Darcy let out a little laugh. “Who needs ‘em?”

“Well, if you ever want to join me in the PI world,” her roommate offered a rare smile. “I wouldn’t say no to a partner.”

Darcy smiled back. “Thanks, but I think I’m going to stick it out.” She furrowed her brow. “Why did he call her a heroin addict?”

“Huh?” Jess looked over, curious.

“This witness,” she said, tapping the file in her lap. “My LT called her a nineteen-year-old heroin addict when he was talking about her yesterday.” She tilted her head to one side and studied the tox screen. “But there’s nothing in this file about heroin.”

“Was he looking at her record?” Jessica asked, shifting her large, dark eyes to the box of files.

Darcy shrugged. “Probably. I don’t have that with me though.”

“Can you remote into the server and get it from work?”

She sighed. “I could…but that’d be logged and I’m sure I’d hear about it on Monday from Driscoll.”

Jessica thought for a minute and shrugged her shoulders. “I have a login.”
Darcy blinked. “You do?”

She nodded. “It’s tied to the business address, so I’m pretty sure no one will link it back to you. I can pull the file for you.”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “You’re sure?”

“Sure.” She flipped off the TV and waited while Darcy retrieved her laptop from her bedroom. Her fingers flew over the keys and within seconds, Darcy found herself looking at the familiar NYPD intranet.

“Thanks, Jess.”

Her roommate shrugged again. “Sure. Hope it helps.”

If nothing else, Alex Cohen’s police record gave her something else to point her bleary eyes at while she waited for the urge to sleep to return. She scrolled over the list of prior arrests—Jess was right, heroin and prostitution charges—and returned to the mug shot. She squinted her eyes at the screen and frowned.

“She’s not 5’7,” she said softly, focusing on the numbers just above Alex’s head in her mug shot. “She’s shorter than I am.”

Not bothering to hide her curiosity, Jess leaned over and stole a look at the medical record on the couch. “Well she’s the right height on this one,” she said, pointing to where one of the nurses had scribbled 5’3” beside her weight. She looked at the screen again. “Maybe they photographed her before she took her shoes off.”

Darcy shook her head. “No, there’s no way.”

Jessica pursed her lips thoughtfully. “Unless you want to consider advanced osteoporosis a possibility—” Darcy snorted before she continued, “there’s really only one explanation.” Her narrow shoulders moved in a small shrug. “You’re looking at the wrong police record.”

Darcy frowned again. “This is the one we’ve been looking at the whole time,” she said cautiously. “And it’s the one Driscoll had on his desk yesterday.”

Jessica shrugged again. “Well, if you’re lucky enough to work for a man who’s never been wrong before, consider me jealous.” She got up and stretched her arms over her head. “But just to be safe, I’d run another search for your girl and make sure you’re looking at the right one.”

“Thanks,” Darcy said, distractedly not looking up from the screen.

“In the meantime, I’m going to bed,” she said around a wide yawn. “Enjoy your hookers.”

“I always do,” Darcy grinned as her fingers moved over the keys again. “Sleep well, Jess.”

A search of active records only brought up the file she’d been reading and one other for a man named Alexander Cohen who had been transferred to Sing Sing in 2004 where he was currently serving a life sentence for something Darcy didn’t want to read about at four in the morning.

She huffed out a sigh and moved her cursor to the search bar again. Cautiously, she hovered over the box that read ‘all records’ for a few long moments of consideration before she checked it and searched again. Predictably, her second search yielded more results. Almost too
many. Darcy scrubbed at her eyes for a moment and got up to make a pot of coffee.

She sorted the results by relevancy and dismissed the two she’d already read. The third record caught her eye. A missing person’s report from 2013. With her teeth sunk into her bottom lip, she hesitated for only a moment before she clicked and a weight dropped like lead into her stomach.

The missing person’s report had been filed by her parents in White Plains and then never updated. It was for Alexandra Cohen. The Alexandra Cohen whose police report they’d been referencing. The blonde woman with dark eyes and thin lips. The photo they’d used for the posters showed an Alexandra with a sparkle in her eye and a dimple in her right cheek when she smiled. She looked healthy and happy.

And nothing like the girl Darcy had been interviewing.

She clicked back and forth between two files. There was no denying that the healthy, happy girl from the missing posters was the same girl in the mugshot. She checked the dates of Alexandra’s arrests. Her last run-in with NYPD had been when she’d spent six days in lockup in September of 2013. Her parents had filed their report two months later. They’d used an older picture of her to downplay the turn her life had taken when she moved to the city, but it was the same girl.

Not the girl Darcy knew.

Darcy’s Alex was shorter, for one thing. And absent the dimple the other Alex had. The longer she stared at the missing person’s report the more the differences began jumping out at her. Their eyes were similar—and at a quick glance, she understood why no one had dug any deeper—but they weren’t exactly the same size.

And Darcy had seen her Alex smile. That was different too.

She sat back and let out a long, slow breath.

“So who,” she said finally, picking up the medical record again, “the fuck are you?”

***

Russell Bennet didn’t appear to be expecting a visitor at 7:15 on a Sunday morning. For a guy awaiting trial on blowing up a pawnshop, he didn’t much look the part. He rubbed his eyes like a little boy as he shuffled into the cubby on the other side of the plexiglass and sat down. He eyed her suspiciously while he picked up the phone.

“They said my lawyer was here to see me,” he said in a voice thick with sleep. He narrowed his green eyes at her through the glass. “You’re a lot hotter than my last lawyer.”

Darcy rolled her eyes and reminded herself that this had been a long shot from the get-go. “It’s legal visits only on Sundays,” she said, stating what she’d learned from the MDC website. “I have to ask you some questions.”

He shrugged. “Ask whatever you want, my story isn’t going to ch—”

“I don’t care about your story,” she interrupted and reached into her bag. “I just have to ask you something about the girl in the back room.”
“Yeah, look, man,” he held up his hands, cradling the phone between his ear and shoulder. “I didn’t even know we had a back room.”

Her patience wearing thin, Darcy unclipped the only photo they had of the Alex she knew—the one they’d taken at the hospital of the side of her face to show the injection blemish on her neck—and held it up to the glass. “Do you know this girl?”

Russell scoffed. “Of course I do.”

“Did you know her before she was found bound and gagged and almost dead in the back room of your place of employment?”

His face did something unexpected then. His thick eyebrows narrowed in confusion and he squinted. “Wait. What?”

Darcy sighed. “Just answer the question, Russell.”

His look of bewilderment deepened. “I will as soon as you tell me what any of this has to do with Maggie.”

She stopped short. Her breath caught in her throat. “Who?”

“Maggie McNeil,” he said as if it were obvious. “The girl in that picture. She lives upstairs. I used to see her every day.”

Darcy shook her head. “This girl told us her name was Alexandra Cohen. She’s from Manhattan Beach.”

It was Russell’s turn to shake his head. “No way,” he said firmly. “That’s Maggie McNeil. She lived in one of the apartments upstairs; she used to buy coffee for whoever was working when she’d go out to get one.” He frowned again in thought. “Actually, I’m pretty sure she was fucking the landlord.”

“What makes you say that?” Darcy asked before she could help herself.

He shrugged. “She always had a lot of keys. And I know one time she helped let somebody in when they got locked out by accident.”

“Why didn’t you mention this when you were questioned the first time?”

“Nobody told me she was involved.” He looked concerned. “Are you sure she’s the one who was in that room?”

Darcy nodded, her mind racing. “Positive.”

Russell shook his head. “Well that doesn’t make any sense. The news said that girl they found in my shop was a hooker. And I mean…it’s a big jump from fucking the landlord to being a hooker, ya know?”

She began packing up her bag again. “Do you know what apartment she lived in?” she asked, her pulse thrumming in her ears.

“Uh…” Russell’s eyes shot upward and to the right. “I think she lived in 4B.”

“Thanks,” Darcy stood from her side of the cubby and went to hang up the phone. She paused and put it back to her ear. “Also, I’m not a lawyer, but here’s some free advice. You’re in
prison,” she reminded him. “Stop talking to people you don’t know without your attorney present. I could have literally been anyone.”

He looked confused. “Uh…thanks,” he said cautiously and hung up the phone on his end.

Darcy’s fingers were flying over her keyboard as she made her way out of the prison. *Serious shit going down,* she texted Steve, her heart racing with excitement. *Finish Avenging soon because I really need to talk to you.* She paused and bit her lip before she added the last part. *And please be safe.*

She told herself there was no point in expecting a response. He would let her know when he was safe and when he was coming home. But it didn’t stop her from checking her phone three times between the prison and her favorite coffee shop.

***

Unlike Russell Bennet, Ginger didn’t look like she’d been pulled from sleep when she sat down across from Darcy. The only reason Ginger looked tired was because she hadn’t gone to bed yet.

She eased herself into the booth and gulped greedily at the coffee Darcy had ordered for her. “I’m telling you, Dee, you’re in the wrong fucking business. I just spent the last two hours with hands-down the most beautiful cock I’ve ever seen in my life.” She let out a low whistle and shook her head. “It was like a work of art.”

“Ginger,” Darcy held up a hand. “This isn’t a social call.”

Ginger rolled her eyes. “Well you know, maybe a few social calls wouldn’t kill you every now and then. You need to relax.” Her dark eyes darted past Darcy and gave a hopeful look around. “Where’s that all-American side of beef you got following you around lately?” She gave her a wicked grin. “He’s gotta be good for some relaxation.”

“Ginge,” Darcy narrowed her eyes and folded her arms on the table. “Something big is going down and I need your help.”

Ginger sighed and took another gulp of coffee. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay, Dee,” she folded her arms too and raised her sculpted eyebrows. “What’s up?”

“How well do you know the girls who work Gravesend?”

Ginger looked confused. “Aaaand what girls would those be?” She shook her head with a laugh. “Do you hear yourself, Dee? Hookers in Gravesend? Where would they set up shop? Outside the yoga studios or the fucking cupcake shops?”

Darcy sighed. “Are you telling me no one works out that way?”

“I’m telling you if they do,” she gave her a pointed look, “we’re in very different tax brackets.”

She nodded. “What about Manhattan Beach?”
Ginger shook her head again. “Same story. Also, we don’t have annual conventions or an online database so I’m not sure why you think I’d know every whore in Brooklyn. What are you getting at?”

Darcy removed the photo she’d shown Russell from her purse and held it up for Ginger. “Does this girl look familiar to you?”

Ginger looked back, blankly. “Should she?”

“She told me her name is Alex Cohen—supposedly she works near Cutler’s Pawn Shop on Avenue—” Darcy stopped as Ginger had already begun shaking her head. “What no? What’s wrong?”

“That ain’t no whore,” she said plainly.

Darcy frowned. “How can you tell?”

She gave her a knowing look. “I’ve been open for business since I was fourteen, Dee. You start to be able to recognize these things.” She pointed a neon yellow talon at the corner of Alex’s mouth. “Those lips aren’t workin’ for a living, trust me.”

Darcy turned the photo back around and squinted at it. She shook her head as she tucked it away and took out the legal pad she’d been scrawling on for the last two months. “Y’know, if this whole sex worker thing doesn’t work out, you might want to consider police work, Ginger.” She made a few quick notes on a page that was mostly blank but for a few sad attempts at Russian phonetics scribbled in the corner.

Ginger yawned. “I can’t afford to take a pay cut,” she said with a sleepy grin. “So, what are you gonna do now? Go back to work? On a Sunday?”

Darcy frowned. What was she going to do? “Ideally, I’d take this straight to my lieutenant and add it to the huge pile of shit that doesn’t make sense about this case.”

Her companion raised her eyebrows again. “But…”

“But that’ll just let him know that I’ve been working behind his back and it’ll be just what he needs to suspend me for real this time.”

“Oooh,” Ginger shook her head. “Don’t piss off your pimp, girl.”

Darcy scoffed. “Driscoll is not my pimp.”

Ginger shrugged. “You’re doing all the work? Your pussy’s the one taking the risk while he bosses you around and makes more than you?” She shook her head. “Sounds like a pimp to me.”

“It’s called the chain of command, Ginger.”

“It’s called a lot of things, baby girl,” Ginger countered with another grin. “Whatever you want to call him, don’t piss him off.”

She rubbed at her eyes with one hand. “Yeah, I know.” She looked at her watch. “I should probably—”

Ginger wrapped a clawed hand around Darcy’s wrist. “You should probably stay and have some breakfast with me before I go home and crash.” She held up a hand before any objections
could be voiced. “My treat,” she promised and reached into her bra for a wad of large bills. “That gorgeous cock came with a big tip.”

Darcy couldn’t help but smile as she shook her head and reluctantly accepted the menu that was handed to her. “You are such a poet, Ginger.”

***

“I’ve gotta say, you didn’t strike me as a Black Widow,” Steve said, his tone almost conversational the next time Alex returned. And although she wasn’t really Alex, she hadn’t given Steve another name to call her.

She looked up from where she’d been perusing his cell phone with a half-smile on her lips. “Sort of the idea, isn’t it?”

He smirked back. “Fair enough.” He motioned with his chin to the phone in her hand. “Snoop on anything good lately?”

She shrugged and set the phone down. “Not nearly as interesting as I was hoping.”

“What were you thinking?” he scoffed. “That I had a top-secret Avengers file that I kept on me at all times?”

His captor rolled her eyes. “I’m hoping you don’t take this personally, Steve,” she looked up at him through her dark eyebrows. The blonde he’d seen the first time they’d met must have been a bottle job. The longer he looked at her, the more obvious it was that her features were that of a brunette. “But you of all people should understand the importance of completing a mission.”

“Oh, I understand missions plenty,” he agreed. “But I’m not sure what I have to do with yours.”

“I just need your help in reclaiming what’s ours.” She said it so casually, Steve almost missed the way her eyes narrowed at the mention of her mission.

“Bucky,” he said and swallowed hard. “You’re trying to lure him out?”

She offered him a sad, understanding smile. “You Americans have so much…your super soldiers and your secret weapons,” she shook her head. “But in Russia, we only have our winter.” She stood up and approached him again. “And you stole that from us.”

