"Captain Rogers."

"Agent. It seems we'll be working together for the foreseeable future."

"Indeed, it does."

"Well, if that's the case, I'll need something to call you."

"Agent 13 works just fine."

"What? Don't you have a name?"

"That's on a need to know basis. And you don't need to know."

Steve just blinks at her perturbed as she bit back a smile and started walking away. Just as she was about to round the corner, she turned her head and called back over her shoulder,
"Welcome to SHIELD, Captain Rogers."

The course of true love never did run smooth.
Prologue

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 3rd, 1994

Arlington, VA

‘I see skies of blue and clouds of white, the bright blessed day, the dark sacred night. And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.’

The crooning voice of Louis Armstrong filtered softly throughout the living room of the comfortably aged and settled Cape Cod. The white house, settled among a thicket of trees, sat perched up high on an incline, overlooking the sleepy Bellevue Forest neighborhood. In the distance, laughter could be heard as a group of young boys played a pickup game of baseball in the street. The music rang out peacefully through the open windows as a light, summer breeze pushed the transparent curtains back and forth in an airy dance.

A thunderstorm the night before had dissipated the thick humidity that was usual this time of year. The air was light and refreshing. Louis’ dulcet tones were uninterrupted except for the occasional scratch of the needle on the record. It was quiet in the open living room as the sole occupant busied herself with her scented marker masterpiece. Bright shades of blue, yellows and greens clashed together as a rough image of a garden grew and took shape.
Seven-year-old Sharon Elizabeth Marie Carter was hunched over the coffee table, her face scrunched up in concentration as she scribbled freely with a red marker reeking of strawberries. Her mass of blonde curls rested atop her head in a ponytail and she frequently was blowing her bangs out of her eyes. Resting lopsided on the couch was Sharon’s most prized possession and her partner in crime, her Bucky Bear. He was immaculately dressed in his snug, dark blue jacket. The only sign of wear and tear being a missing button and rattled fur where Sharon had once spilled juice on him.

‘I see friends shaking hands saying how do you do, but they’re really saying I love you.’

Pleased with her masterpiece so far, Sharon pulled a wrapped lollipop from one of her numerous denim overall pockets and popped it in her mouth theatrically. In the kitchen could be heard a low whistling and steady click of a cane.

“Do you want carrots with lunch Sweet Pea?” Uncle Daniel called out from the kitchen as Sharon gasped and turned betrayed towards the entrance even though he couldn’t see her.

“No carrots! I’ll turn orange if I eat carrots.”

A head of almost entirely grey hair peeked to look into the living room as a face worn with age turned upward into a smile. Crinkles around the eyes and mouth appeared giving away the fact that the man in question had spent much of his life smiling and laughing. Daniel Sousa’s smile turned even more amused as he took in Sharon’s fierce frown and her stubby arms crossed across her chest.

“And who told you that carrots turned you orange?”

“She was violet, Uncle Daniel.” Daniel had to bit his lip to prevent his grin from growing bigger in the face of his great-niece’s ire.

“My mistake. Alright, no carrots. How about green beans?”

“Yummy. And peaches! We just picked the peaches yesterday!”

“I’d never forget the peaches. Lunch will be ready in a few minutes, but before that, I have a mission for you.”

Sharon perked up at the word ‘mission’ and tossed her marker to the side as she gave all her attention to Daniel, her brown eyes wide and attentive.

“Mission?! Give me the mission!”

“Okay, here it is. Your objective is: get Aunt Peggy to leave her paperwork in the office and join us for lunch. Also, make sure to wash your hands before sitting at the table.”

“Got it, sir!”

“On your way then, Agent Carter.”

He saluted Sharon with a grin before returning to the kitchen as the young child sprang into action.
Not content to merely walk to Aunt Peggy’s office down the hall, Sharon somersaulted her way there. She grew too dizzy and disoriented by the fourth roll and sprawled across the hallway carpet as the world spun and spun.

She pushed herself up and quietly crept down the remainder of the hallway to the door that was only cracked open an inch or so. She kept her steps light as she remembered the first rule of spy work: always take your opponent by surprise. As she neared the door the crisp tone of Margaret ‘Peggy’ Carter could be heard as she conversed on the telephone.

“I know you have the situation handled, Nick, but you can’t mind an old woman worrying. Just because I’m retired that does not mean I am content to sit on my ass and just let the world pass me by.”

Sharon loved listening to her Aunt Peggy talk. No one sounded like Aunt Peggy. Mom always said it was because Peggy wasn’t born in the States like Sharon and her mother, but came from the United Kingdom (“Aunt Peggy is from a real kingdom? Is there a king and queen and dragons?”), the same magical land Sharon’s father was born in. Though her father had spent most of his life living in the United States, even he didn’t sound like Aunt Peggy.

Hearing Aunt Peggy say one of her mother’s forbidden words of ‘ass’ made Sharon giggle and she gasped, trying to stifle the sounds into her hands. Her aunt paused for a moment and Sharon held her breath. She then jumped as Aunt Peggy spoke loudly,

“I’m sorry, Nick, could you hold for a moment? I seem to have a little spy outside my door. Dearest? Is that you?”

Sharon sheepishly pushed the door open to peer into the spacious office that was Peggy’s haven. Behind Peggy, the entire wall was bookshelves filled with thick tomes written in a variety of different languages. Peggy had once sat down Sharon with a large, dusty one that was filled with a gibberish language Aunt Peggy called ‘Latin.’ It hadn’t made any sense to Sharon. Covering the floor was a large and brightly patterned Persian rug that Peggy had claimed was a gift from a Shah from the Middle East. The centerpiece of the office was Peggy’s fortress: her sturdy, dark stained oak desk. Uncle Daniel joked that Aunt Peggy spent more time at the desk than anywhere else in their house, even their bed.

Even though she was past the age of 70, time had been good to Peggy Carter. Her hair was still thick and voluminous with smatters of brown still present throughout the grey. Retirement had not been enough to dull Peggy’s routine of wearing rollers to bed each night to produce high-quality curls every day. She was dressed primly in a satin blouse and high waisted trousers and her signature scarlet red lipstick drew one’s attention to her full mouth and beautiful face.

"What brings you into my lair, dearest?"

“I’m on a mission,” Sharon stated proudly, jutting her chin out as Peggy quirked an eyebrow in merriment.

“And what’s this top-secret mission?”

“I have to make you come to lunch. Uncle Daniel cooked and everything.”

“I would bloody hope he did, seeing as I am useless in the kitchen. Give me a minute, dearest, and then we’ll complete your mission.”

Sharon nodded, her curls bouncing as Peggy flashed her a smile and went back to talking on the
phone. Sharon twirled around in a circle as her eyes flashed to the collage of photos on the far right wall. She ambled over to the black and white photographs of Peggy’s life. Sharon smiled as she looked over the familiar faces. In the corner was a shot of Peggy and Daniel from their wedding day, Uncle Daniel sporting a large grin and crooked bowtie as he lifted Peggy’s lace veil. Next to it was a candid photo of Peggy holding a small, wriggling bundle that was her and Daniel’s daughter Jill the day she was born. Following that was a picture of Jill, Sharon’s dad and his sister, Sharon’s Aunt Judy in front of a brightly lit Christmas tree as the three children posed in matching Christmas sweaters. Sharon’s eyes darted upwards and she looked at the photograph of Uncle Dum-Dum giving a boisterous laugh, arms spread wide, and mustache larger than life as he laughed at a joke Uncle Gabe had just given with Uncle Monty crinkling his nose in the background with Uncle Jim and Uncle Jacques rolling their eyes, looking as if this nonsense had happened a hundred times before. Knowing them, it probably had.

The next photo was always hard for Sharon to understand as it was blurry and had been taken in poor lighting. All one could really make out was the hunched profile of a soldier bracing against the wind as he smoked a cigarette. The only clear indication that it was Bucky Barnes, her Bucky Bear’s namesake, was his distinct blue jacket, noticeable even in a black and white photograph.

At the center of this collage of Peggy’s life and achievements was a single photo of a tall, handsomely built man decked out in the stars and stripes of the United States. At his side rested a red and white shield. His blonde hair was tousled and his eyes distant as he looked ahead, eyes not focused on the camera that had caught him unawares.

This was Steve Rogers. The hero of all of Aunt Peggy’s war stories. Sharon had grown up hearing the wild tales of the ‘kid from Brooklyn’ who had single-handedly saved the world with the sheer power of his will.

It wasn’t until Sharon had started school last year that she realized that everyone knew Steve Rogers. She had also learned that he had had another name: Captain America.

The Star Spangled Man with a Plan.

To Peggy and Sharon, he had always been Steve.

Sharon loved hearing stories of Steve Rogers, even though sometimes she didn’t want to ask Peggy about him, because then Aunt Peggy would sometimes seem sad. And Sharon never wanted Peggy to be sad. Peggy was her favorite person in the world and her favorite person should never do anything but smile. Sharon stared at Steve Rogers for a moment longer before her attention span demanded she look elsewhere or be perpetually bored.

She turned her brown eyes to a gold medal hanging off the wall. She rocked up onto her tiptoes and reached out her small fingers to grasp onto it as the emblem of an eagle stood out to her.

“What have you got there, dearest?”

So enraptured in her young musings, Sharon hadn’t even noticed Peggy had ended her phone call and was not standing behind the seven-year-old. Sharon had failed lesson two of spy work: always be aware of your surroundings.

“I was just looking at your medal.”

“Ah, yes. Pretty isn’t it?” Peggy reached out and pulled the medal down from the wall and held it out in the palm of her hand as she kneeled down beside Sharon so the girl could have a better look. Sharon eagerly ran her fingers over the cool metal as she picked it up, judging the weight critically.
“It’s heavier than it looks,” she announced to her aunt who nodded.

“That it is. Do you know what it says on it?” Sharon angled the medal towards it as she carefully read out the letters.

“SHIELD.”

“Yes, very good. And do you know what SHIELD stands for?”

“Oh, yes! You told me this! Strategic…Strategic Homeland…and…and.”

“Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division.”

“That’s what I was going to say!” Sharon pouted at Peggy, her lip jutting out.

“I know dearest, I just couldn’t help myself.”

“What does it mean? SHIELD?”

At this question Peggy paused and blinked, gathering her thoughts for a moment before regarding her niece with grave eyes.

“SHIELD helps people. It does what other organizations and people cannot in order to do the right thing. SHIELD is trying to make the world a better place.”

“Just like you?” Sharon asked leaning into her aunt’s personal space, reaching out to grasp her shoulders. Her hero worship of Peggy was clear and true as she blinked up at her aunt. To be faced with that kind of trust and confidence warmed Peggy to her soul as she wrapped an arm around Sharon and tugged her nearer.

“I try my best, but I’m only human.”

“But you’re the bestest human! You started SHIELD so it must be good! I just know it.” Sharon nodded with conviction to get her point across as she reached out and laid her hands against Peggy’s cheeks. Peggy smiles against Sharon’s hands as she watched her niece delightedly.

“Is that so?”

Sharon nodded vigorously and used her hands to make Peggy nod as well.

“Yes! It’s so good that one day I’m going to be a SHIELD agent.”

Peggy blinked and watched Sharon for a moment as she bit back a hitch of her throat, her heart fluttering in her chest.

“You really want to be an agent of SHIELD?”

Sharon nodded gravely as she glanced back down at the medal.

“I don’t want to be anything else…except maybe a Power Ranger.”

Peggy bit back a smile as she tucked a loose strand of Sharon’s hair behind her ear.

“Well, one day I think you’ll make a fine SHIELD agent, or Power Ranger. Whichever you chose to be, I’ll be very proud of you.”
Sharon giggled and clapped her hands as Peggy slowly stood and hung the medal back onto the wall. She turned to her great-niece and held out her hand.

“Let’s go complete your mission and eat lunch, Agent Carter.”

Sharon smiled widely up at Peggy, highlighting the gap of her missing tooth.

“After you, Director Carter.”

The two Carter females walked out of the office leaving behind the photos of the past to rejoin the time of the present.

Chapter End Notes

I've been wanting to write a Sharon Carter centric fanfiction since viewing the Winter Soldier two years ago, and now only feel comfortable and prepared to do so. It's been several years since I last wrote publicly, so please be patient with me as I hopefully get back my groove.

As I am a pretty visual learner, when it comes to characterization and world-building, pictures help me like nothing else. I have a storyboard Pinterest going for the series and be prepared for me often to post pictures here in the notes to give you some insight into the story I'm building.
Chapter Summary

Aliens.
Fucking aliens.
Somedays, Sharon Carter couldn’t believe this was the world she was living in. It wasn’t enough that an egocentric billionaire was flying around in a tin can and a giant, smashing green monster tore apart Harlem, and hints that whatever SHIELD had covered up in Puente Antiguo last year had something to do with actual gods from other worlds.
Nope. Now aliens were a part of the equation.
Fan-fucking-tastic.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 7th, 2012.

Over the Atlantic.

Aliens.
Fucking aliens.

And not the friendly E.T. sort, but rather the conquer all and leave nothing but ashes and bones behind sort, circa Independence Day.

Somedays, Sharon Carter couldn’t believe this was the world she was living in. It wasn’t enough that an egocentric billionaire was flying around in a tin can and a giant, smashing green monster tore apart Harlem, and hints that whatever SHIELD had covered up in Puente Antiguo last year had something to do with actual gods from other worlds.

Nope. Now aliens were a part of the equation.

Fan-fucking-tastic.

The quinjet hit a shot of turbulence and Sharon shuddered in a deep breath as the ship shook and rattled momentarily before righting itself and continuing on its trajectory over the Atlantic towards New York. She was in the belly of the ship, sitting snugly in her chair as the chatter of the two pilots in the cockpit filtered back towards her.

Spread across her lap were paper clippings and data pads all displaying the awe-inspiring horror that had occurred days before in New York. Across from her three monitors were displaying the same images through newscasts as SHIELD tech dumped info across the screens. At the moment Christine Everhart from WHIH was interviewing witnesses from the attack and Sharon had to roll her eyes at Everhart’s dramatic delivery and the fact she was strutting through the burning remains
A week ago Sharon’s life had been normal, or at least as normal as life could be for an agent of SHIELD.

For the last five weeks she had been deep undercover in Macau sousing out a large string of human trafficking rings of minors. Finding the rings has been the strenuous part, taking them out had proven easy and efficient. She had been in the process of wrapping her mission up neatly with a bow when noise from SHIELD started clambering in. It had been disjointed, jumbled and incoherent.

Sharon had been only able to make out a little:

A SHIELD facility had been destroyed, a weapon was stolen, an unfriendly was roaming freely and Agent Barton had been compromised.

All previous missions were nixed. Anyone who was in the near vicinity was to report to the closest SHIELD facility or helicarrier, everyone else was to burrow and go to ground to the nearest safe house and await further instructions. No one was to engage with Barton.

Sharon had done just that and had waited with baited breath for the next shoe to drop. She didn’t have to wait long.

She had been awakened in the middle of the night on May 5th (UTC time) to her SHIELD phone blearing out warnings. She had chaotically turned on her laptop and hooked into the SHIELD mainframe to see New York burning and crumbling before her eyes.

Three days later and New York was still burning.

Sharon sighed as she rubbed her eyes and looked away from the flashing monitors. She hadn’t slept since waking up that fateful day in Macau. She was too jazzed to even think of sleeping in a time like this. The fear, the worry, the anger all mixed together with the dizzying sensation that this all had to be a dream had kept her from even resting her eyes.

Sharon didn’t know what to think or believe as information kept pouring in from around the world. Most of all, she wanted answers.

First, the evidence must be reviewed. With a calming breath Sharon rolled her neck and quietly took pleasure in the pops and cricks that followed the movement. She raised her brown eyes to the monitors and began replaying the footage. The quality wasn’t ideal and the shakiness of it was so chaotic Sharon was positive she could have shot more coherent footage while riding a rollercoaster. That was neither here nor there.

What to take into account? First off: the players. Or as the world was calling them…the Avengers.

Iron Man was as visible and present as only Tony Stark could ever be. The red and gold flash zig zagged across the city leading those flying aliens on a crazy goose chase before shooting them down. Stark wasn’t the only flashy character appearing on her screen. A towering blonde with wind swept locks and a giant lumberjack quality body with a red cape had been shown summoning lighting with his hammer atop the Chrysler Building. The few, scattered reports that had come in from SHIELD that hadn’t been heavily redacted had identified the walking wet dream simply as
'Thor.' Apparently the antagonist of this whole thing had been Thor’s brother, Loki.

Norse gods. Honestly.

Just as impressive as Thor, but not nearly as pretty to look at had been the green raging machine known as the Hulk. The last time Sharon had seen him on camera he had been destroying Harlem.

He must not like New York, Sharon mused as she watched the green giant crash into the public library taking out the entire Classics section. The hulk let forth a roar that had Sharon leaning back in her seat and fast forwarding away from his snarling face.

Now came time for the surprises of the footage.

Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton.

The two top SHIELD agents and assassins had been right in the thicket of the craziness of the battle. Sharon watched as Barton, who she guessed had become uncompromised, took out aliens from his high perch on a skyscraper. She raised an eyebrow in interest as Natasha went from being the ground force to flying high with the alien fleet. Even buzzing around at a high speed and velocity Natasha had the skill to crush an alien head with her thighs.

Impressive.

But Nat was always impressive, so it wasn’t her death defying feats that had captured Sharon’s attention.

No, it was the red, white and blue stars and stripes that Sharon kept going back to as she reviewed the data.

A shield ricocheted throughout the footage as a man in the aforementioned colors and standards dodged left and right, taking out aliens with fueled packed punches.

He looked alarmingly like Captain America.

Not that there was a clear shot of the man without his helmet on but the fighter was purposefully playing up the image of the Star Spangled Man with a Plan.

There was nothing in Sharon’s reports about the man; no name, no status, no identifying feature. He was just a man in an updated Captain America costume.

Sharon suspected Coulson had something to do with that.

But the question that Sharon kept coming back to was why? Why bring out the stars and stripes? Why create a new shield? Why resurrect Captain America from the history books?

The last time a ‘Captain America’ had seen the light of day had been the ‘50s when a neurotic fan by the name of Burnside had taken up the mantle against logic and reason. However, that fiasco had been short lived and Aunt Peggy had taken care of it.

Sharon sighed at the reminder of her aunt. She must be going out of her mind watching this footage…well, only if it was a good day. If it was a good day Peggy would be pouring over the same footage Sharon was and raging to know who had ever dared to take up the shield in Steve Rogers’ name.

If it was a bad day…well, Sharon didn’t like thinking of Peggy’s bad days.
Sharon ran her hands through her short bob. Her natural honey blonde was covered by bright highlights and hair. She tugged her leather jacket closer to her as she tried to fight the chill of the quinjet. It was like an icebox in there. Rubbing her hands together for friction, she leaned back and rested her head against the wall of the quinjet, her eyes resting on the paused image of the middle monitor: at its center was the shield in midflight about to connect with the jaw of an unsuspecting alien.

What was Fury’s game?

Why parade a man around like Captain America?

It seemed she wasn’t the only one wanting to know. Sitting daintily in her lap were some of the international headlines of the last few days.

**Captain America Alive?**

**The Return of an American Hero?**

**Return of the Stars, Stripes and Shield**

**Who is the Man behind the Mask?**

Who, indeed.

Sharon would be having words with Fury when she landed. She needed to know why he did this. There was an uncomfortable tightness in her abdomen. Sharon didn’t like this feeling of uncertainty that had been shadowing her since she first saw an image of this brightly dressed imposter in Macau.

She didn’t know what it was, love of Peggy, respect for the dead, admiration for legacy and history, but Sharon needed to get to the bottom of this mystery.

In the midst of aliens, monsters and gods, knowing the identity of this *Cap* would perhaps make Sharon’s world stop tilting off course.

Maybe.

“Agent 13, we are five minutes from our destination. Helicarrier *Alpha* is in sight.”

The words of the pilot jerked Sharon into action as she shoved aside the articles and pads, unbuckled her seatbelt and hurried into the cockpit to get her first view of the devastation. The quinjet glided across New York Bay and Sharon looked to the skyline. The reports cited that all the fires had been put out yesterday citywide, but Sharon could still see smoke billowing in the distance.

“Do a flyby, I want to see,” she directed at the pilot, who nodded and proceeded to swoop down to slide across the various landscapes as Sharon leaned forward to look through the glass.

Buildings were in tatters, some completely gone, but others only hazardously holding on through their foundations and steel beams. Cars and buses were still overturned and many were smoky infernos of metal and ash. Glass from shattered windows covered the streets mixing in with the rubble of fallen buildings.

Clean up crews and volunteers were hard at work, shoveling and moving debris. Stations manned by the Red Cross and tents with food, water, and medical supplies could be made out even from
Sharon’s high vantage point. She saw the tanks and military convoys of the National Guard and other armed forces called in to clean up the mess left behind.

Sharon looked away and lost her breath at what next caught her eyes. Lying across the remains of three buildings was a giant…Sharon didn’t quite know what it was, but it was huge and definitely alien.

“My God,” she whispered to herself as the quinjet flew past it. She had seen the footage, it had taken the combined efforts of Thor, the Hulk and Iron Man to take a sucker like that down. The quinjet moved up and did a flyby of Stark Tower, Tony Stark’s personal monument to himself.

God, it was an ugly building.

To be fair, Sharon couldn’t be sure if the design was inherently ugly or if the fact that it looked like an atomic bomb had gone off within it, leaving it shattered and wilting, instead of tall and imposing as its namesake had undoubtedly intended it to be. Sharon looked at it, the only thing left identifying it as belonging to Tony Stark was its sad little ‘A’ perched precariously by itself, looking nearly like it might by joining its siblings on the ground below.

Mentally categorizing everything she had seen Sharon leaned back to address the pilots.

“I’ve seen enough. Take me to Alpha.”

Time to get to work.

The pride and joy of SHIELD’s helicarrier fleet was floating bruised and battered above New York Bay. Sharon had heard of the damage wrought to the ship by Barton, the Hulk, and others. She was surprised it was still standing…or, in this case, flying. The retrograde shields had been damaged so the helicarrier was out in plain sight, easily detected by anyone with two eyes. Sharon reached up and grasped handlebars as the quinjet gave a rickety landing onto the deck of the helicarrier. The moment the turbine engines powered down and the ramp opened, Sharon was moving through the belly of the ship, scooping up her backpack and stuffing the various newspaper clippings and data pads into it. She slipped in onto her back and departed the quinjet with a wave to her pilots.

Waiting for her was Dwight Rollin Stanford.

Middle-aged and showing signs of it with thinning hair on top and a soft belly developing due to more time spent behind a desk than out in the field. Stanford had been Sharon’s SO and handler since she graduated from Academy and while he was a cankerous, impatient, hothead asshole, he was Sharon’s asshole and she was proud to be his number one agent.

Besides, Stanford truly was a teddy bear behind the assholery. He just didn’t like to show it…ever.

Even with his back to her as he muttered darkly into his phone Sharon could tell he was beyond the point of stress. Clutched tightly in his stocky fingers was a cigarette (not the first one if the yellow staining of his nails was to go by). Stanford had a complicated relationship with smoking. He called it his glossy-eyed mistress, his wife called it grounds for divorce. So every few months he entered into the act of quitting smoking, which usually lasted all of a few days until he was chugging down cigarettes like shots, his habit would then be exacerbated by the anger of Mrs. Stanford giving him the business on a daily routine.

So, simply put, Stanford smoked a lot. He smoked, even more, when he was stressed.

Sharon imagined aliens attacking New York was enough to stress him out now.
She moved closer to her handler as he abruptly finished his brusque conversation and snapped his cellphone shut with gruff finality. He turned to her unimpressed with her overall general appearance and presence.

So, no different than usual.

“About fucking time you got your ass here. What, have you been eating fortune cookies and takeout all this time?”

Smoking had only increased the raspy quality of his voice.

He had been going at it awhile.

Sharon rolled her eyes and folded her arms across her chest.

“Miss you too, Stanford. My mission report.” She pulled the file from her backpack and gave it to the long-suffering Stanford who looked over it as if it had personally offended him.

“I’m dealing with life-ending catastrophes and you think I give a flying fuck about child prostitutes in China? Don’t answer that.”

He growled before she could open her mouth with a quick-witted response. She smiled and mimed the act of zipping her lips shut and throwing away the key. Stanford sighed and looked as if he was contemplating the life choices that had led him to become a SHIELD handler. He took a final drag of his cigarette before dropping it and digging his heel viciously into the butt. He nodded his head and took off at a swift pace as Sharon easily kept stride as she followed him into the labyrinth of hallways and staircases that made up the helicarrier.

Even with the aliens dead and the god Loki vanquished it was still a madhouse aboard the helicarrier with SHIELD personnel and agents rushing here and there. Sharon was nearly steamrolled by a contingent of STRIKE Team Delta as she turned a corner.

Assholes.

“So, did I miss anything?” she asked cheekily as she and Stanford climbed a flight of stairs and took a hard right.

“Funny. Come up with that one on the ride over?” he muttered without even looking at her. Sharon pouted when he glanced at her and grinned when Stanford rolled his eyes and hip checked her.

“You saw the reports and news. You know what you missed.”

“That’s only half the story. Who’s Loki and what was his game plan?”

“Classified.”

“Where did those aliens come from?”

“Classified.”

“Did the World Security Council really try to nuke Manhattan?”

“Classified.”

“Where are the Avengers?”
“Oh, let me see. Hmm. Classified.”

“Is there anything that’s isn’t classified?” Sharon snapped, annoyed as Stanford huffed in a laugh and shook his head at her, the closest thing she would get to a fond gesture. He jerked to a stop and brought his hand up to his ear, his eyes looking past Sharon as an unseen voice spoke to him over the comm.

“Well, gee, you don’t say,” he barked miffed before glaring at Sharon as if she was the one annoying him, “Yes, I’ve got her. Agent 13 on her way.”

He shook his head and nodded to the elevator that would take her to the center of the helicarrier, the Console.

“Boss wants to see you,” was all the information she got before being shoved into said elevator. She shot one final glare at Stanford as the door slid shut. She leaned back against the wall before remarking to the empty chamber,

“Bridge.”

“Access granted.” The female computerized voice said in return as the elevator smoothly began ascending. It only took 30 seconds or so and then the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened as Sharon stepped into the heart of the helicarrier.

She strolled past rows of agents busy at their monitors and computers. She gave a nod to Deputy Director Maria Hill as Fury’s Number Two briskly shouldered past her, barking orders into her comm.

“Fury’s at the controls,” Hill supplied helpfully before disappearing into the mass of swarming agents. Sharon nodded and looked forward and took in the commanding sight of Director Nick Fury. Clothed in his usual black leather ensemble he stood with a rigid back, straight shoulders and hands clenched at his sides as he overlooked various files coming in at breakneck speeds. His one good eye moving over the information quickly as he swiped left and right at his fancy, enlarging images or making files disappear from the screen.

Urban legends abounded freely about Fury. Junior agents firmly believed he was the stuff of nightmares and at Academy more than one story had been shared that had the recruits seeing Director Fury as the bogeyman.

Sharon may have also believed those stories once had she not known the man since she was a young child and he was apt to show up at Peggy’s house with news of SHIELD that more often than not turned into arguments of ideology over dinner. Yep, a bright-eyed, young Sharon Carter had shared more than her fair meal with Nick Fury.

The perks of being the great-niece of a SHIELD former director.

Not that many people at SHIELD knew that.

At work, she was just Agent 13.

The fewer people that knew her last name, the better.

“Agent 13,” Fury’s voice broke her from her thoughts as she took his unvoiced invitation to join him at the helm of Alpha.

“Director,” she greeted respectfully as she peered down at the screens and the same images
she had been pouring over for days.

The Avengers.

“How was Macau? Did you flush that trafficking ring?” Fury asked conversationally, perfectly poised and exceedingly vague and polite.

He knew Sharon hated when he did this to her. The upturn of his smirk was enough to tell her he knew that as well.

“Done and done. Really though that seems small pickings to what has transpired here in the last few days.”

“I can’t say I know what you mean, Thirteen.”

Asshole. Why did she like him again?

“Really? We’re playing this game? I would have been here in an instant if someone had kept me in the loop,” she accused as Fury continued overlooking the screens.

“You and half of SHIELD. You not being present was not an intended slight. Events transpired quickly and I had to roll with the punches. You would never have gotten here in time to be of use.”

“Speaking of use, when will I get to know all the facts? Most of the information I’ve gotten is redacted or heavily classified. I want to know the juice, Nick.”

“All information of the Battle of New York is freely given to any SHIELD agents…who have Level 7 clearance. You’re still a 6 aren’t you?”

“That was cold.”

“Become a Level 7 and you can know anything you want.” He looked away before speaking again.

“Besides, getting back to your point of not being called in, there wasn’t much you could have done, the real heavy lifting was done by them.”

He nodded down to the screen that was highlighting the deeds of the Avengers. Sharon’s eyes were immediately to the shield and the man wielding it.

“Yeah, that’s another thing. Nick, what is this?” She pointed down to the image. Fury only raised an eyebrow.

“I believe its Captain America. Surely you, more than anyone else, would recognize the man.”

Sharon bristled at his effected airy tone and reached down to the screen, blew up the image of the man and tossed it forward as it erupted into a holographic image before her.

“Captain America? Really Nick? What, did Coulson convince you that morale was low and the way to raise it was to put a man in the stars and stripes and have him prance around alongside a monster and a god?”

Fury had given a slight flinch at the mention of Coulson and Sharon filed that away for musings for a later date. He turned fully towards her and regarded her silently for a moment.

“And what exactly do you think I did, Agent 13? Find a man off the street and put him in the costume to garner sympathy points from the general public? Who do you think this man is?”
Sharon turned towards the 3D image of Cap. It had been taken of him giving orders to his fellow Avengers. His face was still hidden by the flimsy blue mask with the ‘A’ blazed upon it, but one could make out his strong jaw, see the blues of his eyes, and the conviction that resided within them. He had broad shoulders snugly outfitted in the skintight suit that bordered on the ridiculous (yet Thor was marching around in a cape, so who was she to judge the fashion statements of superheroes).

All in all, he was a quality Captain America. But he couldn’t be the real one. Steve Rogers had died in 1945 and no one had seen him since.

Sharon shrugged giving off the air of nonchalance as she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned back on her legs to regard Fury.

“A former military man maybe? You went to him, inspired him with tales of Captain America and said he could be the living embodiment of the legend?”

“Intriguing guess, but no. The man you see before you is, as I live and breathe, Captain Steve Rogers.”

He said it with such stark truth that a chill swept up Sharon’s spine as she blinked wildly for a moment, her eyes darting to the hologram image of the man.

Up close and personal, it did strongly resemble the pictures in her history textbooks.

“Steve Rogers is dead,” she murmured trying to hold onto the last strands of reality before she was tipped over the edge. She watch Fury closely as he took a step towards her, his eyes staying on her.

“No, he’s not. Steve Rogers is alive.”

And over the edge, she went.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos, subscriptions and comments! Please keep them coming.

Moving on, picture time!

Sharon's Post-Avengers hair style & color:
Sharon’s outfit upon returning from Macau:
D.R. Stanford, Sharon's SO:
Welcome Back, Cap

Chapter Summary

Rising above the rows of gravestones was an alabaster shrine to America’s greatest hero. Carved entirely out of the unforgiving hardness of marble was the likeness of Captain America. He stood seven feet tall, proud and as defiant as the American spirit. Both feet were planted firmly in a position of authority leading up to broad shoulders standing at attention that held the neck of a man who had never bowed down to any foe before him, whether they be Nazi soldiers or bullies in Brooklyn alleyways.

Even in the whiteness of the marble the impression of his uniform was as distinct as the star on his chest and the stripes flowing down his abdomen. The ‘A’ of his helmet protruded forward and the wings flanking the sides jutted out. With his left arm raised in the name of freedom he brandished his mighty shield above his head, ready to fight and defend. In his right hand he gripped strongly a flagpole with a large American flag blowing gently in the early morning breeze.

Embodied in the memorial was patriotism, valor, and heroism.

It was the perfect monument to Captain America.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 10\textsuperscript{th}, 2012

Washington, D.C.

“It’s the eye of the tiger, it’s the thrill of the fight, rising up to the challenge of our rival.”

A groan echoed throughout the dark bedroom as a blonde head reluctantly emerged from her duvet cocoon and groggily glared at her blaring cell phone.

“Five more minutes,” she mumbled to thin air to no avail as the phone continued its tune.

“And the last known survivor stalks his prey in the night, and he’s watching us all with the eye of the tiger.”

With none of the grace her years as an agent had awarded her, Sharon swatted at the phone and after several failed swiping attempts finally got the blasted music to turn off. Once she was gratefully immersed in blissful silence, she flopped back down onto her pillow and sighed deeply.

It had been a late night the night before and she felt like she had only laid her head down to rest mere minutes ago. Speaking of time…she pressed her phone and blinked rapidly at the harsh assault of blue light illuminating her face. The time reflected on the phone was enough to have her groaning again and desperately wishing for sleep.
To sleep or not to sleep, she mused as her eyes darted up to her textured ceiling, she could make out the bumps and grooves even in the dimness of the pre-dawn greyness. She stretched lazily as her surroundings became sharper and her focus more intent until she was rolling herself out of her lovely queen bed and shuffling into the bathroom. She slapped her cheeks lightly to wake herself up as she regarded herself in the mirror. In the harsh fluorescent lights, she looked pale and tired as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Her blonde hair was sticking up in every which direction; her worn Georgetown University t-shirt was baggy and loose and had seen many a better day and was two sizes too big, so it nearly hid her boxer shorts from view. Fighting a yawn she dragged her feet towards the kitchen.

She perked up as she stumbled into the galley kitchen and saw her salvation sitting daintily on the dark, granite countertop.

Her coffee maker.

She had had that bad boy since college and he had yet to let her down (if only she could say that about the men in her life). Within a few minutes she had the machine up and running and as it was bubbling and brewing, she leaned against the countertop in the long, limited space.

The apartment was part of the package deal that was being a SHIELD operative. Though, to be fair, Sharon was willing to admit it was a tad bit more luxurious than the standard SHIELD home package. Sue her, she had wanted to live in a happening neighborhood in one of the busiest cities in the US. Located right at the heart of Penn Quarter off of Pennsylvania Ave, this high rise apartment was Sharon’s home when she wasn’t being called away to the various ends of the earth to do god knows what in the name of freedom and security.

To her right was one of her favorite spots in DC: the Newseum and across the street was the National Gallery of Arts. When she was in her dining room, if she pressed her face to the window and stretched her neck she was awarded the sight of the Washington Monument rising above the low-level buildings that made up the DC skyline. Penn Ave was always bustling with people moving up and down towards the Mall and the White House. She could be at any Smithsonian in a matter of minutes. Her weekly jogs consisted of choosing whether to run along the Potomac or the Tidal Basin.

Restaurants of every nationality and cuisine style (most importantly burger joints) were at her fingertips and god knows there was always a new cupcake bakery popping up somewhere waiting to be tasted. And brunch, the brunch….

Sometimes, Sharon Carter really loved her life.

Just not before 6am in the morning.

As the coffee machine pinged to alert the fact it was done, she did a happy little shuffle/jig towards the machine, pulling a mug out of the cabinet above her. Once she had the right ratio of coffee and creamer, she inhaled the intoxicating scent and allowed the warmth of the mug to fill her whole body as she finally came to life.

She greedily sipped at her elixir of life until the very last drop. With much-needed caffeine in her system, she felt prepared to begin getting to work.

She had a mission after all.
Padding back into her bedroom she dressed quickly in nondescript clothing and detoured into the bathroom to tame her bed hair and brush her teeth. Gathering up her keys she was out her door at just past 6am.

She strode to the elevator and let it carry her down to the lobby from the 11th floor of her building. She exited and made a beeline for the front desk where concierge Billy Ray was holding court.

“Morning, Ms. Carter,” he greeted affably with a beaming smile as she returned it and leaned against the sleek, modern desk.

“Hi, Billy Ray; got anything for me?” she inquired as he slid the newest edition of the Washington Post towards her.

“Just the paper. It’s a doozy of a headline this morning.”

“I’ll bet,” she muttered, having a strong guess of the headline in question but not wanting to look at it just yet. She flashed another smile at the man before slipping away to the front door, keeping the newspaper tucked in the crook of her elbow. As she stepped outside she took in the still quietness of Penn Ave, only an hour or so away from the complete craziness of rush hour traffic. The sky was lined with hues of pink and orange with the growing sunrise off in the distance of the east, still not visible above the Capitol. It was early morning, but there was a heaviness to the air that meant another hot and humid day in DC was imminent. Lovely.

Sharon headed towards her usual parking spot and with a beep of her car remote was slipping into her blue sedan that had been her companion since high school. She had learned to drive in this car, being schooled by her dad who thought being an English professor made him an expert on cars. It was this same car she got her first speeding ticket in, as well as her first fender bender, and the first time she had gone to second base with a boy (junior year of high school with varsity baseball player Elliot Smith).

Point of the story is, she and her car had been through a lot together. However, her little blue pal was starting to show his age with some wear and tear, and his miles just kept ticking upward. She was secretly hoping for an upgrade soon, particularly of the SHIELD kind. But at the moment that was neither here nor there.

It wasn’t until she was all buckled in and had the AC going that Sharon dared to fully look at the paper. It had been innocuously resting in the empty passenger seat, folded inward so as to hide the front page headline. For the past few days, all the newspapers of the world had been dominated by the events in New York. Images of aliens raining down from that portal in the sky, shots of the Avengers fighting them off, murmurings and musings on who some of them were (Thor, for instance).

And now, they finally had some answers to the identities of these superheroes. Or at least one in general. Sharon picked up at the newspaper and wasn’t surprised by what she saw gracing the front page.

**Steve Rogers Alive after Nearly 70 Years in Ice**

Late the night before (just as the 11pm news was about to begin) a statement had been released from Stark Industries confirming that the heroic Captain America of last week’s battle and the late, great Captain America of WWII was one and the same. He had survived the crashing of the Valkyrie into the Arctic and had been entombed in ice for the past seven decades and had been discovered just before the attack on New York.
It had been a short and simple statement as if anything about it was simple. Within minutes
#CaptainAmerica had been trending on Twitter and the internet had effectively been broken.
Everyone had been clamoring for the details of how, when, where and why. The public had only
been slightly nullified by the fact that Captain Rogers would be giving his first interview at noon
the next day.