He clenched his jaw as unwelcome images of Bucky being tortured at the hands of his captors, of being drugged and beaten and having his memory erased every time the slightest hint of his past clawed back to the surface. “I didn’t steal anything,” he reminded her. “I just tried to make him remember who he was before you turned him into a weapon.” He took a measured breath. “And you’re wasting your time. I have no idea where he is.”

“No, I believe that,” she said sincerely. “I’ve been watching you chase your tail looking for him for years. If you knew where he was, you couldn’t stop yourself from bringing him home.”

He huffed out another difficult, sarcastic laugh and managed a shake of his head. “You went to an awful lot of trouble with all of this, sweetheart. You could’ve kidnapped me years ago.”
“I had to make sure you were my ticket,” she gave a languid stretch of her arms and moved to his side. It wasn’t until then that Steve realized there were needles in his arm. Something was flowing into his veins. “Relax,” she said, wheeling a chrome IV stand so he could see the label on the bag. “I’m just keeping you hydrated.” She gave his chest a patronizing pat. “And you weren’t my first choice. I almost had him back in DC. Didn’t expect that idiot hooker he was so fond of to die so quickly. She really was my best lead.”

Her casual tone turned his stomach. “And you thought that by framing him for murder…”

“It would get someone else looking for him too,” she finished his thought. “I’m all for saving on my legwork.”

“But you kept killing…what did those other women do to you?”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Oh please. You sound like Darcy.” She gave a thoughtful pause. “You know, she’s the only cop I’ve ever seen give a shit about what happened to a prostitute.” She sighed and moved the IV cart back out of his field of vision. “But that’s my problem. Nobody cares about one dead hooker.”

“But five or six…”

She offered him a wry smile. “Everyone loves a serial killer, Cap.”

“Most people would find it more difficult than you did,” he said trying with every ounce of strength he had to move when she came closer. It was no use. He might as well have been dead from the neck down. “Becoming a serial killer.”

“Most people haven’t done the things I’ve done,” she reminded him. “Things that would make even that traitor Natasha cringe.”

“She might be a traitor——”

“No might be,” Alex cut him off harshly. “She is a traitor. She betrayed her family,” she narrowed her eyes. “Her sisters.”

Steve felt his eyebrows lift. “Not sure you get to talk about sisterhood if you just murdered six innocent women.”

“Collateral damage, Captain,” she said, the words clearly rehearsed and cemented in her mind. “The mission is what matters.”

“Collateral damage?” he repeated. “It didn’t look like collateral damage watching Izolda Rusakov talk about how nobody cared that her sister was murdered.” He clenched his jaw. “It wasn’t collateral damage when Darcy had to tell her friend’s parents that their daughter was never coming home.” The memory of Darcy’s red and splotchy face, the tears she’d been trying to hide after she’d identified Kitty’s body kept the anger boiling in his stomach. But if he’d been hoping to appeal to her humanity, it was a lost cause. She fluffed off his words with a shrug of her shoulders. “So what if you’re wrong?” he asked.

The change in topic caused her head to snap back in his direction. “What? If your knight in shining armor doesn’t come swooping in to save you?”

His lips turned up at the corner. “I’d love to believe that’s going to happen for you—mostly because I’d love to see him again—but you’ve got him all wrong, honey. He’s not stupid enough to fall for this trap,” he shook his head. The truth tasted unpleasant on his tongue. “Not for
He hated that he wasn’t lying. Wasn’t bluffing. But the truth was, no matter where he was or what he remembered, Bucky wasn’t waiting in the shadows, ready to swoop in and help him to get free. He wouldn’t risk his freedom to rescue Steve. No matter how many times he’d done it in the past.

“Why do you think I brought you here?” she asked, surprising him with her answer. “I’m going home with what I need one way or another.”

Steve swallowed hard. “What do you mean by that?”

“The mission is what matters,” she repeated gravely. “And as fond as we are of our winter, he is only a weapon. The fist of Hydra.” Steve watched as she ran her fingers down his forearm and pulled his hand up from its place at his side. He could feel nothing. It was like watching her manipulate someone else entirely. “If I’ve misjudged him, like you say, and he doesn’t come,” she curled the fingers of Steve’s hand in on themselves and covered them with her own. “We will use your fist instead.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so we all know who Darcy’s roommate is, right? It’s not remotely canon but I couldn’t help myself.

Also, I borrowed some lines from Dexter and Buffy for this chapter. Don’t sue me. :-)

I love you all endlessly and hope you come play with me on Tumblr at idontgettechnology.
Nineteen

Chapter Summary

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the spider to the fly...

Chapter Notes

Those crazy kittens that seem to be finding this story and reading it all in one go? WOW! You're amazing!
Those super sweet kittens who've read every chapter as I painstakingly take my sweet time posting? WOW! You're incredible!

Everyone who's followed me on tumblr since I started writing this beast? Wow. I am so sorry you have to see the greasy inner workings of my brain and what I repost on that site. :-P

No, seriously. I love you guys. And no, you're not seeing things. I needed to add another chapter. Just 3 more after this one and then we're outta here. I promise.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her head was still spinning with ideas and possible explanations when she climbed her stairs and stopped short at the sight of Will Lewis standing in the hallway, ready to knock on her door. “Dad?” she asked, feeling her expression mold into confusion.

Surprised, he turned around and offered her a big smile. “Hey! There she is. Good timing, kiddo.”

She ascended the last two stairs and noticed the plastic grocery bag in his hand as he gave her a quick hug. “What are you doing here?”

He waited while she unlocked her double deadbolts and followed her into the apartment. “I got your message, about Driscoll and the case.” He offered her a bashful smile and held up the plastic bag. “I know it won’t help, but I brought Rocky Road and the Babysitter’s Club.”

A lump rose quickly in the back of Darcy’s throat, bringing with it all the stress and frustration of the last few months. The late nights, the early mornings, the strange pieces that refused to fit together. Her vision swam and wordlessly, she walked toward her father and wrapped her arms around his middle, tucking her head under his chin.

She felt him let out a weak laugh as he rubbed a comforting circle on her back. “It’s gonna be okay, Bumblebee. It’s not the end of the world.” He pulled away and dropped his head to give her a concerned look. “Is this just…work stuff?” he asked cautiously, swiping at one of her tears with his thumb. “Or is something else going on?”

She sniffled and rubbed quickly at her eyes. “I’m just…really glad you’re here,” she said finally in an uncharacteristically small voice.
Her father returned her smile. “Go grab a couple spoons,” he motioned with his chin to the kitchen, “then you can tell your old man what’s been going on.”

Darcy looked at her watch. “Dad, it’s nine-thirty in the morning.”

He looked offended. “Hey, if you don’t want any ice cream, that’s just more for me.”

She couldn’t help but smile for real. “I didn’t say that.”

“Then chop-chop,” he pointed to the kitchen again. “Just don’t tell your mother. She thinks I’m taking you out for breakfast.”

Darcy hadn’t planned on telling her father everything. It just sort of happened that way. Between his company, the ice cream, and the predictable plot and dialogue of her favorite childhood movie, Darcy found that all the details of the case, including everything she’d learned in the last few hours alone, came rushing back and tumbling past her lips.

“And the worst part is that I don’t even know who I’m supposed to tell about all this,” she said around a mouthful of chocolate, marshmallows and almost. “I’m scared if I tell Driscoll he’s just going to have everything he needs to suspend me for insubordination.” She stopped and frowned. “No, that’s not the worst part.”

“No?” her father looked intrigued.

“No,” she shook her head. “The worst part is that I sat right across the table from this girl and I didn’t suspect a thing.”

It was Will’s turn to shake his head. “No, no, don’t do that, Bee. No good dwelling on what you should’ve seen or done differently. You’ve got more information now. You’re a better cop than you were yesterday…so what’s your gut telling you now?”

She swallowed and pursed her lips in thought. “That she’s the key to all of this…and if I find her, I find what I’m looking for.”

When she looked up, her father was nodding encouragingly, making her feel like she was in fourth grade again, trying to riddle out a long division problem. “C’mon, kiddo. You’ve been running around the city all morning chasing leads, let’s put ‘em together. Where do we start?”

Darcy gave him a side-eye. “You’re supposed to be retired.”

He grinned. “And you’re supposed to be in Vice,” he reminded. “But I won’t tell if you won’t.”

She hauled her files up onto the coffee table and spread everything out again. To her relief, her laptop had saved Jessica’s intranet login and she was able to pull up the real Alexandra Cohen’s police record. “So this is who your department thinks was the only vic to walk away from your guy?” Will asked, motioning to the screen.

“Girl,” Darcy corrected. “And yes.”

“But Driscoll’s not the one who interviewed her,” he clarified with raised eyebrows. “Right? You and your Sergeant did?”

She nodded. “Yeah.”

He reached out and closed the laptop. “Then forget her.”
“Dad—”

“I mean,” he softened. “Y’know, if you want to start looking for missing persons on your off time, that’s fine. But right now, the only thing you know for sure is that she’s not our girl.” He gave her a look. “The less moving parts you’re looking at, the more obvious the answer is going to be. Here’s what you need to focus on—what do you think this girl wants?”

Darcy bit her lip. “If she really is a Black Widow…like Natasha said…” she shrugged. “I guess she probably wants Bucky back under Hydra’s control.” She frowned. “But staging her own crime scene and attack wouldn’t get her any closer to finding out where Bucky was—it would just guarantee that we’d be looking for him too.”

“Oh,” her father nodded and waited for her to continue.

“With all of our resources. And manpower.” She grimaced. “Goddamnit.”

“Just because you fell for it doesn’t mean it wasn’t a complicated plan, Bee,” he reminded her gently. “Sure, it’s easy to lump this woman in with all the idiots you bust in a normal week…but every so often, someone comes along with a talent for this bad-guy stuff.” He shrugged. “And anyway, you’re not the only one she fooled, from the looks of it. So don’t beat yourself up too much.” He cleared his throat and continued. “The address she gave initially, when you first interviewed her,” he reached for the medical record.

“The apartment in Manhattan Beach?” Darcy shook her head. “It’s some shipping container warehouse. Decoy address no one—including me—ever bothered to look up.”

“You look into this other alias?”

“Maggie McNeil?” she shook her head again. “Not yet.”


Darcy handed him the forensic report of their only crime scene. At less than half a page long, the CSIs had deemed it one of the cleanest rooms they’d ever tackled. “Our best hope is for this tiny patch of epithelial cells they found under one of Kitty’s nails.” She reached for the well-handled autopsy report of Tina Salazar. “But without a specimen to test it against…”

Will was quiet for a while, considering the information before him. “The good news,” he said sinking his spoon back into his carton of ice cream, “is that the case against Bucky isn’t very strong and most of it centers on this Alex girl’s testimony.”

“And the bad news?” she asked, crunching down on a mouthful of cold almonds.

“The bad news is that your case isn’t the greatest either. And your best hope of changing that is catching a ghost.”

Darcy dropped her head into her hands and heaved a heavy sigh. “Well. At least it’s not all bad news.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw her father tilt his head to one side and furrow his brow in concern. “What is that? What am I hearing?”

She cocked her head too and felt her eyes widen as she recognized her ringtone. She sprang to her feet and dug into her purse, willing herself not to be disappointed if it wasn’t Steve calling to check in. She wasn’t expecting the way her heart jumped up into her throat at the sight of Stark’s name on
her screen. She took a deep breath and hit ‘accept’. “Hello?” she asked tentatively, trying not to imagine all the worst-case scenarios where Tony might have reason to call her.

“Hey, 5-0,” she felt her heart unclench at his conversational tone. If something really had happened to Steve, he wouldn’t be starting out with nicknames. “No joke this time. I really need Rogers back. Wheels up in forty-five minutes.”

Any sense of relief she’d just felt dropped quickly away. “What?” she asked, feeling like someone had just scratched the record inside her head.

Tony sighed. “I’m sure you know who I’m talking about. Tall, blond, a little self-righteous but in a hot way?”

If her heart hadn’t started thudding in her ears, Darcy would have found that funny. “Tony, I haven’t seen Steve since yesterday.”

At this, her father perked up with interest.

“That’s…not what he says.”

She furrowed her brow. “That’s not what who says? Steve? If you’re talking to him why are you calling me?”

“No, I mean…” There was a gravelly sound of frustration and a brief tussle before Natasha intercepted the phone from Tony’s end.

“Darcy?”

“Present,” she said, her pulse not slowing down. “What the hell is going on?”

“I texted Steve yesterday and told him we were stalled on the mission.” Darcy didn’t say anything, so Natasha continued. “And then he texted back that he was going to stay in Brooklyn and keep working until we needed him…” She paused. “When was the last time you heard from him?”

Darcy swallowed hard and reminded herself that if Natasha could sound this calm, the she didn’t have a good reason to panic yet. “Yesterday,” she repeated. “He got the call from Tony and he left.”

“Just like that?”

Her thoughts returned to the last time she’d seen him and she almost rolled her eyes. _No, Natasha_, she thought in that tone that always got her in trouble, _first he kissed me goodbye and THEN he left with the unspoken agreement that he was going to come back and fuck me through the mattress._ “More or less,” Darcy said, turning away from the curious gaze of her father.

“And you haven’t heard from him since?”

“No,” she pushed back the hair that had dislodged from her messy bun. “What have you guys heard?”

“Just what I told you,” Natasha said with a slight edge to her voice. “But it was over text and…” she paused. “I don’t know. It was weird.” Before Darcy could ask what made it weird, Natasha continued. “Hang tight. We’re coming to you.”

She hung up without another word, leaving Darcy confused, alarmed and unsure of what to do next.

“The hell was that about?” Her father asked, reminding her with a start that he was still there.
She set the phone on the coffee table and pursed her lips. “I guess the Avengers are coming over?”

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Introductions were quick and surprisingly painless as Darcy motioned to her father and watched him shake hands with Tony Stark. Darcy didn’t offer her own hand to shake, figuring that if the man had already hacked into her cell phone, he was already more familiar than she wanted him to be.