Less than six hours away and the whole world would be formally re-introduced to Steve Rogers.

Having heard the news three days ago and having it reaffirmed in the above headline, Sharon still
couldn’t make heads or tails of the situation. Fury had provided her with the specifics and
particulars of how Captain Rogers had rejoined the land of the living (as much information as Fury
is ever willing to give without a price).

Apparently, the serum running through Rogers’ veins had been enough to keep him clinging onto
life for the last 70 years.

Suspended in time for 70 years…Sharon wondered if he dreamed at all during that time, or if the
last thing he saw was blinding ice and then awoke in an instant in an entirely different world. Had
he been knocked out by the crash? Or had he felt the chill of ice creeping into his bones as he
waited to die?

Sharon shivered at the thought, the AC suddenly making the inside of her car feel like a freezer.
She hastily turned down the dial making the coolness mild rather than full force.

Distractions. She was allowing herself to be distracted by emotions. Doing that in the field could
get her killed or worse, compromised.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and put the car into drive. Pulling out onto Penn she
veered the car northwest, turning onto 7th, then D and then finally onto 9th, following it until she
was breezing through the mostly empty 9th St Tunnel that took her underneath the Mall. She took
the ramp onto 395 S and followed it to the bridges over the Washington Channel and heading
towards the 14th St bridges over the gentle Potomac. Cruising along comfortably in the early
morning traffic Sharon allowed herself to enjoy sights of the luminous Jefferson Memorial on the
shores of the Tidal Basin.

Driving over the Potomac allowed her to see the Triskelion, SHIELD’s home base, rising like a
beacon far off on Roosevelt Island. Not following the height restriction the Triskelion rose even
higher than the Washington Monument. No matter where one was in DC, he could nearly always
see the Triskelion and be reminded of the security SHIELD provided to the world.

In the early morning of the dawn the stronghold of the three columnar buildings, joined together by
a jointly shared floor that housed the World Security Council, the Triskelion appeared tranquil, its
floor to ceiling windows gleaming in the sunlight, no one would suspect the mischief and mayhem
that was contained by the occupants of that building.

Sharon felt a small thrill run through her body as her car raced over George Mason. SHIELD and
all it stood for was intrinsically a part of her and no matter how many times she saw the Triskelion,
it always felt like she was seeing it for the first time as she had as a young girl, clinging to Aunt
Peggy’s hand as she was given the grand tour.

Continuing on, it was only a few minutes and then she was exiting onto George Washington
Memorial running alongside the Potomac. The sun was higher in the sky and the day had the
makings of being bright, sunny and cheerful. The more north she traveled the closer the Triskelion
appeared until it was a sleeping giant in the distance as she came upon the Memorial Ave roundabout. Taking the second exit she continued west, formally entering Virginia as her destination grew in the distance.

Arlington National Cemetery.

Normally closed at such an early hour, but another perk of being a SHIELD agent meant that one could typically get in wherever she wanted when she wanted, within reason. Using it, however, to sneak in backstage at the Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show due to ‘pressing and urgent matters’ involving a potential bomb threat hidden in the bedazzled, million dollar bra was fiercely looked down upon (thank you for nothing Agent Ward).

Having parked her car and flashed her SHIELD badge to the guards on duty Sharon was on her way into the sprawling final resting place of America’s finest. Growing up she had come here every Memorial Day to walk among the tombstones alongside Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel. They would pay close attention to the graves of soldiers from WWII, in particular, the lost men of the 87th Infantry, Uncle Daniel’s comrades in the war.

After so many years of wandering freely through the grassy plains, Sharon knew exactly where she wanted to go. She strode across the dew-kissed grass feeling the bottom of her jeans grow damp. With her hands stuffed in her jacket pockets, she followed the familiar winding paths, enjoying the light breeze, the chirping of the birds above her in the trees and the fractures light floating through the branches.

Early as it was (and Sharon hated being up early, cardio be damned) there were worse ways to spend one’s morning.

Like, being shot at for example (she had spent many a morning verifying this fact).

After ten minutes or so of strolling the Crook Walk, the trees began to part as she came into a clearing cushioned between McClellan and Memorial that was filled with rows of the ubiquitous white gravestones. She veered off the path and wandered near the cherry blossom tree in bloom. At the center was something rather stunning.

Rising above the rows of gravestones was an alabaster shrine to America’s greatest hero. Carved entirely out of the unforgiving hardness of marble was the likeness of Captain America. He stood seven feet tall, proud and as defiant as the American spirit. Both feet were planted firmly in a position of authority leading up to broad shoulders standing at attention that held the neck of a man who had never bowed down to any foe before him, whether they be Nazi soldiers or bullies in Brooklyn alleyways.

Even in the whiteness of the marble, the impression of his uniform was as distinct as the star on his chest and the stripes flowing down his abdomen. The ‘A’ of his helmet protruded forward and the wings flanking the sides jutted out. With his left arm raised in the name of freedom, he brandished his mighty shield above his head, ready to fight and defend. In his right hand, he gripped strongly a flagpole with a large American flag blowing gently in the early morning breeze.

Embodied in the memorial were patriotism, valor, and heroism.

It was the perfect monument to Captain America.

To Steve Rogers…well, as Aunt Peggy had always said, ‘He’d be embarrassed by all this spectacle. He was a man, not a bloody mascot of American ideals.’
Sharon didn’t know how long she stood there as the morning shifted from pre-dawn to just early. In the distance she imagined the hellish morning commute into DC was now going into full force and was bumper-to-bumper. The world was moving forward, but time felt transcended here in this place, in this presence of this memory to a man once believed lost forever. Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, she moved closer to the memorial and stepped up to the gravesite situated before it.

Capt. Steven Grant Rogers

1918 – 1945

‘Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph.’ ~ Thomas Paine

Steve Rogers had forced the Valkyrie into the ice on March 4th, 1945. He had been just shy of his 27th birthday.

Sharon had turned 26 just this past February and she hadn’t done half the things in her life that Rogers had before his death…disappearance. And as kickass as an agent she believed herself to be, Sharon didn’t think she had it in her to come back from the dead. And in the first month of his resurrection, he defeated aliens hell-bent on destroying humanity (sometimes Sharon truly believed the world they lived in was actually a high budget Hollywood action film because really, aliens destroying humanity? That’s just lazy writing).

Anyway, the legend definitely proceeded the man.

She didn’t know what had compelled her to come here, to this spot, as she had done dozens of times as a child. But it had been a nagging thought since returning to DC. She just needed this, and perhaps it was best if she didn’t think about why.

She regarded the mausoleum again for a moment before sucking in a breath, squaring her shoulders and raising her hand in a perfect military salute. In the quiet of the morning, it felt solemn rather than silly that she was saluting the ghost of a man who was actually living and breathing.

“Welcome back Captain.” Her voice was too loud in the peacefulness of the space, but Sharon reckoned in the next coming days and weeks this spot would be anything but peaceful. The public would come for their fill of Captain America.

It wasn’t every day an American legend came back from the dead.

She did a turnabout and left the Captain American Memorial behind her, and as she stalked across the grass she nodded respectfully to the gravesite resting parallel to Steve Roger’s left side. It was simply engraved:

James Buchanan Barnes

1917-1945

Son, Brother, Friend, Soldier, Commando.

Bucky Barnes had always been her favorite.

As she made her way back onto Crook Path she felt the telltale beep on her personal cellphone in her back pocket. She slipped it out, swiped right and smiled as she saw the text from her oldest friend in the world, Catherine Reyes. The two girls’ friendship had started in the summer before
third grade when the Reyes family had moved in next door on Floyd Avenue in Richmond, VA. It had taken exactly four hours after the family initially moved in for Sharon and Catherine to declare themselves friends for life and seventeen years later that declaration was still going strong through thick thin and fights over who was the better boyband: Backstreet Boys or NSYNC?

Nowadays Catherine and her college sweetheart Jessie Stromberg were making their mark in New York City and consequently had had front row seats to the Chitauri invasion. Luckily, the two hadn’t been hurt in the attack. In fact, Jessie’s Instagram photo of Thor wielding his magical hammer had received 10K likes. Impressive.

Throughout their friendship, people had been quick to declare that Catherine was the Bucky Barnes to Sharon’s Steve Rogers.

It was only in this setting that Sharon could truly appreciate the irony of that.

In true Catherine fashion, she always seemed to know when Sharon needed her, even when Sharon didn’t know how to ask.

**To Sharon:**

*Shar, I just saw the news. Is it true…is he really alive?*

Sharon paused and wondered how to respond. Obviously, the news of Rogers’ second chance at life was making the early morning news circuits. By the time the interview aired in a few hours, Sharon wouldn’t be surprised if there wasn’t a single person in the world who didn’t know Steve Rogers’ name.

There was too much history and legacy wrapped up in his name and title for him to ever not matter to the world.

Sharon fired back a response and a moment later her phone buzzed one right after the other as Catherine’s stream of consciousness took textual form.

After smirking at Catherine’s rambles her eyes fell on the last text.

**To Sharon:**

*How’s Peggy taking the news??*

How, indeed.

Sharon sighed and ran a hand through her short bob, gripping the ends of her hair and giving a slight pull as she to the parking lot and slipped back into her car.

She hadn’t been to see Aunt Peggy yet, even though she had been in DC since arriving four days before after her chat with Fury aboard the *Alpha*. She wasn’t usually one for cowardice, but truth be told, Sharon knew had she visited Peggy she wouldn’t have been able to look into her eyes and not reveal the return of Peggy’s long lost war love.

And that would have been…messy. And Sharon didn’t like messy.

So she kept her distance, which hurt like the lingering pain of a bruise. But now Peggy would know the truth and Sharon…Sharon would handle the fallout.

She prayed to a god she rarely prayed to that today, of all days, would be one of Peggy’s good
days.

Putting the car into drive she took off towards Arlington to visit Peggy at her care center. The ride was only 20 minutes or so but felt like a lifetime as she pulled into the parking lot of the care center. It was situated among rows of trees, its redbrick façade, Palladian windows, and arched doorway screaming inviting and cheerful.

She greeted the desk receptionist with friendly smiles and inquiries into their families. So maybe she was taking a few extra minutes to get to Peggy’s room, see her, she was only human. Finally, though she came upon the open doorway and could hear the rustling of Peggy in her bed. While early in the morning, just going on 7:40am, Peggy was always at her most active in the morning. By noon she’d be sluggish and ready for an afternoon catnap and by the afternoon she was just content to reside in her bed, sometimes going in and out of memories.

*Pull yourself together Carter.* With a quick shake and a head nod, Sharon plastered a smile onto her face and lightly knocked on the door before popping her head into the light and airy room. It was an east facing room and sunlight was streaming in through the windows as Peggy’s room overlooked a courtyard that housed an intricate fountain, the trickling of water heard through the open window.

Peggy was propped up in her bed, a James Patterson thrill in her lap (Peggy loved figuring out the twist ending before said ending), a quilt Peggy’s daughter, Jill, had knitted a few years back, resting at the foot of Peggy’s bed. Littered throughout the room where reminders of Peggy’s life: a snapshot from Peggy and Daniel’s wedding, a picture taken of Peggy, Howard Stark and General Chester Phillips at their first offices of SHIELD, pictures of Jill, Sharon’s father and aunt as they grew up, and pictures of Peggy’s three grandchildren. To Peggy’s right, hanging merrily on the wall was a drawing of an apple tree that Peggy’s granddaughter, a precocious eight-year-old named Mona, had proudly given to her grandma at her last visit. On her bedside table as an assortment of the various medications Peggy needed to take on a daily basis to be ‘comfortable’ as Peggy’s doctor had stated last time Sharon had seen him.

Even now in her nineties, Peggy was still a beauty to behold. Her hair, now entirely silvered grey, was still strong and thick and it fell down her shoulders in gentle waves. Her features, worn and aged by time, stress, and the perils of espionage, motherhood, and bureaucracy all wrapped together to make up a messy, complicated, but overall joyful and fulfilling life.

“Dearest!” Peggy exclaimed as she took in the sight of her niece. So far, so good.

“Hi Aunt Peggy,” Sharon ventured further into the room, plopping into her favorite overstuffed chair that rested to Peggy’s left.

“I see you’re finally back from your sojourn in Macau. Have fun with those trafficking rings? It seems that there always popping up. How many did you take out? Three? Four?”

“That’s classified,” Sharon teased and as expected Peggy’s face scrunched up in indignation.

“Oh, what pitter-posh. I was busting skulls together when you were only a twinkle in your father’s eye, little one.”

Sharon’s smile only grew as she slinked down in her chair, making herself comfortable. She loved days like this when she and Peggy could go toe-to-toe back and forth, with Peggy being sharp as a fiddle.

These were the best days.
Unfortunately, as time continued on, they would become rarer and rarer.

But they weren’t there yet, so Sharon wouldn’t dwell on it. Not when other news was to be had. The lighthearted atmosphere lessened when Sharon caught sight of the newspaper resting lightly to Peggy’s left on the bed. It was the same edition of the *Washington Post* that Sharon had read that morning.

Steve Roger’s solemn face was staring blankly up into the air.

Peggy followed Sharon’s gaze and sighed, her index finger reaching out to gently trace Roger’s facial features.

“I imagine this is not an absurdly late April Fool’s prank?” Peggy asked, already resigned to the truth as Sharon shook her head.

“He was discovered by SHIELD back in April and they were able to thaw him out, within a day he was awake and within weeks was back at it with the shield as you saw on the footage of what happened in New York.”

“Is that all Fury told you?” Even in her shock, Peggy still had a way of getting to the heart of the matter.

“For the most part. I’m not at the proper clearance level to know much more.” Sharon shrugged and fiddled with her turquoise ring.

“And you haven’t thought to hack your way in and take what’s ever up for grabs?” Peggy’s voice was light, but somehow Sharon knew there was a test in that question. She looked at her great-aunt for a moment before leaning casually back into her chair.

“That’s more Romanoff’s game than mine. Besides, good things come to those who wait.”

Whatever Peggy had been angling for most have been pleased by Sharon’s response because Director Carter was replaced by Aunt Peggy. She was silent for a few moments, her brown eyes resting on the image of Steve Rogers.

“It seems a dream,” she finally said softly, her eye darting towards Sharon as she smiled mirthlessly, “I think I’ve been waiting all my life for this moment, and here it is and I don’t….”

“Don’t know how to feel?” Sharon helpfully supplied as Peggy nodded and looked away, rapidly blinking her eyes and reaching up to surreptitiously wipe at one as Sharon respectfully gave her a few moments of privacy by turning her gaze to the window.

“I can’t even imagine what’s he thinking,” Peggy continued after several long moments as Sharon turned back to her, “To be ready to die in one moment, only to wake up in a new year and time, then to battle aliens like it’s a nickelodeon. I hope…I hope he’s had a moment to breathe, collect his thoughts.”

“If he hasn’t, then he’s definitely earned himself a vacation.”

“Hmm. A holiday, yes. He always used to tell me that it was a goal of him and Barnes to travel to the Grand Canyon. Perhaps—” Peggy gave a halting breath as she tried to smile at Sharon. Sharon leaned closer to the bed, placing her hands on the comforter. Peggy shook her head, wanting, no, needing to continue.

“Perhaps…I just can’t help thinking that we should have done more. I saw the coordinates of
where they located the Valkyrie, Howard had searched that area once. How could we have missed it, Dearest? Why didn’t we…I should have done more.”

Tears were now falling down Peggy’s aged cheeks as Sharon leaned forward and scooped up Peggy’s hand, enclosing a hand that had fired guns as easily as she changed diapers within both of Sharon’s as she leaned down and pressed a kiss to Peggy’s veined skin.

“No, no, no, none of that Aunt Peggy. Do you think Steve Rogers would let you say these things about yourself, huh? It wasn’t your fault, nor was it Howard Stark’s, or anyone. You didn’t know,” Sharon stated simply, imploring her aunt with her eyes.

“You didn’t know, so you made the most of a crappy situation, and you moved on. But you didn’t leave him behind, Aunt Peggy. Look at what you did, at what you built. You created SHIELD and look at all you’ve done. He’d never begrudge you that.” She squeezed Peggy’s hand for affirmation as Peggy sent a watery grin her way.

“As always, my dear Sharon, you know what to say. Thank you, dearest.”

They kept their hands enjoined as Sharon fed all the limited information she knew of the Chitauri attack to Peggy who nodded and hummed at all the right times. The morning moved on and the two discussed matters as far ranging as politics to reality television and seemingly in a moment Peggy’s nurse came in with lunch.

Sharon kept her aunt company as she ate and afterward Peggy fought her usual routine of naptime in order to catch Roger’s interviews, but it was a battle she was losing. Her eyes were drooping and she had been gradually sinking down into her pillows and right before noon, she had slipped into her dreams. Sharon regarded her fondly for a moment before leaning over her aunt and tugging the comforter up higher so that Peggy wouldn’t catch a cold draft.

Sharon settled back into her chair and checked her phone, two minutes until show time. Her head swiveled to the small, flat screen TV in the corner of the room, currently a black mirror. Sharon chewed her lip thoughtfully and lasted thirty seconds before curiosity won out and she was grabbing for the remote and turning the TV on. She kept the volume low and flipped to the channel just in time for the craziness to begin.

She settled in for the long haul and picked up the applesauce her aunt customarily avoided like the plague and popped the top off and began digging into it with Peggy’s discarded spoon. The TV flashed as the main news anchor began by reiterating the statement from Stark Industries on the return of Captain Rogers from the dead. The man segued into the famed heroics of Rogers’ time during WWII as a few black and white photos appeared on the screen marking some of his most famous missions. Sharon took note of both Peggy and the Commandos popping up in a few.

A few more minutes of exposition followed before the shot changed to a woman in a professional, high-end grey dress seated in a plush scarlet chair addressed the audience with a camera-ready smile.

"Thank you for the introduction, Mitch. And now for a man who needs no introduction, especially since the events of the attack in New York last week, I am honored to be sitting here with Captain America himself, the embodiment of American values, Steve Rogers."

The camera panned to the right and seated rigidly was an uneasy Steve Rogers. Sharon’s breath caught in her throat as she took in the sight of the man who had once been the bulk of her bedtime stories. Her forgotten spoon slipped from her grasp and plopped nosily into her empty applesauce container. Distractedly Sharon set the two down on the rolling tray and leaned forward to better
pay attention to the interview at hand.

Most of the pictures and film rolls involving Steve Rogers had been in black and white, so seeing his golden blonde hair and bluer than blue eyes came as a bit of surprise, the camera seemed to think so too as it zoomed in on the Captain’s face. He looked as if he had just stepped out of the 1940s with his dark, high-waist trousers and a tucked in plaid button up. Even his hair maintained the combed-over look that had graced many posters and history textbooks.

In fact, that wasn’t the only thing straight out of the textbooks, so was the small and self-effacing smile that graced Rogers’ handsome façade. Sharon knew that smile because Dum Dum had always loved teasing Rogers over it whenever he uncomfortably flashed it.

It was Captain America’s USO smile.

And it appeared he was once again on stage, but now his audience was the whole world.

“So, Captain, let me just begin by thanking you for your service, both in the war and in the recent events in New York. Your valor proceeds you.” The interviewer gave a gummy smile as she leaned charmingly into Rogers’ space and the Captain gulped and nodded.

“Well, I didn’t do anything that no other man wouldn’t have done. In both instances, I just wanted to do the right thing. And with New York, it’s my…my home, it was personal.”

The woman laughed gaily and Rogers blinked, taken aback by the bark-like laughter.

“You’re too modest, Captain. To begin, how are you ever sitting here? How did you survive nearly 70 years in ice?”

Rogers nodded and sheepishly shrugged and to someone without a trained eye, everything from his posture to his wording would come across as natural if not slightly rattled and shaken, but Sharon was in the spy business, she knew when people were putting up fronts. And the wall around Rogers? It could put the Wall of China to shame.

“I’m no scientist, you’d have to ask them to really understand all the nuances. All I can really say is that the serum that Dr. Erskine created did something that…kept me alive. And then I was found, and the rest is history, I guess as the expression goes.”

“That and the will to live, I imagine,” the reporter chimed in and it took Rogers a moment before wearily nodding in acquiescent.

“And what has your impression been of the 21st century so far? It must feel pretty exotic to you.”

“It’s louder,” Rogers supplied to more sharp laughter from the reporter, when she was done he continued, “I’m afraid to say that with the Chitauri invasion and the subsequent cleanup, I haven’t had much of a chance to see the world yet.”

“And what would you want to see? What will you do now in the new world you’re living in? What’s next for Captain America?”

The reporter leaned forward, intrigued to hear the answer and it was almost as if Rogers knew it wasn’t just her hanging off his every word and eagerly awaiting his response, it was the entire world. Rogers’s eyes, which had been polite and vigilant now turned blank and his face went expressionless as if he felt the world bearing down on his absurdly broad shoulders.

“I don’t know yet. I guess I will just have to wait and see.”
"Us as well, Captain, us as well. Now, moving onto more exciting things, please tell me about the Avengers...."

The interview continued on covering all the bases of the events in New York and the new superhero team that had formed in its wake but Sharon couldn’t find it in herself to pay attention.

When she was younger she had had a severe soft spot for strays. Puppies, kittens, bird, bunnies, and squirrels had all ended up in her care against her parents’ adamant wishes. She couldn’t help it though, those animals had been in desperate need of help and tender care and had turned their large, glossy eyes onto her and she had been unable to turn away and leave them to their own devices.

That same innocence, framed by loneliness and a yearning for someone to understand had, just for a moment, been seen in Rogers’ baby blue eyes before vanishing into the mask that was Captain America.

Sharon was apprehensively aware that she might have just imprinted on Steve Rogers.

Which, meant, in essence, that Sharon was royally screwed.

Long after the interview was over and the TV was dominated by daytime soaps, Sharon was still sitting in her chair, lost in her thoughts. Finally, after a long moment, she shook her head and righted herself.

She was being ridiculous. Absolutely mental. Imprinting on a national icon? Jokes. It was just childhood admiration mixed in with the shock of seeing her childhood hero in real life.

It was a phase. It would pass.

Anyway, what were the odds that she’d even ever meet Steve Rogers?

If the universe was kind, then pretty slim.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was a bit of a mammoth to get through, if I'm being perfectly honest. It just kept growing longer and longer. I hope everyone enjoys and do please comment, I thrive on getting feedback.

Using the image of the cell phone conversation was an experiment of mine and I'm hoping to do such things in the future, particularly using social media accounts such as Instagram and Twitter. I want the story to feel as real world as possible and the real world loves sharing their lives on social media.

The quote from Steve's tombstone comes from Thomas Paine's The Crisis, and it also forms some of the inspiration for having the Winter Soldier as the title of the second Captain America film. 'Winter Soldier' is a play on the summer soldier and sunshine patriot that are mentioned in The Crisis. I thought it'd be a fun nugget to add to the story. The more you know.
I also hope people enjoyed my little aside about Grant Ward and Victoria's Secret Angels. I don't really watch Agents of SHIELD, but I figured I'd drop in a reference for fun.

Here is a picture from one of the comics that served as my main inspiration for the Captain America Memorial.
Wars May Be Fought with Weapons

Chapter Summary

But SHIELD, she hadn’t considered SHIELD.

Now that Natasha had put it out there Sharon felt stupid. Of course SHIELD, the man was a super-soldier and super-soldiers didn’t just retire to bumfuck nowhere.

Besides, Peggy had founded SHIELD. Sharon suspected that fact alone would be enough to get Steve Rogers to stay.

Peggy had always said Rogers had been a bit of a romantic. More of a bleeding heart it seemed like.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 12th, 2012

The Triskelion, Atrium

“Phil Coulson was more than just an agent or handler, hell, he was even more than my one good eye,” Nick Fury commended on from atop his podium. He was standing before the imposing titanium eagle at the heart of the atrium. It was typically believed that the eagle, that had once been the symbol of the SSR and then SHIELD’s calling card was due to freedom and good old American patriotism, but really it took its meaning from the Native Americans who had viewed the eagle as a way of looking at things in a new light. It was what all former SSR and present SHIELD agents were called to do. The world was an increasingly weird place to live, and a new way of viewing things was the only way to survive. Now more than ever. Just ask the aliens.

Beams of shattered sunlight filtered in from above the windowpane rafters. It was an unusually sunny day for this time of year.

Fury was speaking to a packed house. Every available agent, analyst, supervisor, handler, asset, STRIKE team member and even Secretary Pierce of the World Security Council was present to pay their final respects to a man everyone had admired (secretly or not).

Phil Coulson.

He hadn’t been Sharon’s S.O. but she had had her dealings with him (being friends with Romanoff had ensured that).

Coulson had easily been the most competent and efficient SHIELD agent Sharon had ever met (and that was saying something when you looked at her family background), and yet he had also easily been the most compassionate as well.

He got the job done, but he always put people first.
“Phil Coulson understood SHIELD more than anyone I have ever met, and every day in and out, his work embodied the ideals of the institution and all that we stand for,” Fury continued, standing tall and proud like a beacon guiding his wayward agents home as everyone listened attentively.

Sharon shifted in her seat, reaching up to tug her dress down where it had ridden up when she had crossed her legs (she was a lady after all). When her movement resulted in a snicker to her left she quickly and surreptitiously elbowed the mark in the gut.

“Oomph,” Antoine ‘Trip’ Triplett exclaimed as he eyed his cousin warily, his frown grew even more intense as he took in her sly little smirk. The vixen.

“Girl, that was uncalled for,” he hissed at her, behaving more like a six-year-old than the 27-year-old man and secret agent that he was. Family did that to each other.

Never one to be outdone (and particularly by a Carter) he pinched her side and watched with satisfaction as Sharon narrowly avoided jumping out of her chair like a panicky alley cat. From Sharon’s right, Bobbi Morse could be heard trying to suffocate her snort into a cough. If the shaking of her shoulders were anything to go by, it did not appear to be working.

Throwing a quick glance to the front to ensure Fury’s attention wasn’t on her (the man saw everything, Jesus Christ) Sharon turned fully to Trip ready to unleash her legendary Chinese burn on the man when a sharp voice quietly interrupted the escalating war.

“Children,” Melinda May spoke evenly and quietly which was even scarier than her yelling. She had been sitting in front of the pair and had turned her head to allow them to fully see her unimpressed face. Even just looking into her dark eyes for a moment was enough to chill both agents. In fact, torture interrogation right about now sounded warmer and friendlier than May’s hard stare.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Both agents whispered as they turned their attention back to the front as Fury finished up his eulogy.

“I know in this lifetime I will never meet a finer man than Coulson, nor a finer SHIELD agent. However, that is a task I leave to you, the best of all of us. May you go forth every day and be even a fraction of the agent Coulson was. Even then, we will succeed in making this world a safer place for all of us.”

Fury stepped back as every head turned towards the Wall of Valor, gleaming in the afternoon sun. A small curtain over the bottom right side of the wall was dropped and revealed the newest name to its roster.

**Phillip Coulson**

Sharon stood to attention with the rest of the atrium as a military salute was given. And then it was over.

Back to business as usual. Just another day at SHIELD.

Sharon was making her way through the sea of somberly dressed personnel when Trip’s hand reached out to wrap around her wrist.

“I’ve got to go check in with Garrett, we still on for lunch this week?” Even with her heels on Trip was still several inches taller than her. His normally beaming face was stoic for the occasion but Sharon saw a hint of a smile peeking out from his pearly whites. Out of all her cousins from the Commando side of the family (and boy were there a lot of them), her favorite had always been
Trip.

They had always clicked, now even more so with the two belonging to SHIELD. Not that Commando legacies hadn’t found their way into the spy and intelligence business. There were legacies all over the place, really, from CIA, FBI, Homeland Security, DOD, MI6, Secret Service, NASA, Army Rangers, Marines, Seals, the UN, and the DGSE.

What? When your grandfather fought alongside Captain America you had to do your best to keep up.

Speaking of the Captain he had been absent from the memorial service.

A shame, really, because Coulson had always been his number one fan. He had had cards and everything.

Sharon shook her head from the distracting thoughts (they were occurring more frequently than she liked) and smiled up at her cousin.

“Of course, I’m picking you’re paying. Just like always. I still can’t believe you’re on Garrett’s service now. The man is a hard-ass, and last I heard he wasn’t quite right in the head.”

Sharon did the universal symbol for ‘batshit crazy’ as Trip raised an eyebrow unimpressed.

“That’s my S.O. you’re talking about.” Try as he might though he couldn’t stop his mouth from quirking up in amusement as he joked with his cousin. It was another thing Sharon loved about Trip: the man was absolute sunshine personified. When working in this field, sunshine was needed.

“Hey, I’m just trying to prepare you for when he comes at you with a machete. He’ll do it. Just ask Ward. I hear he’s still scared of the Amazon for that reason.”

“Hardy-har-har. You’re hysterical, you know that? You should do standup.”

“Well if I did that who would continue to beat you on the shooting range? Can’t have you getting cocky.”

Trip clutched his chest and staggered back a step as if having a heart attack.

“Ooh, girl, you wound me! The betrayal, it’s just too much to live with.” He continued teetering backward until unfortunately, he bumped hard into the last person you wanted to do that to: Victoria Hand.

Sharon had to stifle her giggles into her hands as the woman turned her infamous ‘ice queen’ stare onto her cousin. Sharon ducked behind his large body to hide from the brunt of the coldness as Trip stammered out an apology to the agent. When she had fully reduced him to a blabbering fool she finally took her leave of the two with her eyes cast downward and her nose upturned, almost as if she had smelled something unpleasant.

“Agent Thirteen, Agent Triplett,” she bitingly departed as the two stood frozen in her wake.

Sharon was still tittering when Trip turned back to her, hands on his hips and eyebrows furrowed.

“Wow, Trip, you’re quite the menace. Perhaps you and Garrett are meant for each other.”

“Quiet you,” he poked her in her side again (damn him, he knew all her weak spots) as she squeaked and glared.
“Triplett!” Garrett’s booming voice reached them easily from across the atrium, standing at his side was his favorite protégé Grant Ward. Trip gave him the ‘one minute’ signal before turning back to Sharon.

“Well, I’m off to do secret spy stuff. You stay out of trouble now.” He furtively glanced around, seeing that no one was paying attention to the pair, before leaning in to press a kiss to her cheek.

“See you later Share-Bear.” He then, because he was an absolute child, blew a raspberry and guffawed loudly as Sharon wiggled out of his grasp and shoved him towards Garrett.

“Get out of here,” she yelled at him, fighting to keep her own grin off her face as he saluted her and headed over to the surly pair of agents. Her smile stayed until her brown eyes fell upon the Wall of Valor only a few feet away from her. She walked towards it, her heels quietly clicking on the tile.

Carved out of the whitest marble, the Wall of Valor was the highest regard S.H.I.E.L.D could provide to its fallen agents. There were more than a 100 names upon the wall and Sharon turned her attention to its newest addition.

The inscription still felt warm to the touch as she traced her fingers carefully over every letter. She had done this to every other agent upon the wall once upon a time; it was her own way of saying thank you.

Besides the addition of Coulson’s name, there was something else different about the wall. A name that had been upon it since its inception in the 1950’s was now missing. Sharon’s fingertips moved to the empty space that had once housed Steve Rogers’ name.

He and Bucky Barnes had been the first names added to the wall on Peggy’s orders. Now Bucky was all alone, the name to his right erased from the marble as if it had never been there at all.

Sharon stood there for a few moments longer before a flash of red hair caught her eye.

Natasha.

Moving as quickly as she could in four inch heels, Sharon maneuvered her way through the trickle of agents still standing in the atrium and with a few carefully placed elbow jabs and ‘excuse me’ she came upon her friend.

Natasha was standing to the side quietly speaking with Maria Hill and with how blasé the pair looked they could be speaking of something as innocuous as the weather. It had been three months since she had last seen Natasha in person, various missions and the events in New York had been enough to keep the two out of reach.

At first glance, Natasha appeared as cool and calm as always. Her curled bob was a vibrant shade of red, her lipstick just as unmistakable and eye catching. Her black dress was tight and well fitted to her petite body that showed off her toned muscles that could easily kill a man if she felt like it.

Nothing was out of place.

If one encountered her in the street in this moment he would never think she had just attended the memorial service of the man who had never once doubted or given up on her.

Sharon was still locked out from reading the classified documents over the helicarrier attack but she knew enough.

She knew that Natasha had encountered both Barton and the Hulk.
To have done that and still be standing…that was something else entirely.

“Nat,” Sharon breathed out as the redhead turned towards her. Her face was imperceptible for a mere moment, something flashed in her green eyes, and then it was gone. Natasha took a relaxed stance as she nodded to Hill in farewell. Her eyes lit up in amusement and the corner of her mouth twisted up as she took in the sight of her friend.

“Well, if it isn’t the dumb blonde.” Her raspy voice gave nothing away as Sharon internally raised an eyebrow. Usually, Nat would have to be fine if they were falling into the habit so quickly, but after the hellish last few weeks she had been through Sharon wasn’t buying it. The problem would be getting Nat to ever confess to anything. She wasn’t one of SHIELD’s best because she was pretty. So Sharon played along as they danced the dance they had been doing for years.

“What’s up, you soulless ginger?”

“Not much, just enjoying the day.” This was said with a sardonic smile as Sharon silently kicked herself. Great question Sharon, with this display you might as well ship yourself back to the Academy. Rookie.

As Sharon looked for even footing, Nat must have decided to put her out of her misery by lightly suggesting, “I’m hungry, want to blow this popsicle stand?”

Sharon nodded with a genuine smile, “I know the perfect place.”

Natasha theatrically sighed as the two fell into step together, heading towards the parking garage.

“Still on a quest for the World’s Greatest Burger?”

“Always. It’s a never-ending mission, Nat; it could take me my whole lifetime.”

“Lucky me.”

The two took the elevator down to the parking garage and Natasha strode right past Sharon’s sedan leaving the other agent no choice but to follow her as they came upon Natasha’s pride and glory, her SHIELD issued Corvette Stingray.

Sometimes Sharon hated being a Level 6 agent.

“You going to stop drooling any time this century and get in the car?” Nat called out from the front seat as Sharon shook herself from her car envy and climbed into the passenger. With a roar of the engine, the sleek automobile came to life and Natasha wasted no time in leaving the Triskelion behind.

Clutching her leather seat tightly Sharon could only squeak out directions to the Fainting Goat as Nat took sharp turns, royally bypassed the speed limit and even pulled a very smooth, very illegal U-turn.

Sharon’s life flashed before her eyes and she bid goodbye to the imaginary three kids she always saw herself having, as by some miracle, they upon the restaurant still intact.

At least mostly.

Sharon was pretty sure her soul had fled from her body somewhere on 15th Street.

After pulling off an immaculate parallel parking maneuver the two spies found themselves seated
cozily in the dark interior of the Goat; their table up against a brick column, given the two at least an air of privacy.

Sharon fought for several long minutes to convince Natasha to try the house burger but in the end Nat ordered the Brick Chicken just to spite her. After their menus were cleared and their waiter, easily besotted by Nat, finally left the two in peace, an easy and friendly silence fell upon the pair.

The silence lasted all of a minute before Nat broke it.

“So,” she began, looking up and blowing her straw cover at Sharon, hitting her right between her eyes, “When are you going to ask?”

“Ask what?” Sharon naively batted her eyes remembering Aunt Peggy’s word, *always go for innocence, it makes them think you’re a lamb rather than a lion. Only when you have fooled them, then you pounce like the lioness you are.*

The Red Room must have been lacking in tact as Nat saw right through her and aimed a kick at her ankles, chuckling as Sharon yelped.

“I can see all the questions in your pretty brown eyes, so just ask.”

“You think I’m pretty?”

This time Sharon was able to dodge Nat’s foot.

“Thirteen.”

“Widow.”

“Sharon.”

“Natasha.”

“Barbie.”

“Short stuff.”

Truly the name calling could have gone on forever, that’s just the kind of friendship the pair had.

Silence reigned for a moment as the two sized each other up, but after a moment snorts of laughter and toothy grins took up their space as the two relaxed into their chairs.

It was at the moment that their food arrived and Sharon eagerly bit into her burger, chewing obnoxiously so Nat could fully understand the grievous mistake she had made in ordering chicken. Honestly, it’s like she just did these things to hurt Sharon on the inside.

“My chicken’s delicious,” Nat remarked as she daintily cut and chewed her monstrosity. It’s like she knew what Sharon had been thinking. The blonde wouldn’t put it past the former Russian spy.

“It looks dry to me,” Sharon quipped as juice from her own burger ran down her chin. She reluctantly lowered the masterpiece to wipe her mouth; she did have manners after all. Her straight posture in the chair was enough to show that.

Nat rolled her eyes at her friend and continued eating her chicken. It wasn’t until the plates were empty and picked up from the table and another round of wine heading their way that Nat brought up their previous subject.
“You can ask you know, I can’t promise I’ll answer anything, but I won’t stop you from asking.”

Sharon blinked as she sipped at her wine, red and staining her lips, before lowering the glass and taking in the sight of her friend.

Natasha had been ‘on’ throughout their whole lunch and even with her invitation, it seemed unlikely that she would crack at all under Sharon’s questioning.

Better to step carefully.

So many things to ask, so many things she was dying to know. The question was, where to begin?

“How’s Barton?” she asked gently and internally grinned at the sight of a taken off guard Natasha. It was nice when Sharon could surprise her.

Natasha blinked before her face retained its neutral façade. She shrugged and looked over Sharon’s shoulder.

“He was fine last time I saw him.” She reached up and fiddled with the diamond necklace she only ever wore in civilian clothing. Even in this light, Sharon could make out the design of the arrow as Natasha ran her fingers over it soothingly.

Whatever Nat and Barton had was…hard to make any sense of really. Everyone knew their story: he had been ordered to take her out but had made a different call and had brought her into the fold at SHIELD. Her first few months at the agency and he had been the only person she willingly spoke to.

She trained with him, they went on missions together, and they even commanded STRIKE Team Delta together.

In essence, they were the Dream Team.

And what they did in their personal lives…well, it was SHIELD’s worst kept secret that they were together in some capacity. However, they defined that that was between them. But too many times had their vacation days lined up in sync for it to be mere coincidence. Their fierce protectiveness of each other was legendary within SHIELD as well. And god help people like Loki who tried to use one against the other.

Something was going on there.

In all the years Sharon had called Natasha a friend, the redhead had never fessed up to the depth of her feelings for the archer. But she had seen the two together, she’d have to be blind not to notice the unspoken connection between the two.

Whatever they had went far past romance, the two would die for one another.

So Sharon didn’t quite know what they were, but she teased and Nat only ever smirked and made a lewd comment in return.

Now, Nat was still her collected self, but her eyes were distant as she regarded Sharon.

“He taking some time off?”

He hadn’t been present at the memorial service and he had been working under Coulson for more than fifteen years. However, with the wild ride his mind had been on Sharon couldn’t blame the
guy for staying away.

How do you look your colleagues in the eye when you were responsible for killing their peers and friends?

Natasha nodded nonchalantly as she took a sip from her wine glass.

“He’s not up for playing soldier right now. He’s off clearing his head.”

“And you’re not joining him?”

Natasha flashed her a satirical smile that was sharp around the edges.

“He’s a big boy, he can take care of himself.”

“And what about you?”

“What about me?” Natasha was quick to quip back, her smile teetering onto sharp rather than playful. Warning bells beeper in the back of Sharon’s head, but she was undeterred. She would just have to take a different path, is all.

“I heard about the Hulk,” she said softly, not to comfort Natasha because if anyone was a lion between the two it was Natasha, but because she genuinely meant it. She wouldn’t want to go against the green giant. Banner may be a genius, and from all she heard, a soft spoken man in the flesh, but when he went green, all bets were off.

“You’ve seem to have heard a lot for only being a Level 6. You finally meddling like I’ve always wanted you to?”

“A girl hears things,“ Sharon countered, not to lose focus. It was one of Natasha’s talents to speak in circles to either get her mark distracted enough to spill a detail that the redhead needed.

“So you went up against him, huh?” she asked and was only rewarded with an effaced shrug. “I hear he’s quite the opponent.”

“He’s something else, that’s for sure,” Natasha intoned drolly as she swished her wine glass and watched the ripples she created.

“Were you ever scared?” Sharon asked not really expecting an honest answer, but sometimes Natasha had to be hit with the brunt of a friend’s concern to truly understand that the friend cared at all. She and Sharon had been having this conversation for years to varying degrees of success.

“Hardly. The guy’s a teddy bear on the inside, you just have to get past the indomitable rage.”

In that moment Sharon knew that all she’d be getting out of Natasha. No matter how hard she’d pushed, Natasha would just remain as unmoving as steel in return. It didn’t matter that Sharon was only coming from a place of concern, if Natasha didn’t want it then there was no way to give it to her.

Sharon understood and backed off even if it made her feel a bit like a shitty friend to do so.

Nat would share in her own time.

Sharon flicked her napkin at the spy as a truce and the warm smile she was greeted with in return was enough to tell her that her pushing hadn’t been taken as an offense. As the two relaxed around each other Natasha spoke again,
“You know, of all the ways I saw this conversation going you have yet to ask the question I thought you’d ask first.”

Sharon quirked an eyebrow, genuinely confused.

“And that would be?”

“Rogers.”

Sharon’s carefree demeanor shifted to rapt attention as her brown eyes flicked up to Natasha, who looked like a cat who had caught the canary as she took in Sharon’s subtle change.

“I haven’t forgotten about your…connection to the good Captain.” Natasha continued as she regarded her painted nails.

“I thought you’d be curious about him.”

Oh, how the tables turn. Sharon supposed she deserved this.

Sharon shrugged and tugged an unruly strand of hair behind her ear. She had been dying her hair platinum for the past year and she was now ready for it to return to its natural honey color. Hell, she might even grow it out. There was nothing more infuriating than having hair too short to put into a ponytail.

“He’s just a man,” Sharon casually replied after a moment.

“Is he really? Wasn’t he your hero growing up? Was your love just as pure and true as Coulson’s?”

“Well, no one could compete with Coulson. And no…I didn’t grow up admiring Captain America. I admired Steve Rogers.”

“Is there a difference?” Natasha categorically asked.

“There used to be, I guess you’d be a better judge of that than me.” She looked to Natasha who shrugged.

“C’mon Nat, what’s he like?” As always, Sharon’s curiosity couldn’t be quenched. She had been a history major for a reason. She always wanted to know things. A good and bad thing given their field of espionage.

“He’s stoic, a man of little words, a bit too straight laced for me, and he didn’t like Stark.”

“Does anyone like Stark?” she had read the tabloids; Tony Stark was a walking human disaster. She didn’t know how Pepper Potts put up with that hurricane of self-destruction. And boy, had Natasha had stories when she had come back from her stint as Stark’s PA earlier in the year.

“He’s not too bad, at least when he isn’t dying of pallidum poisoning and generally being an ass-hat.”

“Back to Rogers,”

“I don’t know what stories you were fed as a wee little one, but I don’t know if you’d recognize that man if you met him in person.”

Sharon sat back in her chair and nodded. It made sense. The man had gone down in the ice and had woken up in a brave new world. How could he ever be the same?
“He’s been quiet since his interview two days ago, has he gone to ground?” Sharon asked as Natasha nodded.

“Fury has him set up at the Retreat to give him a few weeks to clear his head, figure out what he wants to do next.”

“What does Fury want him to do?”

Natasha’s smile was near feral as she grinned up at Sharon, “I love how quick your mind is.”

“What does Fury want Nat?”

“What do you think? He wants him to be in SHIELD.”

Sharon blinked. In all the times she had thought about Steve Roger’s future ever since she knew he was alive she hadn’t thought of that.


But SHIELD, she hadn’t considered SHIELD.

Now that Natasha had put it out there Sharon felt stupid. Of course SHIELD, the man was a super-soldier and super-soldiers didn’t just retire to bumfuck nowhere.

Besides, Peggy had founded SHIELD. Sharon suspected that fact alone would be enough to get Steve Rogers to stay.

Peggy had always said Rogers had been a bit of a romantic. More of a bleeding heart it seemed like.

“You think he will?”

“I don’t think he has much else going for him.” Nat, as usual, was blunt in her honesty.

Steve Rogers, Captain America, an agent of SHIELD.

God help all of them.

Sharon’s life seemed destined to become even more interesting.

Chapter End Notes

Happy belated Fourth of July! With the holiday passing, it only seemed appropriate to post a chapter! Hope everyone enjoys. Please keep the comments coming! They're my fuel to keep working.
Chapter Summary

The sky was blue, aliens existed and yielded magical hammers, and Sharon would never crack under interrogation.

SHIELD…they made people into iron fortresses.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 15th, 2012

Washington, D.C.

If Sharon were president the one thing she would ban would be running as an acceptable form of cardio. Yes, she understood it was healthy, but at what cost?

She was stumbling into her apartment after a grueling seven mile run in the D.C. heat. Summer was well and truly here. No chance of White Walkers in the Sixth Circle of hell that was Washington, D.C. in late spring.

A lifetime of having lived in the region still couldn’t prepare Sharon for the intensity of the humidity that the weather could bring about.

Throwing her shoes histrionically across the room so they landed in a pathetic pile near the couch, she noisily stomped into the kitchen. Two glasses of ice cold water later, excessive fanning, and batting away at sweaty and obstructive bangs, Sharon was finally feeling the semblances of being a person and not an overheated monstrosity.

Rotating her neck and hearing the satisfied clicks of air bubbles she felt her body loosen as her heartbeat lowered itself to an acceptable beat.

Now that she was cool, calm and collected, there was only one thing Sharon wanted to do.

Dance.

With a few quick swipes and taps of her fingers, she had music blaring from her personal iPhone.

‘I need a love doctor ahhh aah uu yeah uuu yeah, I need a love doctor ahhh aah uuu yeah. Oh, girl, don’t make me last to know.’

What better way to end a workout than a one-woman dance party?

Bouncing around with reckless abandonment around her apartment, Sharon sashayed and twirled to the beat, mouthing along to the words as she leaped off her couch and slid fantastically across the wooden floors.
Her poor neighbors below.

She was in the middle of a sick air guitar move when her phone beeped with an incoming text. Keeping her hips in time to the joyful tempo of the music, Sharon pulled out her personal iPhone and saw the incoming text.

She burst out laughing at the image of Catherine’s fiancée Jessie posing ridiculously in a fedora as the pair strolled through a farmer’s market. His cerulean eyes smoldered with a hint of a dimple blooming in his cheek. Ever since Catherine had accused the third year Cornell medical student that he was behind the times for not understanding the intricacies of Gangnam Style, Jessie had been valiantly trying to prove that he was indeed 25, and not a 52-year-old trapped in a decidedly smoking hot host body.

So there was the fedora, and the subtle droppings of slang such as “Swag,” “Legit,” and “Let’s bounce” into conversations, as well as the tendency to bellow “Hunger Games!” whenever faced with a tough decision.

Let it not be said that when Jessie Stromberg went all in, he went all in.

With a quick swipe of her finger Facetime was up and running and within seconds Catherine Reyes’ smiling face was filling up Sharon’s screen.

“Share-Bear!” Her oldest friend alive exclaimed jubilantly, the image was shaky as it was obvious that Catherine was strolling the stalls of the market, Jessie’s fedora bobbing loyally behind in the background.

“Kit-Kat! What’s crackalackin senorita?”
The best thing about talking to your best friend, you had absolute permission to be as nonsensical as possible and no one could blame you. Inside jokes were just par the course.

“The world is coming to an end,” Catherine proclaimed dramatically, her usual no-nonsense attitude that helped her along in law school was replaced with her natural theatrical nature (She had been in all four years of high school theater productions) as her brown eyes lit up with mischief.

“What is it this time? You couldn’t find organically sourced quinoa?”

It was no secret, Catherine Reyes, with all her worldliness, was a food snob, along with being a vegan. Heaven helped the man who ever offered her processed food again.

“Stromberg and I are on the brink of ruin. I may love him, but I am this close to cutting him loose. He did something truly unforgivable.”

Sharon vociferously gasped playing her part in this narrative.

“What did he do this time?”

Jessie squawked outrageously as he pushed his beautiful face into the camera to glare Sharon down with his mesmerizing gaze. The thing about Jessie was that he was preposterously good looking. So Sharon counterbalanced that by being as demeaning as possible. Jessie was just as intelligent as he was stunning, but it was so much more fun to reduce him to his washboard abs and Chris Pine like eyes.

“Who said I did anything?!? It’s Reyes’ and her outlandish expectations.”

Catherine huffed and shouldered her fiancée as she turned the phone towards her, cropping Jessie out of view.

“I don’t think it’s too much to expect the man I love most in the world to be able to buy me a yam when I ask for it. But did he bring me a yam? No, he brought me a sweet potato.”

“I told you, Woman, they look the same!”

“Hardly, dearest. Is your eyesight going? Should I trust you to one day perform surgeries on people? It’s a lawsuit in the making. I may have to prosecute you.”

Sharon snorted as she watched the happy couple quip back and forth for her entertainment,

“You want to work in the Office of Legal Affair for the UN, Kit-Kat,” Sharon replied, “I really doubt Jessie’s misdemeanor is enough to try him in front of the Security Council.”

Catherine was in her final year of law school at Columbia and had her eyes set on the UN to play with the big boys. If her current internship at the aforementioned office was anything to go by, then Catherine was well on her way to world domination.

Sharon was simultaneously proud as she was terrified.

She had had a front-row seat of Catherine at Model UN. That girl was vicious.

“Boo, and I so like the bad boy types.” Catherine batted her eyes at Jessie as he rolled his own and slipped his arm around her shoulder pulling her securely into his side as the two squished their faces together to make funny faces at Sharon.

After several seconds of impressive muscle contortions, Catherine asked the question she had been
dying to ask for days,

“So, hear anything about Captain America?” Her question was innocent, but Catherine Reyes was far from innocent.

“Yeah, have you seen the man who’s strong, and brave and here to save the American Way?” Jessie cheekily saluted her as Sharon rolled her eyes.

“Nice segue, you two, real smooth. I have not seen him. I have it on good authority that he is taking a long overdue vacation.”

“God, can you believe the world we live in? Men coming back from the dead and aliens dropping out of the sky. Half of New York is still a wreck!” Catherine exclaimed as she looked over rows of strawberries. She held up a bunch, weighing it in her hands before deeming it acceptable and paying the man behind the barrier.

“Yeah, well, Brave New World, and all that. I think this is about to become our new normal.”

“I shudder to think what could come next.”

“Well, the Avengers will be there to stop it, along with SHIELD.”

“So you’re our knight in shining armor Share?” Jessie joked as Catherine’s hand fed him one of the strawberries and he smiled juicily around the fruit morsel. It really was unfair how hot he was.

“Always, babe, always. Well, look, lovebirds, as much as I love technologically third wheeling your weird fruit foreplay, I’ve got to run. We still on for our Skype date on Wednesday?”

“We’ll be there! Love you lots, bug!”

“You too, caterpillar. You kids have fun, but keep it real, keep it clean, keep it real clean.”

The only answer she received was two tongues sticking out at her before the screen blacked out.

God. Those two were nauseatingly in love. It was sickening. Sharon may be secretly jealous, but she’d never reveal it, and she had gone through torture training, so it was just a fact of life that she’d go to the grave with that secret.

The sky was blue, aliens existed and yielded magical hammers, and Sharon would never crack under interrogation.

SHIELD…they made people into iron fortresses.

Sharon set her phone down and as she did so she caught a whiff of her own body scent which was staggeringly pungent in the aftermath of her run.

A shower was in order then.

But first, more dancing.


May 20th, 2012
It was well past midnight when Sharon finally found herself on the doorstep of her own apartment.

What had begun as a simple and benign lunch date with Trip had transformed into lunch, and then one game of pool into three games of pool, into hustling the entire bar of occupants into pool, then into a somewhat boisterous disagreement with a belligerent loser, then into an uproarious bar fight with said loser and all bar occupants, which had resulted in a trip to SHIELD Medical along with bruised knuckles and a fractured ring finger. She was better off than Trip though, with his outstanding black eye and concussion.

All in all, it had been a rather average day.

Sharon flexed her hand tiredly and gave a mild wince at the dull stab of pain that radiated from her palm.

“Tylenol,” she whispered to herself as she unlocked her front door and staggered wearily into the darkened abode, “I need Tylenol.”

She dropped her purse onto the side table and listened to the jingle of her keys as she dropped them into the porcelain decorative bowl her mother insisted she buy. It was only due to the numerous times she had trod through her apartment that she could maneuver down the hallway without bumping into walls or shoes scattered around the floor.

As she was coming upon the living room that she suddenly froze. Her ears strained into the silence as she mutely pressed herself into the wall, regulating her breathing and taking in deep, calming breaths.

There was someone in her apartment.

Silently her right hand slipped to the waistband of her jeans and with calculated movements, she removed her Glock 19 and brought it up to eye level. She clicked off the safety and lowered the gun as she tilted her towards the living room, listening for any noise that could be of use.

The air was unnaturally still and there was no disruption to give anything away. It seemed the two would be locked in a game of chicken until someone broke first.

Sharon understood patience and staying the course, but someone was in her territory and there was no way she was hiding out in the hallway until they came hunting.

Quickly going over the mental map of her living room, categorizing furniture and windows, she made a game plan, and with one final deep breath, she sprang into action. She jolted herself into the living room and threw herself down to the wooden floor, rolling across the aged wood with ease. She landed on her feet in a tight crouch in front of the couch and aimed the gun towards the grey divan.

In the dark she could make out a black shape that was, for lack of a better word, lounging across the sofa. The confusion she felt was pushed away as adrenaline began seeping into her pores and she tightened her grip on the pistol.

A favorite saying of Fury’s flashed across her brain, “Sometimes it’s better to shoot first and ask questions later. You can’t ask questions if you’re dead.”
Her finger inched towards the trigger as the shadow continued lounging as an amused voice broke through the darkness.

“Is that any way to treat family, Share-Bear?”

Sharon instantly relaxed as the shape moved and with a click the room was flooded with the light of Sharon’s second favorite lamp that she had found in a daylong garage sale hunting excursion with her mother.

The black shape, in all its annoyingly smug glory was none other than Sharon’s cousin, Greer Martin. Blonde, blue-eyed, with full lips pulled up into a smirk to rival Natasha, Greer was a right pain in Sharon’s ass, but she loved her anyway. She was spread out across the couch and hadn’t even bothered to take off her combat boots as she unrepentantly rested her feet on one of Sharon’s numerous throw pillows.

The barbarian.

Of all her extended blood relatives, (besides Peggy of course) Greer was unquestionably Sharon’s favorite. Looking more like sisters than cousins, and with little more than a year separating them, the two girls had grown up thicker than thieves and the mischief they had gotten up to had been just short of legendary.

While Sharon had followed Peggy’s footsteps towards SHIELD after graduating from Georgetown, Greer had graduated top of her class at Dartmouth and had fast-tracked her way right into the CIA.

Of all the various progenies of the Margaret and Michael Carter family trees, it was only Sharon and Greer who had followed in the spies’ footsteps.

Peggy’s daughter Jill had found success as Ambassador to the UK; Sharon’s father, Harrison, was a professor of literature at Georgetown, and Greer’s mother, Judy, was a pioneering neurosurgeon.

Let it be known that Carters very rarely failed at anything they did.

Yet it was Sharon and Greer who went into espionage and the high-risk career of trying to save the world from itself on a regular basis.

Still. That didn’t give her cousin any right to break and enter into her sanctuary.

“Greer,” Sharon greeted dryly as she rose from her crouch, “You know I’ve told you a hundred times to use the front door. You know, like a civilized person.”

Greer scoffed as she crossed her legs and rubbed her still shoed feet over Sharon’s throw pillow.

Now she was just doing it on purpose.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“Remind me to never introduce you to Natasha Romanoff,” Sharon grumbled as she none so gently pushed Greer’s feet off the couch and plopped down noisily next to her cousin. She grabbed her squished throw pillow and after punching some life back into it, she settled it behind her and leaned back to regard Greer fully.

She loved it when the family got together.

“Oh, please, we met long ago,” Greer responded gleefully, her smile absolutely wicked as a cold
chill settled over Sharon.

Nat and Greer interacting with one another?

Yikes.

Sharon groaned in response and sunk further down into the couch as her cousin’s grin amplified. God, she wished she had some alcohol right now.

“Do I even want to know how you two know each other?”

“ Nope.” Greer popped the ‘p’ as she reached out and toed Sharon’s thigh as the SHIELD agent lightly batted her away.

“Hopefully your friendship isn’t at my expense.”

“But it makes for some great text threads.”

Wonderful.

Sharon dropped her head to the back of the couch and turned to the side to observe her cousin.

She looked to be in working order, no signs of any external injuries, bright eyes and no bags beneath them, she had sprawled easily with no signs of fatigue or stiffness.

It looks like wherever she had been gallivanting off to for the past month hadn’t hit back too hard.

“Just get back in from wherever you were?”

“Yesterday. I was in Mozambique. I’d tell you about it, but it’s-“

“Classified,” the two blondes finished together as Sharon weakly nodded and chuckled.

It was always nice to have someone not to talk about work with.

“Everything go according to plan?”

“For the most part.”

“You make people pay?”

“Better yet, I made them cry.”

“Good girl.”

The two exchanged grins as Greer’s blue eyes began raking over Sharon, evidently taking the same inventory of her cousin that Sharon had completed only moments before. They moved to her hand and stopped as she reached out and held up Sharon’s hand for consideration. She turned over Sharon’s palm and stopped when she saw the majority of the minimal damage was targeted at Sharon’s knuckles. She lowered her hand and raised an eyebrow as she regarded Sharon evenly.

“Get into a punching match at SHIELD?”

“Even better, I went out with Trip.”

Greer snorted as she turned her body fully towards Sharon.
“Suddenly, everything makes sense. Now, what trouble did that boy get up to because clearly, he needed saving of some sort.”

Sharon relayed the sordid tale as Greer watched on with fascination. By the end, she was clutching her sides from laughing so hard and wiping stray tears from her eyes.

“He did not try to karate chop his way through a gang of bikers?!?”

“If I’m lying, I’m dying. God’s honest truth. You should have heard him. He was screaming like a little girl.”

The two Carter descendants once more burst out into laughter and it took several minutes to reign the two back in. It was silent for a moment or two before Greer’s eyes flashed playfully.

“So, how is our dear Triplett? Is he single by any chance? Having you ever thought of trying to tap that beautiful chocolate ass?”

“Greer!” Sharon proclaimed wondering if her best course of action would be to stick her fingers in her ears and go ‘lalalala, I can’t hear you.’

“What? Don’t tell me you forget about that massive torch you carried for him during high school? You hacked the Atlanta Hawks internal database in order to secure him season passes to their home games.”

Sharon blushed. That hadn’t been her proudest moment. Most girls when they had schoolyard crushes on boys would flirt, bat their eyes, and stroke their arms. Sharon had committed felonies.

Her mother had not been pleased. Peggy had also scoffed at her attempts to woo Gabe Jones’ grandson but had taken her aside to secretly express her admiration for Sharon’s ingenuity.

In the end Trip never saw her as more than an annoyingly endearing cousin in the sea of Legacies. Sharon had licked her wounds and then went on to date the senior valedictorian.

Sharon felt the flush of her cheeks and rolled her eyes as Greer cajoled from next to her and knocked her shoulder.

God, she could use some wine like yesterday.

“I was fifteen. He had a Mustang,” she said as if that explained everything. And really, it did.

Greer propped her head up in the palm of her hand as she nodded reminiscently and absentmindedly licked her lips.

“Ohh, I remember. I let him get to third base in that Mustang.”

Well, wasn’t that just typical.

“And now my childhood is ruined, thanks, Greer.”

“Anything for you, Share.”

Sharon elbowed her in the side as Greer shoved her to the farther side of the couch. A minute standoff and the two were ready to relax and sprawl across the couch catching up on family drama and gossip as well as cryptically talking shop. Greer was curious about the Avengers but expressed little to no interest in Steve Rogers and Sharon didn’t volunteer any information.
Conversation lulled for a moment before Greer asked with forced nonchalance, “So how’s Old Woman Carter?”

Greer and Peggy had never been remarkably close. As both were two badass women who kicked butt and took names, there was respect, but they had never been close the way Sharon was to Peggy.

Sharon lightly shrugged. She had seen Peggy just the day before for an hour. It had been a good day, but she had started fading at the end and Sharon had left before it could get worse.

“She’s okay, she has her good and bad days. But she’s holding up.”

“It’d take a lot to kill her.”

Sharon made a noise of agreement as Greer rested her eyes on her.

“She have much to say about Rogers’ rise from the grave?”

Sharon bristled uncomfortably. Peggy’s feelings for Rogers were…common knowledge to say the least. Everyone had always acted like they knew the full extent of that relationship due to what they had read in the history books and remarks Howard Stark had once made to a room of reporters while tipsy back in the ’70s.

What had always bothered Sharon was the fact that such bystanders had always felt entitled to be able to feel Peggy’s pain because Captain America was an American pantheon. The truth of the matter was, it was no one’s business except Peggy’s, and now Rogers’, about what had happened in their short-lived love affair.

The rest of the world had no right to that knowledge.

“What makes you think she’d share it with me if she had?”

Greer’s eyes narrowed disbelievingly as Sharon curled into herself.

“Please. She likes you more than her own grandchildren.”

Sharon winced. Peggy’s relationship with her family had always been…complicated, to say the least. While Uncle Daniel had always been Peggy’s most staunch supporter and even her Deputy Director, her daughter Jill had resented having to share Peggy with the rest of the world and that resentment carried onto her children.

Now that Peggy was sick, things were better. But it had taken years for reconciliation to occur and Daniel hadn’t even been alive to see it.

“That’s not…entirely true. Besides, I was all she had for a while.”

“Save me the pity party, Peggy always knew what she was doing,” Greer’s voice was crisp as Sharon sighed and nodded.

A stifling silence pressed upon them for a moment before Greer’s expression softened and she poked Sharon in the side, giggling when Sharon jerked forward.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve been there for her. It’s been good for you too.”

Sharon shrugged, neither agreeing to nor denying Greer’s statement. Greer settled back into the couch and picked up Sharon’s remote.
“You get Netflix on this thing?”

Sharon huffed a laugh and nodded as the screen came to life.

“Fantastic. We’re watching Friends.”

Sharon acquiesced and soon they were in the middle of Season Four. It was when the third episode was beginning that Sharon nudged Greer softly.

“I’m glad you made it back safe, Greer.”

“Thanks, Share-Bear. Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

I know it's been forever but I was finally able to work through this chapter. If it feels a bit incomplete or lacking, that's because in a way it is. It's half of a chapter, the second half coming shortly (definitely shorter than it took to complete this one).

The main thing I am trying to achieve with these two chapters is setting Sharon apart from everyone else at SHIELD. She's different than Natasha, Clint, Fury, Steve and Maria. She didn't join SHIELD out of desperation, or anger, or because she owes the world a debt. She joined SHIELD because she believes in it. That means SHIELD doesn't consumer her the way it does the others. She has a life outside of SHIELD. She has family, friends, hobbies and interests. She's the type of person who leaves the job at work at the end of the day. She's driven of course, but she is normal. Hopefully that comes across.

Character introductions!

Catherine Reyes:
Jessie Stromberg:

Greer Martin:
Please, please, please review! Thank you to everyone who has. You guys are incredible!
Welcome to Level 7, We Have Cars

Chapter Summary

This had was the moment she had been waiting for. With every promotion a SHIELD agent received a...gift of sorts. Level 1 was a SHIELD phone, Level 2 a DNA imprinted glock, Level 4 an apartment, Level 6 an all access tour of the White House, and Level 7...7’s got cars.

Oh yeah.

Chapter Notes

Hi guys! I am so sorry for the very long absence. School just got very busy and I lost motivation, but I'm back and hoping to update much more frequently. I hope I haven't lost all my former supporters and I hope you'll all stick it out with me.

More notes at the bottom! Be sure to look at pics of new characters and more!

Happy Reading :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

June 26th, 2012

The Triskelion, Shooting Range


Four down, four to go, Sharon thought as she fired at the moving robotic and heavily armed drones jutting around the shooting range. Nasty little buggers. A flash of light caught her attention and a quick peek down at her chest confirmed the theory that a laser beam had found a new home...right above her heart. She threw herself down into a roll just before an explosion went off right where she had been standing.

Springing easily to her feet, she ducked down below a metal barrier just as one drone flew above. It paused, hovering in the air like the menace it was before continuing on as it waited for to make her move.

“Try out the new drones Quentin said, it will be fun Quentin said,” Sharon muttered to herself as she reloaded her Glock and surveyed the terrain, “There’s nothing fun about this, Quentin!”

She was test driving an experimental drone army that most likely was the demented brainchild of FitzSimmons. Those two never showed any mercy to field agents. Even worse than flying deathtraps that wanted nothing more than to turn you into smithereens, were flying death traps that
were learning as they attacked.

Meaning they had taken into account everything Sharon had done and now knew her go-to moves and ways to stop her. So her taking down four with her gun? Not happening again. Testing her theory, she jumped up and shot at the nearest drone, her heart sinking as the gun deflected off the strongest part of its armor.

She was so screwed.

She ducked back down, ignoring the blast two feet to her left as she regrouped and came up with a new game plan. Reaching into her pockets she pulled out the only thing that may make a difference.

A SHIELD issued Thunderstick.

No, it was not Asgardian in nature, but rather a clever, explosive device that gave off a boom of sonic energy. Enough power and energy behind it to extend to a 20-foot radius when used.

It could just be Sharon’s ticket out of this sick experiment. She would just have to time it perfectly. She poked her head out and saw the remaining drones hovering near one another, pack mentality and all that.

Now or never, then.

Jumping up and sprinting forward Sharon yelled to the drones, “Come and get me, you tin heads!”

Their attention immediately fell to her and they rushed to her, their motors whirling noisily in the cavernous space that was the shooting range.

Sharon continued running toward them, dodging laser beams in the game of chicken she was playing. Closer and closer the two partied merged towards each other until the perfect moment appeared. Sharon slid across the unforgiving concrete and when she came to a complete halt, she jammed the Thunderstick onto the ground, lifted the hatch and pushed on the button. It lit up, blinking frantically as it began counting down. Sharon rolled to her feet and ran for her life.

She made it to a crate just as the sonic boom went off. She dived and hit the ground hard and listened with great satisfaction as the drones gave anguished, metallic cries as they met their demise. When Sharon’s ears finally stopped ringing, she stuck her head out and found three of the four drones laying in ruins on the floor.

Not bad.

The fourth and final drone had somehow survived the blast and was resting in the air, once again waiting to prey upon her. Sharon huffed a breath and irritated shook her bangs out of her eyes. God, she needed to grow out her hair.

“Okay, Thirteen, you got this.” She mumbled to herself. The Thunderstick hadn’t been her only game plan, she had one more trick up her sleeve. But it would need a lot of finesse. She eyed the drone, its steel armor glinting in the fluorescent lights. It was strong and nearly impenetrable, and its only weak spot was its underbelly. She knew she could take that incessant gnat down if she could get access to its undercarriage.

The question was, how?

It’s not like it was a dog who would roll onto its stomach if she offered some scratched. Though,
knowing FitzSimmons she wouldn’t be surprised if they had programmed these things to both be deadly but big teddy bears at heart.

Sharon watched it hover in the air for a few moments before a brilliant yet crazy scheme came upon her. She had nothing else to lose, so why not? Firing her gun in the air right above her, she easily got the drone’s attention as it began flying towards her. Sharon got up and ran, a location in mind as the drone followed closely behind.

*Well, Icarus,* she thought as she jumped atop a crate, crouching down as the drone swooped above her. It pivoted and came back towards her and she was ready to do what needed to be done. *Time to get too close to the sun,* was her last coherent thought as the drone lunged. She pushed herself off the crate and reached, gripping tightly onto the undercarriage of the drone. It dipped and faltered, unused to the unexpected weight gain. Sharon held onto dear life nearly ten feet off the ground as the drone dizzily flew this way and that, trying to dislodge its unwanted guest.

One way of trying to do so, ramming itself into an unforgiving wall.

Hard.

Sharon was relentless and kept holding on searching and searching for the plate that would reveal the heart of the machine and all its wirings. She pulled her legs up as the drone attempted to crash into a crate as a way of getting rid of her.

Finally, she felt the plate give way and she tossed it aside and chanced a glance up at something truly beautiful: the drone’s wirings. Not even caring to admire the ingenuity of the way it was crafted, she reached up, grabbed hold and tugged, ripping apart wiring and seams.

The drone paused suddenly, nearly dropping Sharon with its stillness as it began to sputter and spark. Sharon grabbed more wirings, freeing them from their sockets. The drone gave an unsettling sound as its motors whirled in overtime. Its lights blinked before finally giving way and dying.

The drone completely powered down, hurtling both itself and Sharon to the ground below. Sharon turned her body and rolled into a somersault as her back hit the ground. She rolled daintily to her feet and stood with surprising ease. Littered around her were the remains of the fallen drones.

“Well,” she muttered to herself as she patted dust off her shoulder, “That was easy.”

A small crowd of agents that had gathered to watch Sharon’s craziness broke out in applause. Sharon smiled good-naturedly, taking a bow as she exited the range to the viewing area, accepting pats on the back and congratulations. The only one who seemed to have problems with her performance was Rollins, an arrogant STRIKE flunkie who spent more time up Rumlow’s ass than anywhere else.

She really hated the STRIKE teams.

She was torn between punching him in the jaw or in the crotch when Stanford’s voice rang loudly in her comm.

*“Thirteen! Get your ass up here!”*

“On it,” she replied, pocketing her Glock and heading to the nearest elevator.

*“Twenty-first floor,”* she told the computer as her access was approved and the glass elevator began ascending. Sharon took a moment to fix her hair and to enjoy the view over the Potamic. The Washington Monument gleamed in the afternoon sunlight.
Soon enough Sharon arrived on the 21st floor and ventured towards Stanford’s tiny and cramped office. The man had no sense of filing and he constantly worked in a state of chaos. A firm believer in the ‘old school’ way of doing things, he had not switched over to digital files and still handwrote everything, and consequently would only accept handwritten reports from his agents. The only plus side was that it kept Sharon’s cursive game strong.

Eyeing the empty office, Sharon ventured into the madness and waded through numerous files as she made her way to Stanford’s desk and plopped herself down into his ridiculously comfortable rolling chair.

Stanford was not an idle man of comfort, but this was the only luxury he awarded himself, that and sleeping in separate bedrooms from his wife. So, he got to sleep and he had a great chair that he spent most of his day in. It seemed fair to Sharon. Sharon nearly melted into the seat as the aches from her battle with drones began to fade.

She may have sat there for a minute or an hour when Stanford made his grand entrance in his usual habit, by barging in. He hardly spared her a glance, he eyes glued to his report.

“Out of the chair,” he barked and Sharon went without complaint. They had done this dance many a time before. They shuffled past each other as Sharon lower herself into the chair across from his desk that was not nearly as luxurious. Stanford plopped down onto his throne, lowered his file, cracked his knuckles, and squinted his eyes at Sharon as if she was the cause of all of his headaches.

She wasn’t; she was only the cause of 55% of them. She had created an equation once and had come to that mathematics answer. Stanford had been less than pleased when she had presented it to him. The two remained in a stare off for a few minutes before Sharon attempted to break the silence by doing what she did best.

Pissing him off.

“So, what brings me in today, DR?”

“Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, Dwight.”

“Definitely don’t call me that.” His words may have been gruff, but there was a twinkle in his eyes, Sharon was sure of it.

“Got it Boss, not interpersonal connections for us. So, what do you need? Is it a new mission? Where am I going this time? Bora Bora? Because let me tell you-“

“Quit the yammering, Thirteen. Do I look like one of your girlfriends you got to brunch with? No, no I do not. So quit the talk on Bora Bora.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Smartass,” he mumbled under his breath and Sharon smirked. She loved their time together.

“Alright then, what’s the 4-1-1?” she asked, genuinely interested in why he had needed her up here.

“You’ve been promoted,” he bluntly stated, his voice loud in the tiny space that was his office. Stillness followed as Sharon blinked incomprehensively at him. She had heard him, but her brain needed a moment to catch up.
Did he just say she had been promoted?

“Did you just say I’ve been promoted?” she questioned breathlessly as Stanford rolled his eyes.

“You sure are SHIELD’s finest, aren’t you? Yes, that’s what I said. Congratulations, you are now a Level 7 agent.”

He may have been short with her, but real pride gleamed under his grump facade. He only took on agents he believe in and in the pit of his heart he could see Sharon going all the way, hell she could even be Director one day. Not that he would ever tell her that, not even on the pain of death.

“I’m a Level 7.”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“You’re being serious with me.”

“As serious as the grave.”

“I’m a Level 7 boss ass bitch now.”

“I…am not going to comment on that.”

An awkward silence descended as Sharon remained sitting stock still, eyes wide and pupils dilated. Stanford was beginning to worry that she was having a stroke and he was a bit rusty on his CPR skills. Maybe he should reach out and…no, never mind, he wasn’t going to do that.

“So,” he began before fading away as his best agent continued to gape at him like a fish out of water.

Suddenly like a dam opening, Sharon erupted from her seat, beaming brightly and punching the air.

“Yes! I knew it! I knew my day would come, that being patient would pay off and that hacking the mainframe wasn’t the answer.”

“What?”

Before he could question anything more, Sharon reached across the desk, throwing her arms around her handler catching him off guard.

“This is the best news I could have heard.”

“Let go of me.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Stanford.”

“Pease, let go.” Instead, her arms tightened and Stanford begrudgingly gave into the affection. He slowly reached up and patted her on the back once. Then his arms just rested there as he waited Sharon out. Luckily she finally removed herself from him, her smile still in place.

“I’ll make you proud, boss.”

“Please, you’re already an embarrassment to me. Now get, there are some files in your office that you finally have access to. I’d get reading if I were you; Fury’s expecting you in his office bright and early to go over the specifics of this promotion.”
“Done and done.” She smiled at him again before nearly skipping out of his office finally leaving Stanford in peace. She hurried down to the 19th floor where her office was located with a lovely eastward view of the Kennedy Center. And true to Stanford’s words a rather large pile of files was resting neatly on her desk, waiting for her to crack them open and devour their secrets.

Finally, she would know all the facts of the Battle of New York. It may have more than a month ago now, but she was still haunted by what she didn’t know and now like a kid in a candy shop, she’d eat all the chocolates.

She was just about to open the first file when she noticed a sticky note resting innocently atop it. With a hint of trepidation, she lifted it and read it as a slow grin emerged across her face.

“Alright, Nat, we’ll play.”

She left the files and her office behind, once more heading to the elevator and heading to the bowels of SHIELD where the Armory was located, deep beneath the waves of the Potomac. For any SHIELD agent, a trip to the Armory was like reaching nirvana because in the Armory were all of SHIELD’s newest toys.

And there was nothing agents and spies loved more than their toys.

Just look at James Bond.

As the elevator finally descended, Sharon gleefully glided through the open door and found Natasha casually leaning against a wall so casually and smoothly that on anyone else it would look horrifically forced, but not on Nat. Her lip tilted upward into a smirk as she took in Sharon’s excited state.

“Fancy meeting you here, Barbie.”

“Hmm, it’s not as if you left me a breadcrumb trail leading right towards you. So I take it you heard.”

“Heard what? Oh? That you’re now finally hanging out with the cool kids in Level 7. It’s old news,” she said the words with a grin as she reached out and lightheartedly punched Sharon in the shoulder. It only hurt for a moment.

“You know what this means, right? We’re now equal.” For all the years Sharon had known Nat, the red-headed assassin had always been one level ahead. It fueled a rather friendly rivalry between the pair of spies.
“Can you kill a man 29 ways while dancing to the *Awakening of Flora*?”

Sharon faltered and quizzically glanced at her friend.

“Uh, no, no I cannot.”

“Then we’re not equal. But don’t worry Carter, I won’t hold it against you. We’re wasting time.”

Natasha shoved Sharon forward into the Armory as Sharon took a moment to admire the rows and rows of tech, guns, tanks, and anything else a spy could ever want underneath the Christmas tree. God, she loved it down here.

Standing by and barking orders to his minions was the number two in charge, 19-year-old Quentin Phillips, a certified genius. A gangly youth with lush, wavy hair and an infectious grin. Quentin had gone to MIT at the age of thirteen and during his tenure there had somehow been able to reverse the polarity of gravity during a hockey game. It was still a legend at MIT apparently. He had come to SHIELD a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed teenager and had quickly risen to the ranks of being the right-hand man of SHIELD’s resident Taskmaster: Sir Warwick Pemberton, or as he demanded to be referred to, the Admiral.