“So, here’s what we know,” Natasha began before she began tracking Tony’s movements around the small space with her eyes. “Tony…”

“Sorry,” he said distracted, peering down the hallway and into the kitchen with a critical eye. “Lewis your apartment is really…”

“It’s a shit hole, Tony,” Darcy cut him off and crossed her arms over her chest. “But it’s one of the last rent-controlled shit holes in the borough and I make $39,000 a year. So.”


Darcy rolled her eyes. “Yeah. It’s a tragedy. Anyway—”

“But you’re a police officer! What is wrong with this city? Who can live on that?”

She held up a hand. “Preaching to the choir. If my salary pisses you off so much,” she shrugged. “I don’t know. Call the mayor. In the meantime, we’re down a national treasure here, so can we stick to the topic at hand?”

Her father exchanged a quick glance with Sam before Natasha cleared her throat. “This is the last text I got from Steve,” she said, pulling up her phone. “Yesterday at four-thirty.” She passed the phone to Darcy without preamble and watched her study the message.

“Now this is the message you said was...weird?” Tony asked, accepting the phone and squinting at the message. “It hardly says anything. I don’t know what you’re reading into.”

“There’s no emoji,” Darcy said after a moment’s consideration.

Tony blinked. “Better call the Pentagon.”

“No, no,” Sam stood from where’d grabbed a seat beside Will on the sofa. “Darcy’s right. If you send Steve a smile or something, he always sends one back.”

“Always,” Darcy reiterated.

“I convinced him it was proper cell phone etiquette a few years ago,” Natasha admitted, allowing herself a half-smirk before she turned serious again. “Anyway.”

“So what are we saying?” Darcy’s father piped up from behind the pow-wow. “Someone took him? That wasn’t him sending that message?” The four of them exchanged looks and shrugs as he continued. “And you think this woman you’re chasing...this uh...” he glanced under his glasses at the notes on the table. “This Black Widow. You think she abducted him?”
“I don’t have another good reason why he wouldn’t be in contact,” Darcy said, sitting back down on the couch.

“Darcy, what is this?” Natasha had picked up one of Darcy’s notepads and was squinting at the scribbling in the corner.

Darcy felt her cheeks grow red at her pitiful attempt at sounding out the Russian she thought Bucky had spoken to her. “It’s uh… it’s just something I heard.” She moved her shoulders. “I mean, I think that’s what I heard. I was trying to…” she stopped herself and waved the idea away. “Anyway, doesn’t really matter. I don’t know what it says and I definitely don’t know how to spell it to find out.” She cleared her throat. “Anyway, the rest of that paper is a lot more important.”

Tony glanced over her notes. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s my best lead on our Black Widow,” she said, taking back the legal pad when it was handed to her. “I’m pretty sure we’re close to figuring out who she really is.”

“Well right now it doesn’t matter who she is so much as where she is,” Tony reminded, taking a seat in the opposing arm chair.

Darcy blinked. “Well, if we want a warrant, we need as much on her identity as we can get.”

“We might not have time for a warrant,” Tony said, his dismissive tone making her grit her teeth. “We need to be focusing on where she might have taken him.”

“And if you find him and go in, guns blazing,” Will looked skeptical, “everyone’s just going to be okay with that?”

Tony frowned. “It depends on where he is, I guess,” he said, testily. “Another reason we need to be focused on finding Rogers so we can decide if we need to waste time getting a court order.”

“Look, pal,” Will held up his hands. “I didn’t write the Constitution—”

“What if she took him home?” Natasha interrupted, her eyes still focused on the notes in Darcy’s hand.

“Home?” Sam asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Back to Hydra,” Natasha continued, finally looking up. “To Russia.” She paused, waiting for a response. When none came, she continued. “What if she wanted to lead Bucky away from all of us so she took Steve somewhere only he’d know to look?”

Intrigue had replaced Tony’s irritation as he leaned forward with curiosity. “Is that possible?”

Natasha shrugged, her lips pursed. “It’s what I would’ve done,” she admitted. “It’s a good strategy. Get away from the city where he’s been able to hide for the last few years. Take the one thing we know he still cares about…”

Stark didn’t look quite as convinced. “And you think he’d go?” he asked. “You think Bucky would go?”

One by one, their eyes fell to the redhead. She looked up after a moment with a frown. “I don’t know,” she said finally. “I don’t know him anymore. I can’t say what he would or wouldn’t do.”

Sam moved his head thoughtfully to one side. “He did pull Steve out of the Potomac,” he said after a
moment. “He could’ve let him die in DC and he didn’t.”

“And he saved me,” Darcy said quietly, subconsciously rubbing at her left wrist.

Natasha nodded. “There’s that.”

“So it’s pretty safe to say he’s at least been keeping tabs on what Steve’s been doing,” Sam continued. “Who he’s spending time with…who he cares about.”

“If you’re right, Romanoff,” Tony rested his elbows on his knees, “where would she take him?”

Darcy was sitting close enough that she caught the way the muscles tightened in Natasha’s jaw. “There’s a research facility,” she said carefully. “The one where they used to keep him.” She paused and kept her lips in a firm, straight line. “It’s…it’s no picnic to get to, but there are only maybe ten people on the planet who know about it.”

“And where is that?” Tony asked.

“Siberia.”

Darcy swallowed hard at the idea of Steve being held somewhere that cold and empty. “Well yeah, okay, that makes sense,” she said, trying to work around the feeling in her gut. The one that told her they were moving farther away from the target, not closer. “But how feasible is it that she could have gotten him there that fast?”

Natasha shook her head. “She’s not working alone, whoever she is. It’s likely she’s had this set up for months…maybe even years. And she’s had time to move.”

“According to this,” Tony glanced up from where he’d been calling up information on his phone. “We can be there in 8 hours.”

Darcy bit her lip. “What if you’re wrong?”

“Then we’ll regroup and we’ll figure it out,” Natasha said before she reached out and placed a hand on Darcy’s shoulder. “We’ll find him,” she offered a small smile. “I promise.”

From beside her, Will cleared his throat and began cleaning his wire-rimmed glasses on the corner of his shirt. “Now, I know I don’t have a dog in this fight, but you folks seem ready to just fly off any second. Before you do—has anyone tried to trace his phone and make sure you’re flying in the right direction?”

The weight of everyone’s gaze slid from Darcy’s father to Tony on the other side of the room. His dark eyes widened like he just realized he left the oven on. “Sonofabitch,” he said quietly and sat straight up, plucking away wildly on his phone. Natasha muttered something in Russian under her breath. “I’m ignoring that and reminding you that no one else thought of it either,” he said, not looking up. “Here,” he gave a quick flick of his wrist and projected an overhead view of what looked like a steel plate in the middle of a scrubbed green and brown field. “Does this look familiar?”

Natasha squinted at the projection until he pointed it to one of the bare living room walls. “It doesn’t look familiar,” she said slowly. “But it wouldn’t. Not to me.” She narrowed her eyes and looked at the coordinates and specs filling in beside the image. “Mostly underground, north of Miryuga?” she nodded definitively. “That’s definitely the place.”

Darcy sat back, her lips pursed in thought. She didn’t want to admit that something about this didn’t feel right. But the evidence was solid, she reasoned with herself. Stark’s tracking capability was
lightyears ahead of anything they could have done at the station and everything Natasha had said about why Alex would bring him back to Russia made perfect sense.

But it still didn’t feel right.

Sam jumped up before she had a chance to voice any of this. “Good,” he said quickly. “Let’s move.”

“Wait wait wait,” Will held up a hand again. “That’s it? Just like that? You’re going to Siberia?”

Stark looked at him incredulously. “Uh, yeah,” he said. “Sounds like that’s the plan.”

Will scoffed. “That’s not a plan at all,” he insisted. “There’s three of you! You just said she’s not working alone—what if this is some kinda ambush?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Are you everybody’s dad? Jesus.” He shook his head. “We’ve got 8 hours to come up with a plan. We’ll figure it out.”

Natasha was already on her phone. “I’m letting Rhodey and Wanda know what’s going on,” she said, getting to her feet. She offered a brief smile at Will. “Don’t worry, Mr. Lewis. We’ll be fine.”

Sam stopped on his way out the door behind Tony. “Darcy, do you want to—”

“No room for tourists, Sam,” Tony called over his shoulder. “We’ve gotta move.”

Darcy sighed, her feelings a little stung at Tony’s dismissal. She wasn’t helpless after all. She forced a tight smile. “He’s right,” she said. “I’d probably just get in the way.” Before she could stop him, Sam reached out and gave her a quick hug. “Be careful, okay?”

“You got it,” he said and offered a smile in return. “We’ll bring him back,” he promised.

They were gone as quickly as they’d come and closed the door behind them. The silence that followed was deafening for a minute as Darcy tried to process everything that had just happened.

Still on the couch, her father cleared his throat. “So what do you want to do, Bee?” he asked when she looked up.

Darcy frowned and pursed her lips again. “This doesn’t feel right, Dad.”

“What, the Siberia thing?” he motioned in the direction the three Avengers had just left. “No, I agree. It’s a little too neat.”

She shook her head and moved across the living room to sit next to him again. She sank her fingers into her hair and pressed the heel of her hand to her temple. “This whole thing has been so…” she paused. “So complicated and so…local, I guess.” She looked over at him. “I mean, all these killings have been here in Brooklyn. Or in DC,” she considered. “But no where Bucky hasn’t been.” She frowned again. “It just doesn’t make sense after all this planning and all of these…” she motioned to the files, “aliases and double lives…It doesn’t make sense to pack it all up and go back to Russia on spec.”

Her father considered this with a slow nod of his head. “Okay,” he said carefully. “But let’s say you’re wrong, just for argument’s sake. Say they’re on their way to get Steve and he’s going to be back safe and sound.” He watched her face for a reaction. “What’s going to let you sleep at night?”

When she didn’t answer, he rephrased. “What’s the most important part of all this…for you, Bee. Not for Driscoll or your super friends or any of this Russian spy bullshit,” the corner of his mouth quirked in a smile the same time hers did. “When is this going to be over for you?”
Darcy took a deep inhale and felt her mouth set into a firm line. “Of course I want them to get Steve back,” she said seriously. “And I’m sure they will but…” she stopped and tried to piece her thought together before she continued. “But just getting him back isn’t going to solve anything.” She looked up at her father and frowned. “I have to at least know who this woman is,” she said with grim determination. “These women…” she stopped. “Their families…the people who cared about them,” she shook her head as her voice came dangerously close to cracking. “They deserve justice too. I mean it doesn’t…” she cleared her throat. “It doesn’t matter what they did for a living. They didn’t deserve what happened to them. I want to be able to tell their families what happened and give them some kind of closure. They deserve that much, at least.”

Will reached out and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “That’s my girl,” he said quietly and kissed the top of her head. “All right then,” he said when he let her go. “What’s next?”

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Darcy eyed the apartment door warily before she glanced down at her phone and frowned at the search warrant on her phone. “There’s a really good chance this isn’t going to hold up,” she said, biting her lip.

Her father considered this with a nod. “One thing at a time, Bee,” he reminded her. “Let’s get your perp first,” he nodded at the door. “We can worry about the appeal later.”

She didn’t know why it surprised her that her father had known which judge to call in Brooklyn to push a quick search warrant through. He’d been on the phone before she could even wonder how they were going to manage it, making jokes about golf swings and asking about Judge Donovan’s grandchildren before suddenly switching into cop-mode and rattling off the address Darcy had scribbled down for Maggie McNeil.

Or Alex Cohen.

Or whoever she was.

In the moment, it had been reassuring that at the very least, she’d tried to follow protocol. And she knew having documentation would look good when she had to come clean to Driscoll and accept whatever punishment he decided to hand down.

But standing out in the hallway, with only her retired father and his civilian 9mm to back her up, Darcy wasn’t so sure this was the best idea. She took a deep breath and pushed that thought away, raised her arm and knocked on the door.

No answer.

She tried again. “NYPD,” she called through the door. “We need to speak with you.”

Nothing.

Darcy sighed and looked at the doorknob for a minute before she glanced over at her father. “Think we could kick it down?”

Darcy sighed again and nodded. “Right,” she said around a tight frown. “So… I guess we should bite the bullet and…” she trailed off as her father got down onto his knees and pressed an ear to the door. “What are you doing?”

Will looked up at her and held out a hand. “You gotta bobby pin?”

She furrowed her brow in confusion. “…Yes…”

He beckoned with his fingers. “Give it. We don’t have all day.”

“You just said…”

“I said I’m not kicking anybody’s door down,” he reiterated and beckoned for her bobby pin again. “But there’s gotta be something to show for all this shit this woman’s put you through.” Wordlessly, Darcy handed over the bobby pin that had been holding back the whispy hairs at the base of her skull. “Plus,” he pressed an ear to the door again. “This was like this when you got here,” he looked up at her again. “Can’t help it if some crazy old man broke in before you even got on the scene.”

She took a steadying inhale and watch him pick the lock with alarming competence. “This is a terrible idea,” she said, willing her hands to stay steady and her heart to slow down.

“Sure is,” he agreed amiably and got to his feet as the door popped open with a click. “But you can always move back in with us if it gets you fired.”

She rolled her eyes and drew her gun. “That means a lot, Dad.”

“I’m here to help,” he muttered and followed her inside.

The apartment was small. An exceptionally neat kitchen and living room combo with a sparsely decorated bedroom and bathroom attached. They cleared the corners and blind spots inside of a minute and Darcy felt herself relax as her father closed the door behind them and met her in the middle of the living room. He looked around as he holstered his gun. “Not exactly Susie Homemaker,” he commented, taking in the bare walls and hardwood floors, “is she?”

Darcy shook her head. That feeling in her stomach, the one that felt like dread and tasted like sulfur in the back of her throat, had only gotten worse since they’d gone inside. “No,” she agreed. “It’s really…” she swallowed hard as the right word rose to the surface of her mind. “Spartan.”

Her dad glanced over. “Spartan, huh?”