A wizard with tech, a voice like velvet, a no-nonsense outlook on life, so undeniably British and with not an ounce of discretion or subtly, the Admiral had been stocking SHIELD’s agents with the very best of the best for decades. He was so good he made the FBI and CIA weep. And MI6’s Quartermaster had nothing on him.

“Hey, Q,” Sharon greeted, ignoring Nat’s jabs to her back.

“Ladies,” at the twin set of glares he received, the teenager blushed and cleared his throat.

“I mean, Agents, very badass Agents who could totally destroy me if it ever came to it.”

The glares continued.

“And who, besides being complete BAMFs, are so beautiful that everyone else pales in comparison, especially Agent Morse.”

“Better,” Nat acquiesced with a hair flip as Sharon shrugged.

“I still think he could do better, I think we’re better looking than Hill.”

“We’d be pushing our luck with that one.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” The two shared grins before once again setting their sights on Quentin, whose blush fascinatingly extended past his face and down his neck. He was too easy sometimes.

Taking sympathy on the boy wonder, Sharon began redirecting the conversation to the most important part, her promotion.

“So, Q, all flattery aside we are here for a very important reason.” Quentin quirked an eyebrow as Nat butted in.

“Thirteen’s in dire need of an update…of the Level 7 kind.”

Quentin’s face turned into a smirk as Sharon beamed happily, her smile giving away her joy.

This had was the moment she had been waiting for. With every promotion, a SHIELD agent
received a...gift of sorts. Level 1 was a SHIELD phone, Level 2 a DNA imprinted glock, Level 4 an
apartment, Level 6 an all access tour of the White House, and Level 7…7’s got cars.

Oh yeah.

No more boring blue sedan for her (may he rest in peace…or pieces as was the likely scenario).
She was getting a SHIELD issued car. Not only would it be a beautiful piece of machinery, but it
would be tricked out to the max with bulletproof glass, hidden weapon caches, a computer AI that
would put Siri to shame, and free Sirius radio and even built in Wifi. Rumor had it that Fury’s SUV
had the capability to fly. Quentin and the Admiral had refused to comment on that development.

Quentin gestured to the vastness of the Armory and the floor below where all the cars were kept.

“Well then, Agents, come on and take a ride with me.”

At the pair’s unimpressed look, he faltered a bit.

“Too much?”

“Just show us the cars, Quentin,” Natasha drawled in only a way she could. Quentin quickly took
them down to the cars. They passed Audis and BMWs as well as a very stunning Ashton Martin. It
may have been her ties to England but Sharon found herself very partial to the tricked out Range
Rover Quentin pointed out.

However, she was a woman on a mission and there was only one car she was claiming as her own.
She finally saw her masterpiece nestled between two Escalades.

She was in love and she knew this was the one.

She took off determinedly to her prize, leaving both Natasha and Quentin in her wake. Quentin
seemed perplexed and Natasha merely resigned as she realized what had caught Sharon’s eye.

“Really, Thirteen?”

“This is the one,” Sharon murmured, running her ringers reverently along the sleek and sexy black
paint job. This is the car she had been dreaming of.

It was a stunning Corvette Stingray.

She held her hand up and Quentin had the sense to throw the keys to her. She opened the door and
slid into the leather seat thinking that this must be what heaven feels like. She turned on the engine
and listened in delight to the purr of the engine as she slid back and knew she was home.

“Ooh, Momma likes this.”

Natasha appeared at the window, leaning in and watching Sharon half with exasperation and
amusement as she saw the ecstasy on her friend’s face.

“I thought you might. I won’t even put up a fight about the fact that it’s the exact same model and
type as my own baby. Original much, Carter.”

Sharon grinned unrepentantly up at the assassin as she revved the engine, “I’m sorry, I can’t hear
you over the purring of the engine.”

Nat good-naturedly rolled her eyes and turned to Quentin who had been twiddling his thumbs.
“I think Thirteen’s chosen her prize. Although, we haven’t got to the best part yet.”

Sharon blinked in confusion. “What’s better than getting a brand new car that looks and sounds like this?”

Nat’s smirked turned sinful as she leaned in.

“The test drive.”

A ripple of adrenaline flowed through Sharon and her hand tightened on the gear shift.

“You’re so on.”

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**June 27th, 2012**

*The Triskelion, Director Fury’s Office*

“Director,” Sharon greeted as she sauntered into Fury’s vast, yet hardly furnished office. It was about as warm and welcoming as a swarm of piranhas, which is how Fury liked it. Fury nodded to the across from his glass desk and Sharon seated herself.

In the excitement of yesterday with the promotion, her new baby and spending half the night reading the files on the Battle of New York (that Loki was one sick dude) Sharon hadn’t had time to truly think through the timing of the promotion. She knew she was an exemplary agent and that she deserved to be a Level 7 agent, but Fury never did anything without an angle and he never gave any gift without requiring a price in return.

Fury wanted something and Sharon had to decide if she was willing to pay the piper.

If she wanted to keep her Stingray she’d have to.

“Congratulations on your promotion to Level 7, Thirteen. I can think of no one better at the moment who deserves it more.”

Yep, she was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

“Thank you, sir. It is an honor to serve SHIELD in such a way. I hope I do you proud.”

“I’m sure you will. I’m sure Margaret Carter will also be very proud of you as well. She’s wanted this for you for a long time.”

Any moment now.

“However, along with the perks of being a Level 7 Agent there comes new responsibilities and sacrifices. There are things that we ask of you, things that I ask of you.”

There it is.
“Things such as what, Director? I’m sure nothing that will compromise my ethics and morals.”

Sharon always did what needed to be done. She had lied, cheated, manipulated and even killed, but Fury knew there were lines she’d never crossed and he had always respected that. She hoped he wouldn’t make her cross them now.

Fury had the gall to look insulted at the suggestion and the tightness in Sharon’s stomach eased a bit. Whatever Fury was angling for it wouldn’t cause her to be unable to look at herself in the mirror. Whatever it was then she could deal with it.

“I’m asking you to become Captain Roger’s partner.”

See, she knew she could handle…wait, what?

A thick silence entered the office as Sharon stared disbelievingly at him. Her brain had stuttered to a halt and she couldn’t even attempt to make words. She didn’t understand him at all. Fury sighed and changed course as he began talking again.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors of Captain Rogers joining SHIELD. I’m here to tell you that it is not mere hearsay, it is a fact. I spoke to Rogers recently and he has agreed to sign onto SHIELD. He is…excited to get back in the game. He will be here in a few weeks. I want you to work with him. Help him…acclimate.”

“A-acclimate?” Sharon stuttered, still not fully believing that this was real. She had to be dreaming. She reached out and pinched her skin. Nope, this was reality.

“Yes, help integrate him into the 21st century, work alongside him, and show him the ropes. He needs someone. He is…delicate at the moment.”

“He’s Captain America, there’s nothing delicate about him,” Sharon blurted out without thinking as Fury smirked and leaned back into his chair, resting his hands idly in his lap.

‘I’m glad to see your shock didn’t affect your ability to form words and sentences.”

“Cut the bullshit, Fury; what are you playing at? Why me of all people?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be only you. I was thinking it would be a tag team effort with Romanoff. She’s had exposure to him, but I worry she may…shock him a bit, he may need someone more, well, more like him.”

“Wholesome and all American?” Sharon sarcastically quipped, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Obnoxiously stubborn and a pain in the ass,” Fury volleyed back without batting an eye. Sharon was mildly impressed at that.

“Besides you and Romanoff, I’d also have an agent undercover as his neighbor to keep an eye on him when he isn’t here. So, really, I don’t believe I am asking too much of you. How hard is it to look after a grown man?”

Sharon glowered at him letting him know she did not appreciate his smugness.

“He’s not just any man and I am too close to the situation to be objective.”

“Why? Because he thought about dating your great-aunt years ago?”
It’s more than that and you know it! What do I even say when I introduce myself to him? ‘Hi Captain, I’m Sharon Carter the great-niece of the love of your life and am a living embodiment that she lived a life while you dreamed in the Artic for 70 years.’ Oh yeah, that’ll go over swell. He’ll love me.”

Sharon’s heart was pounding and suddenly it felt like all the air in the room had been sucked out.

“Less than ten people in this building know your first name, even less know your last name. I see no reason why Rogers would ever need to know it.”

Sharon gaped at him.

“You think he’ll just accept me as Agent 13?”

Fury shrugged as if this conversation was a blip in his day, and knowing him it probably was.

“Everyone else does.”

“How am I supposed to look at him every day and lie to him?”

“It’s not a lie.”

“It’s an omission and you know it.”

“Is it really hurting anything if he never knows who you are? You’ll be his partner, not his friend. You’ll have his back, that’s enough. That’s what he needs.”

Sharon snorted, leaning forward and placing her head in her hands.

“I didn’t think Captain America needed anything or anyone. He’s the man with the plan,” she murmured, campy film reels involving Rogers rolling through her head, commanding her to buy bonds. It had always been a favorite in history class.

Fury sighed and regarded Sharon’s slumped form for a moment.

“Carter…Sharon, you haven’t seen him at the Retreat. He boxes, runs, reads, eats and sleep, rinse and repeat. If he doesn’t have someone looking out for him when he gets here, that’s all he’ll do here. I need more than his body, I need his mind and his soul.”

Damn him. He had always know her weak spot. He knew, somehow, someway that she had already imprinted on the good captain.

Damn him.

Sharon sat up straight as Fury eyed her speculatively. He cleared his throat and gestured to the room,

“So, Agent 13, are you in or are you out?”

Chapter End Notes
I've spent a lot of time thinking about how much better Marvel could have fit Sharon into the MCU from the very beginning.

CATFA: I've heard that the writer's intention was to have the agent who speaks to Steve when he first wakes up later be revealed to be Agent 13/Sharon Carter later. I like that. They should have done that.

Avengers: Have Sharon's role in terms of size be comparable to that of Maria Hill. A supporting yet important player. She could have been the one to recruit Steve at the gym. He would initially be mistrustful, they could interact somewhat on the helicarrier. At the end of the film Steve is committed to SHIELD, he runs into Sharon who states they'll be seeing more of each other and then he asks for her name. She is coy and says Agent 13 and walks away. Steve still doesn't know she is Sharon Carter, but now the audience strongly suspects it.

CATWS: Have Sharon be the main female lead. I love Natasha in this movie, but Sharon deserves a chance to shine as well. Her and Steve have been working together, he still doesn't know her name. There is still the mistrust angle and he does eventually learn who she is and they overcome that.

AOU: Have her be at the party and that after party showdown with Ultron. She then goes off to the CIA (same way Rhodey went to the Air Force) and then reappears during the Battle of Sokovia and she is on the helicarrier being a badass.

CACW: Pretty much what she already does but more attention given because she would be the female lead.

If they had just done this and fleshed out her and Steve's relationship and allowed it to slow burn I feel like so many more people would love her and see her as just as invaluable as Natasha.

Sigh.

Moving on, here are pics!

Quentin Phillips:

The Admiral:
Sharon's Corvette Stingray:
“You’re doing it wrong.”

“You need to achieve the perfect meat-to-onion ratio.”

“You don’t want to overwork the meat. It’ll be too dense then.”

“Then I guess it’s good I have surgeon’s hands; their light and delicate,” Jessie quipped back at Sharon, throwing a glare over his shoulder where she was perched, watching the proceedings anxiously. She knew she shouldn’t have entrusted Jessie the most important task. He was a novice when it came to burgers.

Catherine, who stood across from the pair in Sharon’s tight galley kitchen, snorted as she continued tossing the fruit salad. Sharon sighed, throwing Jessie one last cross stare before going back to her station of chopping up lettuce, tomatoes, and avocados to decorate the burgers with.

The couple had flown in two days ago to spend the holiday weekend with Sharon before hurrying back to their busy lives in New York. Yesterday had been spent at the usual tourist attractions such as the Mall and monuments and a memorable few hours in Madame Tussauds with enough selfies to last a lifetime.

Now today was the big day, the big 2-3-6 of the land of the free and the home of the brave and all of DC was buzzing with hoopla and cheer as many descended upon the Mall for the firework display that evening.

Sharon had been there, done that, and was never doing it again. DC in July with a mile thick of humidity, crammed with several thousand strangers was an experience she was not willing to repeat.

So instead she was having a party of three with her oldest friend and said oldest friend’s hunky fiancé who was almost perfect…except for his meat-handling skills. Shame really, he always seemed like quite a catch. However, if there was one thing Sharon never joked about, it was burgers.

While the 4th of July wasn’t her favorite holiday (that spot was held firmly by Halloween) it was a longstanding Commando tradition to go all out and Sharon was never one to disappoint. Outfitted in a cliché American flag tank top and cutoff denim shorts, she had painted her toenails red, white and blue. Luckily Catherine and Jessie hadn’t left her alone in her patriotic fervor. Catherine had a red, white and blue headband in her hair under her topknot bun and Jessie, with his usual style and
flare was rocking an American flag fedora. Someone needed to keep that man away from ridiculous hats. Streamers of the three colors were hanging down from the ceiling and they had been listening to holiday-themed music all day.

‘It was the Fourth of July, you and I were, you and I were, fire fireworks that went off too soon, and I miss you in the June gloom too.’

The music washed over the kitchen, droning out the buzz of the AC as the trio worked on the food, prepping it all for grilling. A few minutes later, Jessie stepped away from his station with a flourish, presenting the sight to Sharon as she stepped forward.

“Well, Your Meatiness, does it meet your approval?” His eyebrows wiggled mockingly as Sharon stepped up to appraise his work speculatively. After several seconds of tense silence, Sharon shrugged nonchalantly.

“That’ll do, pig, that’ll do.”

Her face broke out into a grin as Jessie groaned and elbowed her out of the way, picking up the platter of newly formed hamburgers as Sharon and Catherine trotted behind, carrying their own haul of food.

They left Sharon’s apartment behind and headed to the elevator that took them up to the rooftop patio. Luckily it seemed none of Sharon’s neighbors had had the same idea and the three had the whole roof to themselves. They stepped outside, nearly buckling under the heavy heat and humidity of a usual summer day in DC.

The sun was shining brightly down upon them and there was hardly a cloud in the sky. In the distance, the Washington Monument gleamed in the sunlight and beneath them, Penn Ave was teeming with people heading this way and that. An American flag was seemingly perched at every corner and the whole city looked like it had vomited up independence and patriotism.

No one did the Fourth of July like Washington, D.C.

The only thing missing to be the cherry on top was Captain America himself.

The press in the city had been anticipating for days that the good Captain would be making an appearance on the White House lawn or at Lincoln Memorial, but to no avail. There had been no sighting of the man, the myth, the legend and his shield all day, much to the disappointment of politicians and bureaucrats everywhere.

Sharon had it on good authority that Rogers had been spirited away to New York by an over-enthusiastic Tony Stark for a birthday party to make up for the last 67 he had spent frozen in the Arctic. According to Natasha, all the Avengers were present and the only person more excited than Stark himself was Thor, who apparently was always up for a good birthday party. Though, according to Nat, Roger’s age was that of a small child in Asgard, so Thor carried on cradling Rogers in his arms and calling him a ‘wee babe.’

Gods were weird.

Yep, as possibly the biggest coincidence in history or a phenomenal publicity stunt, Steven Grant Rogers, the revered Man with the Plan, had been born on the fourth of July all the way back in 1918. Today was his birthday and he was now 27 or 94, depending on how one looked at it. And wasn’t that a trip.

All the morning news shows had been buzzing about it and President Ellis had included in his
usual holiday speech a birthday shout out to the Star Spangled Man. Hence the excitement that the man himself would make an appearance. Alas, the masses were still without Steve Rogers, who hadn’t been spotted in public since his TV interview back in May.

Although Stark was doing an impressive job of bringing the people up to speed with Rogers’ goings on today. In the last hour alone he had uploaded three pictures to Instagram, each showing the Avengers in wide arrays of celebration and partying and Rogers himself looking more disarrayed in each new posting.

Hopefully, he was enjoying his birthday…on the inside.

Sharon pushed thoughts of Steve Rogers out of her head. It was a no-go zone. All she had been thinking about since her meeting with Fury was Rogers and she refused to do it today, of all days. She’d go back to worrying about him tomorrow, today she was celebrating her country’s independence with some of her favorite people.

She trotted across the rooftop patio, sweat already trickling down her neck, as she followed Jessie to the grill. Together they got it going and got the burgers grilling alongside buttery corn on the cob. Catherine tinkered at the rickety picnic table that had been on the roof as long as Sharon had been living in the apartment complex.

All in all, grilling took about an hour before the three were sat down at the picnic table with juicy corn on the cob, mouthwatering burgers that smelled absolutely divine, a wide array of picture-worthy fruit, and cold bottles of beer as they toasted merrily and began eating like kings. The sky shifted and the sun began its descent westward as dusk settled over the city. The clouds alighting with hues of orange, pink and purple as the oppressive heat began to settle into slight discomfort.

D.C. was never a quiet city, but a roar of people in the Mall could be heard distinctly from the rooftop. Between the sun, the copious amounts of food and the two bottles of beer, Sharon was feeling warm and loose as she sunk low in her lawn chair, laughing to one of Catherine’s outlandish stories from law school.

“And then he said ‘How many lawyers does it take to screw in a light bulb? Three, One to climb the ladder. One to shake it. And one to sue the ladder company.’”

Jessie groaned deep and tossed his head back as Sharon snorted into her bottle. Catherine looked absurdly pleased with herself, her hands still raised in the air gesturing wildly.

“Good one Kit-Kat,” Sharon conceded, throwing a bone to her best friend. Catherine beamed back at her. She leaned back into her chair and set her dark eyes on the blonde.

“So, that’s what’s happening with me. What about you, Share? Anything interesting going on at work?” The question was innocent, but as a lawyer in training, Catherine was anything but. Sharon momentarily tensed before shrugging indifferently.

“Work is work. Get missions, watch everything go FUBAR, save the day, rinse and repeat. It’s pretty low-key, actually," she joked weakly, taking another swig from her bottle. Her mind, as always, went back to Fury and what he had asked of her, and the answer she had given him. She stared off into space for a moment.

‘He is…delicate at the moment.’

‘You’ll be his partner, not his friend. You’ll have his back, that’s enough. That’s what he needs.’

“Share-Bear, you still with us?” Catherine questioned, concerned glances shared with Jessie.
Sharon blinked at the pair before slowly nodding.

“Yeah, I’m the bee’s knees. Sorry, work has been... *stressful* lately.”

“And let me guess, whatever is stressful is-“

“Classified,” all three stated at the same time as Sharon weakly giggled, wiping the sweat from her brow.

“I must sound like a broken record sometimes. I’m sorry, guys, with the cloak and dagger, but it’s the nature of the business.”

“Well we shouldn’t push you,” Jessie interjected looking sharply to Catherine, “And some of us should check our perverse curiosity.”

Catherine stuck her tongue out at her fiancé, who bravely tried to keep his composure, but his face crumbled into a dimpled grin and he reached across the table, fingers interlocking with Catherine’s. Catherine smiled at him before apologetically turning back to Sharon.

“Okay, so we don’t talk about work. What about your personal life? Meet any fellas lately?”

Sharon groused slumping down in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest.

“What are you, my mother?”

Catherine puffed out a laugh, her eyes twinkling in the dusk.

“Please, if I was Mama Carter I’d have had you hitched years ago. Probably to that old college beau of yours, what was his name again? Matt, no, Mark-“

Sharon whined closing her eyes shut.

“Max Davenport,” she finally supplied and even saying the name after so many years was like drinking gasoline; unpleasant and toxic to one’s health.

“Yeah! That guy. The douche from that male acapella group, the Chimes. He was such a tool.”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Sharon grumbled lowly.

“Didn’t he want you guys to move in together when you both graduated from Georgetown?” Catherine questioned as if she had really forgotten what had happened that fateful graduation day. The memory was still seared in Sharon’s brain and she had seen some serious shit storms before.

“Worse. He proposed, in public, in front of my entire graduating class. God, it was awful. He didn’t accept my rejection gracefully.” There may or may not have been a temper tantrum.

“Well, it was on a jumbotron screen,” Catherine mused snickering all the while as if she truly enjoyed Sharon’s pain. She probably did, most people in Sharon’s life did. She needed better friends.

“Why wasn’t he suitable husband material again?”

“He didn’t want a wife, he wanted a pretty trophy that would parrot back at him how he was a gift from God. I still can’t believe I was with him for two whole years. I still plead temporary insanity.”

“By what?” Jessie questioned twirling his fedora.
“Abs. He had such pretty abs.” Sharon pouted just thinking about his six-pack. Six-packs had always been Sharon’s weakness when it came to the opposite sex.

“Well, moving on from the acapella singing meathead, any guys in your life currently? Getting some ass?” Catherine winked saucily at her as Sharon rolled her eyes.

“What is it with engaged couples always wanting to pass their happiness along to their single friends, hmm? Some of us like being single.”

“Please, no one likes being single.” To prove her point, Catherine reached out and stroked Jessie’s face as he blinked lazily at her, nuzzling into her hand.

Sharon wanted to barf.

“And even if you didn’t want a relationship, you shouldn’t have to suffer abstinence. Women have needs, you know.”

“And who says I’m not getting regular sex,” Sharon shot back and sat triumphantly as both Catherine and Jessie turned wide-eyed towards her. Ha, she could have the last word too.

“You’re getting sex? Hold on, you have a booty call?!?” Catherine squealed as Sharon shifted uncomfortably.

“I may have an…arrangement of sorts with someone at work. Don’t look at me like that, it’s purely physical. You know, letting off steam after missions and such. There are no feelings involved.”

“He’s a field agent?”

“Yeah?” Sharon supplied, not knowing where Catherine was going with this.

“God that must be so hot,” Catherine’s mouth was an O as Jessie shot her a sharp glare.

“Babe, I’m sitting right here.”

“Quiet, can’t you just imagine, all that adrenaline, and if he’s a field agent he must be in shape. Goddamn, Sharon, sometimes I envy you.”

“And now I lost my appetite for dessert,” Jessie carped and flipped his fedora back on his head.

“How long has this been going on for?”

“A few months,” Sharon answered crossing her legs.

“And you never thought to tell me? Sharon, I’m hurt.”

“There’s nothing to tell. As I said, it’s just sex.”

“Still, I bet that Black Widow knew about it.”

“Well, Nat is in the spy business. Also, she may have walked in on us once.”

Catherine blinked lively as she leaned eagerly towards Sharon.

“Where? Your office? The training ground? A quinjet?”

Sharon cheeks flushed as she begrudgingly answered, “The showers.”
Catherine crowed smugly as Jessie gaped.

“Carter, you naughty minx!”

“I hate both of you,” Jessie muttered to himself. The two women decided to take mercy on the male and moved on to other topics, but Catherine’s eyes promised that they would be having ‘girl time’ very soon about Sharon’s friends with benefits situation.

Time moved quickly after that as the sky darkened and the city waited in anticipation for the annual fireworks display to begin over the Mall. Sharon seated herself at the edge of the rooftop, her legs dangling over the side of the building, her eyes looking towards the Washington Monument in the dying light. She glanced beside her and saw Catherine camped out in Jessie’s lap, their heads bent close together as Jessie whispered into her ear, his hands gently rubbing circles on her stomach. Catherine had an arm loosely thrown across his shoulders and was leaning into him, smiling gently up at him.

All in all, they were a perfect couple.

But people like Sharon, with the life she led, she didn’t get things like that. And she was fine with that…for the most part. She looked away when she felt the buzz of her phone in her denim pocket. She pulled it out and saw a new text message from Natasha.

**To Carter:**

_I think Cap’s finally enjoying himself, you know, for a grandpa ;)_

Attached was a picture of the Avengers in Stark’s tower. A monstrous American themed cake with what seemed to be nearly a hundred lit candles was placed in from of Steve Rogers, his blue eyes wide in the candlelight as he attempted to blow out all of them in one go. He looked more relaxed than he had in any of Stark’s photos. At least he wasn’t grimacing and in general looking like a stick in the mud.

One should always enjoy their birthday.

*Boom. Boom. Boom.*

Sharon turned her head up just in time to see the first fireworks erupt across the skyline. Catherine and Jessie went silent behind her, their eyes transfixed on the site. Red, white and blue shimmers painted the night sky and the explosions were so loud that echoed through Sharon’s body, her heart beating in time to the booms.

And with the fireworks reigning above her, the cheers of the crowd heard from even here, Sharon thought for a moment that anything was possible.

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*July 10th, 2012*

*Richmond, VA*
“Brody! Come here, boy!”

A moment later Sharon found herself bowled over by her family’s English springer spaniel. Brody had been with them since Sharon was a teenager. The Carters had a love for spaniels. She fell back onto the grass and accepted his doggy kisses as he pushed his face into her head.

“I missed you too, bud!”

Sharon supposed they would have stayed there forever, Brody’s fury body climbing all over her had it not been for the sharp whistle coming from the front door. Brody bounded off of her and she rolled onto her side to see her dad walking towards her, a gentle smile on his aged face.

“Hey, Daddio, how have you been?” Sharon greeted cheekily raising her hand, which her dad grabbed and helped pull her up to her feet. She threw her arms around him in a tight hug. She would take this secret to her grave, but Sharon was a bit of a daddy’s girl.

Harrison Carter was an unassuming man with an average build and height. For having Michael Carter as his father and Peggy Carter as his aunt, he had grown up as a lover of books and literature and was made for the world of academics, not espionage. He was a tenured English professor at Georgetown and some of Sharon’s favorite memories from college had been sitting in on his lectures and watch him come to life right before her eyes as he discussed the books he had loved for years.

“It’s good to see you, kid,” he greeted in return, slipping his arm around her shoulders and leading the pair into Sharon’s childhood home. She had been born and raised in this house. On the doorframe in the upstairs bathroom were Sharpie marks showing Sharon’s height throughout the years. Her childhood room still had her NYSNC and Backstreet Boy posters up on the walls. She had her first kiss in the backyard at the age of six with a neighborhood boy.

Inside Sharon was immediately assaulted with the familiar scents of home and the absolutely heavenly smell of home cooking.

“Is Mom feeding an army?” Sharon questioned heading off to the kitchen as Harrison chuckled in response.

“You know how she gets when it comes to you. She can’t help but spoil you.”

Things hadn’t always been easy for Sharon and her mother. During her childhood, Sharon had not been at all subtle when it came to her hero worship and admiration of Peggy. Every mom wants their daughter to be like her, but Sharon had wanted to be like Peggy. Her mom had also vehemently been opposed to Sharon entering the Academy. If it had been up to Sharon, she would have entered straight out of high school, but her mom had been adamant that she would attend college and get an education like every other young adult.

The compromise had been wrought with tension and for the first few months of school Sharon and her mom hadn’t spoken, Harrison being the go between the two. The road back to a healthy and happy relationship had taken a lot of time and patience, but the two were there and Sharon allowed the coddling her mother often employed around her. If it made her mom happy to try and get Sharon fat, and harp on about marriage and babies, then Sharon would bear it with a grin.

She’d do a lot of things to make her mom happy.

Amanda Carter was rooted firmly in the kitchen, pulling Sharon’s favorite casserole out of the
oven when she spied her only child.

“Sharon, sweetheart!” She quickly set the dish down on the countertop and came to Sharon, bringing her into a tight embrace that Sharon returned, resting her head on her mom’s shoulder. She may have gotten most of her personality from the Carter side of the family, but she got her looks from her mom. They shared the same honey blonde hair and dark brown eyes. In fact, Sharon was almost a spitting image of her mother at that age.

“Let me look at you,” Amanda pulled back from Sharon and took in the sight of her daughter, her eyes moving quickly and pointedly.

“You’re getting too skinny. Don’t worry, I’ll fill you up.”

“Mom—”

“Mother knows best is what I always say and I’m always right. Come, come, go set the dinner table and we’ll get eating.”

The Carter family moved from the kitchen into the dining room where they chowed down, sharing neighborhood gossip, her dad telling her about the upcoming syllabus for the fall semester and Sharon sharing tidbits from work. SHIELD was still a bit of a sensitive subject in the Carter household. Her parents hadn’t been pleased when she followed in Peggy’s path, but they had tried their best to be supportive. Every time Sharon came home from a mission there was a home cooked meal waiting for her in her freezer and her plants were always watered while she was gone. Her dad was always slipping books into her duffle bags so she would have something to read in her rare downtimes.

They would never a 100% approve of her choice to be a spy, but they would do their best to be there for her, and at the end of the day Sharon loved them so much for that.

There was a bit of an elephant in the room, one that had been existing since Steve Rogers had come back from the dead. Captain America was a sore subject for all of the Carters. Everyone knew the stories and legends and how Peggy had felt about him. It had been enough to admire him and his heroic sacrifice, it was something else altogether to see him come back from the dead looking not a day older than when he had gone down into the ice.

Sharon had yet to talk about Rogers with her parents and they had never brought him up. Yet, it was always there, the need to fill the space with something, even a half lie if only to acknowledge the ghost that had haunted the Carters for years.

And now, thanks to Fury, it seemed time to finally fill the space.

Sharon set down her fork and cleared her throat as both Carters turned towards her inquisitively. Brody pawed at her lap hoping for a morsel of food as she gently pushed him away.

“So,” Sharon began haltingly, still not quite ready to acknowledge her decision aloud, “I have some news about work. I am taking on a new long term…mission of sorts.”

Amanda seemed to deflate right in front of Sharon as she halfheartedly moved food around her plate.

“It’s not another deep undercover, is it? The last time you spent five months in Argentina without any contact, and I just don’t think I can go through that again, sweetheart.”

Harrison remained quiet yet stoic but looked down as well, remembering the long months having
no idea if Sharon was alive or dead. Sharon was quick to shake her head and remove those looks from her parents’ faces.

“No, it’s nothing like that. In fact, for the most part, it will keep me around DC more often. I’m… becoming a keeper of sorts for a new agent. Showing him the ropes and all of that. I’ll be his partner, I guess you could say.”

Amanda and Harrison exchanged looks as Amanda perked up.

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s great to hear. Peggy always said you had the makings of a handler.”

Sharon winced as she continued on.

“Yeah, it’s a bit like that. The thing is…the thing is this new agent is Steve Rogers. Captain America is joining SHIELD.”

It was so quiet one could hear a pin drop.

“Did you just say you’ll be working with Steve Rogers?” Her dad questioned blinkingly, staring at her as if she had grown a second head.

“Yep, that’s the gist of it.” Sharon attempted the casual angle, as her parents shared looks across the table.

“Will, will he know who you are?” Amanda asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“No, just that I’m Agent 13. We won’t be friends…it’s purely professional.”

She felt the air shift as her parents continued to comprehend this new information. She could saw the questions flash across their faces as they attempted the best way to go about asking.

“Have you told Peggy yet?”

Sharon flinched. This was the question she had been dreading to answer.

“No, not yet. I’m planning to, I just haven’t had the time,” or the courage, she thought silently.

“Do you think it’s best to tell her?” Amanda countered gently, “I mean, with her memories and all….?” She trailed off as Sharon looked at her sharply and took a defensive stance.

“I trust her, I trust Aunt Peggy with my life. And her memory is just fine.” She didn’t mean to be so harsh, but she hated the way her family tiptoed around Peggy, acting as if she were on a complete downward slope. She wasn’t there yet and for the most part, her memory was as sharp and witty as she was.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized sagging down into her chair as she rested her elbows on the wooden table.

“No, I’m sorry,” Amanda said, reaching across and grasping Sharon’s hand, “I just worry for you, being dragged into all that…history.”

“He’s not going to learn my name, I’ll just be Agent 13 to him, not Sharon Carter. I’ll keep my distance. It will be fine.”

Her parents once again shared uneasy glances before coming to some kind of silent understanding.
“Well, sweetheart, if you know what you’re doing, we’ll support you no matter what.”

It was a brave face for her sake, but the sentiment made her relax all the same as she squeezed her mom’s hand and shot a smile towards her dad.

“Thanks, that’s what I needed to hear.”

Not for the first time, Sharon was seriously wondering what she had gotten herself into for accepting Fury’s offer.

July 14th, 2012

Arlington, VA

Only two days left.

She really couldn’t believe it. The time had slipped by way too quickly and now in two days, Steve Rogers would be arriving in D.C. ready to start his new career as a SHIELD agent. Sharon wasn’t ready for him to arrive. She didn’t think she would ever be ready to face him, but an agent has to do what an agent has to do. In two days’ time, she’d have her game face on.

The last few days she, Natasha and Agent 29, the undercover agent posing as Rogers’ neighbor, has been coordinating the final few details for his arrival, but it still felt like there was so much left to do.

And one of those things she had put off long enough.

With one final shake of her head, she entered the familiar nursing home and made her way to Peggy’s room. She found her aunt resting idly in bed, the TV playing with the volume on low so that it was just a gentle hum in the airy room.

“Dearest,” Peggy greeted with a genteel smile as Sharon came closer to the bed, “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

Sharon smiled in return, plopping down into her favorite armchair as she wiggled and made herself comfortable.

“I thought I’d stop by. Happy to see me?” She questioned cheekily as Peggy huffed a small laugh.

“Thrilled really, I would much rather have your company over Sir David Attenborough, thrilling as his narrative may be.”

Sharon grinned but it seeped away as she settled in, Peggy’s dark eyes watching her inquiringly. It was time to put up or shut up. She was an agent of SHIELD, she could tell her great-aunt that she’d be working with Steve Rogers.

She could do this. She would do this.
She opened her mouth to speak but was cut off as Peggy gasped and reached out to her.

“Oh, dearest, I had almost forgotten the great news I wanted to share with you.”

Sharon blinked in surprise but nodded her head as she listened attentively to Peggy. Whatever it was it had to be rather impressive to have made such an impression on her.

“I spoke to Steve on the phone yesterday.”

Sharon’s heart dropped and she prayed Peggy couldn’t feel how clammy her hands were turning.

“And, Sharon, I swear, when I heard his voice it transported me back to the War. I felt as if I was a young woman again, and Steve…he would come flying into headquarters with Barnes and the Commandos at his heels. I haven’t felt that way in so long, it was...it was quite remarkable.”

Peggy’s voice was thick with emotion and her eyes glinted in the fluorescent light as her grip on Sharon tightened.

“He told me that he is coming to D.C. to work for SHIELD. Have you heard that? He wants to belong at SHIELD, my SHIELD! He told me that he would be honored to join the organization I founded. He’s just as charming as always.” If Sharon wasn’t mistaken there was a hint of blush at Peggy’s cheeks.

“He wants to visit me, you know,” Peggy continued lowly, speaking more to herself than to Sharon.

“He will come to see me when he arrives. I’ve dreamed of this, so many years ago, of him walking through the door alive and healthy and now it’s finally happening. I feel…so full, I can’t describe it, dearest.”

Peggy nodded to her small vanity in the corner as Sharon turned her head to look at it.

“I’ve asked the nurses to get out my hair curlers. Give a little bounce to this old mop of hair. And I’ve even requested some red lipstick, I thought it’d be a nice reminder for Steve when he comes. That sounds silly, doesn’t it? A bit girlish, perhaps I shouldn’t….”

At the downturn of Peggy’s mouth, Sharon was quick to jump in.

“It’s not silly, Aunt Peggy! I think it’s great and I think Captain Rogers will love it. I think he will be so happy to see you, I think you should do it. Show him what he has been missing.”

There was a lump in Sharon’s throat that she couldn’t quite get rid of. Her stomach churned and a knot was forming in her chest that felt an awful lot like guilt as Peggy turned back to her.

“I’m rather surprised I had to hear about his new job from him. You must have heard it at SHIELD by now.”

“Only just recently,” Sharon countered weakly, “I thought it was a rumor, to be honest. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you though. It must have been a shock to hear it from Captain Rogers.”

Now, now was the time. She’d have to do it now.

She opened her mouth and the words wouldn’t come out. Looking at Peggy’s obvious excitement at being reunited with Rogers, she couldn’t find it in herself to say anything.

To tell Peggy would mean to have Peggy in on the lie. Sharon had seen how such lying and
keeping secrets had brewed resentment between Peggy and her daughter that had carried on for years, and how those bridges had only been amended within the last decade. How could she ask Peggy to keep such a secret from Rogers?

Simple. She couldn’t.

This secret would be Sharon’s to bear. She would keep Peggy away from its ugliness.

What Peggy had with Rogers was pure yet tragic, Sharon wouldn’t add to it. Let Peggy have her time with him and be free of such lies. They deserved some happiness.

“You needn’t worry, dearest,” Sharon blinked and looked at her aunt in surprise, “I promise not to breathe any word that I have a niece in the agency. It will be our little secret.” She smiled as if sharing an age-old joke and Sharon sent a pantomime of one back.

Our little secret, indeed.

Sharon glanced to the one photo that contained an image of her in the room. It was an old photo from when Sharon was six and spending Thanksgiving with Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel. Uncle Daniel was conked out on the couch, his cane resting idly at his feet. Squished together in an armchair were Peggy and Sharon, Peggy reading aloud from one of Sharon’s favorite childhood books. Her blonde hair was platinum at that age and in curly ringlets and she was a vision in a purple dress.

Times were so simple then.

If only they could be that way now.

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**July 15th, 2012**

**Washington, D.C.**

They were less than a day away now and Sharon was at her wit’s end. There was still so much to be done and so little time to do it. She and Nat had been firing texts back and forth all morning and while Natasha was holding down the fort at SHIELD, Sharon was making her way to Dupont Circle to oversee the final checks to Rogers’ new apartment. Let the record stand that she had been against Fury’s order to bug the place but she had been outvoted by Fury and Natasha and now she was just living with it. Sure, she could understand the reason, but an invasion of privacy was still an invasion of privacy, national icon or not.

Pulling off a smooth parallel parking maneuver, she exited her Stingray and entered Rogers’ new apartment building at 1601 18th St. NW just northeast of the famed Dupont roundabout. She took the stairs up to the fourth floor and entered the hallway, the wood floor creaking beneath her feet. The building had been chosen for its old feeling and historic touches in an attempt to make Rogers comfortable. As if the man was ever able to forget he now lived in an entirely different century, but whatever, Sharon would try and make him comfortable.
She continued down the hallway, passing Agent 29’s new apartment. The door to Rogers’ apartment was open as SHIELD staff buzzed around, fixing up the final touches on furnishing the place. It was a lovely apartment, rather nondescript, but still, any Washingtonian would give up Sunday brunches and Georgetown Cupcake to live in such a desirable neighborhood.

She sauntered in, nodding to agents as they passed her. It had a large kitchen and in the living room a record player with an assortment of records dating back to Rogers’ heyday. She turned to the bookshelf and overlooked the selection: *Never Surrender, Madame President, The Night Stalkers, The Second World War* just to name a few.

Just as she stood up straight she felt a presence behind her and turned to see Agent 29 looking at her appraisingly. The two had never worked together before, but Sharon had heard of Twenty-Nine’s renown. Considered the best actress in SHIELD, Agent 29 often got some of SHIELD juiciest deep undercover missions. Rumor had it she had studied at Julliard before being swept up by SHIELD.

Windswept chocolate brown hair that was immaculately styled, dark inquisitive eyes, Southern charm to spare and the ability to become a chameleon at any moment and become a new person at the drop of a hat, made Agent 29 a deadly spy. Sharon hoped she’d be a strong ally in this new mission of having Rogers’ back. She didn’t fully understand Fury’s desire to have an undercover bodyguard of sorts for when he was home. She didn’t see how Agent 29 could protect him in any way if he was down an out, but orders were orders and she would trust in Fury’s beliefs. Sharon and Nat would have his back on missions and at SHIELD, Twenty-Nine would keep an eye out for when he was home.

It should be a perfect system. But nothing is ever perfect.

“Agent 13,” Twenty-Nine greeted courteously as Sharon nodded in return.

“How goes it, Twenty-Nine?”

“We’re almost complete here. Captain Rogers should find the space warm and inviting at his arrival tomorrow.”

In Agent 29’s arms were several scrubs, folded neatly. Sharon had almost forgotten Twenty-Nine’s cover story. She would be a nurse working at MedStar. Sharon knew it wasn’t a coincidence that Twenty-Nine would be holding the same occupation as Rogers’ mother. As well as the fact that she had a passing resemblance to Peggy with her dark hair and eyes.

It seemed that Fury had thought of everything. There were always ways to exploit a situation to get the outcome one wanted.

Fury wanted Rogers and Agent 29 to be neighborly and chummy, then they would be. Sharon only hoped that Twenty-Nine wouldn’t play him too hard. She cleared her throat and gestured to the open space of the apartment.

“Where are the bugs?”

“One in the kitchen, two in the living room, one in the front hallway and one in the bedroom.”

Sharon jerked around and stared at Twenty-Nine with a baffled expression, a simmer of anger rippling beneath her façade.

“The bedroom? Doesn’t the man deserve a sliver of privacy? Take it out.”
Agent 29 blinked in confusion, not used to having a colleague question her so.

“But Director Fury-“

“I don’t care about Director Fury. This is a war hero and a national icon, and more importantly a human being and he deserves the right to do whatever he wishes in his bedroom without us listening in, whether he be alone or with company. Take it out.”

“But-“

“I won’t ask again, Twenty-Nine.” Sharon’s words held a feeling of finality to them that even Agent 29 didn’t feel like fighting. Righteousness wasn’t just a commodity Rogers played in spades. Agent 29 sighed and nodded.

“Of course, Agent 13; it will be taken out.”

Sharon gave a sharp nod and felt the crease in her forehead give way a bit. She felt a headache coming.

Phenomenal.

“I trust that everything else is going according to schedule?”

“Yes, the team will be done here within the hour and then I’ll begin settling in the adjacent apartment. We are a go here.”

“Fantastic,” Sharon replied dryly, “Romanoff will be in touch if anything changes. If not, well, good luck with Rogers.”

“I’m sure I’ll be able to handle him just fine,” Twenty-Nine replied with a hint of a smirk. It marred her pretty face Sharon absentmindedly thought, it made her look unrelenting. That was most likely the desired effect.

Sharon exited the bustling apartment and hurried back down to her car, wanting to leave the whole scene behind.

This was her decision. She had said yes. She knew what she was getting herself into. And yet….

She felt stifled in her own skin. All she wanted was to breathe without the knots in her stomach weighing her down.

Perhaps it would be easier once she saw him, face to face. He’d no longer be the legend she had grown up admiring.

He’d just be a man. A man who had shaped her childhood and world, but a man nonetheless.

Maybe, just maybe, things would be easier once they started working together.

She could only hope so.

Tomorrow was fast approaching.
Thank you so much for the reviews for the previous chapter! I'm glad people are still enjoying the story, even with the long break. Please keep it up, reviews keep me motivated.

Also, exciting news, Steve will finally make his grand entrance in the next chapter! Then the party will really get started.

Moving onto pics!

Sharon's childhood home:

Amanda Carter:
Harrison Carter:

Agent 29:
Brody:
The First Encounter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July 16th, 2012

Reagan National Airport

Dodging a twin stroller, Sharon tucked herself into a corner of the hustling terminal as more and more people spewed out from baggage claim heading this way and that, volleying for taxis and shuttles heading into metropolitan D.C. Dressed innocuously as a young, millennial tourist in beat-up sneakers, skirt, t-shirt and a well-worn denim jacket, Sharon looked no different than anyone else milling around the airport. She peered over the top of her sunglasses and kept an eye wandering to all exits and making contingency plans as a way of passing the time.

Her eyes meandered to the screen displaying incoming flights and honed in on one in particular. It had landed on time fifteen minutes ago.

Her target should be making his grand entrance any moment now.

As she waited she was embarrassed to notice her right leg bouncing up and down absentmindedly, and in the span of thirty seconds, she had cracked every single knuckle on her two hands.

She had hardly slept a wink the night before. It didn’t help that this morning alone she had downed three shots of espresso on top of two cups of coffee as a way of calming her nerves.

She was…jittery.

She’d need to get it under control before show time. Almost as if reading her mind (more likely having noticed her on the airport security monitors) a voice echoed into her left ear.

“Stop fidgeting,” Natasha ordered, “Relax. It’s just Rogers.”

“Easy for you to say,” Sharon snapped back, startling a young couple standing a few feet away from her. She flashed them a quick grin before turning her back to them and hunching inward. “You’re not about to meet your childhood idol.”

“Well, Anna Pavlova has been dead for more than eighty years, I’d be worried to run into her. Although, if Rogers can come back from the dead, then maybe….”

“Very funny, Nat.”

“I try. Now buck up, Thirteen; we’ve got work to do.”

Sharon nodded and turned back to the gates to watch the newest surge of departing passengers. She leaned back against the wall and loosely crossed her arms over her chest, forcing herself to take steadying breaths.

To entertain herself she watched passively as passengers embraced friends and loved ones. A college-age girl was hugging her mother when Sharon noticed a flash of blonde hair over the girl’s
shoulder. She raised her head and saw him.

Steve Rogers.

He was easy to make out in a crowd. The man couldn’t be subtle even if he tried. His broad shoulders were splitting through the crowd as if it were the Red Sea and he towered over most everyone else. His blonde hair was neatly arranged in a comb-over fashion that hadn’t been in vogue for a very long time. Outfitted in dark, high-waisted trousers, scuffed oxfords, a simple, pale green plaid shirt and a frayed, dark leather jacket that didn’t look to be from this century. Fury had mentioned in passing that several of Rogers’ possessions from the War that had been lingering in storage for years had been given to the good captain.

Perhaps the leather jacket was one of them. The craftsmanship and quality of it seemed from long ago.

He didn’t seem quite real, seeing him up close and in person for the first time.

He truly was a man out of time.

The only effort he had made in hiding his identity was a pair of aviator glasses covering his eyes. They had done nothing to stop the staring.

Sharon was fairly certain that the gags of women staring giddily after him had no idea he was a national icon. All they saw were the broad shoulders, trim waist, and muscles that his leather jacket had no hope of hiding. They also had no way of knowing that his enhanced hearing more than likely meant he was catching every giggle and throwaway comment about his impressive physique.

He looked...different than Sharon had imagined. She had seen the movie reels and the news reports about him, she had even seen the few photos the various Commandos and Peggy had had of him, but he looked as if he could be an entirely different person. His face was pinched, his mouth turned downward in not quite a frown, but more so an eternal grimace he couldn’t seem to shake. His shoulders were hunched forward as if trying to conceal his bulk and failing miserably. His head was pointed downward in a clear attempt at not making eye contact with anyone else, and he kept a wide radius of everyone else, making sure no one crossed into his space.

He was trying to be...small.

Peggy had talked of this sometimes, that Rogers had spent the vast majority of his life as a 5’2” enfeebled soul that had only lived as long as he had due to his own tenacity and the unending belief both his mother and Bucky Barnes had had in him. That even when he gained the height, weight, and strength from Erskine’s serum, he would still act like that spitfire from Brooklyn who had a chip the size of Manhattan on his shoulders and who caused more than his fair share of headaches for Barnes.

He’d curl into himself, try and stay out of peoples’ way, more used to being the one knocked around rather than the one knocking around. Peggy believed he never fully became comfortable in his new skin.

It appeared his first few months in the 21st century had done nothing to ease that comfort.

Blinking away the thoughts, Sharon noticed that Rogers had a duffle bag slung across his shoulders and he seemed intent on exiting without any notice from anyone else.

Game time then.
Sharon curled her hands into wrists, sucked in a breath and then released her hands, pulling her shoulders back and standing up straight.

“Showtime, Carter,” she muttered to herself, game face firmly on and heartbeat in check. “Target acquired,” she murmured to Natasha before shaking her head and marching forward.

“*Go get our boy.*”

As determined as she was, Sharon approached her mark as she always did, fully in character. She walked loosely, her eyes transfixed above, giving off the aura of a traveler and tourist lost in her own head. She paid no attention to others and it was with remarkable ease that she was able to bump into Rogers as she passed him, sending both stumbling.

It was like ramming into a wall.

He really was all muscle.

Sharon careened into him and reached out, grasping his shoulder so as not to fall on her butt. As the pair righted themselves, Sharon felt the impatient jostling of others hurrying past the two. She shook her head, an embarrassed flush gracing her face as she moved her sunglasses to the top of her head and flashed an apologetic grin to Rogers.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry about that! I’m such a klutz!” Sharon grinned self-deprecatingly and shrugged good-naturedly.

“I swear, I should just stick a sign on me that warns ‘There be danger here. Avoid at all costs.’”

Rogers, for his part, blinked and looked baffled at this interaction. Sharon couldn’t tell if he didn’t remember the last time anyone had bumped into him, or if he couldn’t remember the last time someone had addressed him as anything other than Captain America.

The key here was to give him no reason for him to believe she had any idea who he was. He was just a boy and she was just a girl and this interaction would scream of normality.

“And now I’m blabbering at you, you’re probably thinking ‘Someone get this chatty Cathy away from me.’”

“I…no, wait…what?” Rogers stuttered before biting his cheek and looking away, his cheeks staining a light pink as Sharon stifled her smile. His voice was deeper than she had been anticipating.

Rogers in person was…oddly endearing.

Oh no, she was having feelings. She needed to squash them and go in for the kill.

Sharon gave him a moment to collect himself before inquiringly curiously, “So, business or pleasure?”

Rogers' eyes looked about ready to bug out of his head.

“Excuse me?” he shuffled his duffle bag nervously across his shoulders and Sharon once more jumped in.

“Your reason for visiting our nation’s capital, business or pleasure?”
Realization dawned and Rogers flushed again as he tilted his head carefully and considered his answer.

“I-I’m here for business. Moving here for my new job.” Even from behind his shades, he kept glancing at her skittishly, waiting for the shoe to drop and for her to declare for all to hear that he was Captain America. Well, the joke was on him.

Sharon bobbed her head and beamed at him.

“Well, congratulations! Excited?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Rogers muttered under his breath and Sharon stifled a snort threatening to get out. Rogers started angling his body towards the exit door and Sharon knew she needed to wrap this up neatly.

“Best of luck and all that. And again, I’m so sorry for ramming into you like a bull in a china shop.”

Sharon reached out and patted his shoulder, not able to ignore how he momentarily startled at her touch as if he wasn’t used being touched anymore. Sharon’s smile turned increasingly sincere as Rogers nodded and ran a hand through his hair.

“Well, of all the people who could've run into me, you weren’t the worst.”

Sharon blinked at Rogers for a moment before grinning, making sure her left dimple popped cheekily.

“Enjoy DC, it’s a fun town if you know where to go.” She stepped back from the Avenger and offered a wave as he looked at her for a moment longer, nodded his head and turned, heading out of the exit and into the muggy D.C. day. Sharon watched him go, her heart thudding loudly in her chest.

She had just met Steve Rogers.

The five-year-old in her was crowing with delight, but the spy side was telling her to get over herself and be objective.

If this was how she always felt interacting with him things would definitely get interesting.

A crackling in her ear brought her back to the present.

“Did you plant it?”

Sharon scoffed, “What do you take me for, an amateur? Of course, I planted it. We’re good to go.”

Reaching into her purse, she pulled out her SHIELD phone and within a few button clicks found herself staring at a moving green dot. The dot was Rogers and he was currently heading to his new apartment in Dupont Circle. Nestled discreetly under the collar of his jacket was the small tracking device Sharon had planted when she ran into the captain. She pocketed the cellphone and began walking towards the exits, Nat still chattering in her ear. Sharon absentmindedly drowned her out till one question caught her attention.

“Did you notice his butt?”

Sharon halted and was immediately run into by a speed walking suit who was yammering loudly
into his phone. Sharon groaned and rolled her eyes upward as she continued walking.

“Nat, not now.”

“What? Hill was impressed with it. I’ve been reading up on our boy’s days as a dancing monkey for the USO and many firsthand accounts state that the highlight was the good Captain in his little booty shorts. I want your opinion on the matter, for science.”

“It’s a bit flat,” Sharon growled back, startling an elderly woman to her right.

“Hmm. Pity. Maybe you need an up close and personal experience-“

“Thirteen out.”

Sharon yanked out her comm and tossed it into her purse, zipping it shut noisily. She pushed through the doors and walked into the sunshine.

Steve Rogers was now her co-worker and partner.

Game on.

July 16th, 2012

Washington, D.C.

Really, in hindsight, Sharon should not have been surprised that upon entering her apartment a few hours after her encounter with Rogers, Nat would be seated casually at her dining room table. Leather jacket slung loosely on a chair, feet up on her wooden table and the red hair assassin in question leaning back in her seat as if she owned the place.

What was her life sometimes?

“Really?” Sharon questioned as she tossed her keys aside and moved closer to the table.

“Honestly, does anyone use the door anymore? I need a security system.”

“As if I couldn’t hack that thing in 30 seconds flat,” Natasha threw back flippantly, a grin on her face as she peered up at Sharon. Sharon shrugged in response, it was true after all. Natasha leaned forward in her chair and gestured to the paper bags resting idly on the tabletop.

“Stop with the histrionics, Carter, and sit your butt down. I brought you burgers and everything from Good Stuff Eatery.”

Sharon perked up at this exciting development. Spike Mendelsohn had always been her favorite Top Chef.

She eagerly sat down and began rifling through the bags and her heart melted when she saw an
added bonus.

“You even got me a toasted marshmallow shake? Nat, you shouldn’t have,” she gushed, batting her eyelashes as Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Don’t say I never do anything for you. Now, shut up and eat.”

The pair heartily began eating their burgers all the while listening to the near silence coming from the sound system that was also resting on Sharon’s table.

“Has he been making any noise?” Sharon questioned nodding to the device as Nat shook her head.

“Not a peep since he arrived a few hours ago. I’m starting to worry he may actually be showing his age and has had a heart attack.”

“Wouldn’t that be embarrassing for Fury,” Sharon sarcastically quipped as she stuffed her face with French fries. “After all, he seems to think Rogers’ will be the cherry on top that is SHIELD.”

“Please, everyone knows I’m Fury’s cherry. Rogers is…the chocolate sauce.”

“What am I then?”

“Hmmm…those icky peanuts at the bottom people put on sundaes as a way of fooling themselves that they are being slightly healthier.”

Silence reigned for a few moments as Sharon blinked warily at Natasha, her hand still outstretched towards her milkshake.

“Thanks, Nat…I think.”

Natasha nodded sanguinely, “You’re welcome.”

The two went back to staring at the sound system for a few beats before Natasha huffed and exclaimed,

“Well, this is getting boring. I think it’s time we send in Twenty-Nine.”

Sharon shrugged and nodded in acquiescence, no time like the present she silently mused. Natasha reached up for ear and spoke aloud to the room.

“Agent 29, initiate Operation Friendly Neighbor.”

Sharon couldn’t hear the response but only a few minutes later the silence in Rogers’ apartment was shattered by his doorbell chime. Sharon’s ears pricked as she heard the shuffling of feet, the first noise Rogers had made since she began listening, and the sound of light footsteps heading towards the door. Next came the unlatching of the lock and the creak of the door opening as Rogers came face to face with Agent 29, or as he would know her, Kate Sawyer his next door neighbor.

“Well howdy, new neighbor,” Twenty-Nine drawled sweetly in the way that only Southern women could pull off. Sharon knew she was standing there in a pair of pale, pink scrubs, her hair up in a messy bun looking tired yet friendly, her makeup light and natural so as to give off the best first impression.

“Um…hello,” Rogers awkwardly volleyed back and Sharon was beginning to wonder if this was truly Rogers’ default stage. Dum-Dum had always made it fairly clear that Rogers lacked greatly in
charisma and apparently human interaction.

“I heard through the complex gossip chain that we were getting a new addition, so I thought I’d come and introduce myself. The name is Kate Sawyer, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Sharon imagined Twenty-Nine had struck out her free hand and a moment of silence followed as the pair shook hands. The silence continued on as Sharon and Nat exchanged looks across the table.

“Well,” Twenty-Nine chimed in, “Do I get a name or should I just refer to you as Apartment 4B?” her tone was light and jovial, a hint of a giggle underneath her words. She truly was a seminal actress.

Rogers cleared his throat and began speaking, “I’m Steve…Steve Rogers.”

The words came out begrudgingly as if he had to force them from his lips. It was clearly his go-to response when interacting with others was to wait for them to realize he was Captain America and then scream hysterically in his face.

What a way to live.

Luckily, or unluckily for him, Agent 29 knew exactly who he was.

“Well, what a strong name! It’s so nice to meet you, Steve Rogers. I hope you’re hungry because I have a ‘welcome to the apartment block’ gift, a warm and homemade cherry pie.”

Contrary to public opinion, Rogers’ favorite flavor of pie was not, in fact, apple, but rather cherry. Sharon had learned this from Peggy and had passed it along to Twenty-Nine. The rustling of aluminum foil could be heard as the pie was exchanged between the two.

“Thank you,” Rogers replied, a touch of warmth to his words, “I appreciate it.”

“You’ll appreciate it more once you take a bite out of it. It’s a Sawyer family recipe from the foothills of North Carolina.”

Sharon guessed Twenty-Nine was smiling beguilingly as she leaned in Rogers’ doorway. Silence again stretched out and Twenty-Nine must have realized she was encountering a wall not even she could scale. Time for a tactical retreat then.

“Well, I have an early shift tomorrow and some laundry to attend to. But I just wanted to say hello, and hopefully, I’ll see you around, Mr. Rogers.”

Natasha snorted and began humming the tune to Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.

“It was nice to meet you as well, Kate, and thanks again for the pie.”

The faint sound of footsteps could be heard and when Agent 29 spoke again her voice sounded farther away as if she was standing right outside the door of her new apartment and had turned back to Rogers.

“A word of advice, the best time to do laundry is late at night. The machines are always backed up in the daylight hours.”

“Thanks, but I actually have a machine in my unit. But I’ll keep that in mind if it ever breaks.”

SHIELD had installed the matching washing machine and dryer so Rogers’ wouldn’t be forced to
socialize. They were thoughtful that way.

The door closed and once more there was a shuffling of feet heading to what appeared to be the kitchen. A tiny clang sounded, most likely Rogers placing the pie tin down on his quartz countertop. A cabinet drawer was pulled open and closed and a moment later the sound of aluminum being set aside as Rogers cut into his pie. Chewing was too faint a sound to be picked up by the bugs in Rogers’ apartment so Sharon and Nat sat in silence for several minutes before Rogers’ footsteps carried him into his living room.

He shuffled around a bit, flipped a light switch and several long moments later Sharon heard the familiar scratch of a record player starting and music began drifting into Sharon’s dining room.

‘There is a tavern in the town and there my true love sits him down.’

Sharon blinked rapidly and sat up straight. There was something similar about this song, a memory from long ago.

‘Fare thee well for I must leave thee, do not let the parting grieve thee.’

Peggy had hummed this tune once when she had regaled to Sharon about encountering Rogers’ in a bustling pub after his famed Azzano exploit that had reunited him with Bucky Barnes and been the beginning of the Howling Commandos.

Peggy had been in a red dress and had talked of one day hoping to find the right dance partner. She had meant Rogers. This was where the romance and longing had begun. That was the moment Peggy and Rogers began their path as star-crossed lovers.

‘I can no longer stay with you, I’ll hang my harp on a weeping willow tree’

“Hey! I was listening to that!” Natasha complained as Sharon unceremoniously reached out and turned off the listening device, plunging the pair into a reverberating silence. The room suddenly felt far too large for Sharon’s liking as she blinked away the lyrics of the song. She swallowed and shrugged casually, just a touch too tense, as she leaned back into her chair.

“He’s just listening to music, that’s hardly anything groundbreaking. Let’s give him the night to himself, there’s nothing to glean from listening in like Big Brother.”

Natasha regarded Sharon for several long moments, her eyes narrowed and her eyebrows pinched and Sharon prayed that Nat would just let her get away with this. Natasha must have found something for her face cleared and she gave a singular nod.

“Alright, Carter, we’ll do this your way.”

Natasha stood, gathered up her coat and began heading to the doorway. She paused next to Sharon’s chair and seemed to be debating something internally with herself. Sharon watched her curiously as Natasha finally reached out and placed her hand on Sharon’s shoulder, leaving it there for a moment, squeezing just a tinge too much and then lowering her hand and heading out as if she had never been there at all.

Sharon didn’t even hear her front door open and close.

When she finally figured she was alone she sighed and slumped down in her chair, her burgers not settling as easily as she wished.

In the almost oppressive silence of her apartment, she placed her head down on her table and closed
her eyes.
The song still haunting her memory.

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_July 17th, 2012_

_The Triskelion, Atrium_

Sharon found herself absentmindedly fiddling with the end of her minimalist grey blouse as she
waited for Rogers’ imminent arrival. Word had spread like hot fire through the Triskelion and it
seemed like every agent, tech specialist, handler and STRIKE team member had found a reason to
be loitering in the wide open space of the atrium.

Sunlight filtered in through the glass pane ceiling, it was another typical, muggy DC summer day.

Sharon checked her phone for what felt like the tenth time in the last five minutes and the green dot
was closer than ever; in fact, it was pulling up from the Potomac across the Theodore Roosevelt
Bridge. He’d be here any moment now.

Sharon cracked her knuckles and neck just as the dot appeared outside the front doors.

Time to face the music.

Sharon knew the moment Rogers entered the building because an almost insect-like buzzing went
throughout the crowd. Some of the best of the best of the spy world were reduced to gawker status
when encountering a simple man who spent his free time looking like an American flag.

Sharon could totally understand their awe inspired looks.

Sharon pushed her away from the gathering crowd and began walking towards Rogers. He was
outfitted nearly identical to what he had been wearing yesterday at the airport, only the green plaid
shirt had been switched for a blue one, which brought out the blue of eyes Sharon noticed minutely
and then pushed away. He was still wearing the leather jacket which would prove useful to Sharon.

She stepped up right into his eyesight and she watched the exact moment he took notice of her. His
eyes first flitted past her, rapidly taking in all of SHIELD, but it only took a few seconds before
they flashed back to her and he paused completely, his face shuttering down and drawing a blank
as she walked up to him.

“Captain Rogers,” she greeted cordially and professionally, placing her hands behind her back and
rocking onto her heels.

“You’re the girl from the airport.” He accused eyes narrowed as he took in the sight of her. Sharon
kept her head up and her shoulders straight as he evaluated her.

“Yes, I am.”
“So it was all a setup then, bumping into me, making small talk. You were playing me.”

“I was testing you,” Sharon shot back and ignored Rogers’ snort of contempt.

“Testing me for what?”

“Well, for one your memory. We wanted to see how attuned you are to your settings, it’s rather important in the spy business. You did well with that, but the other, well…” Sharon trailed off as Rogers’ glared at her. She sighed and reached out, ignoring his flinch and placing her hand underneath her jacket collar. She easily found the tracking device and pulled it out, holding it up for him to see.

“You failed the other one rather miserably.”

“You placed a tracking device on me,” he stated flatly, his face having no expression in it.

“I was testing you. It’s what we do here at SHIELD.”

“On Fury’s orders,” Rogers snipped and Sharon shrugged.

“Everyone has a boss, Fury didn’t make me do anything I wasn’t willing to.”

The words were mostly truthful.

“Now, if you will come with me I can begin your tour and orientation.” Sharon nodded to the atrium where the pair were still being ogled by the greater SHIELD community.

“Oh, because I should really trust you.”

His words hurt more than they should have but Sharon acted nonchalantly as she began walking towards the elevators.

“Welcome to SHIELD, Captain, where no one truly ever trusts anyone else. Now, are you coming or what?”

It took a moment or two, but Sharon finally heard the tread of footsteps behind her and she internally heaved in a sigh of relief.

This was definitely going to be interesting.

Chapter End Notes

They've finally met!

Thank you so much for the reviews, please keep it up!

Pic time :)  

Sharon’s outfit at the airport:
Sharon’s sunglasses at the airport:

Sharon’s outfit at SHIELD:
Hey, I Just Met You

Chapter Summary

It was a well-known fact that pretty much everyone at SHIELD was a masochist of some sort, but field agents had that trait in spades. If they could bypass Medical they did, even when they were bleeding out their eyeballs and had organs tumbling out of their stomachs. Barton once circumvented Medical by shimmying through the air vents, a truly stunning feat considering his leg had been broken in three places and he had been high on horse tranquilizers. Nat once slipped out unseen while under observation of a medically induced coma after a mission gone wrong in Beirut.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

July 17th, 2012

The Triskelion

“…and over there is Accounting and Statistics,” Sharon droned an hour into her ‘Welcome to SHIELD’ tour. Rogers had been a constant shadow at her back, studiously keeping two paces behind her. He had yet to say any words, only throwing out heavily loaded mms and grunts when needed. She felt the weight of his hardened stare at her back and with each step, she took she felt her shoulders tightening.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the elevator doors opened to an empty car and stepped in Rogers following and keeping a healthy amount of space from her in the open glass, steel-toed lift.

“Medical,” she addressed to the computer system and remained still as the elevator began its descent, humming all the while. She racked her brain for anything she might have missed so far. They had viewed the training grounds, the Armory, Communications, Air Cavalry, Special Forces, Human Resources, etc. At this point one of the only things left was –

“The 45th floor houses the World Security Council headed by Secretary Alexander Pierce. I’d introduce you, but he’s in Bangkok for the foreseeable future for a conference. It’s a pity, I hear he’s a big fan of yours.”

Rogers remained stoically silent as Sharon sighed and continued.

“It doesn’t matter anyway, you only go and see the World Security Council when they want to yell at you about something. Hmmm, on second thought maybe you will spend a lot of time up there.”

Rogers stonily didn’t take Sharon’s bait for a joke.

Man, what a tough crowd.

To her embarrassment, she nearly jumped out of her skin when he finally spoke. His voice echoed
sharply in the confines of the elevator.

“I do plan on seeing them soon and demanding how they could ever think nuking Manhattan was an acceptable idea.”

She should have figured that. Morita had always said that Rogers’ middle name was Righteousness. She imagined he was going to cause a fair amount of headaches for Fury and SHIELD. Well, that was Public Relations’ dilemma.

“Yeah, that too. Moving on.”

Just at that moment, the doors opened and the two departed heading into the one area of SHIELD that field agents avoided at all costs.

Medical.

It was a well-known fact that pretty much everyone at SHIELD was a masochist of some sort, but field agents had that trait in spades. If they could bypass Medical they did, even when they were bleeding out their eyeballs and had organs tumbling out of their stomachs. Barton once circumvented Medical by shimmying through the air vents, a truly stunning feat considering his leg had been broken in three places and he had been high on horse tranquilizers. Nat once slipped out unseen while under observation of a medically induced coma after a mission gone wrong in Beirut.

It was a long-standing game of cat and mouse between field agents and the medical staff that often involved threats, the intent of violence, and a fair amount of corralling and bribery.

The automatic doors slid open and Sharon ignored the instant silence that followed the pair as they maneuvered their way through Medical. Wide eyes and awed expressions were all that the doctors and nurses were sporting and Sharon didn’t even need to eye Rogers to know he was ducking his head and curling his shoulders in to block out the stares.

Sharon picked up the pace and when they came upon the right door, she gave a quick rapt of her knuckles before gesturing to Rogers to head in. She followed behind just as Dr. Oukri rounded her lab table to greet the pair.

An innovator in her field, Dr. Oukri was one of SHIELD’s best. Taller than the average woman with a shock of thick, curly hair and an infectious personality, she was one of the best at handling the flighty behavior of the field agents.

“Captain Rogers!” she greeted in her melodious voice. “It is such an honor to meet you.”

She shook his hand enthusiastically as Rogers quirked an eyebrow and shot her a small, polite grin.

“It’s nice to meet you…”

“Dr. Zenaye Oukri.”

She flashed a smile and nod towards Sharon who returned it as she leaned back against the bare wall, crossing her arms over her chest and taking the scene in silent amusement.

Dr. Oukri stepped back from the good captain, a broad grin still on her face as she placed her hands on her hips and took him in like he was a specimen under a microscope. She was nearly buzzing in excitement not noticing for a second as Rogers’ face reddened from the attention. Sharon stifled a giggle into her shoulder as he scowled at her. She shrugged cheekily in return as Dr. Oukri finally
came out of her dream world.

“Well, let’s get down to the dirty business,” she laughed at Rogers’ extreme eyebrow raise and began moving to the lab table, “Nothing untoward, Captain, that I can promise you. Just the basics: a simple physical and some blood tests. It’s the standard for every SHIELD agent. Please take a seat.”

She gestured to a bench as Rogers stood still for a moment before giving a small sigh, removing his jacket and seating himself down. Dr. Oukri listened to his heartbeat and commanded he give several deep breaths, she checked his eyes and ears as well as his reflexes, took his temperature finding that he ran several degrees hotter than normal humans (this already had been gleaned from Howard Stark’s wartime journals) and so on.

Sharon watched impassively keeping her eyes trained on Rogers’ face. He took in everything politely and unemotionally. He must be used to the prodding and poking from the medical world. Sharon vaguely remembered Peggy mentioning once that if Colonel Phillips had gotten his way Rogers would have spent the war as a lab rat.

Sharon straightened as the blood test commenced curious to see firsthand Rogers’ healing capabilities. He didn’t so much as flinch when the needle was injected into his arm. A few minutes later the needle was removed and Sharon stepped closer and watched in awe as the spot imprint of broken skin healed in less than a minute, leaving his skin as unmarred as a newborn baby. Even the slight swelling around the injection site had faded and flattened out.

“Impressive,” she murmured as Dr. Oukri hurried to her lab table, typed rapidly into her SHIELD issued tablet and a moment later brought up several holograms of results. Her eyes widened as she took in the findings looking like a kid at Christmas.

“Wow,” she whispered to herself.

“Care to share your results with the rest of the class, Doc?” Sharon questioned as Dr. Oukri came back to the present with a sheepish shrug and a quick run of her fingers through her hair.

“It’s just…the results, they’re quite remarkable.”

She turned to the pair and began elucidating on what had her so excited.

“There wasn’t much to glean about you and your physiology from Dr. Erskine’s notes or Howard Stark’s musings.” She paused and looked right at Rogers. “You’re a medical mystery. The way you survived in the ice for so long. Many in the medical profession are speculating that with the way your cells regenerate it’s possible you age much slower than the average person, in fact, some believe it’s possible you may not age at all.”

Rogers flinched which and Sharon sucked in a quick breath as she felt her eyebrows running away from her, perching high in her hairline.

Living forever. Only Rogers would have such poor luck.

She glanced over at him and saw how tightly coiled his body was and she sighed. Good damn imprinting. She pushed herself off from the wall, clearing her throat as two pairs of eyes looked towards her.

“I believe you have some tests to attend to, Dr. Oukri,” she pointedly remarked and Dr. Oukri finally seemed to realize that her next great pet project was not as illuminating to the man in question.
A faint blush came to her cheeks as she nodded.

“Of course, I’ll have my hands full for the foreseeable future. It was a joy meeting you, Captain Rogers. Don’t be a stranger.”

On anyone else, the words would seem flirtatious, but both Sharon and Rogers could see the earnestness on her face as she once more shook Rogers’ hand and sent a nod Sharon’s way. The pair departed from Medical, the silence of awed spectators following them the whole way. They had only entered the elevator and Sharon was working up the courage to say something to the Avenger when Maria Hill’s voice sounded in her comm.

“Agent 13, please escort Captain Rogers towards Director Fury’s office.”

Sharon nodded to thin air and announced the 40th floor to the computer as Rogers’ regarded her curiously.

“Boss man wants to see you,” was all she said in explanation as Rogers’ blank face hardened into marble. It was clear he had a few bones to pick with Fury.

To be honest, at this point she did as well.

“Captain,” Director Fury lazily greeted as Rogers marched heavily into his stark and sterile office. The only delightful thing one could say about the cold suite was its fantastic view of the D.C. skyline.

“Enjoying your first day?”

“Cut the bullshit, Fury,” Rogers spat coming to a stop in front of the sleek desk. It was at this point Fury turned his chair so as to give Roger’s at least the appearance of his full attention.

“Excuse me?”

“What kind of stunt are you pulling? Having a spy tag me with a tracking device less than five minutes in this swamp?”

“The agent was doing her job, and a mighty fine one at that seeing that she pulled a fast one on the great Captain America. Let’s be honest, you didn’t even see it coming.”

“I shouldn’t have to see it coming. You should just tr-“

“What? Trust you? If you haven’t forgotten, Captain, we’re spies here. Trust is the last thing on our minds.”

Rogers’ shoulders slumped as he regarded the man behind the desk. Taking pity on the super soldier Fury took a different, more agreeable approach to the problem.

“Look, don’t take it personally. I wanted to test your awareness. Now you know you need some work.”

“It wasn’t like this in the War,” Rogers muttered quietly to himself as Fury chuckled.
“We’re not in the War anymore, Captain. It’s a brave new world and you’re going to need to find your place in it.”

“That may be so,” Rogers volleyed back as he stood straight and crossed his arms over his chest. “Look, I understand you’re doing your job and that she was doing her job, but I don’t think I can work with the young woman out there. I need to trust my compatriots and I can’t with her, not after the way we met.”

“I’m sorry you feel this way. Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Rogers furrowed his brow, unused to his orders not being followed; even if the Howling Commandos had always done so with whining and groaning. Same as Howard.

“You have to assign me someone else. Anyone else, even Romanoff is preferable.”

“Hmmm…no. I don’t have to do anything. That’s why I’m the Director and you’re a Level 8 field agent.”

“I won’t work with her, Nick.”

“Well, that’s too damn bad because I’m not assigning you anyone else. That agent out there has the potential to be one of the best. She can learn a lot from you, and you can learn a thing or two from her. You hate it? Well, learn to suck it up. She’s not going anywhere.”

Rogers narrowed his eyes and his chest puffed out. Fury had a faint recollection of dinner with Peggy Carter and her husband Daniel, a young Sharon drawing in the living room, and Carter was recounting a story of how when Rogers was a man on a mission he could become a bit like a hurricane, leaving only total destruction and chaos in his wake.

Well, Fury was living in a world where gods roamed freely and aliens came out of the sky. A super-soldier ready to throw a tantrum didn’t faze him in the slightest.

Knowing a losing battle when he saw when Rogers did the only tactical thing, he retreated.

“Understood, sir.”

Lesser men would have buckled under so much scorn placed in a single word, but Fury had always been the better man. He nodded once to Rogers, effectively dismissing him, and turned back to the windows.

Sharon was texting Nat on her phone when Rogers emerged from Fury’s office. She pocketed her phone, standing and running her hands over the wrinkles of her blouse as Rogers came to stand before her.

She was surprised he had come out in one piece. Fury had a habit of chewing his prey and spitting them back out to be finished by greedy vultures lying in wake. Rogers opened his mouth, closed it, collected his thoughts and then opened his mouth again.

“Well, Agent,” he began awkwardly as Sharon quirked a brow, “It seems like we’ll be spending the foreseeable future with one another.”

“Indeed, Captain,” she replied with a confused blink of her brown eyes. He gave a jerky nod as he placed his hands in his pockets.

“It seems like you know everything about me, but I don’t even know what to call you.”
Seeing the olive branch for what it was, Sharon was quick to latch on and try and make things amenable between the pair.

“You may call me Agent 13.”

The Avenger regarded her silently for a moment as if expecting a punchline to a joke. When it didn’t come he was quick to ask,

“You don’t have a name or something?”

*If only you knew,* biting back a smile Sharon shook her head.

“It’s on a need to know basis, and you don’t need to know. Anything else, Captain?”

He starred at her dumbstruck before slowly shaking his head.

“Excellent. We have a long day tomorrow, so I suggest you head home and get some rest. See you at 0600 in the training grounds.”

She turned away and walked to the elevators and it only took a few seconds for the doors to open. She stepped in the car and turned to Rogers flashing him a sly grin.

“Welcome to SHIELD, Captain.”

The doors shut before he could respond and Sharon quickly sucked in a breath, leaning against the wall as the elevator began its descent.

Well, that had been interesting.

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**July 18th, 2012**

**The Triskelion, Training Grounds**

“It’s so early,” Sharon moaned as she wiggled deeper into her hoodie and sipped on her traveler’s mug of coffee.

“You’re such a baby,” Natasha retorted in a bored fashion as she swept her vibrant red hair up into a bun. Sharon was impressed, Natasha’s hair was shorter than hers at the moment.

“How can anyone be a morning person? Truly, it’s hell on earth.”

“Speak for yourself,” Natasha sassed in between stretches.

“Says you, you look like you just walked out of a fitness magazine.”