Darcy frowned. “If she lived here… she definitely wasn’t putting down any kind of roots.” She took a deep breath. “Well, I already broke and entered,” she said out loud. “Might as well get on with my illegal search.”

“Legal search,” her father reminded, shooting her a look over his glasses. “And I broke. You only entered.”

She shook her head around a humorless laugh. “It’s nice we have this father/daughter bonding time.”

“Start looking, Bee,” he motioned to the bedroom. “She could come back.”

Darcy frowned. “I don’t know…” she said, heading in the direction he’d suggested. “I don’t think she’s been here for a few days.” The apartment didn’t feel dusty or particularly neglected. Just… untouched. She found a desk and slid her hands into her sleeves to open the top drawer. A neat stack of utility bills in the name Margaret McNeil and a checkbook with a few months’ worth of
checks ripped out. No photos, no personal touches anywhere in the room. The other drawers yielded more of the same disappointing results. Her wardrobe was incredibly limited and consisted mostly of black and gray long sleeve t-shirts and black pants. Sensible shoes.

Not unlike what Natasha wore when she wasn’t on a mission.

She poked around the room for a few more minutes. The bedside table drawer was empty, the bathroom was practically antiseptic in its tidiness. “There’s nothing here, Dad,” she called, unable to hide the disappointment in her voice. “This bed hasn’t been slept in in days,” she shook her head. “There’s not even a bathmat in the bathroom.”

When he didn’t respond, Darcy made her way cautiously back to the living room. She stopped in surprise at the sight of her father pushing the coffee table out of the way and flipping back the braided rug beneath it. “What’s up?”

“No bathmat but she’s got this big ugly thing out here?” he asked. His short nails pulled at the seams of blanched floorboards for a few moments before he seemed to find what he was looking for. “Uh-huh,” he changed his approach and pushed down so that the board swung down and revealed a small space underneath. “How ‘bout that,” he looked up with a grin.

“Holy shit,” Darcy grinned back. “Just like in the movies.”

She dropped down onto her knees beside him and peered into the small cubby beneath the floor. Blindly, she plunged her hand in and groped around for a minute before her fingers found purchase on a small stack of papers. Feeling momentarily victorious, she brought them up and spread them out on the floor.

The bubble of excitement she felt burst swiftly. The papers she’d retrieved were mostly bills and things that looked like contractor assessments. Nothing about Hydra or Bucky or…anything interesting. Her father noticed her disappointment. “What were you hoping for?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. A Russian passport and ten thousand dollars in cash?” She shook her head. “I mean…this is…” she frowned. “This is like…landlord shit.”

“Let me see,” he took from the top of her pile and studied the numbers and line items. “This is all for repair work done to the basement.”

Darcy scoffed. “It’s a shame they wasted their money,” she rolled her eyes. “That whole basement’s gotta be wrecked from the explosion.”

Will squinted and held the paper farther away from him, peering over the top of his glasses again. “How long ago was that?”

She frowned. “I don’t know…like…four months ago? Maybe three?”

He leafed through the pages. “This is for work as recent as two weeks ago.”

“What?” She took the papers back when he offered them to her. “Why would they be working on the basement and not touching the storefront? That’s where all the money was coming from.”

“Unless it wasn’t,” Will said quietly, picking up another paper.

She looked up. “Huh?”

“If the pawn shop was just a front and they had something going on underground—literally—then
they’d want to fix that up first.” He shrugged. “I’m gonna go out on a limb and say this landlord isn’t exactly on the level either if he’s letting one of his tenants hold onto all this stuff for him.” He offered the pages he’d just picked up. “This is techy shit,” he shook his head. “Give me the construction stuff.”

Darcy frowned and traded him without argument. “What kind of techy shit?” she asked, more to herself than to him. The pages he’d handed her were slightly more interesting. There were technological specs and sketches of what looked like improvements being made to a standard signal booster. “What are you?” she asked, tilting her head to one side. She dropped down to sit cross-legged on the floor and spread the pages out in front of her again. “Is she trying to…” she tilted her head the other way. “Are you trying to call somebody or block somebody?”

“Who are you talking to?” Will asked, not looking up.

“Myself,” she muttered. “Mostly. Does the name Talley Tech sound familiar to you?” She squinted at what had been written in one of the margins.

Her father glanced up. “Should it?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know…it sounds familiar, but I can’t figure out where I heard it from.” She pulled out her phone and did a quick search. Her eyes widened at the second search result. “Oh my God!”

“What?”

“Arthur Gates!”

Will blinked. “Who?”

“Arthur Gates!” she repeated, the excitement building in her chest. “Last year Eddie busted this guy,” she held up her phone. “Arthur Gates. He was kidnapping little boys from Vinegar Hill and letting them keep their phones. So the parents would be able to talk to them and everyone thought that was a good sign.”

Her father looked apprehensive. “I’m already not liking where this is going.”

“No,” she shook her head. “That’s wise. Anyway, so the cops were trying trace the calls and the signal kept bouncing from tower to tower. First from borough to borough and then the pings started radiating outward,” she motioned in a circle with her hands. “Like, these phones were pinging towers all the way to Philly and Boston and no one could figure out what was going on until Eddie found out that this company,” she pointed to the name in the margin again. “Talley Tech had made this prototype of a device that could bounce a cell signal to any tower within a certain radius and sold it to Arthur Gates for a shit ton of money.”

“So the cops had no idea where those kids really were?”

“Exactly,” she said with a nod. “And they ended up wasting all this time on raid after raid, breaking down doors and sending in the cavalry and it turned out they were…” she stopped, the realization dawning on her. Her eyes fell to the paper again.

The specs and sketches. The proposed improvements on the original piece of tech. The numbers scribbled in with the data.

It wasn’t random.
They were coordinates. GPS coordinates. Darcy typed them into her phone and watched with sinking dread as the map spun to the other side of the globe and focused on that same barren patch of northern Russia. “Fuck,” she whispered.

Her father’s face folded into concern. “Talk to me, Bumblebee,” he insisted. “What’s up?”

“Arthur Gates,” she said again, already weary of having to say his name again. “While the cops were chasing their tails, running all over the Eastern seaboard looking for him, he was right here the whole time. He was keeping the boys chained up in his basement.”

Will considered this with a slow nod. “Well,” he said, tilting his head to one side in consideration. “If I was going to hold an honest-to-God superhero against his will in the hopes of luring out his best friend, the assassin,” he passed her the pages he’d been reviewing, “I would choose a basement like this one.”

According to the schematics he’d just been studying, the basement of the pawnshop went two levels below ground. If she included the electrical work and general construction that had been done with the pile of energy bills she retrieved from the desk in the bedroom, Darcy had to guess it wasn’t too far of a leap to assume she’d been able to transmit Steve’s cell location to the base in Siberia.

“We’ve gotta go,” she said, getting to her feet.

Will was confused as he stood up next to her and brushed himself off. “Good,” he said with a nod. “Let’s grab a cab and get down to your precinct. We can bring everyone—”

Darcy was already shaking her head. “No, there’s no time for that.”

“Darcy.”

She looked at her watch and willed herself not to let her frustration show. “Look, I don’t know what her master plan is—but whatever she’s planning to do, she can’t hold him forever. We’ve already wasted twenty-four hours and if Steve is here then I’m not leaving until I figure out how to help him and we don’t have time to go convince my idiot CO to come down and take me seriously.”

Her father did not look impressed. “So you just want to go rescue Captain America from something called a Black Widow agent whose been trained her entire life to kill without conscience and is holding him in a space she designed to be able to lure and capture another assassin with something like sixty years of military and espionage experience under his belt?”

She blinked. “Yeah.”

He nodded. “Okay, just making sure I knew what the plan was.”

Her face furrowed in confusion. “Really?”

He shrugged. “I trust you, Bee. I think you know what you’re doing. And I want to make sure nothing happens to you. So,” he shrugged again. “Yeah. If this is the plan, I’m in.” Before she could say anything else, he took the papers from her hand and spread them out on the coffee table. “I don’t want anything to happen to your evidence,” he said, taking photos with his phone with a dexterity that impressed her. “We can come back for this stuff afterwards,” he reasoned as he tucked his phone away. “But I want to make sure there’s a record.”

Darcy stifled the urge to rush at him for another grateful hug and settled for a nod and a tight smile. “Thanks, Dad.”
The pawn shop had put up temporary walls and had attempted to lock down the valuables that hadn’t been damaged in the initial blast, but it was still a disaster. Scorched walls, shattered windows and twisted hunks of metal were still strewn everywhere. Strips of yellow caution tape waved at them from the window panes and Darcy felt a chill go through her as she stepped over a melted display rack.

“Jesus Christ,” her father muttered under his breath. “What’d they use to blow this place up?”

“Remember that big…space worm snake thing that wrecked New York a few years ago?”

“Yeah…”

“It was one of the weapons from the aliens that were flying that thing.” She ducked under a low hanging support beam.

Will shook his head. “I’m so glad I’m retired.”

They fell quiet again as they approached the door to the closet where Alex had been chained and gagged.

No, Darcy stopped and corrected herself. She isn’t Alex and she wasn’t chained and gagged. She did that to herself.

To set this whole thing in motion.

She willed her skin not to crawl at the thought of how long all of this must have taken to plan. How desperate Hydra must be to have Bucky back under their thumb. How patient this woman was to wait for so long for her prey to wander into her web.

‘Will you walk into my parlor?’ said the spider to the fly...

The first line of the old nursery rhyme echoed in Darcy’s mind as she carefully nudged the door open with her foot and peered around the corner, gun drawn.

The room was almost exactly the way she’d last seen it. Cheap wood paneled walls, a linoleum floor scattered with porn magazines, discarded garbage and food and a faint smell of urine. In the corner stood, a stained, stripped mattress and chipped brass headboard. Her chains were still there, smashed in half by one swift crack of Steve’s shield. Darcy’s heart twisted as the unwelcome memory of Steve sliding that shield into the backseat of their Subaru on the way to DC.

‘That’s coming too, huh?’

Steve had smiled in response to her question and tossed his overnight bag in as well. ‘Never leave home without her’, he’d joked.

She shook her head and focused on the room before her. “If I was a door to a secret, underground Nazi lair,” she said, her voice just above a whisper. “Where would I be?”

With his gun, her father motioned to the corner opposite the bed. In the dim light, she could just make out the outline of another door. Her heart thudded in her ears. The door ran along the seams of the panels. It was the kind of thing that would have been almost impossible to see if she hadn’t been looking for it. The kind of thing the EMTs and even the police would have missed in their preliminary sweep of the room.
Will motioned that he was going first and approached the door with textbook caution. He only had to lean into it gently before it popped back out to them, inviting him a place to nudge his gun and pry it open the rest of the way.

There were stairs on the other side. Stairs that led downward into pitch black. Darcy swallowed hard. The scared little girl inside of her didn’t want to go down there. She didn’t want to come face to face with the monster at the end of this story. She wanted to go home and curl up safe on the couch and watch her favorite movie and eat ice cream with her father.

As if he could read her mind, Will turned around and locked his blue eyes with hers. He raised his gray eyebrows and asked her, silently, *You ready?*

Darcy took another deep breath and tried to remember the reasons she’d come down here in the first place. The doodles in Natalia Rusakov’s diary and how she’d wanted to be a fashion designer once upon a time. Kitty’s pink fingernails pinching her cheeks and fixing her eyeliner. The pile of devastated little sisters she’d left in Chicago.

The feeling of Steve’s fingers intertwined with hers.

Darcy inhaled again and nodded once to her father before they began their descent into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry. I hate myself. I can’t believe I did that to you guys. And after all you’ve done for me. I’m the worst.

But if you liked this at all, let me know? Tell me your favorite parts? Tell me what you hated, I don’t care. I just like to talk to you guys.

(It goes without saying that I don’t own the Babysitter’s Club-the entity, I definitely am an almost 30 year old woman who owns the Babysitter’s Club on DVD.)
Chapter Summary

FFS, you've suffered enough. Let's end this.

Chapter Notes

OMG. THANK YOU for all of the amazingly wonderful supportive reviews and comments and new friends on Tumblr. I'm getting stupid emotional over this fic ending (which like, don't worry, I have at least one more fic in the Cop!Darcy universe planned) and it's all your fault!

I'm dedicating this chapter to the amazing and stupendous Amerna who gave me most of the idea and let me talk it out with her when we both should have been working. Because she's sweetness and light.

Fair warning: there are likely gross inaccuracies with physics and mechanical/electrical engineering. I am fairly certain I'm on a government watchlist for what I've been Googling to write this fic and I just gave up and Frank Sinatra'd this shit. (Y'know...my way.)

Carry on, my beautiful beebs <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There had been more than a few times in his life that Steve was certain he was going to die. When he was seven and had last rites read over him while he burned up with scarlet fever. When he was eleven and had been beaten so badly by a neighborhood bully that he’d bruised or broken every one of his ribs and thought he’d never be able to take a full breath again. Every winter when he caught pneumonia and Bucky watched him out of the corner of his eye like he might keel over at any second.

And then later, of course. When he threw himself on a grenade at basic training. When he jumped over a cavern of explosive hellfire because Bucky wouldn’t leave without him.

And then that time when he really thought he was dead. When everyone thought he was dead.

The idea of his own death had never really bothered him. Not like it did most men. He’d been flirting with it for so long, he never had a chance to develop the ego that so many people carried with them. The part of them that refused to believe the world would carry on without them. The belief that they were somehow so important to the universe that death would be kind and skip over them. He’d always known that death wasn’t kind. She didn’t make those kinds of bargains. He had always just assumed that if he died, it was because he was meant to. At that time. In that place. And that was that.
There’d always been a kind of peace in living like that.

But this was different. There was nothing peaceful about how this was going to end. Any scenario he could think of ended badly. If Bucky came after him, he’d be doing exactly what this woman was expecting and end up playing right into her hands. If he didn’t…Steve swallowed hard. With his body and all his strength completely useless, there was nothing he could do to stop her from doing whatever she wanted with this station she’d set up.