It was true. Outfitted in stylish and form-fitting workout gear and not a hair out of place, Nat looked like a thousand bucks. Sharon would gladly give a thousand dollars to go back to bed. She checked her watch for the umpteenth time and then glanced at the empty training grounds.
“I say that if he’s not here in the next five minutes we go get breakfast. You with me?”

Natasha arched an eyebrow as she pulled out of her stretch and regarded her friend for a moment.

“A moment ago you wanted to crawl back into the cocoon you call a bed and now we’re getting breakfast?”

Sharon shrugged nonchalantly as she sipped her coffee, “I’m adaptable.”

Natasha snorted, “I’ll bet you are.”

“Hey!”

Sharon’s defense of her honor was cut short as Rogers arrived at the training grounds. Sharon nearly did a double take as she took in the sight of the supersoldier in SHIELD issued Under Armor.

It was a sight indeed.

He wore simple track pants but the top…the top appeared two sizes too small and it seemed a bit ready to rip at the seams as Rogers moved towards them.

It, well, showed off everything the serum had given him. And Sharon meant everything. She was pretty positive he had bigger boobs than she did and were they, yes they were jiggling a bit as he walked. And through the thin material of his shirt, she could make out the outline of his abs.

Abs were her weakness.

Sharon was broken out of her reverie when Nat whistled loudly in appreciation of Rogers’ attire as he neared the pair.

“Looking hot, Rogers,” the redhead teased, enjoying the flush that came over his face and extended down his neck. She wondered how far it went. Oh, she was going to have fun with this.

Sharon shook her head to clear her less than savory thoughts. God, he was her partner. He had kissed her great-aunt! That was a no-no, abs be damned. Staunch in her resolve she made her gaze clinical as she turned to Nat and the two shared a look.

“Well,” Sharon announced as she brought up the day’s itinerary that Dr. Oukri had sent over.

“So on today’s agenda, we’ll go through the paces, charting your strength, endurance, etc. We also need to evaluate your strengths and weakness and where you need to improve. Also we –“

“Boring,” Natasha announced in a singsong voice as Sharon blinked. The redhead turned to Rogers with a predatory edge to her grin.

“Why don’t we skip all the minutiae and get to the fun part. Let’s spar.”

“Nat, we need to start with the basics.”

“And we’ll get there…eventually. What do you say, Rogers? You must be itching to punch something other than a bag or a Chitauri.”

Rogers raised an eyebrow before shrugging indifferently.

“I could go a few rounds,” he offered dryly as Natasha grinned in triumph and looked to Sharon
who shrugged.

She could tell these two would be trouble.

“Fine,” she acquiesced before pointing at Natasha, “But you’re the one telling Dr. Oukri and the others.”

“Deal. Really, Thirteen, loosen up. It’s not every day one gets to fight Captain America.”

“Oh, I’m leaving that to you,” Sharon waved her mug in the air, “I’m going to sit over there and enjoy my coffee and imagine I’m back in my bed. Have at him.”

True to her word she found a comfortable spot to sit and slurped from her mug. She may come off as distant but she was secretly thrumming with excitement to see what Rogers could do. The grainy newsreels from the War and the even shakier phone cameras from the Invasion of New York didn’t even begin to glean the amount of damage he could do.

This was all of her childhood dreams come true and it was only 6:15am. Anything was possible.

She watched passively as the two stretched and began circling one another. Rogers looked a bit hesitant as he wrapped his wrists and hands. Look at him, such a gentleman.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he cautioned.

“Oh trust me, you won’t hurt her,” Sharon called from her spot as Nat smirked.

“Scared, Rogers?” the assassin taunted as Rogers narrowed his eyes.

“Just trying to be polite, Romanoff. I’ll check it at the door.”

“You do that. Thirteen?” she questioned as Sharon held up a scoreboard.

“May the best man win,” Sharon said to the competitors as Nat bounced on her toes.

“Don’t worry, she usually does,” Nat responded as Sharon bit back a smirk.

Poor Rogers, he really didn’t know what he was in for.

“Three…two…one. Go!”

Natasha didn’t waste any time and immediately charged Rogers. He fought her defensively, ducking her blows and kicks. It didn’t take long for Nat to find a weak spot and exploit it. She jumped up and wrapped her legs around Rogers’ broad shoulders and climbed him like a jungle gym. With her speed and surprising strength, she got Rogers on his back in less than five minutes.

Sharon cringed in sympathy as he went down like a tree, the thump echoing throughout the cavernous training grounds.

That had to hurt.

Nat hadn’t even broken a sweat as she stood above the out of breath Avenger. She smirked down at him and held out her hand.

“Again?” she questioned with a hint of mockery. Rogers’ blue eyes flashed and grim determination came over his face as he grabbed her hand and hoisted himself up into a crouch.
“Again,” he agreed as the pair went at it again, moving so quickly if Sharon blinked she’d miss something pivotal.

She slipped her coffee contentedly as she settled in to watch.

Truly, this was better than television.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the long delay! This chapter was a bit of a slug to get through, hopefully the next one can come out quicker.

I've also started writing a T'Challa/OC story if anyone is interested in that. It's on my profile, so please check it out. I'll try and link it (if I can figure out how to).

Thank you for all the reviews so far. You guys are the best! Please keep it up! I love receiving feedback :)

Pic time!

Dr. Zenaye Oukri
And That's What You Missed in American History

Chapter Summary

“Let’s quit Stalin and move onto World War II.”

He gave it a moment to let the joke sink in as Sharon snorted, Natasha humored him with a dry smirk and Rogers raised an eyebrow before murmuring,

“I understood that reference.”

Professor Jackson sighed and muttered to himself, “Boy, it’s going to be a long day.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

July 21st, 2012

Howard University

“Remind me why we had to come here for Rogers’ history lessons?” Natasha asked as she lounged in her chair. They were situated in an empty seminar room. It was traditional in that there was a nearly wall-length chalkboard at the front of the room where a simple desk, chair, and projector were located. Rows of tables were raised in levels with dinky desk chairs seated at them.

Natasha idled in her chair, her shoulders slumped down and her feet lazily propped up on the table in front of her as she blew obnoxious pink bubbles with her gum. Her chewing echoing loudly in the vast space of the classroom.

Sharon was in the same row seated on the table itself, her legs swinging back and forth as she cast a glance towards Rogers.

He was in the aisle over, actually seated in a chair, his hands resting idly on the table. He had a notebook and two pencils spread out before him.

Sharon looked away and addressed Natasha, “This is where Professor Jackson teaches, after all. It makes sense to come to him when he’s the one doing us a favor. Besides,” she lowered her voice but the twitching of Rogers’ ears proved that it wasn’t worth the effort.

“It’s good for Rogers to get out instead of keeping him cooped up in the Triskelion all the time.”

“Ah, you hear that, Rogers? You suffering from Stockholm syndrome?” the redhead teased from across the row as the Captain rolled his blonde eyes.

“You’ll be the first to know, Romanoff.”

“I’m counting on it,” she sassed back with a pop of her gum as Sharon sighed and checked her watch.
It was 2:03pm, Professor Jackson was now three minutes late.

She had no time to debate his tardiness because the classroom door flew open and in lumbered a thick and stocky, middle-aged African American man. He was decked out in classic college professor apparel with a burgundy sweater vest underneath a rumpled tweed blazer that had seen better days.

The man came down the stairs, his briefcase tucked under his arms. He barely spared a glance at the three SHIELD agents as he deposited his briefcase and blazer at the desk and began fiddling with the projector.

After several long moments of silence, he finally seemed to achieve his end goal as he turned to the three.

“So,” he began in a deep sonorous voice that bounced off every surface of the seminar hall, “I take it that you’re my intrepid historian?” he looked towards Rogers who colored slightly as he stood to shake the professor’s hand.

“Steve Rogers. It’s an honor to meet you, Professor Jackson. I read your book on the Civil Rights Movement while I was…on vacation after the events of New York.”

“Captain Rogers, I think the real honor is on my part. In fact, I really should be thanking you,” he said wryly, a twinkle of humor in his dark eyes as Rogers momentarily floundered.

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“In my freshman year at Dillard, I took a course on Captain American and his Howling Commandos. It and Gabe Jones is what inspired me to become a historian. I wrote a dissertation on the part you played during Operation Overlord.”

“Oh, well,” Rogers ran a hand sheepishly through his hair, “Happy to help?”

Sharon hid a chuckle into her shoulder as Natasha fondly rolled her eyes while watching the blond Avenger.

“However,” the professor’s voice suddenly turned stern as he poked Rogers in the chest, “Don’t think that means I won’t hesitate to flunk you if you give me anything less than 100% during these lessons. I’m doing this as a favor to Nick Fury, and I have four other classes to teach and more than a 100 students to deal with all at the same time as I’m working on a new publication. You work hard, or don’t show up. We clear?”

Sharon raised an eyebrow impressed. In the week she had spent with Rogers she had seen a lot of sycophants hoping to cuddle up to the national icon. She appreciated that at least someone was willing to be real with the man, other than her and Natasha.

From Rogers’ posture and the determined fire in his eyes, she figured he was appreciative as well.

Professor Jackson set his eyes on the two female spies and nudged Rogers good-naturedly.

“And who are these two young ladies? Your bodyguards?”

“Co-workers,” Natasha supplied with a wave of her hands as she chewed her gum. “The name is Natasha Romanoff.”

“Well, Ms. Romanoff, I have a no gum rule in the classroom. Can’t stand the obnoxious popping.
So, if you will.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow and glanced towards Sharon who shrugged. After a moment she spat it out into the wrapper, bunched it up and successfully tossed it into the trash can across the room.

“Thank you,” Professor Jackson looked to Sharon, “And your name?”

“Agent 13 works great, thanks, Professor.”

The academic blinked, opened his mouth, and debated the merits of asking before closing his mouth and shrugging.

“Works for me. Now, since you are accompanying Captain Rogers, any tests or papers he is meant to complete will also be done by you two as well. I also demand participation in my classes, so the more you speak the higher your marks will be.”

Natasha looked floored for a moment before muttering to herself in Russian and sitting up in her chair. Sharon snickered to herself.

“Something funny, Agent 13?” Professor Jackson asked as he walked to the chalkboard and began writing.

“Nothing, sir, it’s just I majored in history at college, so I look forward to the refresher.”

“Hm. And where did you attend?” he asked conversationally, still writing on the board as Rogers took his seat.

“Georgetown, here in DC”

The professor chuckled as he stepped back from the chalkboard and wiped his chalky hands, pockets of chalk sprouting up around him.

“Well, that is unfortunate. But no worries, I’m sure we can fix some of the misunderstandings you acquired at good ol’ Georgetown. Now please, take a seat.”

Sharon bristled as she heard Nat snort. Seeing that she’d be getting no support from the redhead or the good captain, she swung around and situated herself in a seat.

“Now,” Professor Jackson moved to stand in front of his desk, tucking his hands into his pockets as he addressed the three with a grin.

“Let’s quit Stalin and move onto World War II.”

He gave it a moment to let the joke sink in as Sharon snorted, Natasha humored him with a dry smirk and Rogers raised an eyebrow before murmuring,

“I understood that reference.”

Professor Jackson sighed and muttered to himself, “Boy, it’s going to be a long day.”

He walked to the chalkboard and began instructing, “I thought it’d best if we started at the beginning, or rather, the end for Captain Rogers. It was March 4th, 1945 when the Valkyrie went down off the coast of Greenland….”
Rogers whizzed past her so quickly her hair blew in aftermath of his wake. She whistled as she hit the timer and took in the results of his mile.

It was…impressive, to say the least.

“You ran a mile in under two minutes,” she announced to the super soldier as he came to a stop a few feet away from her, barely looking like he had broken a sweat.

“Hmm,” he murmured, reaching for his water bottle, “Must be a slow day.”

“Yeah, you were really lagging on that fourth lap,” the female spy teased back as Rogers smirked and drank his water.

“You know this officially makes you the fastest man in the world.”

“I’m sure there’s someone out there faster than me, or will be one day,” Rogers supplied as Sharon shrugged and jotted down some notes on her clipboard.

They had spent the morning getting Rogers’ stats set and put into the system. She had also been running him through simulations with his shield. He had mostly used it defensively, so starting next week they would start on offensive measures, maximizing the shield’s ability to inflict damage on others, as well as keeping Rogers’ alive.

It was a pretty piece of metal; sleek, lightweight and nearly indestructible. They had yet to find anything that even put a dent in the vibranium.

They had also looked into designing Rogers’ new stealth suit. As…patriotic as the prototype Coulson had designed (Sharon was of the opinion that it was butt ugly, but who was she to speak ill of a dead man?) it just wasn’t practical for the kind of missions Rogers was expected to go on in the future. They had ditched the majority of the red and white, leaving a streamlined navy stealth suit that would be going into production soon, once a tailor could get their hands on Rogers.

And what a lucky tailor indeed….

What? He was hot. She was just admitting the truth with that.

Rogers already had a strong female fan club growing within SHIELD. Just yesterday when they had been eating lunch in the mess hall, Sharon had witnessed a female STRIKE member trip over her own two feet when Rogers’ accidentally made eye contact with her from across the room.

It made the Avenger continuously uncomfortable, but it provided much amusement for Sharon. And she needed amusement in order to be putting up with Rogers day in and day out.

Sharon entered the data she had been collecting into her tablet and looked at all the readouts, thinking ahead.

“Allright,” she said to Rogers as she plopped down onto a bench. He stood a few feet away absentmindedly stretching as she spoke to him.
"Well, it’s clear that you’re much stronger and faster than the average man. Not that that’s news to anyone. Your fighting style is mostly defensive and while I’m sure it held up in WWII, it’s a bit outdated for today. I’ve seen clips of you fighting in New York, you felt a bit out of your depth there, correct?"

Rogers glanced over at her before sarcastically quipping, “Well, I was fighting aliens.”

“Semantics,” Sharon volleyed back as she continued looking at her tablet. “Well, one thing is clear, you haven’t skipped leg day. We should use that to our advantage. I think you would excel at parkour, judo, jiujitsu, and kickboxing as well as some catching up in karate and boxing. Sound good, Captain?”

“I defer to your expertise.”

She had to give it to him, his deadpan delivery was excellent.

It was all he had been giving her whenever they were together. The most animated she had seen him had been at the airport when he had just been a boy and she had been a girl and they had bumped into each other on accident. Except, of course, that it hadn’t been an accident and he had never just been a boy and she wasn’t just a girl.

He had warmed to Natasha, but he stayed perfectly cool when it came to Sharon.

And she was fine with it…mostly. At least, that’s what she kept telling herself.

It’s like Fury had said, she wasn’t meant to be his friend. She’d have his back here at SHIELD. That was enough.

“Alright, I’ll put that on the schedule for next week.” She checked her watch and was impressed that time had flown by so quickly. “We still have 15 minutes left in our session. Fancy a little hand to hand?”

She had yet to spar with Rogers, leaving the fun to Natasha who enjoyed flipping up and around Rogers like he was her own personal gymnasium.

Rogers was quick though and was figuring out Natasha’s moves. She now only got an edge over him due to her cunningness and unpredictability.

Sharon knew she was no Natasha, but she was well versed in Muay Thai and fighting against Captain America…well, let’s just say one of her childhood dreams would be coming true.

Rogers contemplated the question for a moment before giving a single nod.

“I’ve been wanting to see what you can do.”

Sharon was already throwing off her sweater, leaving her in her sports bra and leggings.

“Sounds good to me,” she responded as she rolled her shoulders and cracked her neck, feeling her muscles relax.

The two blondes circled one another waiting for the first move. Rogers took a halfhearted swipe at her that she easily ducked, dancing backward on the tips on her toes. It went on like this before Sharon charged forward jumping up to land a knee strike at his head. She soared through the air and felt satisfaction when her knee caught him in the chin, bucking his head back.
Rogers was quick, however and had gripped her legs, flipping her soundlessly over his shoulders and throwing her hard down to the mats.

She groaned as she landed, the world still spinning as she regained her bearings. Pushing her legs up, she rocked onto her shoulders and flipped herself up to her feet as she turned towards the Avenger. His blue eyes were intently taking her in, already reading her internal playbook.

There was a reason he was considered one of the greatest strategists of the 20th Century.

She smirked and cracked her knuckles. Oh, this was going to be fun.

The two blitzed one another with elbow strikes, jabs, and punches. He was fast, faster than anyone Sharon had ever fought before. He was just a flash before her eyes and it was all she could do to duck and dodge him before his fist landed into her face or side.

To her credit though he had yet to pin her and she had even landed a few blows upon his person. Now, whatever bruises she inflicted would be gone in the next ten minutes or so, but there was still pride that she could strike Captain America at all.

She felt her brain shut off and go into pure instinct mode as the sparring continued. Muscle memory served her well as she completed a near perfect body kick on his upper torso. The force behind her kick pushed him back a step or two and Sharon knew she’d be paying for that later because her leg was already feeling the force of smashing it into a brick wall, which was essentially Rogers’ body.

Rogers came back at her quicker than ever and suddenly he was dictating the fight, pushing and prodding her whichever way he felt like. Sharon was completely on the defensive as she flipped herself back to get some space from the imposing super-soldier.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts and tried to assess the situation. And to think, she had called Rogers’ moves outdated. For being so big he was awfully quick on his feet. Sharon would just have to go in so hard and fast that Rogers’ had no time to react.

Nodding to herself, she vaulted at him and perfected a diagonal kick to his chest. He grunted and curled forward and she took advantage of the misstep. She threw an arm around his neck and forced his head down as she landed an elbow strike to his cheek and another kick to his torso. She continued her assault giving the Avenger no time to breathe. She was hard and brutal, her usual disposition against opponents.

With a sweep of her feet at his knees he went down hard with her on top on him. The two blondes were breathing heavily and Sharon didn’t know if they had been dueling for minutes or hours. She straddled the soldier and pressed down on his throat.

He blinked up at her in surprise as she smirked.

“You may be stronger than me, Captain, but you’ll have to be smarter to beat me.”

She was about to call it when out of nowhere he freed his legs and kneeled her in the stomach. She groaned and lost her grip on him and he made quick work of flipping her off him and pinning her down to the mats. He had her completely trapped beneath him and her arms twisted behind her back so she was left to wriggle uncomfortably.

He was incredibly heavy. If he was less attentive he’d be suffocating her, but she could tell he was taking precautions not to press fully down on her.
She was panting and sweat pouring off of her in waves as she struggled fruitlessly against him.

He leaned down and asked into her ear, “Give in?”

She would deny that she shivered at the words.

Knowing defeat when it had knocked her down she gave a single nod and he released her, moving off of her and leaving her on the mats. She rolled onto her back and stared up at the ceiling, her chest rising in quick spurts of breath.

That had been quite the workout.

She blinked in surprised when Rogers’ hand took up the majority of her view as he offered it to her.

“Best two out of three?” he asked and Sharon felt a deep sense of pride. She must have provided some kind of challenge if Rogers was wanting to go up against her again.

She grinned and reached for his hand and he pulled her up like she weighed nothing.

“You’re on.”

The two circled one another again before lunging. The sounds of their blows echoing through the training grounds.

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July 30th, 2012

Arlington, VA

Steve Rogers was not a man who typically buckled underneath pressure and fear. He was the type to run face first into a fire or fight without ever debating the consequences until way after the fact, much to the chagrin of one Bucky Barnes.

Steve flinched at the thought of Bucky.

To the world, he had fallen off the train nearly 70 years ago. The world had mourned and moved on and Bucky was nothing more than a footnote in the history books or documentaries that saturated the public.

But to Steve…it had only been a few months since he had lost his best friend.

He no longer felt the white-hot rage that had consumed him like a supernova when Bucky had first died. That rage had propelled him to tear down Hydra piece by piece until nothing was left except its ashes. That rage had consumed him so thoroughly that the only way it had ebbed away was to be locked away in ice for nearly the same amount of time Bucky had been dead.

Now he just felt…empty.

Romanoff told him he was going through the five stages of grief, whatever that meant. He didn’t know when he’d get through all five.

He still woke every day thinking for a quick second that Buck was still alive. He went out into this
new world and every day saw something that he wanted to share with Bucky, whether it was food, clothing or even television.

Bucky would have loved this world and all the untapped technology in it.

Bucky Barnes may have been remembered as an indomitable ladies man and charmer, but Steve knew how much of a nerd the man had actually been. Engineering had gotten him just as hot and bothered as a dame with miles of leg.

Steve chuckled weakly at the thought before purposefully pushing such thoughts away. He couldn’t think of Bucky right now, because if he thought of him then he’d think of the Commandos, Howard Stark and…Peggy.

It’s not that he didn’t want to think of Peggy. He always thought of Peggy. She was as deeply entrenched in his brain as Bucky was. In fact, he was going to see Peggy for the first time since coming to DC.

He had only joined SHIELD because of her, because she had started it with Howard. He would never have joined otherwise. He didn’t trust Fury as far as he could throw him. He had burgeoning friendships with Natasha and Barton due to New York, but he knew their capricious behavior and loyalty could change at the drop of a hat. And Agent 13…well, he didn’t know how he felt about the blonde shadow he had acquired at SHIELD, but her presence got under his skin and made his head buzz whenever she was nearby.

She was a puzzle he couldn’t figure out and she filled his head with endless frustration.

But Peggy…Peggy had been his dream.

More beautiful than any woman had the right to be and fiercer than a hurricane, the moment Margaret Carter had swung into his life he had been a goner for the SSR agent.

And best of all…she had seen him, even when he had been tiny. Hell, he still felt tiny today, even more so with the numerous fans he had acquired as Captain America. The world saw a 6’2”, 220lb super-soldier, Steve still saw the boy from Brooklyn who got into one too many alleyway fights, the one who had more heart than sense.

He was pulled from his musings as his motorcycle came to a stop before Peggy’s care center. He sighed and parked the Harley Davidson and took in the sight of the brick façade.

SHIELD and Pepper had provided him with boatloads of new, modern clothing. Tight shirts and form-fitting jeans and an array of vintage leather jackets (they looked like they had come straight from the 1940s). Steve had yet to wear any of them. He still wore his high-waisted khakis, his plaid shirts, and the leather jacket Fury had gotten out of storage for him.

It might be a crutch, but Steve wasn’t quite ready to leave the past behind.

And it wasn’t like he was completely living in the Stone Age. He had a cell phone, he knew how to text and order takeout online.

He was 94, he wasn’t dead.

Kicking at a stray pebble and slipping his hands into his pockets he once again stared at the front doors.

He could do this. He wanted to do this. Ever since learning Peggy was still alive (one of the few
still alive) he had wanted to wrap her up in his arms and never let go. But while he had spent the last nearly 70 years taking a nap in the Arctic, Peggy had built a life that hadn’t included him.

He didn’t begrudge her it. Peggy had always had too much to offer the world to waste her potential pining away on a schmuck like him.

But she was all he had left, she was the only thing that connected him to his past. His right hand clenched around the compass in his pocket, the one that had her picture still embedded in it.

It was one of the few things the Smithsonian had given him when he came to DC.

Peggy was his life, but what he feared most was that she wouldn’t even remember him. He had been in communication with her doctors, he knew the diagnosis: Alzheimer’s.

Her doctors said that she had her good days and bad days.

He prayed today was a good day. He didn’t know if his heart could take anything less, battered and bruised that it already was.

Feeling foolish for his gloomy thoughts and his prolonged standing in the parking lot; he squared his chin, set back his shoulders, and stalked purposefully towards the entrance. A young, besotted nurse was quick to point him towards Peggy’s room. He ignored the staff’s excited tittering as he came to a stop outside Peggy’s door.

He could hear the faint sweet tones of Ronnie Scott coming through on a record player. He also heard the delicate, soothing beats of a heart accompanied by gentle breathing.

He recognized Peggy’s heartbeat. He’d know it anywhere.

She was right there. In that room, waiting for him.

Suddenly he couldn’t stop himself as he perfunctorily knocked on the door before pushing it open and poking his head in.

His immediately caught hers.

She was…so beautiful.

Her aged brown eyes widened as tears appeared in them. It seemed she had been just as anxious to see him as he had been to see her.

“Oh, Steve,” she whispered, her accent as strong as ever and a dam broke in him. Moving quickly he was at her side and had her tenderly in his arms, his face buried into her neck. She gripped onto him just as tightly. He sniffed and was assaulted by her perfume, the same perfume she had worn during the War.

Suddenly he was transported to SSR Headquarters at the peak of their quest for Schmidt, Phillips jamming orders down his throat as Howard endlessly tinkered in his lab, making a mess more often than not. Dum-Dum had created a new drinking game and had badgered Monty and Dernier into playing it with him. Morita and Gabe were off to the side playing cards and Bucky lounged in the corner, his hair slicked back and a cigarette casually posed between his lips as he hummed a jazz tune. Steve himself was at the map of Europe sharing teasing glances with Peggy behind Phillips’ back.

For the first time since waking up in the 21st Century, he felt home, here with Peggy and the
memories only they shared.

The stoic exterior of Captain America faded away and he was just Steve. He allowed himself to break in her arms, knowing she’d pick up the jagged pieces and help put him back together, just as she had always done.

“Let me look at you,” he whispered pulling back slightly to take her in fully. Her hair, greying with age, was as thick as ever and fell down her shoulders in gentle waves. He cupped her face, filling it fully in his large hands as he reverently stroked her skin.

“God, you are so beautiful,” he uttered as Peggy gave a wet chuckle and wiped at stray tears.

“I doubt that.”

Steve vehemently shook his head. It didn’t matter if she was in a red dress promising him a dance or sitting here now, nearly 70 years later, she was still the most beautiful sight he had ever seen.

“Oh, Steve,” she murmured taking him in as greedily as he did her, “I prayed for this day for so long. I always knew that one day you’d come back.”

“Well,” he choked on the word before continuing, “I couldn’t just leave my best girl hanging, could I? I’ll always come back to you, Pegs.”

He brought their foreheads together and in the quiet, afternoon sun the two lovers were reunited and for the first time since waking Steve felt at peace.

August 2nd, 2012
The Triskelion

“What’s on the docket today?”

Sharon glanced up at Rogers who had appeared in the doorway of her office. She knew exactly what was scheduled for today, but she knew Rogers wouldn’t like it.

Putting on her poker face she grinned and stood.

“Well, I have good and bad news.”

The Avenger raised his eyebrow and stepped aside as Sharon passed him. He followed a pace or two behind her as they headed towards the elevators.

“What’s the good news?” he drawled, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“You don’t have to spend time with me,” the female spy volleyed back as the elevator door slid opened and the pair entered the empty car.

“And the bad?”

“Well,” Sharon mused as she gave the floor number to the computer panel and they began descending to the 11th floor. “You’ll have to share your feelings.”
Rogers regarded her blankly as if waiting for the punchline of a joke. Sharon sighed and inwardly cursed Fury. This job really wasn’t worth it some days and she knew it was going to be one of those days.

“You’re going to your first mandatory therapy meeting with Dr. Abbot. She’s one of the best, so you’ll be in good hands.”

Rogers’ face shuttered and completely shut down as Sharon shook her head. She should have figured this would happen.

“I don’t need therapy,” he assessed as Sharon snorted. She wasn’t able to hide it from Rogers if his glare was anything to do by.

“It’s the 21st Century, everyone needs therapy.”

“Well, I don’t,” he snapped and Sharon felt some sympathy for the super-soldier, but her hands were tied here.

“That is unfortunate then, Captain. All SHIELD agents are obligated to check in with a therapist at least once a month to assess mental health. You’ll do so every two weeks because of your…unique circumstances. If Dr. Abbot deems you…normal or whatever, I’m sure she’ll bump you up to a month like the rest of us.”

While Rogers did not seem completely comforted by this, he relaxed somewhat at the news that therapy was mandatory for everyone.

“You see a therapist?” he questioned, his face no longer as extreme in its tenseness. Sharon nodded.

“I’ve been seeing Dr. Singh since I began here. It helps, I swear.”

And it did.

Rogers didn’t seem any more open to the prospect but he didn’t fight Sharon as the elevator door opened and he dutifully followed towards Dr. Abbot’s office. She knocked on the door and gestured for Rogers to enter.

“I can wait here for you if that would make you feel better.”

Rogers’ scandalized scoff was enough to tell her it would not make him feel better. She shrugged and pushed him through the door.

The door shut behind him and Sharon hoped Dr. Abbot was able to reach Rogers in a way Sharon could not.

With that thought, she turned on her heel and headed back up to her office.

_________________________

**August 3rd, 2012**

*The Triskelion*
It was another long day when Sharon entered her office and found a single file awaiting her on her desk. She approached it cautiously and saw a stick note pinned to the top of it. She reached for it and read it, a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She crumbled the note and tossed it aside and opened the folder.

It was what she feared it would be.

A summary of Rogers’ therapy session with Dr. Abbot.

She slammed it shut and sank into her chair, burying her head in her hands.

She hadn’t signed up for this…complete invasion of privacy. Where did it end? She wasn’t built for this kind of deception.

She reached for the note and uncrumpled it.

*It’s just part of the job. - Fury*

Was it really just part of the job?

With a heavy heart, she reached for the folder and began reading.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the previous comments! I love receiving them, keep them up! Also, we finally get a little bit of Steve's POV. Hopefully everyone enjoys that. I'm going to try and update once a week moving forward, we'll see how it goes.

Hope everyone had a nice Fourth of July!

Pic time!

Professor Cornelius Jackson:
One Tequila, Two Tequila, Three Tequila, Floor

Chapter Summary

“We’re adults, having a very adult dinner with an adult cheese platter and adult wine. It’s great. I love it.”

A beat of silence followed his statement. The lone man sighed and looked at both Sharon and Catherine.

“Who wants to play drunk jenga?”

“I’m in.” Sharon said immediately as Catherine perked up.

“Oh, yes!”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 7th, 2012

Nationals Park

“Come on, Teddy! You got this!” Sharon shrieked from behind the dugout. She was on her feet, hands cupped to her mouth as she cheered on her favorite president.

She watched riveted as Teddy, George, Abe, Tom, Bill, Calvin, and Herbie rounded second base. George was leading the charge and poor Teddy was bringing up the rear as usual.

“You know Teddy hasn’t won a race in the last seven seasons, right?” Greer questioned from next to her as she flipped her hair over her shoulders and sipped her beer.

“What can I say? I love an underdog,” Sharon responded with an easy smile as she turned back to the race.

“Pick up the pace, Teddy! Move those little legs!”

The presidents were passing third and Teddy was really struggling to stay afoot. In fact, he was tottering so much Sharon wasn’t holding out too much hope of him making it home.

And…yep, he just tripped and face planted into the turf.

Sharon flinched as Teddy went down hard and didn’t look to be getting up any time soon.

Abe proved to be the dark horse of the pack, passing George in the nick of time to come home, making him the winner.

“Wahoo!” Trip whooped from down the row, his megawatt grin on display as he turned to everyone.
“I knew my boy Abe Lincoln wouldn’t let me down. Now, you losers need to pay up!”

The Howling Commandos legacies all groaned as Trip held his hand outstretched, demanding his payment.

“Show me the money! Show! Me! The! Money!” He was practically jumping up and down as he hollered down the row.

“You keep yelling in my face, boy, and I’ll take you out back and whoop your ass,” Nathaniel Triplet, Trip’s father, grumbled from next to his eldest son. A sheepish grimace replaced Trip’s grin as he held up his hands mollifying. Next to him, Trip’s younger brother Josiah was snickering into his hand.

“Whatever you say, Pops.”

Sharon sank back in her seat and tugged down her Nationals cap to block out the sun as she stretched out her legs.

It was a beautiful day for baseball.

“Better luck next time, sweetheart,” Sharon’s father consolingly said as he patted her shoulder.

All in all, they had pretty good attendance. Seated together in a neat row was Harrison, Sharon, Greer, Greer’s father, Frank, Trip, Nathaniel, and Josiah.

“One of the days, Teddy will win. I know it.”

A snort sounded from Sharon’s right as Greer made no attempt at hiding it.

“Sure, when pigs fly.”

“We live in a world of aliens, gods, and frozen super-soldiers and you’re setting your bar of suspense of disbelief at flying pigs?” Josiah questioned with incredulous eyebrows.

Josiah was a good kid, and he had a point.

The world they lived in was an increasingly strange place.

Sharon knew that better than anyone.

She settled comfortably into her seat and kicked up her feet, her worn down vans visible. For August the humidity was bearable instead of God awful, which was a positive in her case. Also, the Nationals were up 4-3 against the Cubs. She lightly fanned herself with her hand as the game picked up again in the 5th inning.

Sharon allowed the easy chit chat of her family to wash over her as she absentmindedly sipped her beer and watched the proceedings of the game.

This was the most relaxed she had been since Rogers had begun his new career at SHIELD.

Every day seemed like its own new and surprising battle as the two moved forward in their working relationship, or whatever it was.

Honestly, the more she thought about it the more likely she was to get a migraine.

“Hotdogs! I got hotdogs!” A vendor yelled as he neared their row.
Sharon’s stomach gurgled in interest as she eyed the dogs. They weren’t hamburgers, but really, who ate hamburgers at a baseball game? Even she was wise enough to know that was sacrilege.

She eyed her comrades before sighing.

“I’m buying…”

A cacophony of eager responses hit her in the face as she tried to make sense of the muddle of words being hurled at her.

She raised her hand to cut through the white noise as she waved to get the vendor’s attention.

“Hi, we’ll take at least one of everything you got…”

Just another day at the ballpark.

August 10th, 2012

The Triskelion, Mess Hall

Lunch couldn’t come quick enough for Sharon as she strode animatedly into the crowded mess hall. It seemed many a SHIELD agent had had the same idea.

She scoped out the line for hot food and sighed at how long it was.

Looks like food would have to wait.

Her attention was broken as she heard the agitated murmuring all around her. The mess hall was abuzz with something that had caught its attention and Sharon wanted to know what it was. Sharon followed people’s entranced staring and her eyes ended at a table sat in the middle of the cafeteria, perfect place for observation and perfectly seen by everyone else in the hall.

Sat at it was Natasha…and Clint Barton.

Sharon raised an eyebrow in surprise, her whole body coming to a halt as she took in the sight of the archer. Barton hadn’t been seen in the Triskelion since the events of New York. It made sense. A lot of people had inadvertently died at his hands. It hadn’t been his fault, of course, being brainwashed and all, but still, he had done it.

The agents in the hall also seemed a little lost at the sight of the man. They were giving the table a wide berth, though that could have been due to the fierce glare Natasha was leveling at anyone who so much as looked at Barton funny.

The two spies were camped out at one side of the table, their chairs close enough that the pair’s shoulders were touching and Barton casually had his arm slung over the back of her chair.

Their heads were bent close together as they whispered to one another, red and sandy blonde hair blending together as Natasha made Barton smile.

Probably a corny joke. Those were Natasha’s specialty.
In front of them was a single tray with a half-eaten salad on it that Barton picked from unseeingly. A bag of chips laid opened as Nat munched on them.

It was so like them to share and steal one another’s food rather than get their own.

Sharon was broken from her musings as a technician jostled her. She shook her head and headed to the hot food line which had thankfully died down a bit.

Loading her plate up with fruit, snap peas and a turkey sandwich, she grabbed a Gatorade and strolled towards Natasha and Barton’s table.

Natasha caught her eye and gave a single nod of approval as Sharon slid into a chair across from the dynamic duo.

“Boy, am I excited to eat some food. I’m starving! Hiya, Nat.”

Nat smirked and bit into a chip as Sharon turned and looked at Barton.

“Barton,” she greeted cordially as the archer lifted his head and eyed her for a moment. He turned to Natasha and the two had a rapid silent conversation consisting of eye rolls and eyebrow raises before the man looked back at Sharon and quirked his lips in greeting.

“Thirteen.”

The two had never been terribly close. Their main source of connection being Natasha. But Barton was one of the few good ones. He had a fantastically dry sense of humor, he loved coffee even more than she did, he didn’t take himself too seriously, and he even helped Sharon out with her aiming techniques from time to time.

So he was alright in Sharon’s book.

And he didn’t deserve the suspicious looks being tossed his way as everyone watched him like a, well, like a hawk.

He looked good, all things considered.

She had seen a few grainy security video screenshots of the man when he had been destroying a helicarrier. The eerie glow of his eyes and the vacant expression etched into his face had been enough to send shivers up Sharon’s spine. The brutal way he had gone after Natasha had been so unlike him that Sharon hadn’t doubted for a moment that he hadn’t been in control of his actions.

Barton was a paragon of tough love and getting the job done, but he would never go after Natasha unless absolutely pushed to.

This was the man whose mission had been to kill her once long ago, and what had he done? He brought in her from the cold and molded her into one of the best SHIELD agents in decades.

Sharon dug into her sandwich, munching on it noisily as the trio chatted easily for a few minutes, from mundane topics like the weather to the best way to avoid rush hour on the Metro.

Eventually, though, Barton lowered his fork and pushed his tray away, leveling Sharon with a flat stare as he crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes settled over her shoulder towards the far wall as he remarked in a monotone fashion,

“You might as well just get it over and ask.”
Sharon blinked as she bit into a snap pea. “Ask what?”

Barton sighed and rubbed his temple. “The same questions everyone’s been asking me since I stepped back in this cesspool of gossip and mayhem.”

The look Natasha shot her made it clear that if she messed this up, she’d be disowned by the redhead assassin. Sharon chewed thoughtfully on her snap pea before finally settling on a response.

“Hmm. Well, the only question I have is where did you go to get the fabulous tan you’re rocking? Seriously? When I spend more than an hour out in the sun, I turn red, not even a pretty pink blush, but red as a lobster.”

Barton stared at her for a moment and when he decided she wasn’t throwing a fast one over him, his face relaxed as he huffed out a laugh, sagging down in his chair and lowering his shoulders. Natasha also looked amused as she nudged his shoulder playfully. When he finally stopped chuckling he extended his arms as he exclaimed,

“Tahiti. It’s a magical place.”

Sharon filed that away for later as the trio went back to chatting, a new sense of ease covering their conversation and the stares from the mess hall felt far away as the three enjoyed each other’s company.

Eventually, though reality came looking for the three as Natasha’s phone beeped. She reached for it and after a moment her eyebrow quirked up in surprise.

“Hmm,” she hummed to herself as Barton read over her shoulder.

“Well, Thirteen,” she addressed the blonde, “It looks like you and I have a little field trip to take with our resident nonagenarian.”

Sharon blinked as she let that wash over her.

It’d be nice to get out of the Triskelion. For such a massive building it felt oddly claustrophobic with Rogers walking its halls.

“Oh? Where are we going?”

Nat’s grin turned devilish as she ate her last chip, “Oh, I think you’ll like it.”

August 11th, 2012

Over the Northeast

“I’ve never flown in a private jet before. It feels amazing! Is this how rich people feel all the time?” Sharon questioned as she sat crisscross in the most luxurious leather seat she had ever placed her butt on.
She looked across the jet to see Nat stretched out on a couch made of memory foam, her head resting on a satin pillow as she munched on chocolates provided by the flight attendant.

Across from Sharon was Rogers situated in a seat just like Sharon. He seemed much more composed than Sharon as he sipped on his espresso, a book perched in his lap.

“You’d have to ask Stark. It’s his plane, after all,” Natasha responded as she shot Sharon a grin.

God, it was so great to be a friend of a friend of a billionaire.

The jet was, simply put, a piece of art. The three were located in the main seating area, but there was a lounge ahead of them equipped with a TV and gaming system that rivaled anything Sharon had ever seen before. She bet it was Japanese.

Behind them were two bedrooms and a bathroom that had a working, marble shower in it. Beautiful flight attendants in form-fitting uniforms checked in on the three often, paying specific attention to Rogers and his needs.

His coffee cup had yet to go empty and he had been offered two different massages as a way to pass the time until they landed in New York. He had blushingly declined the massages.

The field trip, as Natasha labeled it, much to Rogers’ dismay, was a personal favor to Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and the light of Tony Stark’s life.

The strawberry blonde had gotten in contact with Rogers and offered up a pitch for good PR for both the Avengers and SHIELD (they were in need of it after the events of New York).

Some good old fashioned, educational PSA videos.

Yep, Captain America was going to try his hand at inspiring the youths of the United States with some words of wisdom.

The idea was simple, Rogers would show up in his suit and wax poetic for a camera crew and the good stuff would make it onto VCR sets in public schools across America.

It’d be like he was in the USO all over again, except no dancing girls this time.

Rogers had accepted stoically as he always did and now the three were flying to New York in opulence and Sharon had never been gladder to be his partner.

Finally, she was getting perks out of this job.

She settled into her chair and sank into like it was a cloud. God, this was heaven.

The flight went by way too quickly for her liking and the next thing she knew the pilot was announcing their imminent landing in New York. The jet landed smoothly and the flight attendants were sure to bat their eyes and giggle as Rogers walked past them to the exit.

The three SHIELD agents exited the plane into the bright sunshine to see a sleek Cadillac CTS awaiting them with a heavyset, middle-aged man leaning against it in a wrinkled suit. His dark hair looked in serious need of a comb and he seemed less than impressed at the sight of two Avengers and the world’s deadliest spy (a girl could dream).

He nonetheless stood up straight as the three came to a stop in front of him.

“Greetings, Agent ‘All I tell are lies’ Romanoff, Captain Good Looking, and blonde woman I’ve
never met before. On behalf of Tony Stark and Pepper Potts, welcome to New York.”

The man did a sad rendition of jazz hands, looking horribly put out at the gesture.

“Hello, Happy,” Natasha replied with her signature smile, the kind that said she was just humoring the man.

Sharon quirked a brow. Who on earth named their kid Happy?

“Well, time’s a wasting. Let’s get this show on the road! Bags in the trunk, people in the car, me drive. Capiche?”

With a click of a button, the trunk opened and the three were quick to follow orders. Happy seated himself at the wheel, Rogers joined him up front in the passenger seat as Sharon and Natasha slipped into the back.

It wasn’t Sharon’s stingray, but still, it was a very nice car that purred as Happy began the drive towards Stark Tower in the heart of Manhattan.

Conversation was light in the car as Happy and Rogers talked sports, Natasha occasionally throwing in a snarky comment as she texted on her phone. Sharon spent her time looking out the window taking in the various sights of the city.

It was the first time she had been in New York since the Chitauri invasion.

Things had improved a lot. Gone were the ashes and ruins of buildings. All of the alien carcasses had been dredged from the debris and deposed of by the government. Buildings were being reconstructed, roads repaved, and public transport was nearly all backup and running.

Things were getting back to normal in the Big Apple.

New York was a resilient city. It had been through hell before, and it would come out of this on the other side.

Soon enough the Cadillac came to a stop in front of Stark Tower, the gaudiest skyscraper in all of New York.

Towering above its neighbors, Stark Tower was a beacon in and of itself. Sharon could admit the building had its own appeal when not looking like it had survived a nuclear bomb. It glimmered in the sunlight and cast a large shadow across Manhattan.

As Sharon stood outside the car while their luggage was collected she noticed the large STARK lettering was missing from the tower and only a single A remained. Natasha came up to her side and smirked as she noticed the same thing.

“Stark is renaming the building to Avengers Tower. He says all superhero rag-tag teams need their own Fortress of Solitude.”

“This is your new headquarters? So unfair.”

Natasha stuck her tongue out as Happy ushered them into the lobby, flashing his security badge and clearing them through.

“I think it’s nice,” Rogers piped as they headed towards the elevators. “Tony doing this for us. Giving us a home away from home.”
His words, while stilted, were sincere. Natasha had passed along to Sharon that during their time on the helicarrier it had been blatantly obvious that Stark and Rogers had not gotten along. They had gotten under each other’s skins real quick.

It wasn’t surprising to Sharon. She had only met the Stark prodigy once when she was a young girl and him a sullen college student, but it didn’t take a genius to see that Stark had some major Daddy Issues. Most of which accumulated around the fact that Howard had been all but obsessed with Captain America.

She imagined it must be hard, growing up in a national icon’s shadow.

She couldn’t blame Stark if he held some resentment towards the resident Man with a Plan.

The four entered an elevator as Happy directed it to send them to the penthouse all the way up on the 93rd floor. Sharon was enjoying the ride when a crisp, digitized British accent spoke from the ceiling.

“Greetings, Captain Rogers and Agent Romanoff.”

Sharon jumped nearly a foot in the air. Where the hell had that come from?

“Hi, Jarvis,” Natasha and Rogers greeted back as Sharon stared at them with bugged out eyes. Why were they acting like this was normal?

“Who’s talking to us?” she hissed to Natasha as the redhead smirked smugly. The talking voice beat her to the punch line.

“I am sorry, it was rude not to introduce myself. I am J.A.R.V.I.S. I was created by Mr. Stark to be his user interface computer system.”

A flash of memory passed through Sharon’s head. One of Peggy’s close companions from her early days at SHIELD had been one Edwin Jarvis, part-time butler to Howard Stark.

“Jarvis runs the tower,” Natasha supplied as Happy nodded in agreement, his head buried in his cellphone.

“Oh, well,” Sharon didn’t quite know what to do here, how did one talk to an AI?

“It’s very nice to meet you…Jarvis.”

She could see that even Rogers was amused by her sheepishness.

“You as well, Agent 13.”

“How did you know my name?” Sharon demanded not even really believing she may be embarking upon a fight with a computer.

“I did a quick body scan. You are Agent 13 of SHIELD Special Services. You’ve been employed at SHIELD for the last four years following your graduation from the Academy.”

Well, Sharon should just be glad he hadn’t blurted out her name. She imagined he must have found it, even if it was buried deep in SHIELD.

Alright, she could deal with discrete talking computers. Just another day at the office.

The elevator came to a halt and Happy all but pushed them out of the elevator and remained in it as
the door slid shut. Sharon stepped into one of the most beautiful living spaces she had ever seen. Everything was tastefully tailored and immaculately designed. The floor to ceiling windows offered panoramic views of the Manhattan skyline and the Chrysler Building seemed close enough to reach out and touch.

Seated on a couch at the heart of the penthouse suite was Pepper Potts. She stood and smiled as she took in the sight of the three agents. She sauntered towards the three, wearing a light blue dress, strawberry blonde hair in a high ponytail and walking gracefully in Valentino heels, she was an absolute vision.

Sharon was probably even a little bit in love with her.

The CEO of Stark Industries was positively beaming as she came up to the three.

“Natasha, great to see you again.” Pepper swooped down to hug the spy and Sharon was surprised by how readily Nat returned the embrace. She wasn’t much of a hugger. Pepper straightened and moved onto Rogers.

“Steve! Looking as good as ever.”

“Ms. Potts,” Rogers returned politely as Pepper gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Please, call me Pepper,” she responded good-naturedly as she lightly smacked his shoulder. A real grin came across Rogers’ face as he nodded. Then Pepper turned towards Sharon and while she must have been perplexed at Sharon’s presence she didn’t show it as she held out her hand.

“Pepper Potts, and you are?”

“Agent 13, it’s nice to meet you…Pepper.”

Pepper’s grip was strong and confident while also being warm and kind. Man, no wonder she could put up with Stark on a daily basis.

“Well, it’s a delight to meet you, Agent 13. I hope you enjoy your stay here.”

“Oh trust me, you may never get me to leave.”

Pepper laughed lightly as the four stood there in silence for a few moments. Rogers was the first one to attempt conversation.

“Is Tony here? Hiding out in his labs?”

An amused expression crossed Pepper’s face as she answered. “Tony is on a spiritual retreat in the Himalayas. It demands complete silence for the duration of it and no communication with the outside world. Happy, Rhodey, and I have a running bet on how long it will take him to crack. Feel free to throw your lot in.”

“Oh, I will definitely get in on that,” Natasha muttered as Pepper smiled.

“Well, once again, Steve, I can’t thank you enough for doing this. Really, it’s going to be amazing PR.”

“I’m always happy to help a friend.”

Pepper flashed him a grin as she nodded, her ponytail bobbing behind her.
“Great! Well, tomorrow is the big day. I thought that I’d let you all get settled in. I made reservations at Le Bernardin for seven followed by a performance of the Wicked. If you’d like to head to your floors, Jarvis will get you accommodated. Steve, you’re on the 45th floor and Natasha, your floor is the 43rd.”

Pepper looked at Sharon as she blew her bangs out of her eyes.

“We have several open floors you can use – “

“Thirteen will bunk with me, thanks though, Pepper,” Natasha cut in and Pepper nodded.

“Of course. Well, I’ll meet you in the lobby at 6:30pm.” The CEO waved them off as they entered the elevator. Rogers was dropped off first and left the two female spies with a nod of his head. Less than thirty seconds later Sharon and Natasha were standing on Nat’s floor.

“I can’t believe you have an entire floor to yourself,” Sharon murmured in awe as she wandered throughout the massive space that was Natasha’s.

“Perks of saving the world,” the redhead replied as she grabbed her duffle bag and took off to the master suite.

“You have five guest bedrooms! Five!” Sharon yelled as she peeked into every single one.

“Need the space for my weapons.”

“The island in your kitchen is bigger than my entire kitchen.”

“It’s a shame I can’t cook.”

“These views are to die for.”

“Well, if you're volunteering,” Natasha smirked at her as she settled on her couch in the living room. “Would you stop acting like a child?” she asked as Sharon bounded all over the living space.

“Do you think Rogers’ floor is exactly the same as yours?”

“I don’t know. Why don’t you go up and check?”

Sharon self-depreciatingly snorted as she ran a hand through her hair.

“I doubt he’d want me in his personal space.”

Nat shrugged as she turned on the TV and began flipping through the channels. Apparently, she had more than a 1,000 available to her.

“I’m going to drop my bag in a guest bedroom,” Sharon announced and Nat nodded distracted as she changed channel after channel.

Sharon slung her bag over her shoulder and picked the guest bedroom closest to the kitchen. It was beautifully decorated in muted hues of grey. It had an en-suite bathroom and a walk in closest.

Maybe Sharon should become an Avenger. If this is the life she’d be living she’d gladly sign up.

She tossed her bag down and threw herself down onto the most comfortable bed she had ever felt. She groaned and stretched out, lapping up the luxury while it lasted.
August 12th, 2012

Avengers Tower

Sharon had to give it to Pepper, she was very thorough in what she did. Pepper and her people had taken an unused room in the Tower and transformed it into a perfect classroom set decked out with chairs, desks, textbooks, and even several rows of lockers.

An entire production team was on hand and gearing up to film. Sharon hadn’t seen Rogers since Hair and Makeup had swept him up an hour ago. He also had to get fitted into his suit.

His SHIELD stealth suit was still in production so for these videos he’d be wearing Coulson’s prototype.

Sharon hoped it looked better in person than it had on the news.

Sharon and Natasha were camped out in directors’ chairs and chit-chatting back and forth, Pepper popping in for the occasional word as everyone waited for the man of the hour.

A swell of noise to her left had Sharon looking up from her phone as Rogers entered the room.

“Oh, wow,” Sharon whispered as she saw the uniform up close. It was a lot to take in.

“That’s a lot of red, white, and blue,” she whispered to Natasha who snickered in return.

There was nothing discreet about the getup. He looked like the living embodiment of the American flag.

His utility belt was big and bulky and seemed very impractical for combat. His helmet was more of a hoodie that swallowed up his neck. The boots…just looked weird.

In fact, his whole uniform was rather reminiscent of his USO costume, except no booty shorts. In its place, however, was very tight spandex that left nothing to the imagination.

He lumbered into the room, clearly aware of all the eyes resting on him. He waved awkwardly to the crew as the director walked up to him and started setting the scene. Sharon watched fascinated and a few minutes later, the set was being cleared and everyone was commanded to be quiet as they began filming.

Rogers came into view of the camera and stood with his hands perched on his hips as he spoke directly to the camera.

“So, your body is going through some changes…”

Sharon bit down on her tongue to stop the peels of giggles from coming out. A look at Natasha told her that her friend was fighting the same battle with much more success than Sharon. When the director called cut Sharon couldn’t hold it in anymore and broke out into raucous laughter.

Natasha kicked her chair as she lightly chuckled. Rogers shot the pair a dirty look but was
distracted by the director who was setting up the next PSA.

“Oh, God,” Sharon said as she wiped tears from her eyes. “This is the greatest moment of my life.”

“Hell yeah, it is,” Natasha replied as she held her phone up, zooming in on Rogers.

“Please tell me you’re filming this.”

“Every last morsel of it.”

“Who will you send it to?”

Nat’s grin turned positively sinister.

“Everyone.”

The PSAs continued ranging from detention to hygiene. Each one was more hysterical than the last and every one had Rogers’ patented Captain America Finger Pointing. Poor Rogers looked increasingly miserable as the day continued on.

Sharon watched as he completed his next one.

“Patience. Sometimes patience is the key to victory,” The Avenger intoned with a head tilt.

“Sometimes it leads to very little and it seems like it’s not worth it, and you wonder why you waited so long...for something so disappointing.”

“What’s this one for?” Sharon murmured to Natasha who shrugged.

“Hell if I know.”

Rogers looked off camera towards the crew and asked with a defeated sigh, “How many more of these?”

“Just ten more, Captain!” The director responded as Sharon grimaced.

Long day, indeed.

Sharon checked her reflection in the mirror one last time as she ran her fingers through her hair, fluffing it out and gaining more volume. Satisfied with the results she tucked her blouse into her jeans as she wandered into her room, grabbing her purse and heading to the living room.

Nat was on the couch watching pro wrestling.

“Heading out?” She asked innocently as if she had no idea of where Sharon was going.

“Yep,” the blonde replied, “I’ll be gone all night.”

“You’re missing out on takeout and movie night with Pepper and Rogers.”

“I think I’ll live.”

“So, should I take your bag to the jet tomorrow because you’ll be too indisposed to come back to the Tower?”
“You are a gem, Nat.”

“Remember, we’re leaving at 10am.”

“I will be there, scout’s honor.” Sharon held up her three fingers as proof as Nat regarded her blankly.

“Have fun,” the redhead yelled as Sharon headed to the door.

“Oh, we will. Give my best to Pepper.”

Sharon headed to the elevator and upon entering the car she hit the button for the lobby.

“Heading out, Agent 13?”

Sharon was able to contain her jump this time. She still needed time to get used to Jarvis, but even she could admit he was mighty helpful. He had directed her to the indoor swimming pool that morning and she had gotten some laps in.

She nodded to his inquiry, knowing he would see it.

“Would you like me to call you a taxi? Or perhaps take one of the company cars?”

“I’m fine, Jarvis. I can get there on my own. Thanks though.”

“You are most welcome.”

The rest of the ride was in silence. When the doors opened Sharon waved up at the camera and glided through the lobby, throwing a friendly smile to the security staff.

She caught a taxi on her own and in a matter of minutes was in front of Catherine and Jessie’s Chelsea apartment.

She hit their buzzard and was buzzed in. She took the stairs up to the third floor and was immediately greeted with a tight hug from Catherine.

“Share-Bear! It’s been too long.”

“You saw me a month ago, Kit-Kat.” Sharon responded as she wrapped her arms around her best friend. The pair waddled into the apartment still wrapped up in their embrace. Jessie hollered hello from the kitchen and it was only when Catherine had released Sharon that he emerged with a cheese platter in hand.

“Ooh, what is all that.” Sharon inquired curiously taking in all the different sights and smells.

“This, my dear Sharon, is a cheese platter. Feast your eyes on this. We have Comte, we have Camembert, we have Brillat-Savarin. There’s Manchego, Mimolette, and Stilton.”

“Wow,” Sharon stared, “That’s a very grownup cheese platter. I am impressed, Jessie.”

He glowed with pride as he set the platter down on their dining room table.

“Well, this is a grownup apartment. Where we do grownup activities.”

“Yesterday we had a nerf gun battle that lasted two hours,” Catherine yelled from the kitchen as she brought out glasses of red wine.
“It was very grown up.” Jessie hastily added as he elbowed Catherine.

“I thought it was pretty childish the way you cried like a baby when I beat you.”

“I told you, woman,” he hissed fiercely, “I got some dust in my eye! I’m allergic to dust.”

“Sure, my love, you keep telling yourself that.” She patted his cheek as she passed him and the three sat at the table digging into the cheese.

It was…something.

They all hid their grimaces into their wine as conversation flowed easily between the three friends. Eventually, it dried up a bit as the three sat there, staring at their wine glasses. Jessie had his head leaning back against his chair as he stared at the ceiling, musing to himself.

“We’re adults, having a very adult dinner with an adult cheese platter and adult wine. It’s great. I love it.”

A beat of silence followed his statement. The lone man sighed and looked at both Sharon and Catherine.

“Who wants to play drunk Jenga?”

“I’m in,” Sharon said immediately as Catherine perked up.

“Oh, yes!”

“Great, I have tequila and whiskey in the kitchen.”

He raced to the kitchen as Sharon and Catherine huddled in the living room around their dinky coffee table, setting up the Jenga blocks. On each block written in sharpie were the rules for the game that a person would have to complete if they pulled them from the tower.

The tower was assembled when Jessie materialized from the kitchen with a tray of shots and a container of salt. He set them down and plopped to the floor in between Sharon and Catherine.

“Alright, players, you know the rules. You gotta do whatever the tile says or drink. Whoever knocks down the tower drinks more. Game?”

“Totally game,” the females parroted back as Jessie hit the remote for the sound system and Rihanna’s Diamonds blared throughout the small apartment. Sharon bobbed her head in time to the music as Jessie set out three shots and readied the salt on their wrists.

“Ready?”

“Ready Freddy.”

“Bring it.”

“Drink!”

The three downed the shots and licked the salt. Sharon puckered her face as the tequila swished down her throat. She nearly gagged at the salt.

“Is that Himalaya salt?” she choked as Catherine’s eyes watered.
Jessie shrugged defensively, “It’s all we have.”

Sharon shook her head and got her game face on. She wasn’t about to let some salt mess up her game. She was the reigning champ of drunk Jenga. Catherine was first on deck as she expertly wiggled a tile from the bottom.

“Bottoms Up!” she read with a grin as Sharon and Jessie cheered.

“Shot!”

She downed one of the whiskeys. She tossed the paper cup to the side as Sharon grabbed her own tile and grinned evilly when she saw what was written up.

“Smug Happy Couples!”

“Noooo!” Jessie cried as Catherine hung her head low.

“You’re cheating! You have to be cheating!” the doctor in training accused.

“The tiles don’t lie, mi amigo. And I believe the happy couple has to take five shots each. Line it up!” Sharon crowed as the twosome lined up the appropriate amount of shots and knocked them back like champs.

Catherine’s head was swimming and Jessie was contemplating where his girlfriend’s twin sister had come from. He blearily freed a tile and blinked a few times before making out its words. By now Rihanna had filtered into Owl City’s Good Time. Sharon was finding it increasingly hard not to dance. Her feet just wanted to be free.

“Celtic Heritage.” Jessie groaned as Catherine chirped from the floor, “Dance for me, baby!”

He struggled to his feet and did a horrible rendition of a jig that was totally not in tune to Owl City’s feel-good music. He finally landed on his butt and the game continued. Catherine freed a tile and frowned.

“9-11 Secret Terrorist Cell Member.”

Sharon and Jessie oohed and awed as Catherine grabbed a stray piece of paper and after some technical difficulties gripping the pencil wrote down a word and folded the paper hiding it from view.

“I don’t think I spelled it correctly, but I’m a rebel! I don’t care about spelling!” Catherine slurred as the game continued, round and round it went as more and more drinks were drunk.

“Santa!” Sharon shouted as she pointed to Jessie and patted her lap.

“Get on my lap, big boy!” she couldn’t help but giggle as the man clumsily did so, nearly knocking the two to the floor.

“You’re a bony chair,” Jessie sulkily muttered from her lap as he freed his tile.

“I’ll bone your chair,” Sharon saucily countered as Jessie shifted uncomfortably. She only held on tighter. Jessie sighed and read out his tile.

“Jeff Probst!”
Everyone was suddenly alert because this was a Round Robin, meaning they’d keep going until someone came up blank and be forced to drink.

“Boston Rob!” Jessie yelled.

“Richard Hatch!” Catherine chimed in.

“Jonny Fairplay!”

“Rupert!”

“Russel Hantz!”

“Cirie Fields!”

“Ozzy!”

“Colby Donaldson!”

“Coach!”

It swung back around to Catherine who looked like a deer in headlights as her entire face blanked.

“Wait…there is…oh crap!”

“Drink!” Jessie and Sharon crowed as Catherine banged her head on the table and began knocking back shot after shot as her boyfriend and best friend egged her on.

The game continued as the three began to make less and less sense. Jessie had lost his button up shirt and was left in a wife beater, Catherine’s cheeks were flushed pink and Sharon had given in to her desire to dance and was shaking her hips to Chris Brown’s *Turn Up the Music*.

“I’m moving like my hips don’t lie!” she happily announced to the apartment as Jessie got the Michelle Kwan tile. He cursed loudly before crawling to the hallway closest and after what felt like an eternity crawled back to the coffee table and forced his too big feet into Catherine’s ice skates.

“I look ridiculous,” he whispered to himself as he curled up on the floor, his eyes hazy with drunken revelry. At some point during the game, he had gotten into a drunken rant about his classmates.

Twenty minutes in and there was no sign of him stopping anytime soon.

“I mean, the man cannot shut up. He just goes on and on about the most ridiculous topics. Do you think I care about whether or not moose are color blind? Hell to the no. God, he’s such a…such a…blatherskite!”

“Dammit!”

Two pairs of eyes settled on Catherine. She had been in a near coma state for the last few rounds but at the word blatherskite had miraculously come back to life. She reached for that scrap piece of paper she had discarded several hours ago and pitifully unfolded it, holding it for the two to see.

*Blatherskite.*

Sharon and Jessie gasped as Catherine mournfully glanced at the nearly toppling Jenga tower. With a sign of the cross, she lunged forward and tore the tower apart until the three were sitting in a sea
of scattered Jenga tiles.

Silence followed for several long moments before the chanting began.

“Drink! Drink! Drink! Drink!”

Catherine gamely threw back all the remaining shots as Sharon wrapped her arms around Jessie and swayed them blunderingly back and forth as she sang.

“We are the champions, my friends! And we’ll keep on fighting ‘til the end! We are the champions!”

She released Jessie and he slumped back to the floor and stroked the hardwood floors tenderly.

“My feet hurt!” he moaned, his face pressed into the wood.

Catherine had passed out midway through her loser shots and had tequila dripping down her chin.

Sharon was feeling on top of the world.

“I—I’m king of…of the world!” she exclaimed for all (or none) to hear. Her attention was suddenly taken by the next song blaring through the speakers.

“‘Cause you make me feel like I’ve been locked out of heaven, for too long, for too long.”

“This is my song!” she squawked and shakily stood on her feet as she danced victoriously throughout her friends’ living room.

All in all, a very grown-up affair.

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August 13th, 2012

Stark Industries Jet

“Go a little too hard last night, Thirteen?”

Sharon grunted into the satin pillow as she laid face down on the couch. She felt the couch dip as Nat sat near her head. She whined as Nat picked her head up and forced open her eyes.

“Are you hungover?” the assassin asked, unimpressed.

Well, it wasn’t Sharon’s fault she hadn’t been raised with vodka in her blood like some people she knows.

“I think I’m still a little drunk, actually,” the blonde truthfully admitted as Natasha sighed and unceremoniously dropped her head. It smacked into the pillow as Sharon cried pitifully. For a moment Natasha ran her fingers through Sharon’s hair (Sharon could have also imagined it) before standing.
“I’ll go get you some aspirin.”

“I love you,” Sharon proclaimed with all the love in her heart as Natasha rolled her eyes and strolled away. Sharon raised her head high enough to spy Rogers sitting across from her in one of the reclining chairs. He eyed her for a moment before going back to his book.

Sharon couldn’t help but feel like he was judging her.

Well, screw him.

“Hey!” she whisper-yelled as Rogers ignored her, “Hey, you!”

Rogers sighed and glanced up, a look of eternal suffering etched onto his face.

“Don’t e-ever get…drunk, R-Rogers. Not worth it.”

She hoped her pearls of wisdom would be passed down generation to generation. Rogers seemed less than impressed.

“I can’t get drunk,” he curtly reminded the spy before going back to his book.

“Well, a-aren’t you lucky?” she sarcastically quipped back, mentally high fiving herself for her cleverness, before plopping her head back down. She was fading fast into oblivion but before she let the sweet relief of sleep consume her, she had a single thought.

All in all, their weekend in New York had been a success.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, this one was a doozy to write. My problem is with chapters is that they become way too wordy. My process is I block out the chapter with bullet points and this one only had 4 or 5, which one would think be only maybe 10 pages or so. Instead it's 19. Sometimes I really wish I could write less.

I have yet to see Spider Man: Homecoming, but once I heard about the Captain America PSAs, I couldn't resist putting them in the story.

Also, I figured out Photobucket, so the pics for last chapter are up, so feel free to go back and take a peek at Professor Jackson and Dr. Abbott.

So, Clint's 'Tahiti' comment is a reference to Agents of SHIELD. Don't worry though, Clint hasn't had any brain washing or anything like that! I just wanted to do the reference. Clint is fine.

I'm noticing that whenever I put Sharon, Natasha and Steve together, Steve doesn't talk much. I just think I've gotten so comfortable with the Sharon/Nat dynamic I just leave Steve hanging on the outskirts. I'm also afraid to write Steve because I think it would be so easy for him to become one dimensional like he often is in fanfics, and I don't want that for Steve. I want him to feel real and nuanced.
But in a way, it also makes sense at the moment to keep him quiet. He's still new to SHIELD and to Natasha and Sharon. Yes, he saved the world with Natasha but he doesn't really know her. And we all know how he feels about Sharon since the airport reveal. So, he needs time to warm up to the two. Hopefully we'll see a better Sharon/Steve/Nat and Sharon/Steve dynamic going forward.

Please, please review! It keeps me going. Thanks for everyone who has reviewed in the past. You're all amazing!

Pic time!

Sharon's drunk jenga outfit:
What's in a Name?

Chapter Summary

“We’re madly in love,” she sardonically quipped, “We’re going to elope any day now.”

“Well, be sure to send me the registry. I’ll buy you the cheapest thing on it.” He threw right back at her as the blonde raised an eyebrow, impressed.

“You’re a pal, Stanford, truly. So, what’s the 4-1-1?” The spy asked as she leaned forward with interest.

“Got a mission for you.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 21st, 2012

The Triskelion

It was a lazy midweek day that found Sharon looking for relief in the 19th floor staff lounge. She had a table to herself as she stretched out her legs and nursed her third cup of coffee of the day. The lounge was relatively quiet and peaceful as several agents loitered around, chatting softly about the day.

Laid out before her was Agent 29’s weekly report on the comings and goings of one Steve Rogers. It read just like all of Agent 29’s reports since Rogers had joined SHIELD little more than a month before.

He goes for an early morning jog every day, rain or shine. When he leaves the apartment he is gone for the majority of the day, most likely at SHIELD. He is gone from his apartment every Saturday morning from 9am to 2pm, exactly. Agent 29 had no idea where he goes but Sharon knew.

He was visiting Peggy.

When he was in the apartment he stayed holed up in there, Agent 29 not hearing much other than the hum of his television (he seemed to be marathoning *M*A*S*H*) and the occasional record being played.

He was polite but distant when encountering Agent 29 in the halls and hadn’t gone out of his way to meet the other neighbors on the 4th floor.

Luckily for him, none of his neighbors suspected him of being an Avenger, so his life was relatively peaceful, all things considered.
He shopped at the mom-and-pop’s corner grocery store a block over, his favored mode of transportation for longer distances was his Harley Davidson, he continued eating Agent 29’s pies without fail, and always returned her pie dish newly cleaned.

All in all, his life, besides from being a superhero, was pretty average.

Still, something was nagging at Sharon as she stared down at Twenty-Nine’s words. He was adjusting well enough, she guessed, from what she read and her own interactions with the WWII vet.

He was coasting through his history classes with Professor Jackson and had even survived the man’s sadistic exam that he had inflicted on the three SHIELD agents last week. The exam alone had been enough for Natasha to call it a day as she would no longer accompany Rogers to his lessons.

That left Sharon and she wasn’t about to be outdone by Rogers, near eidetic memory or not. Which reminded her, she would need to find three more sources for her essay on the Civil Rights Movement.

She made a mental note about that as she closed her folder and stared ahead.

Yes, Rogers was firmly in the 21st Century, but she still felt like she was forgetting something that she needed to tell him…

“Oh crap, has anyone told Rogers about the Dodgers?” she asked aloud, drawing the attention of the few agents around her. Noting that this wasn’t a rare occurrence when it came to the blonde spy, they all went back to their conversations. Her furrowed brows were broken as she realized what she had said.

“Ha! That rhymed. Classic.” Patting herself on the back she went back to her musings as she mentally made a note to broach the sensitive subject of the Dodgers with Rogers. Rumor had it, he was a big baseball fan.

It was only a few minutes later when Natasha waltzed through the door. Throwing a wink towards Sharon, she sauntered towards the fridge and pulled out a mason jar of salad. She rummaged through the shelves and pulled out a plastic bowl and seated herself at Sharon’s table.

“What’s up, Rapunzel?” the redhead asked as she unceremoniously dumped the salad from the jar and began tossing it viciously, making sure it was drenched in vinaigrette. She bit into it fiercely, chomping on her lettuce and spearing a cherry tomato with her fork.

“Nothing much, short-stack,” Sharon responded easily as she pushed her folder away from Nat’s messy eating. Natasha eyed the folder for a moment before going back to her chomping.

“Reading your weekly stalker report?”

“Like you have room to talk, you get the same report that I do,” Sharon huffed as she tucked her platinum blonde hair behind her ears.

“Yes, I do. I, on the other hand, don’t make a big deal about it.”

Sharon narrowed her eyes. “I’m not making a big deal about it.”

“Oh please, you’re a bleeding heart, especially when it comes to Rogers.”
“Am not!” Sharon retorted, scandalized as Natasha snorted.

“I am 100% objective when it comes to the good Captain.”

“Sure you are,” Natasha muttered as she bit into some chickpeas. The only adult thing to do in the scenario was to stick her tongue out, so Sharon did. She took a lot of glee out of it as Natasha rolled her eyes.

“You’re such a child,” the assassin groused as Sharon batted her eyes.

“But you love me,” the blonde cooed.

“I tolerate you, on a good day.”

Sharon smiled fondly as she sipped her coffee contentedly. The pair sat in silence for a few moments, the only noise being Natasha munching loudly on her salad as she ate it savagely. The silence was only broken when Nat gestured towards the blonde with her fork.

“Speaking of the good Captain, has anyone told Rogers about the Dodgers?”

Nat paused for a moment before smirking at her unintended pun, “Ha, that rhymed.”

“That’s what I said!”

Sometimes it felt like Sharon and Natasha shared a brain.

Scary thought.

The two shared a grin just as the Avenger himself appeared in the doorway. Sending a nod to the two, he walked into the room and headed to the counter to pour himself a cup of coffee. He smiled politely to the other agents in the room and ignored the heart eyes that Agent Romero was sending him from her table as well as the leer Agent Sutter was sending his way from his end of the room.

It seemed Rogers was a hot commodity.

Sharon jumped a bit when Natasha lightly kicked her foot and discreetly nodded towards Rogers with a devilish smirk.

“Hey, Rogers,” she said aloud as Rogers acknowledged her while pouring some sugar into his coffee.

“You hear about the Dodgers?”

The two immediately broke out into giggles as Rogers raised an eyebrow nonplussed. He sipped his coffee before replying. “Original.” His tone was exceptionally dry as he moved to stand in front of their table, “It’s not like I heard that same joke every day in ’41.”

“You have to admit,” Sharon cut in with a dimpled grin. “It is pretty funny.”

“Hysterical,” was his sarcastic quip. “So,” he leveled the two with a look. “Is there anything I actually need to know about my favorite baseball team, or are you two just having one over me?”

The two female spies shared a look, seeing who should be the one to tell Rogers the unfortunate truth of his favorite baseball team.

“Well,” Sharon bit the bullet and faced the Avenger head on, “The team is no longer the Brooklyn
Dodgers…they’re the Los Angeles Dodgers now.”

Rogers stared at her blankly for several long moments as she watched him uneasily. She hoped he wasn’t have a stroke.

“They moved to LA? When?” he demanded to know, a pinched look coming upon his handsome face. It was the most emotion Sharon had seen out of him in the short time they had been working together.

“In 1957, I think.”

“Why? Why would they do such a stupid thing like that?” The words were thinly veiled with righteous anger, Rogers’ specialty.

Sharon shrugged, she had never been a Dodgers fan.

“Umm, money, I think was a motivating factor. Also moving baseball to the west coast, the Giants followed as well to San Francisco.”

Rogers stared uncomprehendingly towards her, as if he was trying to wrap his head around the mysteries of the universe and was failing.

“Well,” he finally stated after several excruciatingly long moments. “What a bunch of horseshit.”

Sharon stared. This was the first time she had ever heard him swear. She wasn’t naïve enough to believe he had never sworn before like many other Captain America fans did, she, after all, had grown up on stories from Peggy and the Commandos. She knew Rogers had a dirty mouth, but still, hearing it in person was something else.

It did things to her.

“Who the hell am I supposed to root for now? It sure as fuck won’t be the Yankees.”

Sharon agreed with that on a visceral level. Fuck the Yankees. Particularly A-Rod.

“You can still root for the Dodgers,” Natasha said as she polished off the last of her salad. Rogers looked like Natasha had just insulted his mother as he glared down at the Russian spy.

“And support those backstabbing traitors? I’d rather go back on ice.”

Okay. That was a bit extreme. But who was Sharon to question a man’s love of baseball?

A Field of Dreams was her all-time favorite movie. It made her cry every time.

“There’s always the Mets,” Sharon suggested as Rogers raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

“What the hell are the Mets?”

“Oh! They were created after the Dodgers and the Giants left New York. They’re in Queens.”

Rogers shuddered as his grip tightened on his coffee cup. Sharon was a little concerned that he would break it unintentionally with his super strength. That was a mess she wouldn’t be cleaning up.

Rogers heaved in a sigh as if the weight of the world was on his shoulders as he squared his jaw and set back his shoulders.
“I have a strongly worded letter to write to whatever dumb fuck thought moving the Dodgers to LA was a good idea,” he muttered darkly before marching out of the lounge.

“It was more than 50 years ago!” Sharon called after him, but her words were lost to his back. She turned back to Natasha who seemed amused by the whole encounter.

“Who knew Cap could be such a drama queen?” the redhead asked as she pushed her bowl away. Sharon rolled her eyes as she sipped her coffee.

“Oh, you have no idea.”

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**August 23rd, 2012**

**The Triskelion**

“Can I just say, Captain America, that I am a huge fan!”

Quentin was in true fangirl mode as he nearly swooned at the sight of Captain America in his new stealth suit, the suit Quentin had painstakingly designed for him.

“Please, call me Steve,” Rogers replied, avoiding the eager gaze Quentin had placed on him.

“Of course, Captain America, whatever you say,” the young genius stood just a hair to close to the super soldier as he fumbled with his hands, seeming to have no idea what to do with them. Did he place them on those glorious muscles? It’d be for tailoring reasons, of course. Very professional.

“Q,” Sharon said from where she was standing. “Give the man room to breathe.”

Quentin sighed but did step back from Rogers, allowing the man to move freely in his new suit. It was a thing of beauty. Formed from Kevlar, it was streamlined and utilitarian in its design. Gone were the eye catching red and white from his previous uniform and now a dark navy, with only a little burgundy showing at his sides, it would be perfect for the types of missions he would be encountering as a SHIELD agent. The only nod towards his patriotic identity was the silver star and stripes dancing across his torso. He was, after all, Captain America.

There were some flashes of brown, most notably his new belt that could fit its fair share of gadgets and gizmos without being overkill, he now wore brown leather fingerless gloves and the straps at his shoulder were brown for where his shield would rest when not in use.

Sharon watched as he moved around the room with ease, not at all self-conscious as he had been in his old uniform for the PSAs.

“How does it feel?” Quentin asked, watching Rogers hungrily, wanting praise from his childhood idol. Rogers rolled his shoulders, did a few quick jabs to test movement and nodded in approval.

“It fits like a glove,” he complimented the prodigy who looked ready to swoon. Sharon watched him closely to ensure he wouldn’t pass out. She wouldn’t be catching him if that was the case.

“At your back we have a magnetic alloy, so attaching and detaching the shield can be done with ease.”
Rogers picked up his shield and, true to Quentin’s word, was able to attach it his back without overextending his arm.

“That will be helpful out in the field,” Rogers said, leaving the shield at his back. Sharon noted idly that the shield completed the look, the way it created a halo at Rogers’ back.