He’d seen other places just like it in the years he’d spent raiding Hydra bases with his team. Bulky, tan and gray computers that looked like they’d been around since at least the eighties. Loose and exposed wiring that had been rigged together to boost signals and performance. Some crudely cobbled together scientific instruments and fuzzy monitors. Their tech looked clunky and juvenile compared to what he was used to, working with Stark. But that was all by design. They wanted to be dismissed. Underestimated.

The room led into at least one more he could see from his position. The concrete walls housed a cutout doorway beyond which he could see a cot and a short refrigerator with rounded corners and a heavy handle. The floors were concrete too. Drips from the ceiling had made for shallow puddles of standing water. There must have been one close to him—his captor left fresh footprints every time she walked away. The air was damp and cool and smelled faintly like sulfur.

He didn’t know what was behind him, but he could only guess it was more of the same. Likely something that she was planning to use to inflict the kind of damage that would reset Bucky’s memory and put him back in his box.

A chill slid down his spine. Or she’d use it to wipe his own memory and turn him into the kind of monster he’d spent his whole life fighting against.

The fact was, he really was out of ideas. And rapidly running out of hope. It had occurred to him hours before that he might have finally found himself in a worst-case scenario. Steve forced himself to hold onto the things he could still control. He kept his breathing steady and slow and closed his eyes, steeling himself to remain calm, keep his tone casual and unperturbed when he spoke. “So how long do we wait?”

She looked up from the notes she’d been studying. “For what?”

He rolled his eyes. “For phase two,” he said flatly. “What else is there? You already told me your master plan.”

Her brown eyes narrowed. “You know…” she cocked her head to one side. “I really didn’t expect you to talk so much.”

“Well, if you’d asked before you abducted me…”

She tossed her head back with a dramatic sigh. “I should just keep you knocked out.”

“Sure,” he said as the walls groaned around them. He didn’t have any hopes for these creaks and groans anymore. Not after hours of listening to the them and realizing they weren’t the sound of anyone coming for him. This bunker was deep underground, surrounded by the city’s sewer and electrical lines. “Put me out. Sounds good.”

She rested her elbow on her knee and propped her chin on her hand. “I’m surprised.”

“Why?” he asked. “It’s been a long few weeks. I could use a nap.”
She shook her head. “I’ve spent so much time watching and studying you…I guess I didn’t expect the famous Captain America to be so comfortable with losing.”

He let out a huff of a joyless laugh and glanced down at the thick black leather belts keeping him strapped to the table. “Not exactly a fair fight, honey.”

“Sorry,” she said with a bounce of her shoulders. “Girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.”

He sighed. “You never answered my question.”

She raised her eyebrows. “How long do we wait?” she repeated and looked at her watch. “Few more hours at least.”

His stomach curled in dread as he forced himself to roll his eyes. “Hope I don’t die of boredom by then.”

She looked at him, incredulously. “What do you want to do?” she asked with a scoff. “Play chess?”

“More of a parcheesi man, really,” he countered. “But if I’m heading for a career change, it might help me to learn to strategize a little better.”

“It really would,” she said flatly. “You were pathetically easy to capture.”

“I bet you say that to all the boys.”

She let out a sound of frustration. “That’s it,” she got to her feet. “I’m knocking you out again.”

“Wait!” he said as his panic spiked before he could stop it. She stopped and looked surprised. “Just…” he exhaled and swallowed down the fear in the back of his throat. “Can you just leave me alone?” She looked incredulous for a moment before he continued. “Come on,” he said, letting his guise of carelessness slip away. The truth was only getting more apparent. It was bitter and it hurt to acknowledge, but Steve had found that the truth usually did. “We both know I’m not going anywhere. And if…” he stopped and shook his head. “Bucky’s not coming, so I think we both know how this is going to end.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and sighed. “I didn’t want it to come to this, Cap. I hope you know that.” She shook her head. “This was supposed to be taken care of so long ago.”

He allowed her a brief, sad smile. “I actually believe that,” he said. “Look, you’ve gotta know I don’t have any hope of getting out of here in one piece.”

She didn’t look convinced.

“You already won,” he reminded softly. “You sent my friends off on a wild goose chase, walking into God knows what kind of trap in Siberia. You convinced the whole NYPD that you’re some kind of victim in all this… Regardless if it’s me or Bucky you leave with, you’re getting what you came here for” He let that settle into his stomach and with it, blossomed the faintest hint of a silver lining. His one card left to play. “But,” he took another stilted breath, “if I had to choose which one of us ended up here, I’d rather it be me.”

She looked almost impressed as he continued, “So long as it means you stop looking for him,” he clarified.
Her head tilted to one side in consideration. “I’ll have what I came for,” she echoed softly. “There’s no need to be greedy.” She moved her shoulders in a thoughtful shrug. “Assuming he doesn’t come,” she added quickly. “Then sure, I’ll consider his ledger balanced.”

Steve nodded. “Then I guess that’ll have to be enough.” There was just the faintest glimmer of sympathy in her eyes the longer he talked. Not enough to save him, he knew, but maybe enough get him this last bit of solitude. “But please, all I’m asking for is to spend the last few hours I have as myself...by myself.”

A few long, heavy seconds ticked passed before she sighed and dropped her arms to her sides. “Fine,” she said brusquely. “I’m not leaving,” she insisted. “But I do have to check in.”

“Like I said,” he offered her another brief smile. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She gave him one final, swift nod and retreated to the adjacent room. He heard a squeal of rusty metal a few moments later, signaling that she’d taken a seat on her cot.

He took in as deep a breath as he could. He did his best to quiet his mind while his eyes closed and he attempted something he hadn’t tried in a very long time.

Steve Rogers started to pray.

***

Her eyes were having trouble adjusting as she made her way carefully down the stairs behind her father. She wished she had a flashlight. But a light would only make her trembling hands more apparent. Already she felt too obvious. Her heart hammered in her chest, her breathing was shallow and rasping with each inhale no matter how she tried to stay quiet.

The stairs spiraled downward and with each step, Darcy realized she was waiting for an ambush. Waiting for someone to jump out and kill them both without a second’s hesitation. She swallowed hard and followed her father’s lead, hugging the right wall with her shoulder and squinting into the darkness.

This is so fucking stupid, a voice that sounded suspiciously like Eddie’s whispered in the back of her mind. He was right. This had to be the most idiotic and reckless thing she’d ever done. No backup. No Avengers. No one who even knew where she was or what she’d uncovered. If they died down here, no one would even find them for weeks. If ever.

Darcy shoved the idea of what she might be doing to her mother out of her mind as her father held up his left hand and motioned for her to stop. If she peered around him, she could see a dim gray light coming from around the corner. Willing her heart to stop pounding, she waited while he took a cautious step down and toward the light.

The room at the bottom of the stairs was small and housed only a large breaker box beset with extra wires and cables running along the cement wall and floor. The visibility came from a buzzing fluorescent overhead light which cast more than enough light for a quick visual sweep. The room was empty. The corners clear. Will took one step in, still hugging the wall, before he took another, his gun pointed at the doorway. She waited, holding her breath, until he gave her the signal that it was safe for her to follow him. When she did, she followed the path he’d taken against the wall. He looked her way again and motioned with his chin to the electrical cluster around the breaker box before he glanced meaningfully toward the doorway.
Cover me, he mouthed and waited for her nod before he crept to the box for a closer look. Darcy kept her gun trained on the doorway and resisted the urge to wince as her father pulled open the door with a soft squeak. Inside was a mess of stripped wires and duct tape, buzzing with voltage and sounding like it could overload at any minute. With her eyes flicking between it and the empty doorway, Darcy only caught a glimpse of her father attempting to move any of the spare wire and his jolt when one of the exposed pieces touched his skin.

She glared at him and mouthed the words Be careful, before she raised her eyebrows and asked, Are you okay?

He rolled his eyes and nodded, shaking the effected hand before he motioned for her to get behind him as he moved toward the next room. She fought the urge to argue about who should be going first before she fell in line and allowed him to lead the way. The second room was similar to the first, only without the breaker box and with three large steel drums at least four feet tall. Two were empty, as far as she could see. One was sealed. Darcy eyed it warily as they crept past and the acrid smell of formaldehyde invaded her nose. She didn’t want to know what was in that barrel.

They followed the wires that ran along the concrete walls through one more room, this one with a crude bathroom set-up—commode, stationary tub, stand-up shower and a black curtain hanging in the opposite doorway. The puddles of standing water she’d noticed in the first room were more frequent the farther away from the stairs. The floor was still poured concrete, but it had been a quick and uneven job with spaces for water to well and a few stubborn weeds to grow through the cracks near the corners and the drain in the center of the floor. Darcy couldn’t help but be intrigued by the amount of work that had gone into this concrete labyrinth. Couldn’t help but wonder how long this had been here. How many more bunkers like this had been buried around the country.

Her ears perked up as the background electrical hum grew stronger the closer they got to the next doorway. The florescent lights in both rooms cast enough light so she could see faintly through the black curtain into a space that reminded Darcy of a laboratory from a bad eighties movie. Will crossed to the other side of the curtain and squinted through his thin wire frames. She took a deep breath and raised a hand to move the curtain enough to get the lay of the land, but her father’s free hand closed around her wrist and he shook his head before he motioned again with his eyes for her to get behind him.

Again, she debated trying to silently argue that she had this under control. But she’d seen that look before. The one that told her this was nonnegotiable. That he was being her dad first and her back-up second. She kept her weapon drawn and moved to stand behind him.

She could still see over his shoulder as he moved the curtain half an inch to the right. Her initial suspicions about the state of the lab was correct. The computers were huge and equipped with tiny screens with bright green text and blinking cursors that were already out of date by the time she’d started elementary school. In the center of the room sat something that looked like it might have started its life as a dentist’s chair. An arm attached to the side and was swung all the way back and behind; the mechanical arm housed a contraption that appeared to be half-helmet, half-vice. A stainless steel IV stand was home to three hanging bags of clear fluid.

Darcy swallowed hard as her eyes followed the clear tubes down to the floor and back up the side of the chair to where they ended in someone’s veins.

Steve’s veins.

She clenched her jaw and inhaled sharply. She could only see him from behind—the outline of the top of his head and the sides of his shoulders and arms outline in the dim light of the lab.
“I don’t see anyone else,” Will said closing the curtain and turning back to her. His voice was barely audible. “They’ve gotta have him sedated somehow.”

She forced her heart to stay steady as she nodded. “How do we get him out of here?”

He looked back to the curtain for a minute and then over her shoulder in the direction from which they’d just come. He took a few steps and took hold of her arm, pulling her gently back to the room with the steel barrels. “There’s no way they’d leave him here by himself,” Will said grimly, keeping his voice low once he’d tucked them into the darkest corner. “I saw at least one more room on the other side of that set-up.” They looked at each other for a moment, each mind whirling with possibilities and potential plans. “We need back-up,” he said finally.

“We don’t even know what this is yet,” she said, trying to keep it from sounding like she was arguing. He was right. They did need back-up. “I’m just worried that if we call in the cavalry without being clear what we’re walking into…” Darcy took another breath. “I want to get closer,” she said. “I want to know what she’s got him hooked up to.”

“Bad idea, kiddo.”

“Dad,” she bit back her frustration. “I just want to make sure she can’t kill him in a panic if she hears the door kicked down.”

Her father eyed her carefully. “What are you thinking?”

She glanced back toward the room with the breaker box. “That she’s got a shit ton of electricity running into that room…”

His graying eyebrows rose slowly, expectantly. “Yeah…”

“Whatever she’s planning…” she shrugged. “It doesn’t seem like she can do it the old-fashioned way.”

Will was firm, “I’m not killing our only source of light. That’s suicidal.”

She pursed her lips and frowned before her eyes fell to the dark red spot on his hand where he’d been bit by the electric shock earlier. “Tiny lightning,” she said softly, her mind flashing back to the way Steve had laughed when he’d relayed how Thor had described their first interaction. In that dive bar with the chili pepper Christmas lights. He said Thor had told him she’d ‘felled him with tiny lightning’. That night that suddenly felt like a million years ago. She raised her eyes back to her father’s expectant expression. “What would it take to cause a power surge?”

He glanced again at the breaker box. “With that nightmare?” he almost scoffed. “Next to nothing.”

She bit her lip and followed the wires along the floor with her eyes for a moment. “How much of a surge do you think it would take to knock her out? Couple volts?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I mean, how much would it take?” she was asking herself more than her father. “A few seconds of a surge?”

He looked at her incredulously. “If you were standing with a live wire touching her neck which,” he shook his head. “You’re not going to do that without her killing you.”
She took another steadying inhale. She could see how much her father was struggling with these two conflicting roles. That he wanted nothing more than to throw her over his shoulder and drag her back upstairs to wait while they called for reinforcements. That he could tell how much she needed to stay and see this through until the very end. “If you cover me,” she said carefully, tiptoeing toward what he didn’t want to hear, “I can get a quick, closer look and then I’ll come right back.” He sighed, but didn’t immediately argue, so she continued quickly. “And then we’ll call the station,” she promised. “We’ll go right back upstairs and I won’t even come back down when they get here.”

Will looked tired. He eyed her warily. She held her breath and waited for what felt like a long time until he finally sighed again and pulled her in for a quick, surprisingly tight hug. “You’ve got three minutes,” he said when he let her go.

It wasn’t much, but it was more time than she thought he’d go for. Darcy waited while he surveyed the room from his vantage point behind the curtain. She eyed her path to the back of the set-up in the center of the room. If she could see what all was hooked up to the chair—and more importantly, how Steve was being restrained—she would have some idea of what they were going to do next.

Her father withdrew from the curtain to turn to her seriously. “I mean it, Darcy,” he said. “Three minutes and then we’re out of here.”

She nodded. “Just cover me,” she said, willing her pulse to slow down.

He gripped his 9mm. “I’ll shoot anything that moves.”

She couldn’t help her grin. “That’s my dad,” she said softly and leaned in to kiss his cheek before she ducked around the curtain and into the next room.

It was clear and empty but for Steve, who was far enough away that he hadn’t heard her. She dropped down anyway and shuffled as quickly as she could to the center of the room. The base of the chair was wired similarly to the electrical panel in the other room. She could follow the wires and chords from the base up to the arm and the vice-like contraption on the end of it as well as through the chair itself. The bottom of the chair was wide enough that she could tuck herself beneath it and stay hidden, but doing that obscured her ability to see in any direction other than that from which she’d come. It was a comfort to know that she couldn’t see her father through the curtain.

That meant no one else could see him either.

She shuffled around, trying to stay silent as she examined her options. She wanted to call out and see if Steve could still hear her. Make sure he was okay. That he knew she was there and that she wasn’t leaving without him. But she kept her mouth shut. Any noise wouldn’t just alert him to her presence. It would be suicide—just like her father had said.

She forced her breathing back through her nose and set her concentration on the clusterfuck of wires and duct tape surrounding her. Vaguely, it reminded her of Jane’s RV and the rigging they’d had to do for her satellites and telescopes. But Jane had been meticulous in how she’d labeled things—she had different stripes of electrical tape for everything and helpful color-coded diagram they could refer to whenever anything shorted out. With this mess…Darcy felt her heart sink. There was no telling what—if anything—she could dismantle to buy them a few minutes while they waited for back-up to arrive.

It had to be getting close to her father’s three-minute rule. She was giving herself one final sweep of the cables when she spotted them. Not one, but two exposed wires. She swallowed hard and felt a rush of excitement at the sight. Cautiously, she reached out and grasped them where they
were still insulated. A spark flashed when she touched the two rough ends together and kindled her optimism back to life.

From the opposite end of the space, Darcy heard a rusty, metallic squeak that stopped her dead in her tracks. She didn’t drop her wires, but she kept them apart and held her breath as she heard footsteps.

“Did you say something?”

That voice. Darcy ground her jaws together and felt her stomach boil in rage. This woman who’d killed her friend. Who’d sat across from her and made small talk about Netflix and eyeliner. Who’d had them pursuing a man who was just as much a victim as the women he was supposed to have murdered. This woman was standing only a few feet away from her.

To her surprise, Steve laughed. “Probably,” he said, sounding a little too relaxed for someone in his position. Darcy swallowed hard. She been pretending that she hadn’t missed him, but the sound of his voice brought a lump to her throat. She wanted him back. Safe. With her. “Sorry,” he continued, while she tried to come up with a plan. “I didn’t realize if I was.”

“Were you…” his captor paused. “It sounded like you were talking to someone.”

Darcy shuffled herself around again, her knees digging and scraping against the concrete floor as she tried to see around the base of the chair. If she craned her neck and squished her face into the cold steel, she could just see one of Steve’s ankles and the space beyond it. Just in front of the chair there was another puddle of standing water. It was deeper than the others, as far as she could see. Fed by a more constant stream coming down one of the walls and flowing in a thin tributary across the floor from the opposite corner.

“Who were you talking to?” NotAlex Cohen asked, sounding more suspicious than before.

Darcy could see her feet come closer. Bare feet. Her pulse spiked again.

“I was talking to Darcy,” Steve said simply.

Her heart stopped. Her breath stuck in her throat.

“Darcy?” the other woman asked, sounding skeptical.

Her mind whirled. What was he doing? Was he trying to get her killed? Did her father hear him say that? Had he already left and called for back-up?

“I do that, sometimes,” Steve went on, keeping his casual tone. “I used to talk to my mom after she died. When I missed her. Bucky, and Peggy, too,” he said and Darcy stopped her racing thoughts. “Sometimes it felt like it helped…being able to talk to them, even if I couldn’t see them.” There was a pause. “And now I guess I talk to Darcy.”

Another long pause. The feet didn’t move. “At least she’s still alive,” she said finally. “Don’t worry,” she continued quickly. “She’ll stay that way.”

Darcy swallowed hard again.

“I know,” Steve said, sounding like he really did. “I believe you. I just have some things I didn’t get to say.” He hesitated. “Before I ran out of time.”

Darcy frowned and watched the Widow’s feet move a few inches closer. “I could…” she
stopped herself and started over again. “If there were things you want to say…” she stopped again. “Maybe I could write her a letter for you.”

He scoffed again. “That’s a little too sweet, coming from you.”

“I mean it,” she said, sounding sincere. “I’m not heartless, Cap.”

“Tell that to Izolda Rusakov,” he said with another cold chuckle.

“Fine,” came a short reply. The feet began to turn away.

“Wait!” he called out, making her stop short. They were quiet for a moment. “You can’t be… I mean, you can’t make it sad, okay?”

Her feet moved closer again. “Okay,” she said, sounding almost amused.

“I don’t want the last thing she ever gets from me to be something sad.” Darcy’s gut twisted in a way that had nothing to do with the way she was smashed in her hiding spot. “Tell her…” she heard him smile. “Tell her how pissed off I am that I can’t hate Jessica Simpson as much as I used to because I can’t hear it without thinking about her singing all of her songs on the way to D.C.”

His captor moved another step closer. “Okay,” she repeated, sounding like she was smiling too.

“And that she works too hard…and that I’ve never met anyone who needed a cat so badly in her life.” Darcy squeezed her eyes together and swallowed back down the lump that had risen quickly in her throat. She didn’t want to hear this. She didn’t want to listen to Steve try to say goodbye. Like he was giving up. Not now. Not when she was this close. “I’d want her to know that this wasn’t her fault…and that she did everything she could.”

From her vantage point, she could see that if this woman took one more step—just one—she’d be close enough to reach. Close enough to touch.

“No,” he said, sounding constricted, like it was hard to breathe. “Don’t say that. That’s all too sappy. She wouldn’t want that.” Darcy had her eyes focused on the freckle on the woman’s left ankle. The scars on the sides of her feet. Scars that looked like they might have been from burns. She had paused in her slow shuffle back toward Steve. Just a few more inches, Darcy thought as her fingers started to ache from the grip she held on the cables.

“Who am I kidding?” Steve asked, his voice coming from directly above her. “The only thing I’d want to say…” he stopped and started again. “I mean, all I’d really want to say—”

She’d crept forward just one more inch so that her toes and the balls of her feet were touching the standing water. “It’s okay, Steve,” Darcy heard her say. “You don’t have to tell me anything if you don’t want.”

“No, it’s just…” he coughed. “All I’d really want to say is that you’d better do it fast, Darcy. I don’t know how much longer I can distract her.”

***
Later, when Darcy was writing up her statement and her mind replayed this moment, it would seem like everything only happened in fragments.

One second, she was on the floor, barely processing what Steve had said. In the next, she was already on her feet, her desperate plan having been successful and her adversary unconscious. Somewhere in between, she’d submerged her live wires in the puddle and delivered enough of a homemade shock to knock out a woman of Alex’s size and seared a sizeable electrical burn to her own hands. It had happened with a sizzle and a pop that wasn’t anything like the explosion she’d been envisioning. A quick flash and the crumpling sound a body made when it hit the concrete.

And in between all that and the almost immediate swarm of her fellow officers descending on the lab, Steve was looking at her with something mixed between shock and relief. They watched in stunned silence as Nowicki cuffed the unconscious Black Widow and hauled her up from the ground.

Her sergeant took in the scene quickly and shook his head as he passed off their suspect to the three officers waiting to escort her into a squad car. “I don’t know what all this is, Lewis…” he said with a shake of his head. “But something tells me you just did a hell of a thing here.”

Darcy pushed back her hair and let out a shaky breath. “I’ve got…” she exhaled an exhausted breath. “I’ve got notes for days, Sarge. I can—”

He waved her off. “Chill out, Lewis,” he said, letting his eyes roam the room in disbelief. “Plenty of time to talk once we get you and Captain America out of here.”

Her eyes widened as she turned back to Steve. “Jesus Christ,” she said, her hands shaking as she rushed to undo the buckles at his chest and torso. “Fuck, I’m so sorry.”

To her surprise, Steve laughed. “I wasn’t going anywhere.”

She rolled her eyes. “Do me a favor,” she said, finishing the first buckle and moving onto the second. “Don’t ever get kidnapped again.”

When she looked up, Steve was grinning. “I had her on the ropes, y’know.”

Darcy couldn’t help but smile back. “I know.”

She wouldn’t realize until later—after the adrenaline had stopped coursing through her veins and the pounding in her head and hands had finally dulled—that her father had not given her the three minutes he’d promised. He’d taken advantage of the boosted satellite signal and texted their location to the only one of Darcy’s friends whose number was saved in his phone.

Eddie.

Eddie, who had brought the whole precinct with him at Will’s request, loaded for bear and ready for battle. Who had not asked questions and jumped into action when he was needed. Who was probably going to be dining out on this story for the rest of his life, as far as Darcy was concerned.

Eddie, who had achieved his childhood dream and saved Captain America from Hydra.
I borrowed an idea from Doctor Who here. It was better when Clara said it, I know. But whatever.

So gross inaccuracies aside...what'd you think? Anything you've been wishing would happen but hasn't yet? Anything you'll just straight up hate me for if I do in the next 2 chapters? I might be planning on it and I just like to know what I'm getting myself into.

Did I tell you you're the best? Because you are. You're the best. And your hair looks GREAT today.
Chapter Summary

The middle of the end. In which I make a valiant effort to wrap up my millions of loose ends.

Chapter Notes

*Puts on some Boyz II Men* "Although we've come...to the end of the road...still I can't let go...

Okay, it's not the END end just yet. But it's like, SUPER close and I'm getting weepy just thinking about it. But I've also drawn this out for over 2 years so I can't really milk it anymore, right? Right.

You're all amazing and I promise I'm going to respond to all of your wonderful comments as soon as possible.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Sweet Jiminy Christ,” Driscoll muttered as Darcy entered his office on Monday night. She kept her gaze a little lower than usual, her eyes on her freshly bandaged hands as she took the seat he offered with a wave of his hand. “What happened to taking the weekend off?” he asked, looking up from the mess of files and notes on his desk.

They were her files. Her notes. Her colleagues had packed up her operation at her apartment and dropped everything at the feet of her commanding officer before she’d even gotten out of the ER.

Darcy pursed her lips. “I thought about it,” she said honestly and raised her eyes to his, hoping to get a read. She couldn’t. His mouth was set in a firm line, his eyes not betraying any of his thoughts. She shrugged. “Didn’t really work out that way.”

He let out a hoarse chuckle. “You could say that again.” He shook his head and flipped closed the file in his hand. He paused and looked thoughtful. “How’s Rogers?”

“Dr. Banner says he’ll be fine,” she said, reciting what Bruce had told her when she’d left the tower for this meeting. “They have to—” she pursed her lips, trying to remember exactly what all they were going to be trying. “There’s an antidote to the paralyzing agent she used on him. They had to synthesize some of the ingredients, but,” she shrugged. “According to them, they know what they’re doing.”

Driscoll blinked. “So he’s going to be okay?”

She nodded. “That’s what they tell me.”
He seemed to relax. “That’s good news.”

Darcy still felt like she was holding her breath. “So…” she began carefully. He looked up again. “The reason you wanted to talk to me…” When he still didn’t take the reins, she sighed. “I mean, I assume I’m suspended, at least. If not outright fired so if you want to just—”

“I actually was going to call you down here anyway,” he said, cutting her off gruffly. “There’s been a development in your case.”

She raised an eyebrow and let her gaze fall back to the mountain of evidence on his desk. “There’ve been several,” she said.

He shook his head. “No, Lewis. Your case. Your abduction.”

She frowned. “I thought my case was part of your case,” she said, trying to keep her tone light and free of anything that might read like an ‘I Fucking Told You So’.

He sighed. “Rodriguez finally bugged the right judge and got a warrant for Spencer Roof’s tattoo parlor.” One of his large, calloused hands came up to rub at his eyes. “We found one of her CI’s in his basement. Tied up just the way you were.”

Darcy swallowed hard. “Dead?”

He nodded. “According to Rodriguez, she lost track of her about a week before you went missing.” He shook his head. “We think she’s the one who told Roof and Marlow there was an undercover in the neighborhood.”

Her brow furrowed as she connected the dots. “So I wasn’t targeted because I was a hooker…”

“You were targeted because you’re a cop,” he said grimly. “They were never planning a copycat of the Carver.”

She swallowed and took a deep breath. “Which means that Bucky—”

“If it really went down like you say it did,” he folded his hands in front of him. “Then yeah. He was probably trying to protect you.”

“Hmm.”

She could have said more—should have said more—but the reality of someone telling her she was right was so foreign, any response she could formulate died on her tongue.

They were quiet for a few long moments before she cleared her throat. “What about…” she frowned. “I guess I don’t know what her real name is.”

“Katya Ivanov,” he answered. “I’ve got a friend at the CIA—she was able to connect some dots for us,” he added before Darcy could ask how he’d found that out.

“Has she said anything yet?”

He nodded. “Yeah; she confessed, if you can believe that.”

Darcy raised her eyebrows. “I…can’t, actually.” She paused. “What’d you have to offer her?”
He sighed. “Extradition back to Moscow—”

Her eyes widened. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“After,” he spoke over her outburst, “she stands trial for the murder of Benny Xu and Tina Salazar.”

“Who’s Benny Xu?”

“The landlord no one’s seen in a month.”

“You sure he’s dead?”

“Well, unless we found someone else with his exact DNA profile in that steel drum in her basement.”

Darcy’s stomach turned. “In the barrel?”

He nodded. “It appears she was…” he coughed. “Attempting to dissolve him.”

“Jesus Christ—” she held up a hand. “No more details on that one, please.”

“Happy to leave them out.”

“Wait,” she swallowed down the fleeting urge to gag. “You said Kitty and this landlord guy.” She narrowed her eyes. “What about the other girls?”

He shook his head. “Salazar’s the only one we can definitively tie her to with the DNA match.”

“But can’t they—”

He was already shaking his head again. “DA’s not going to risk anything other than a slam dunk conviction,” he said with a tone that wasn’t open for argument. “It’s more than we thought we’d get out of this case,” he reminded. “She’s still going to prison.”

“In Moscow.”

“In a maximum security facility where she’ll spend the rest of her life in solitary confinement unless she misbehaves, in which case she’ll be shot,” he clarified. “That just happens to be in Moscow.”

Darcy sighed. “Well. That’s something, I guess.”

Her lieutenant scoffed. “It’s a hell of a lot more than something.” He looked almost impressed. “It’s getting a terrorist off the streets and throwing a wrench in a whole scheme of bad shit.”

She considered this. “Yeah,” she moved her shoulders. “Yeah, that’s true.”

“But don’t get ahead of yourself,” Driscoll said with another shake of his head. “That doesn’t buy back all of this shit you pulled.”

She sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

“You disobeyed direct orders,” he reminded. “Repeatedly.”
“Mmhmm.”

“You conducted your own investigation and withheld evidence and information from your own department.”

“Yeah,” she agreed quietly.

“You acted recklessly and with no regard to authority, you endangered your own life and the lives of civilians and goddamnit, Lewis, I’d be out of mind to let you stay.”

Darcy clenched her jaw and schooled her features. She took a deep breath in. “I understand, sir.” She squared her shoulders. She’d been expecting this, after all. He was right. With her long list of insubordinations, he’d be inviting a shit storm of criticism if he didn’t fire her.

“Which is why you’re moving into homicide as soon as you get back.”

She blinked and looked up. “Huh?”

“You’re on vacation,” he said, the corner of his lips twitching into a smile. “Two weeks.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And then…”

“I told you a million times,” he said, almost nonchalantly. “We catch our killer and we’ll talk transfers. I’m a man of my word.”

“You just said—”

“That I’d be crazy to let you stay,” he repeated himself. “In Vice. When you just proved to me and the rest of the world that you’re capable of a lot more.”

There was a voice in her head that told her to grab this opportunity and run before he realized what he was saying. But the rest of her didn’t believe him. “I’m not…” she frowned. “Are you sure you’re not firing me?”

Driscoll softened. “Look, I don’t necessarily approve of all your methods. But this…” he held up her legal pad full of scribbles of leads and witnesses. “This is rock solid police work. You should be proud of yourself.”

She stared at him, stunned for another long moment before she finally allowed his words to sink in. “You’re sure you’re not fucking with me.”

At that, he did laugh. “I am not fucking with you.”

“I’m being transferred to homicide.”

“You are being transferred to homicide. After you take a break.”

She shook her head. “I don’t need two weeks, sir—”

“No,” he agreed. “You need about two months. But I’m giving you the two weeks so you can rest up. Get your shit together a little more and come back ready to go.” He stopped himself and held up a hand. “But I swear to God. No more off-the-clock hero bullshit, okay? If you come back saying you’ve dug up leads on JonBenet Ramsey or Abe Lebewohl or some shit—”

“I won’t!” she said quickly. “I promise.”
“Okay then,” he gave her a satisfied nod. “Welcome to homicide, Officer Lewis.” When she hesitated, still in shock, he rolled his eyes. “This is the part where you say, ‘Thank you, Lieutenant Driscoll, I really appreciate the opportunity.’”

It was Darcy’s turn to laugh. “Thank you, Lieutenant Driscoll,” she parroted and got to her feet when he did. “I promise I won’t let you down, sir.”

He grinned and extended a hand for her to shake. “I know you won’t.”

***

The hallway was empty when she arrived back at the tower. The late afternoon sunlight fell in thick, golden beams across the floor and cast the medical wing in soft, warm light that diminished the ward’s otherwise sterile environment.

She saw Sam before she saw anyone else, leaning in the doorway with a smile on his face. Friday had alerted them to the news in time to turn them around for a midnight landing back in Manhattan. Earth’s mightiest heroes were all fine, it appeared, if only a little jetlagged.

Sam caught her out of the corner of his eye and turned to greet her with a tight hug. “If it isn’t the hero of the hour,” he said when he let her go. “Steve, look alive,” he called, leading Darcy into the room with a friendly arm around her shoulders.

Steve had looked better. Dark circles still pooled under his eyes and for someone who’d been under anesthesia for a few hours, he looked more tired than Darcy had ever seen him. Still, he brightened and sat up straighter when his eyes met hers. “My knight in shining armor,” he joked.

“My damsel in distress,” she countered, taking a seat on the edge of his bed. Her heart fluttered when he reached for her hand and tangled their fingers together. “Hey,” she said mildly and squeezed his hand. “you can use those again.”

He smiled. “Cho and Banner,” he shook his head. “Miracle workers.”

Darcy looked over her shoulder to shoot a grateful smile at the two scientists still hanging in the corner, speaking with Tony in low voices. “It’s pretty amazing, guys.”

Helen smiled and tucked a stray lock of glossy black hair behind her ear. “It wasn’t hard to reverse engineer the toxin,” she said modestly. “Unfortunately, our synthetic antidote isn’t as fast-acting.”

“Oh-ho,” Darcy pulled a face and looked back at Steve. “Does this mean you’re going to have to stay in one place for more than a few hours?”

Bruce laughed. “He’s already surpassing our initial timetable,” he said with a smile. “I predict a full recovery in the next forty-eight hours.”

Darcy smiled and wrapped her other hand around his. “Thank God for that.”

He shook his head. “Thank you for that.”

From his place by the door, Sam cleared his throat. “I think we could probably all go…”
he jerked his head toward the hallway, “find some dinner while these two talk thank-you gifts.”

Their company shuffled out at his suggestion. Tony stopped in the doorway and looked over his shoulder. “Hey, speaking of thank-you gifts…”

“You can send Eddie and my dad some Knicks tickets,” she said with an affectionate roll of her eyes. “That’s thanks enough.”


Her laugh escaped her before she could stop it. “A job?” she repeated. “What—you need a new security guard or something?”

Tony looked offended. “No, I mean—y’know—avenging.”

She blinked. “Avenging.”

“Part-time,” he countered, holding up his hands.

“Tony,” Steve warned, bordering on exasperated.

“On-call only? We’ll still get you a suit—” Darcy only laughed as he continued. “Or maybe a set of fingertip lasers so you don’t have to burn yourself next time you want to take somebody out?”

“Tony,” Steve said again.

“All I’m saying is that I misjudged you,” Tony said, as if Steve hadn’t spoken. “And there’s always room for one more badass on the team. Plus,” he shrugged. “You make shit. I can give you a raise.”


“You sure?” he raised his eyebrows invitingly. “Door’s always open.”

“I’m sure,” she said definitively and reached into her pocket to hold up her badge. “I’m NYPD.”

The room was almost too quiet when they were finally left alone. “Not exactly the date I was hoping to take you on,” Steve said finally, bringing his hand up to brush his thumb along Darcy’s cheek.

She smiled. “You can make it up to me,” she said, leaning into his touch.

Steve leaned forward and coaxed her to meet him halfway. “I fully intend to,” he promised when she was close enough to brush his nose against hers. “Once I’m out of this hospital bed.”

She leaned in to press her lips to his, not letting herself think about close she’d come to never getting to kiss him again. “And just for the record,” she said when they parted and he rested his forehead against hers. “There is nothing wrong with Jessica Simpson.”

Steve couldn’t contain his grin as he reached up to hold her face in both of his hands. “I’m gonna let that one go,” he said, bringing her in for another kiss. “But only because you just saved my life.”
“And because I know you listen to Justin Bieber.”

He was still laughing when she pulled away and scooted in beside him, stretching her legs out next to his and resting her head on his shoulder. He shuffled with some difficulty and wrapped an arm around her, tangling their fingers together again with his other hand. He dropped his chin and kissed the top of her head. “How’re you doing, anyway?”

She let out a soft chuckle. “I’m tired.”

“I’d say so,” he murmured, sounding pretty sleepy himself. “Everything okay with your CO?”

“Mmhmm,” she nodded. “I got my transfer.”

When she looked up, he was looking down at her with raised eyebrows. “Really? Into homicide?”

She nodded again, a giddy smile on her face. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

He scoffed. “You absolutely would have,” he assured her and leaned down to kiss her. “I’m so proud of you.”

His words settled over her like a soft blanket. “Thanks,” she said softly. “Only one problem.”

He looked concerned. “What?”

“I’ve got two weeks of paid vacation before I can start in homicide.”

Steve grinned. “Wanna go to Mexico?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “Yes, I do.” She giggled. “But we don’t have to go all the way to Mexico,” she said, cuddling back down against him. She dropped her head softly against his chest, trying to memorize the steady beat of his heart beside her ear. “I’d settle for a sunny day at Coney Island.”

Steve kissed her hair again. “We can do both,” he said softly, running his fingers along her arm. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

She smiled. “Deal.”

It was late by the time she left. Steve had fallen asleep halfway through an episode of *Lost* and Darcy had decided against spending the night at the tower. Eager to get home and fall asleep without setting her alarm, Darcy untangled herself from him and slipped out of his room.

She jumped at the sight of Natasha waiting in the hallway. “Hey,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself to ward off the chill of the air-conditioned ward. “I didn’t realize you were out here,” she said. “You could have come in.”

Natasha shook her head. “No, I was waiting for you, actually,” she said, her voice quiet and throaty. “I saw Steve earlier.”
Darcy frowned. “What’s up?”

Natasha pursed her lips and looked thoughtful for a moment before she spoke again. “Ya ne pozvolyu im prichinit’ tebe bol’,” she said finally, taking Darcy aback with her effortless switch to Russian. “Vy sdelany iz mramora. I ne slomayetsya.” Darcy felt her eyes widen in the brief silence that followed before Natasha spoke again. “In your notes,” she clarified. “The Russian you were trying to translate. Is that what Barnes said to you?”

Her mouth gaped for a moment as her brain struggled to connect the words with the memory of how Bucky had whispered to her, running his hand along her back. Trying to comfort her, she realized now. Trying to calm her down. Numbly, she nodded. “You know what it means?” Natasha nodded; her throat bobbed with a hard swallow. “What did he…”

“He said that he wouldn’t let them hurt you,” she said softly, a sad smile playing on her full lips. “He said that you were made of marble.” To Darcy’s surprise, Natasha’s dark eyes sparkled with an unshed tear before she quickly blinked it away. “And that you wouldn’t break.”

Darcy felt a lump rise in her throat that she swallowed back down. “I want to help you find him,” she said. “I want people to know that he’s…” she swallowed again. “That he’s still good.”

Natasha nodded and took Darcy’s face in her hands briefly before she pulled the younger woman in and kissed her on both cheeks. “Thank you,” she said, her voice just above a whisper.

She was gone inside of a moment, disappearing down the hall before Darcy could say anything else. Her words hung in the air as Darcy made her way back to the elevator and echoed in her mind the whole way home.

Chapter End Notes

*squints* Is that Russian accurate? I have no idea. I know that that’s what Google told me to put, so that’s what I did.

Also, oops! Guess I ended on a WinterWidow note. Not remotely sorry.

Come play with me at 'idontgettechnology' on Tumblr! I love new Darcyland friends.
Chapter Summary

An end and a beginning and probably something that feels like a middle too.

Chapter Notes

"Endings are hard. Any chapped-ass monkey with a keyboard can poop out a beginning, but endings are impossible. You try to tie up every loose end, but you never can. The fans are always gonna bitch. There's always gonna be holes. And since it's the ending, it's all supposed to add up to something. I'm telling you, they're a raging pain in the ass."
-The immortal Chuck from Supernatural.

So yeah. This is it, guys. Last chapter. I hope you like it, because I really can't think of another way to say thank you for letting me write this fic. I was looking through the other night, reading my other rambling author's notes and it occured to me that this fic has quite literally taken me through some of the darkest times of the last few years. Losing friends and family members to cancer, dealing with my own depression and suicidal thoughts, and finally, moving across the country to start all over and finally finding a place where I can feel at home.

And the one, constant bright spot in all of that was you guys. I can't tell you what your support and friendship and encouragement has meant to me over the last few years...my cup runneth over. Truly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She was awake before she opened her eyes. She could feel the warmth of Steve’s body wrapped around her, the gentle scrape of his short nails against the outside of her thigh. He nuzzled his nose in the crook of her neck, pushing her hair forward to place his lips right against her ear. “Daaarcy,” he whispered.

She groaned and kept her eyes closed, unwilling to even consider the advantages to getting out of bed.

He kissed her earlobe and ran his one hand along her leg while the other slipped under her pillow and pulled her closer to him. “Darcy, you’ve gotta wake up.”

“Hmm-mm,” she hummed, feeling her face fold into a frown. “Too early.”

She felt him laugh against her neck as he continued his soft, sweet kisses. “It’s not too early,” he assured her while the hand on her leg began roaming higher with increasing confidence. “I’ve been up for hours.”
“Mmm,” she mumbled and shook her head. “Something wrong with you.” She pressed back against him, enjoying the feeling of his fingertips dancing along her skin. “What have you been doing?”

“I went for a quick run,” he said, keeping his voice low, just above a whisper. “And I made coffee.”

“Is Jess still home?”

She felt him shake his head. “She was leaving when I was coming back.”

“Mmm,” Darcy murmured again, feeling that familiar tug-of-war between wanting to fall back asleep and wanting to stay awake and talk to him. Her sleep-addled brain stopped and repeated what he’d said a moment ago. “We don’t have any coffee,” she said, her brow furrowing in thought.

He kissed her cheek again. “I bought coffee and then I came back and made it.”

A yawn seized her before she could stop it. “Wow,” she said softly after it had escaped her lips. “You really are a superhero.”

Steve laughed again and turned her gently in his arms so he could press his lips to hers. She fluttered her eyes open as they parted and found him smiling down at her. “Good morning,” he said before leaning in to kiss her again.

This, Darcy had to admit, was pretty good. This rhythm they’d fallen into over the last few weeks while she adjusted to her life in homicide and he resumed full-time Avenger status. This thing where all of their time together wasn’t spent looking at crime scene photos or drug panels. Where they could do normal things like spend the night at each other’s apartment and eat too many tacos and watch bad television or…

Darcy’s thoughts evaporated as he rolled on top of her and began a soft trail of kisses down her jaw and under her ear.

Okay, so if it she was being honest, this was actually the best part. Waking up with Steve like this was infinitely better than the days she woke up alone. Darcy couldn’t help but notice that the nights she fell asleep curled up beside him were the nights she slept the soundest. It had been months since her last full night of insomnia. Weeks since she’d been woken by her nightmares.

“Wake up, sleepy head,” Steve whispered and pulled her earlobe between his teeth. “I’ll make you breakfast.”

It was the rush of heat pooling in her belly that finally roused her from sleep. His hands had trailed down to her waist and before she knew it, he’d slipped her t-shirt over her head and removed his own. “Mmm,” she managed to say again, the edge of her lips turning up in a smile as he resumed his kisses down her neck. “Keep talking,” she insisted, shifting her hips beneath him.

He was already hard when she wrapped her legs around his waist; she could feel him pressing insistently against her through her thin pajama shorts. “What do you want?” he asked softly, pressing the question against her collarbone.

“Bacon,” she breathed, pleased when he laughed against her and ran the tips of his fingers down her waist and over her thigh. “And waffles.”

“Mmm,” he hummed and shook his head. “Waffle iron’s at my place,” he reminded her, nipping kisses over her shoulders before he looked up with a grin. “I can do pancakes.”
“Chocolate chips?” she asked, raising her eyebrows hopefully.

Steve’s face twisted in thought. “I think you might have some M&M’s?”

“Even better,” she insisted around a groan as he slipped his fingers between them and stroked her through her shorts. She wriggled her hips against him and shifted to shimmy out of the last of her clothing.

Steve pulled back for a moment to help slip her shorts down her legs and toss them beside her bed before he followed suit with his own pants and joined her back among the soft, warm sheets and blankets. Any thought Darcy had been entertaining about going back to bed seemed suddenly and outrageously wrong. Not when she could feel Steve’s warm and perfect skin touching every inch of hers. Not when she reminded herself that once upon a time, this kind of thing wasn’t even something she let herself dream about.

The fire he’d stirred in her belly had spread to the tips of her fingers and toes the longer they stayed locked together. Her heart began to flutter and speed up with each stroke of his hands on her belly, her breasts, each tip of his hips, each tease of his cock against her had Darcy biting back a moan with each breath.

She swallowed another groan when he pressed his mouth against her racing pulse and nipped gently with his teeth. She bucked her hips upward impatiently—she knew he could feel how wet she was, how much she wanted him. Darcy wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and, with a groan of frustration, pulled her hands from under him and flipped him onto his back.

Steve looked up at her through heavy lidded eyes and he sat up to hold her closer to him. His hands slid up her back and into her already messy hair as his lips fell back against her neck. She heard him whispering things into her skin, things she couldn’t quite make out over the sound of her heart pounding in her ears. “Lie back,” she whispered, pushing gently against his chest until he was flat on his back. Their hands moved together to position him between her thighs, and then she sank down onto him with a full-belly groan.

Leveraging herself on her shins, she thrust up and down his length; her walls squeezed around him every time she dropped her hips, and he groaned his approval, his hands on her hips to help guide her. She had learned that he loved watching her like this: her breasts bouncing with her motions, her head thrown back and her lips parted with her whimpers, her hands locked firmly around his.

Darcy changed her direction suddenly, falling forward to brace her hands against his chest; she began to rock forward, rubbing against his pelvis. Her moans grew louder, muffled only when she sucked her bottom lip between her teeth; her cheeks and her breasts flushed a brighter red. He bucked his hips up against her, pulling on her thighs to help her in her quest. When he felt the beginning contractions of her walls around him, he moaned.

The way she pulsed and throbbed around him was exquisitely excruciating; he flipped her onto her back, rolling on top of her. He wasted no time as he began driving into her, his thrusts relentless. She cried out loudly every time their hips met, her legs coming up to cradle him against her. Gritting his teeth, Steve buried his face against her neck, his groans of pleasure smothered in the hollow of her throat. The sound of them moving together was hypnotic, lulling them both into a fast, desperate rhythm. A sheen of sweat coated his skin now, perspiration beading along his hairline as he thrust into her, over and over until she heard him gasp.

His hips jerked erratically against hers when he came a moment later. He gasped into her breasts, falling silent save for his heavy breathing. He stopped moving as his orgasm subsided,
resting his body against hers.

Darcy waited for her heartbeat to slow as their breathing returned to normal and he lifted his head from her chest to give her a long, languid kiss. She grinned when they parted. “I believe you said something about pancakes?”

When Steve laughed, Darcy felt a spiral of delight all the way down to her toes. He stretched his neck forward and kissed the tip of her nose. “I’ll make breakfast,” he promised softly, moving a piece of her hair out of her eyes. “You get in the shower; I don’t want you to be late.”

She scrunched her nose in disappointment. “Can’t we just eat bacon and pancakes and stay in bed all day?” she asked, already knowing the answer when Steve pulled away from her and handed her back her clothes.

He had already retrieved his pants when he shook his head with another laugh. “If you think I’m letting you miss your own commendation ceremony…”

Darcy sighed. “It’s not just mine,” she reminded under her breath. “It’s the whole precinct.”

Steve took hold of both of her hands and pulled her to her feet with one swift tug. “Your whole precinct,” he reminded and pressed a quick, hard kiss to her lips. “Go shower. I’ll make bacon.”

***

The mayor had chosen a beautiful day for this particular ceremony. In Darcy’s opinion, Prospect Park was always lovely. But today? With an almost cloudless blue sky, a fresh, lush lawn and an audience full of people she loved…

Today it was absolutely perfect.

She thought it might feel strange to stand up and have the police commissioner pin a green and white bar to her uniform and hand her a plaque with her name and the words ‘Excellent Police Duty’ engraved on it. But it wasn’t. It felt a little like graduation, actually, especially when she heard her father’s signature whistle soar through the crowd. Except unlike graduation, she knew Steve was sitting next to her mother and Jane had cancelled all of her meetings to be there; and unlike graduation, Eddie was sitting next to her with a similar plaque and smile you could see for days. Unlike graduation, she was seated among the best and bravest of the NYPD and despite her earlier griping about the whole thing, she’d never been prouder in her life.

Mayor De Blasio had the firmest handshake Darcy had ever encountered and the sort of imposing presence that made everyone quiet down the second he stepped up to the podium. “I appreciate you all joining me to celebrate the achievements of the brave men and women of our police force. These officers truly embody what it means to protect and to serve the people of our great city and have earned the right to be counted among New York’s finest. We are grateful for their commitment, for their sacrifice, and for their courage. The city is a safer place because of you.

“I debated with myself over whether or not I would address this next point today. But I feel that, given that a number of our officers we’ve just honored were personally involved in this case, I would be remiss if I did not address it. In the months since the Brooklyn Carver was apprehended and our country’s continued entanglement with the terrorist group known as Hydra was
revealed, I have received a number of calls and letter and emails about one facet of the case in particular.”

Darcy held her breath. To her right, Eddie sat up straighter. She caught the tension that squared his jaw.

“Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes was identified early on as the primary suspect in the Brooklyn Carver case via his alias The Winter Soldier. I know that Commissioner O’Neil and Captain Morrison of the North Brooklyn precinct have worked to correct the record on this matter. But after learning the specifics of this case—and more importantly, of the circumstances regarding Sergeant Barnes’ involvement—I want to also go on record and say that the case of the Winter Soldier is indeed a dark one. A complicated one. And I believe that it is a case without a clear answer. But Sergeant Barnes, if you are listening, allow me to say that we are grateful to you for your actions which saved the life of one of our officers.

“And while we may not fully understand the complexity of your situation, know that you will find no enemies in the police forces of Brooklyn, nor in the forces of any of the other five boroughs of this city you once called home. You have our respect, and our gratitude,” he paused and gripped the edges of the podium. “And should you ever need us, I can only hope that we will be there to help.”

Darcy’s vision blurred for a moment as the mayor stopped and allowed for applause. She wished she could turn around to see Steve’s reaction. “As I’ve said before, and will most certainly say again, it is always an honor to recognize and celebrate our police officers. The recognition they have received today is only a small token of our immense gratitude. May God continue to bless our officers and continue to bless New York.”

There wasn’t much left of the ceremony after that and before long, Darcy found herself waiting with Eddie for the crowd to thin before they collected their respective loved ones. “Kind of a game changer from De Blasio, huh?” he said, raising his hand to catch the attention of Becca, Shawn, and his parents.

Darcy nodded, still a little dazed from the mayor’s declaration of support for Bucky. “Can’t say I was expecting that,” she said honestly.

“You think Steve’s head exploded?”

She grinned. “I thought it might,” she admitted, jumping a few inches off the ground and waving her arms until he caught notice of her and pointed her out to her parents. “But nope,” she glanced over. “Looks like it’s all in one piece.”

“You think he’ll come back?” he asked, taking off his hat and rubbing at his short hair before putting it back in place.

Darcy stopped and tilted her head to one side. “Honestly?” she shrugged. “I have no idea. I thought if he was going to come back it would’ve been when Steve was in trouble.”

It was Eddie’s turn to look contemplative, squinting in the sunlight. “Ever think maybe Bucky saved you because he knew that you’d step in and save Steve if he couldn’t?”

She frowned. The thought had occurred to her once or twice, but it twisted her stomach every time it surfaced in her mind. “That’s putting a lot of faith in a stranger on his part,” she said, shaking her head with a scoff. “I don’t know that he’d trust anyone that much—especially me.”
She expected her partner to scoff or make a joke about how much credit she did or didn’t deserve. But he didn’t. When she glanced over, he still looked serious. “If I had to pick one person to trust in all of this craziness?” he shrugged. “I’d pick you.”

It was one of the nicest things anyone had ever said to her and Darcy let the sentiment warm her heart for a nice long moment before she laughed and rolled her eyes. “You would not,” she said, jabbing him with her elbow. “You’d pick Captain America.”

Eddie was still laughing by the time their families reached them. There were hugs and kisses and a flurry of cell phone photos while the rest of the crowd dispersed. After that there was a discussion of dinner plans and who had made reservations where and for what time and how many and Darcy decided that no, this day was, in fact, exactly like graduation after all.

The only real difference was that after the flutter of activity and after her parents—beaming with pride and full of opinions about where Darcy should hang her plaque—had been safely loaded into a cab and sent uptown to secure a table for fifteen, Steve was waiting to pull her in for a kiss she’d been waiting for all afternoon.

“I could get used to this uniform,” he said when he let her go and let his eyes drift downward over her dark blue shirt and slacks. “I didn’t think I’d like it but—”

She rolled her eyes. “I hate this shirt,” she said needlessly adjusting uncomfortably. “I’m always afraid I’m flashing half of New York through the gaps in the buttons.”

He nodded seriously for a moment, trying to smother another smile. “Well, if you need a volunteer to keep an eye on those buttons—”

Darcy laughed and shook her head. “Think my mom will be mad if I change before dinner?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I do, actually,” he said. “She hasn’t taken a recent photo of you since last Christmas and she needs something to send to your grandparents.”

She couldn’t stop her smile. “Did she tell you that?” she asked, reaching up to unpin her hat so she could carry it loosely at her side.

He nodded. “That and so much more while we were waiting for this thing to get started.”

She sobered briefly and cleared her throat. “What’d you think of that speech?”

Steve looked thoughtful for a moment as he kept an arm around her and started them down the path heading back toward the park. “I think that as far as Bucky’s concerned,” he began carefully, “it’s going to take more than just a speech from the mayor to bring him back.” He paused and let out a deep breath. “And, I mean, as much as I want to hope that he will be back someday…” he moved his shoulders. “I just don’t know.”

Darcy tucked an arm around his waist and leaned against him. They walked in companionable, thoughtful silence for a few moments before she spoke up. “If nothing else,” she said, looking up to catch his eye, “you were right about him. He was trying to help me and…” she pursed her lips. “That tells me he’s still got something worth fighting for.”

He smiled faintly and pulled her in closer to kiss the top of her head. He held her close for what felt like a long moment before he resumed their leisurely stroll. “So, what’s next for the freshly commended Officer Darcy Lewis?” he asked, meeting her eye with a grin.
She returned it easily. “Detective’s exam,” she said with confidence. He raised his eyebrows in surprise. “What?” she countered around a smile. “Did you think you were always going to be the only one with a shield in this relationship?”

He let out one of those loud, relaxed, genuine laughs that she loved so much and shook his head. “How long until you’re eligible for that?”

She waved the question away. “Oh, it’s at least two years but,” she shrugged. “Doesn’t hurt to have a plan.”

His smile was bright and full of pride. “Detective Lewis…” he said with a nod. “I like the sound of that.”

She couldn’t contain her grin. “Me too.”

***

He had a clear line of sight from his position. He could see both of them with ease and without compromising his cover. He was well-hidden in the trees. Only a few errant joggers had passed by and they’d paid him no notice.

That didn’t surprise him. He knew how to make himself invisible.

He watched as Steve clapped a hand to his chest and threw back his head with a loud, ungoverned laugh. Beside him, Darcy laughed too and pointed out something up ahead.

They were relaxed together. Comfortable.

Happy.

He watched them walk on the trail—Steve purposefully slowing his strides so Darcy didn’t have to race to keep up with him—until they turned the corner and disappeared from his sight.

Bucky stepped out from his hiding place and pulled his hat down low over his eyes. With his hands in his pockets, he started down the path, walking toward the south gate. The direction opposite of the couple he’d been following.

The grass in Prospect Park was thick and vibrantly green. The flowers had all returned and were littering the city with their cheerful display of pink and blue and yellow. The early summer sun hit the back of his neck, reminding him that he couldn’t stay hidden under all of those layers forever.

A small smile stole across his features before he could stop it.

It wasn’t winter anymore.

-fin-
Officer Lewis will return.

Chapter End Notes

"No doubt - endings are hard. But then again... nothing ever really ends, does it?"
-Chuck again.

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