“Any alterations you need? I am more than happy to make any fixes for you personally.”

And Quentin was getting grab happy as he reached for Rogers who gracefully sidestepped the over eager genius.

“I’m good. It fits great. Thank you, Agent Phillips.”

“You know my name,” Quentin whispered in awe as Sharon shook her head. How was this her life?

Rogers sent her a silent SOS as her phone pinged with a new text message. She read it and raised an eyebrow.

“Well, I hate to cut this love fest short, but the Captain and I are needed elsewhere. Thanks, Q, for all your help.”

She clapped the whiz kid on the back as she ushered Rogers out of the room. The Avenger breathed a sigh of relief as they slipped into the elevator and Sharon ordered it to take them to the training grounds.

“Is he always like that?” he questioned with a twinge of concern as Sharon laughed lightly.

“Only around you, apparently. He’s never been that keen to do anything for me.”

“Lucky me,” Rogers muttered as he crossed his arms over his chest, his new suit doing nothing to hide how incredibly ripped the man was. Sharon blinked and looked away, a playful grin on her face.

“He’s just enamored with you. He’s not the only one. You’ve had to have noticed your fan club by now.”

They were numerous and loud in their admiration of the super-soldier.

Rogers shivered just thinking of all of them. He couldn’t walk down a hallway without being cornered by an overzealous…admirer.

He glanced at Sharon out of the corner of his eye and remarked conversationally, “It seems to have no effect on you.”

Sharon snorted as she leaned back against the railing, “I think any amorous feelings I had for you dissipated the first time you leveled me with your unimpressed glower. It leaves quite the impression.”

“I don’t glower,” Rogers retorted, looking sulky as Sharon smiled bigger.

“Oh, yes you do. It’s your second most common look.”

“What’s my first?” The Avenger questioned.

“Blue Steel,” Sharon teased and slipped out of the elevator just as it opened. She didn’t need to look
at Rogers’ to see his confusion, it was tangible as he followed after her.

“Where are we going?” he asked as he walked a step behind her.

“We’re about to meet STRIKE Team Bravo. Fury has finally assigned us a team, which is good.”

“Why is it good?” Rogers inquired as they turned a corner.

“It means we’re getting closer to being mission ready.”

She saw Rogers perk up at that. She could understand that. The man must be chomping at the bits to finally get out there and kick some ass instead of biding his time for the last month. He had come a long way in the last few weeks. He had taken to parkour alarmingly quickly and was flipping and jumping off walls with ease.

His lessons in judo and mixed martial arts were paying off and he had gone from a defensive fighter to an offensive one quickly.

The clumsiness and awkwardness that had been showcased in the Battle of New York was slipping away, and in its place was a strong, confident fighter who could do his fair share of damage. He was surprising fast and nimble for his size and muscle and the grace in which he moved reminded Sharon more of a dancer than a super soldier. But his grace also could be deadly and he had the ability to take down opponents quickly and effectively.

“What is STRIKE like?” Rogers asked, he had yet to spend much time with the tactical force. Sharon shrugged as they continued walking.

“They’re the muscle of any operation. The teams are made up of hired guns, mercenaries, and black ops. They’re strong, good with weapons, and they get the job done.”

“You don’t sound like a fan,” Rogers surmised correctly as Sharon shrugged and tossed him a look.

“I don’t like meatheads.”

She nodded ahead as the pair came upon Team Bravo. Natasha and Barton spent the majority of their time with Delta, and before being paired with Rogers, Sharon had only ever crossed paths with Echo and Tango occasionally.

Bravo would be her first and long term interaction with a STRIKE team. However, the type of missions Rogers was suited for required the need of a permanent STRIKE team. So, here they were.

The team, as all STRIKE teams were renowned for, were a rambunctious group of trigger happy individuals with just a tinge too much testosterone coursing through their veins, even in the two females on the team. They were definitely more brawn than brain and just a tad too violent for Sharon’s liking. Sharon was worried for a moment that she had stepped foot onto the set of *Aliens.*

God, it was like being in a fraternity.

And here was the president himself, Brock Rumlow.

Rumlow was a man’s man, and he never let anyone forget it. Cocky and arrogant, he swaggered up to the pair and held out his hand to Rogers with an ugly smirk on his hardened face.
“Captain,” he greeted as Rogers shook his hand. She watched the normal male posturing that occurred as the handshake went a hair too long as both men squeezed just a bit too hard.

“Rogers, meet Commander Rumlow, leader of STRIKE Team Bravo,” Sharon introduced them as they finally let go and eyed each other the way rivals always did.

“Thirteen,” Rumlow addressed, his tone as oily as his smile. She nodded at him as Rumlow began calling his team to attention and going through introductions for Rogers’ sake. When they were done with that Rumlow looked at Rogers shrewdly.

“So, Captain, we’d love to see what you can do.”

Well, that was a challenge if Sharon had ever heard one. And she knew enough about Rogers’ to know he’d take it. The guy used to spend his past time getting beat up in alley ways.

“Well,” Rogers’ replied, “Let’s get down to it.”

Sharon sighed as cheers erupted throughout the large space.

She had so been looking forward to an easy day at work.

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August 27th, 2012

The Triskelion

“Did you really have to throw me into the wall?” Sharon complained as she laid stretched out across the mats.

She and Rogers’ had been sparring for the last hour and her body hurt in places she never knew it could hurt.

“Says the woman who broke my rib with that kick of yours,” Rogers gripped as he sipped from his water bottle. Sharon grinned as she looked up at the ceiling.

“Please, I bet it healed in five minutes.”

“More like seven,” Rogers admitted with a wry grin as he seated himself on the mats and leaned back on his elbows.

“Want to go again?” he asked innocently as Sharon groaned.

“Not all of us are super-soldiers, I need a few more minutes.”

“I’ll give you five.”

“How benevolent,” she grunted as Rogers smiled.

“I try.”

The two enjoyed a few moments of silence as Sharon glanced at the Avenger out of the corner of her eye.
“You know, we’ve been partnered for more than a month and I still don’t know much about you.”

“Read a history book, I’m sure it will fill you in.”

Sharon scowled as she pushed herself up into a sitting position, ignoring the aches of her body.

“Been there, done that. It doesn’t say much about you as a man.”

Rogers startled for a moment before looking away and taking a swig of his water.

“Not much to tell.”

“I doubt that. You also don’t know much about me.”

Rogers huffed as he raised an eyebrow at her and she felt a warm flush on her cheeks. Ignoring the sensation she continued on in her pursuit, she could be just as stubborn as Captain America.

“Come on, let’s play a game.”

“What kind of game?”

“I ask you a question, you ask me a question. It’ll break the ice, or something.”

Rogers sighed and seeing no escape from Sharon’s brown eyes and pout gave in.

“Fine. Hit me with your best shot.”

“I didn’t take you for a Eighties man, but interesting. Favorite color?”

“Green,” Rogers answered easily, “What’s your name?”

Sharon blinked in surprised. Of all the questions she hadn’t been expecting that.

“Agent 13.”

Rogers scowled as he batted his sweaty hair out of his eyes. He would really need to get it cut sooner or later, Sharon mused silently.

“I meant your real name.”

“But you didn’t ask that, and now it’s my turn. Favorite movie?”

“The Wizard of Oz. What’s your birth name?”

The female spy raised an eyebrow. She didn’t understand why he was focusing so intently on this.

“That’s not relevant.”

“I want to know it,” Rogers insisted as Sharon blanched.

“Well, you’ll only be left disappointed. Oddest thing you’ve ever done?”

“Stuffed newspapers in my shoes. Nancy?”

“What?” Sharon asked, baffled. What kind of question was ‘Nancy’?

“Sandra.”
“What are you getting at?”

“Dolores.”

“Rogers–”

“Mary.”

“These aren’t questions.”

“Karen. What is your name?”

“You don’t need to know my name!” Sharon snapped as a heavy silence fell over them.

“My name is not important,” she said after a few moments, looking down at her feet.

“How can I work with someone and not know their name?” he asked, voice brittle.

“It’s just what we do here at SHIELD.”

Rogers gave a biting laugh as he stood and wiped off his pants.

“Yeah, well there’s a lot of things here at SHIELD I don’t agree with. Our partnership, is one of them. I’m done for the day.”

He strode away, leaving Sharon to stare after him. When he was gone she balled up her fist and struck the mat fruitlessly before laying back down and forcing deep breaths in.

Lovely.

August 30th, 2012

The Triskelion

“Out of the chair,” Stanford ordered as he stomped into his cluttered office. Sharon didn’t even put up a fight as she slipped out of his comfy, desk chair and deposited herself in the one across from his desk.

“How’s Rogers?” he gruffly asked as he set some folders down and wiped hopelessly at a stain on his shirt. Sharon couldn’t tell if it was barbeque sauce or blood. With Stanford it could go either way.

“We’re madly in love,” she sardonically quipped, “We’re going to elope any day now.”

“Well, be sure to send me the registry. I’ll buy you the cheapest thing on it,” he threw right back at her as the blonde raised an eyebrow, impressed.

“You’re a pal, Stanford, truly. So, what’s the 4-1-1?” the spy asked as she leaned forward with interest.

“Got a mission for you.”
Sharon immediately brightened. At this point she was in as much need of a mission as Rogers. Things had been…rocky since their sparring session a few days prior, and a good ol’ fashioned mission might be what they needed to mend fences and all that.

“Oh thank God,” she whispered, “What is it?”

“Oh, I think you and the American flag are going to enjoy it.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the lateness of this chapter. It definitely has been longer than a week. I was on a retreat for the majority of last week, so I didn't have any time to write.

I hope now to be able to post weekly moving forward.

This chapter is a bit of a filler, hopefully with the upcoming mission the story's plot will move quicker and we can move past a lot of the exposition that has been occurring in the previous chapters.

Thank you for all the reviews! Please keep it up! They keep me going.
Holy Giant Bats, Batman!

Chapter Summary

“Do not use that name with me! I am not Douglas Birely. I am Demonicus!”

“He’s what now?” Gutierrez spat as she shot one bat down.

"Villains these days.” Rollins muttered from his end of the valley, “They all need a shtick now.”

Birely, err Demonicus, no, never mind, she wasn’t calling him that, lunged at her. She deflected him as he pressed her backwards away from the electronic box. He wasn’t a particularly skilled fighter, but he fought fearlessly and his adrenaline was proving difficult to go up against.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 29th, 2012

USS Kaskaskia, Gulf of Alaska

“I feel like you’re not even listening to a word I’m saying.”

“Of course I am,” nineteen-year-old Brian Johnson soothed to his sweetheart Abigail as he poured himself a cup of coffee, more like black sludge, he silently mused as he stared down at the thickness in his cup.

Brian Johnson was an average kid. Too tall to be short and too short to be tall, he was lanky and still had a teenage awkwardness to the way he moved. Rusty red hair, an unflattering smattering of freckles across his face, and lukewarm brown eyes; he was nothing special to behold, more boy than man. Too poor and not smart enough for college he had found refuge aboard an oil tanker and got to, as he proclaimed often to family and friends, ‘see the world.’ Well, the world was just a bunch of water.

At least he finally had his sea legs after five months at sea.

The constant vomiting, in the beginning, had been…less than ideal. And the crew had given him hell for it. Called him ‘greenie’ and whatnot. He had only recently earned a modicum of respect enough to warrant being called by his surname.

He felt the rolling of the sea beneath his feet as the tanker shifted and tilted as he walked down a long and claustrophobically cramped hallway, fluorescent lights flickering palely casting everything in a sickly palate. He nodded to crewmates as he squeezed past then, mindful of not spilling any scalding hot coffee on his hands.

“What was I saying then?” Abby demanded, headstrong in her belief that if Brian loved her, he’d
commit everything she said to memory as if her words were spoken gold.

“Something ‘bout One Direction, I imagine,” he teased as he slurped down some coffee and took a rickety set of stairs up to the top deck.

“Oh fuck off!” Abby hissed, but he could hear a smile in her voice.

“What, you gon’ leave me for, what his name, Harry Styles?”

“I should leave you for Harry Styles.”

She responded and he just knew she was twiddling the single silver band on her right-hand ring finger. He had given it to her before shipping off, it had cost three entire paychecks worth of money.

It was no diamond, but it was a promise.

That when he makes something halfway decent of himself, he’s gonna return home and marry that girl.

“You’d miss me too much.”

He pushed open a squeaky door and pushed himself out into the night air. His nostrils were immediately assaulted with the salty air and the sounds of waves crashing into the hull. He walked to the railing port side and pulled his coat closer as he shivered lightly.

It might be summer, but nights on the Gulf of Alaska were mostly in the 40s. Steam was whirling up from his coffee and he’d need to drink it quickly before it turns tepid. He looked northward, to where he knew Alaska lay, but hardly a light could be seen off of its coast.

“I wouldn’t miss you at all.”

“Liar,” he wheedled.

“Oh, you’re so full of shit—”

The line went silent.

“Abby?” Johnson questioned as he cocked his head and looked up to the night sky, brilliantly black with millions of stars winking down at him. “Abby?” he pressed but received nothing but a dial tone.

“Ahh fuck!” he swore as he angrily flipped his phone shut and contemplated throwing it into the sea. She’d give him hell for the poor service next time he’d call her.

He tucked the phone into his jean pocket and slurped at the coffee, ignoring the burning of his tongue as the tasteless muck went down his throat.

He was just about to call it a night and head in for some time with him and his hand when he heard light singing from down the way.

“The cook is in the galley boys, making duff so handy. The captain’s in his cabin lads, drinking wine and brandy.”

Nestled in the shadows of the forecastle was ol’ Skipper. The oldest sailor on the ship, the crew
whispered that the old kook had been born at sea and had never stepped foot on land.

His age was visible in the lines and wrinkles of his skin, and the bulbous and glassy expression of his watery blue eyes. The man took no notice of Johnson as the boy stood a few feet away.

“Skipper,” he greeted hesitantly as the old man only grunted a greeting in return. “What you doing out here? It’s cold out.”

The sailor only ignored the teenager and continued singing under his breath.

“Way, haul away, the good ship is a-bolding. Way, haul away, we'll haul away, Joe!”

Johnson rolled his eyes and turned away. “Mangy old bastard.”

He hadn’t taken more than a few feet when the world was pulled out from underneath his feet. A screeching echoed across the sea as the tanker groaned around him. He was thrown from his feet and landed hard upon the deck as the groaning continued. Everything shook and trembled and for one moment he thought he’d be tossed into the sea.

But then everything settled eerily. It was the quietest he had ever heard the ship. He couldn’t feel the rolling of the sea beneath him. Everything was stationary.

They had run aground.

He pushed himself up and quickly looked to Skipper, finding the man huddled in a corner of the deck.

“You alright?” he called out and the old man nodded.

“We ran aground,” Skipper supplied as Johnson nodded.

The silence of the ship was broken as doors flew open and the crew flooded the top deck. Beam lights flashed on, blinding Johnson, as curses flew freely across the deck. Johnson hurried to the railing to see if he could see what they had hit, but the sea was dark beneath them.

“How the hell did this happen?” Captain Miller bellowed, his voice righteously angry.

Any answer from the crew was halted as an odd sound came over the ship.

It was a…squeaking of sorts.

Johnson glanced skyward, but with the moon invisible and the blinding lights of the beams, all he could see was unending blackness.

The chirping grew in size and immensity as Johnson fidgeted nervously, sharing uneasy looks with the men around him.

Finally, he thought he could see something in the distance, it was black and moving….

“What the hell?” he breathed out just before chaos came.

They came quickly from the darkness and swooped down upon the ship. Hundreds, maybe even thousands, of fast moving dark shapes swarmed the deck and the men standing there. Screams and yells roared across the deck as men ran, ducked and covered.
It was every man for himself.

Johnson couldn’t believe what he was seeing as he ran. The black swarm clawing at his clothes and smacking him with their wings as they dove down quick and fast and attacked the crew. He yelled as his neck was cut and he threw himself down behind some of the stored oil containers.

He could hear nothing but the high pitch chirping of these…winged monsters and the pounding of his own pulse in his ear. He watched in horrified fascination as one monster swooped down and picked up the first mate clear off his feet and flew off with him.

But this wasn’t the worse of it. Suddenly, emerging from the dark sky was a black shape ten times bigger and fiercer than any of the others. It landed upon the deck, hiss and screeching loudly, its fangs glinting in the beam lights.

Johnson felt his mouth plummet to his feet as he stared at the thing. Its wingspan was wider than the deck itself and it tottered itself forward toward the storage containers, right where Johnson was hiding.

He threw himself to his hands and feet and crawled away, just as the beast reached the containers. It flew up, grasped the coils of the container between its clawed feet, and flew up. It nearly buckled with the weight of the container, but its wings continued batting towards the sky and it took off, container grasped in its grip.

The other creatures followed and just as quickly as the dark menaces had come from the night, they had disappeared. Their chirping gradually turning into silence as they flew away to parts unknown.

Johnson laid sprawled across the deck as he stared up at the night sky in shock and terror.

“What the fuck?!”

August 31st, 2012

Over the United States

“…the USS Kaskasia was run aground in the Gulf of Alaska through mysterious means. It’s the third one this month,” Rumlow informed the team as they sat scattered throughout the quinjet, looking at reports and floating hologram images of the three tankers.

“And you’re saying once they’ve been run aground, they’ve been raided?” Rogers questioned from the helm as Sharon glanced up at him.

“Correct. All three ships had several containers of refined oil stolen from them.”

“How on earth are massive containers of oil being stolen within minutes of these ships running aground?” Dunn, the newest and youngest addition to the Bravo Team asked as he polished his rifle.

“Well, according to reports,” Rumlow wryly remarked as he tapped away on his tablet, “This is what is taking them.”
Suddenly an image blew up at the center of the quinjet. Even in 3D form, it was still too fuzzy to make out. It was a grainy and unfocused picture, clearly taken with a cellphone and shaky hands, it didn’t help that it had been taken at night.

All it showed was a massive, dark form flying into the night. At this angle, it kind of looked like a…

“Is that a bat?” Jack Rollins, Rumlow’s second in command, asked from where he was seated.

“That’s what the crews are saying. One massive bat, and then a swarm of smaller ones, but still larger than your typical bat.” Rumlow shrugged indifferently.

“You can’t possibly believe them.” Gutierrez, one of the only two females on the STRIKE team, scoffed from her perch. The entire team looked about ready to give their opinion but Rogers cut them off with a stern look.

“Whatever it is, we’re going to stop it. Any idea where the oil containers are being kept?”

Rumlow began looking through his notes before grunting, “There have been some odd reports coming out of Unalaska Island.”

“Odd as in how odd?” Sharon questioned.

“Strange noises at nights, a severe decrease in livestock, and, well…”

“Well, what?” Rogers inquired.

“There’s been a large increase in bat guano. Almost absurd how much more there is on the island.”

Rogers and Sharon shared a look, after a moment she shrugged and he gave a single nod.

“Well, it looks like we’re going to Unalaska Island. Thirteen and I will question the locals, see what we can gather from them. Rumlow, I want you and your team to scour the island, see if you can find any evidence of these…bats.”

Rumlow nodded and the quinjet was a hive of activity.

“Ten minutes out,” the pilot announced over the comm system as STRIKE began arming themselves. Sharon had had two favorite pistols holstered and more than her fair share of gadgets hidden on her person. She buttoned up her grey, wool pea coat and tucked her platinum blonde hair out of the collar. Her bob was half up half down and in the unkempt side as she ran a hand through it. She was wearing form-fitting, black skinny jeans and knee-high, black quilted boots. A good outfit for a chilly, coastal setting such as the Aleutian Islands.

Rogers was outfitted in his new stealth suit, his shield strapped securely to his back as he buckled on his navy helmet. It little to no time the quinjet was perching itself upon a grassy hill just outside Unalaska, a city boosting just above 4,000 people.

It was a small, idyllic town, off the coast of Unalaska Bay with a mountain in its background, and deep, rolling green hills as a strong, sea breeze ruffled the grass. The land was rugged and beautiful, not something one encountered in the concrete jungle that was D.C. Sharon breathed in the strong sea air as she followed Rogers out of the quinjet and the two began hoofing it into Unalaska.

They received odd looks from the few people they came across as they walked down Main Street.
Sharon imagined it was both because they were outsiders, and one of them had a red, white and blue shield strapped to his back.

Rogers was sticking out like a sore thumb.

“We really need to go over undercover techniques with you.” She sighed as Rogers raised an eyebrow. Or at least, Sharon thought he did. It was hard to tell with the helmet.

“We’re here to find out what happened to those oil containers and who’s stealing them. We don’t need to be undercover to do that.”

“You have a lot to learn, Rogers.”

They came across a rundown bar and Sharon stopped outside its door. Rogers watched her inquisitively.

“A bar? Really?”

“Bars are the best place for scrounging up secrets. Besides, do you have anything better?”

Rogers looked up and down the nearly deserted street before grunting and nodding at her. She pushed open the door and plunged them into a dark and smoky space that reeked of alcohol and stale air.

It wasn’t very crowded, seeing as it was only about 10am in the morning, but still, a few patrons were sitting around with glasses of beer in front of them.

Suspicious glances were thrown at the two outsiders and a furry of whispered swept across the bar as Rogers and Sharon made their way towards the bartender.

It was a middle-aged woman with a wild head of curly hair.

She gave the two a once over and upon seeing Rogers’ impressive physique, gave him a gap-toothed grin.

“Heya, sugar. You come here often?” she asked as she leaned against the bar, putting her assets on display in her low cut tank top. Sharon stifled a giggle as Rogers pointedly looked away.

“We have a few questions to ask you, ma’am.”

The woman leered saucily, “You can ask me anything you like, hot stuff.”

Rogers paused but continued on. “Have you noticed anything strange lately?”

The woman snorted and wiped out a glass with a sorry looking rag. “Define ‘strange’ sweetheart.”

“Bats,” Sharon cut in, having had enough of the terms of endearment being lobbed at Rogers.

“Excuse me?” the woman questioned rudely, setting her dark eyes on Sharon.

“Have you noticed anything strange about the bat population here?”

“There have always been bats in Unalaska,” the woman said as she once more set her eyes on Rogers. Sharon leaned in closer to get her attention back.

“Yes, but are the bats…normal? Or have they…changed somehow?”
The woman blinked confusedly before giving Sharon an odd look as if she was the crazy one. She side-eyed Rogers and whispered, “Odd friend you have there.”

“She has her merits,” Rogers replied smoothly. “So about those bats-”

“Look here, you may be cute, but are you buying or not? I have work that I need to do,” the woman snapped as Rogers and Sharon exchanged looks. Sharon shook her head and Rogers nodded.

“We’ll be on our way, sorry to bother you.”

“You’re no bother, sugar. Maybe think of coming back some time, huh? Leave blondie at home.”

Sharon glared and spun on her heel, marching out of the bar as Rogers trailed behind her.

“Well, that wasn’t helpful,” he remarked as they stood outside, looking up and down the street.

“I don’t know, you seemed to make a new friend,” Sharon muttered as Rogers shrugged.

“She’s not really my type.”

“Yeah, she was what, 45? Much too young for you, old timer.” She laughed as Rogers leveled a glare at her and shook his head.

“I don’t think we’ll fare any better with the locals. Let’s rendezvous with STRIKE and see what they’ve come up with.”

Sharon nodded and a few minutes later they found themselves back at the grounded quinjet, the hatch open to reveal STRIKE standing together discussing something. Rumlow made a beeline straight for Rogers.

“Find anything?” the Avenger questioned as Rumlow held up a SHIELD issued drone.

“We flew it across the entirety of the island doing thermal scans. We didn’t find much, except for this.”

He held the screen up as Rogers and Sharon leaned in close. On the far left side of the island was an enormous horde of pinkish-orange blobs.

“That’s a lot of bats,” Sharon remarked as Rogers nodded in agreement.

“Let’s check it out. Fire up the quinjet.”

‘You heard the Capitan!” Rumlow bellowed as STRIKE followed orders and within minutes the quinjet was soaring across the island and landing near a deep, rocky valley. Gushing water could be heard and as Sharon glanced over the edge of the ravine she could see two waterfalls. Mist was rising up above them adding am ephemeral feel to the grey and cloudy day.

Walking in a single filed line the team slowly and steadily worked their way down the jagged crevasse without any casualties. Though it was touch and go for a while. Sharon had nearly lost her footing once and would have plummeted down the side of the ravine had not Gutierrez grabbed onto her jacket.

Finally, everyone was safely in the valley, standing before the two waterfalls. Even from this distance, Sharon could feel the spray of the water on the wind and the strong scent of fresh water was overtaking her senses.
“Scans say that those waterfalls are hiding a cave back there, it’s where the readings of those lifeforms are coming from,” Rumlow said from the side as he looked at his readouts.

“Well bats are nocturnal, they’re probably sleeping back there,” Sharon supplied from next to Rogers, as he stared determinedly ahead.

“Let’s be cautious,” he warned. “We don’t know what we’re going up against.”

The team spread out, flanking the double waterfalls. It was quiet in the valley, the only sound being the rushing water as it fell above them. She stood in front of the waterfall, the water coming down in heavy sheets so thick she couldn’t see past it into the cavern beyond.

She didn’t understand Rogers’ wariness. Bats were bats. They weren’t hard to go up against and as Sharon had proclaimed earlier, they were nocturnal creatures. They wouldn’t even notice the SHIELD agents walking beneath them in the cave.

And if they did, well…SHIELD had ways of handling such things.

Sharon glanced towards Rogers, who had his back to her. Reaching for her utility belt she slowly pulled out one of FitzSimmons inventions: a dendrotoxin grenade. It had the ability to render its victims into a state of unconsciousness that seemed as if no time had passed since the explosion of the grenade.

This would take care of the bats if they posed any threat at all.

With one final glance at the Captain, Sharon eyed the grenade. What was it Fury always said, better to ask for forgiveness than permission?

Well, there were worse things than apologizing. She pulled the chain of the grenade and lobbed her arm back.

Rogers, having heard the click of the grenade detonating, whirled around to Sharon just as she was poised to throw it.

“Wait! Don’t-"

He was too late as Sharon released and the grenade went flying through the waterfall into the cave beyond.

_BANG_.

The grenade detonated and silence followed, only the roar of the water echoing all around. Rogers quickly marched up to her and gripped her arm tightly, jerking her towards him.

“What the hell was that?” he barked in a commanding tone.

“That was me handling the problem.”

Rogers’ grip tightened as he shook her.

“You have no idea what you could have done. We don’t know what’s in that cave-"

“And whatever is in the cave is now sleeping. So, we’re all good to go in…” Sharon trailed off as a curious noise started to overtake the waterfall. It sounded like…chirping. Lots and lots of chirping. And it was coming from inside the cave.
Rogers also seemed to have heard it as he released her and turned towards the waterfall. The noise grew louder and louder in its intensity as all of STRIKE tensed and began inching towards their weapons.

Suddenly, the noise reached its crescendo.

“Duck!” Rogers cried as he threw himself and Sharon down to the wet ground. Sharon stared up at the sky as a crush of bats launched themselves out of the cave and through the waterfall. They were everywhere, flying this way and that as they screeched continuously. Ducking and diving and going after the SHIELD agents.

Sharon rolled to her feet and grabbed one of her Glocks, aiming it skyward as she stared in awe. Bats the size of condors were flying crazily throughout the valley attacking her fellow agents.

Gunfire and screams intermixed with the bats’ chirping and Sharon screamed as one of the bats swooped down and clawed at her face. A claw slashed across her cheek, cutting her as blood dripped down her face.

She felt more than saw Rogers come up behind her and begin pushing her towards the cliff face of the valley, where rocks and dips were numerous.

“We need to find cover!” he yelled through his comm as STRIKE began running after them, heading towards the jagged cliff slide.

Finding cover behind a heavy boulder, Rogers threw Sharon down and shimmied in behind her. STRIKE also we seeking shelter around the pair. Sharon shirked away as one of the bats dipped above her, snipping at her head.

The bats were flying way too organized to be natural. Something or someone had to be controlling them as they moved like a school of fish, in sync and without disruption.

Sharon felt her stomach plunge as a deafening shriek sounded from the mouth of the cave. The blonde spy turned her head and watched in horror as a massive bat, so much bigger than the bats they had encountered before, came swooping out of the waterfall. Shaking off the water it swirled and dove throughout the ravine, going after the SHIELD agents.

“My god,” Rogers breathed out from behind her as both stared at it, unable to take their eyes off of it.

The massive bat was definitely the alpha of the group as all the smaller ones fell into line around it, and they created one massive swarm that was intent on taking out the agents of SHIELD. But still, as much as it seemed to be leading, it still didn’t seem like the boss.

A flash of something darting out of the waterfall caught Sharon’s eye.

It was a man.

At least, it seemed man like, if covered head to toe in a trench coat. The man glanced around nervously before whistling through his teeth as the bats came to attention around him.

It was him. He was the ring leader.

And he was getting away.

He was scrambling up the steep, rocky path towards the top of the cliff. He was going to get away.
Not on Sharon’s watch.

Without a glance towards Rogers, she threw herself up and took off running.

“Thirteen!” Rogers yelled from behind, but she paid him no mind as she ran through the throng of bats, feeling their wings press against her body as she sprinted.

She was never going to reach the man in time. With the aid of the bats, he was nearly at the top of the precipice. Thinking quickly, she pulled out her SHIELD cell phone and began filming. Her hands were shaking but she was able to capture the man on film and she nearly cried in relief when he glanced for one moment at the camera, just long enough for a facial recognition scan.

Her excitement was short lived as a bat swooped down from behind her, grasped onto her shoulders and flew.

She shrieked as her feet left the ground. She looked up and found herself firmly entrapped by the bat, and it didn’t look to be dropping her anytime soon. She twisted her head and sound Rogers and STRIKE growing fainter as the bat rose higher and higher.

All the bats were flying together in a tight spiral as they flew skyward, planning to leave the valley and the agents behind.

Well, that was not an option for Sharon.

She had no desire to be bat food.

Hazardously flinging through her belt, she pulled out a taser disk and slapped it onto the body of the bat. It gave an unearthly cry as it was electrocuted. It immediately released her and she went tumbling down to the earth below.

She curling into a ball before hitting the soft grass, rolling the rest of the way down, earning bumps and bruises the entire way.

She laid dazed at the foot of the valley as the bats flew away, disappearing into the mist. She stared uncomprehendingly up at the grey sky before she was roughly jerked to her feet.

“What the hell was that?” Rogers hollered in her face as she flinched. He was in her personal space, his eyes narrowed, nostrils flaring and monstrous look across his handsome countenance.

“I saw a man coming out of the cave, I tried to intercept him-

“Well, look at all the good that did!”

“It’s not my fault that I was lifted off my feet by a bat, Rogers!”

“Not your fault?! This whole thing is your fault! You detonated the grenade that unleashed all of them!”

“I was trying to subdue them, so we could go in the cave,” she spat back, planting her hands on her hips as she glowered at the Star Spangled Man.

“No, what you were doing was going rogue.”

Sharon’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head in disbelief. “Rogue? All I care about is the mission – “
“You’ve yet to take a single order from me. You detonated that grenade, you refused to stay covered during the attack. I’m the one giving orders, Thirteen.”

Sharon couldn’t help but scoff as she raised her voice and jabbed him in the middle of his chest.

“I’m sorry that I’m a bit hesitant to take orders from a man who’s only lived in this century for four months!”

“What does that mean?” Rogers demanded, nostrils flaring dangerously as his gaze grew harder and his shoulders hunched up.

“I think you know what it means!” she yelled back.

“Well, how can I work with someone who won’t take a single order from me? Who puts everyone in danger with her recklessness? Who won’t even tell me her name?!”

The female spy loudly groaned as she threw her head back in frustration.

“Oh, come on! Again, with the name?! Really-”

“I don’t trust you!” Rogers bellowed and suddenly everything went quiet in the valley as Sharon stared at Rogers in surprise. The two were red in the face and gesturing maddeningly throughout their blowout disagreement.

“What?” she whispered, her voice hoarse. Rogers’ face was unforgiving as he regarded her like scum underneath his boot.

“You heard me. I don’t trust you.”

“Ahem,” a cough came from the side as the two blondes whirled around to see Rumlow standing there, holding onto the body of the bat Sharon had tased.

“I’m sorry to break up this…lover’s quarrel. But I think I know how those bats were being controlled.”

Rogers heaved in a breath, tossed Sharon one final glare before coming to Rumlow’s side. Sharon kept her distance but watched intently as Rumlow gestured to the bat’s neck. Wrapped around it was an electronic collar.

“I’m guessing this is on an ultrasonic frequency, something only bats hear. Whoever has the remote would have complete control over the bats, where they go and how they do it.”

“Good work, Rumlow. Let’s get the specs to SHIELD for analysis,” Rogers said, clapping the man on the back. Suddenly a voice echoed inside Sharon’s ear through her comm.

“This is Rollins in the cave. Captain, I think you’ll want to see this.”

Rogers took off in a jog towards the waterfall as Sharon followed at a much more sedate pace. Coming to the waterfall, she found a slim break in the water. She slid through it, getting sprayed from the falling water as she slipped into the dank cave.

It was chasmal how far it went back into the rock face. The only light came from the entrance and the lanterns STRIKE had set around. She followed the fluorescent lights, wading her way through mounds of bat guano and came to a stop a few feet away from Rogers.

Laid out before them were the oil containers stolen from the three tankers.
Rogers glanced at her before wryly remarking, “Guess we found our oil.”

Hours later found the agents of SHIELD camped out around a fire, their light the only thing seen for miles. The quinjet was parked nearby and sleeping bags were spread out around the makeshift camp as the team prepared to bunker down for the night.

Sharon stood outside of the firelight, her back to the various shenanigans STRIKE were getting up to. She shivered in the cool night as she wrapped her arms around herself and stared up at the sky.

There were so many stars up there, twinkling down at her.

One didn’t see this often in DC.

She had been quiet since her blowout earlier with Rogers. God that had been embarrassing. And all of STRIKE had heard it through the comms.

It seemed that she couldn’t do anything right. She hadn’t meant to question Rogers’ authority. She got it, he was Captain America, the savior of World War II. But she was used to running her own missions, working solo more often than not, once and a while accompanied by another agent (namely Natasha). So, yeah, she was chafing a bit under Rogers’ unbending rule. He wasn’t spy material. He didn’t bend or break, it was his way or the highway.

Sharon honestly thought the two were just going through growing pains with one another. Getting used to one another and learning each other’s styles.

Yet…

*I don’t trust you!*

She recoiled just thinking the words. She may not like being Numero Dos when it comes to the team hierarchy, but she trusted Rogers.

It didn’t seem like that was a two-way street.

Maybe she was in over her head. Maybe it had been a mistake allowing Fury to rope her into this. She ran her hand agitatedly through her messy hair as she paced back and forth. This clearly wasn’t working out, Rogers all but hated her. It’d be for the best to let Natasha take over permanently as his partner.

Those two understood each other in their own way.

But yet…she wanted to work with Rogers. It was frustrating and weird and she felt wracked with guilt more often than not, but the last two months hadn’t been entirely miserable, and she knew they could be a good team if they just gave each other the chance.

She sighed just as her phone beeped with an incoming message. She slid it opened and saw that she had gotten a hit on the facial recognition scan.

She looked towards the quinjet where she knew Rogers was stewing.

Best get this over with.

She walked up the ramp into the quinjet and found Rogers pouring over maps of both the Unalaska
Island and the neighboring Aleutian Islands. The man kept his back to the blonde spy, even though she knew he had to have heard her enter.

“Captain,” she greeted, her voice sounding hollow in the quinjet. Rogers remained staunchly stoic as he looked ahead.

“Thirteen,” the way he said her moniker might as well have been a curse. She refused to be intimidated as she walked closer to him.

“I got a hit on our bat-man.”

That piqued Rogers’ interest as he finally turned towards her, his face unreadable. He gave an impatient nod, wanting her to hurry this up.

Sharon glanced down at her phone and with a few clicks the image of the man blew up into a floating, 3D image. Rogers looked at it with furrowed brows.

It was an average looking, middle-aged man with brown hair and eyes and a somehow odd face. “This is Dr. Douglas Birely. He’s from Culver City and has a Ph.D. in genetics. Up until three years ago, he worked for Gilead Sciences.”

“Why’d he stop?” Rogers asked as he leaned back against his war table and crossed his arms over his chest, his arms flexing in his stealth suit.

“He was diagnosed with Stage III Melanoma.” She hit a button and a new picture of Birely appeared showing the effects of his cancer. His skin was in disarray with tumors, scabs, and sores.

“He went off the grid after that, apparently vowing to find an organic cure to it, seeing as modern medicine was unable to save him. According to his girlfriend of the time, though, the cancer changed him.”

“How?”

“Listen to this,” Sharon brought up a 911 recording his girlfriend had called in during a domestic dispute.

“He’s absolutely crazy! He won’t stop screaming about meteors and bats! I think he’s going to kill me!”

A scream could be heard in the background before the recording cut off.

“The call came in only days after he returned from a trip to the Aleutian Islands, here in Alaska,” Sharon supplied as she slipped her phone back into her pocket.

“So, whatever he found here-“

“Is what is causing the mutations in the bats, and created that unholy massive bat? Yes, I believe so.”

Rogers nodded and contemplated things silently for a moment before glancing at Sharon.

“Then we need to stop it.” He gave her a dismissive nod before turning back to the maps. She stared at his form for several long moments before sighing and heading to the hatch. She was at the top of the ramp when she halted and looked over her shoulder.

“Look, Rogers, I know we’re not friends. We’re coworkers, partners. But I need you to know that
I’ll have your back out there, no matter what. And I need to know that you have mine. If not, then this isn’t going to work. And if it’s not going to work, I’d rather know now than continue trying. But if we’re going to do this, then we need to trust each other, at least when it comes to the mission.”

She stood there for a moment, but when Rogers remained silent she sighed and strode out of the quinjet.

“Thirteen, wake up.”

Sharon shot up and had her gun cocked and ready to go. She blinked and realized she had aimed it right at…Steve Rogers.

“Captain,” she greeted as she lowered the Glock to her lap and groggily asked, “What is it?”

She felt like she had only been sleeping for only a few moments and not hours. Glancing around she saw all of the STRIKE team stretched around the fire on their sleeping mats. It was still pitch black and the night was quiet, the only sound being the waves hitting the coast a few miles off.

“I heard something in the distance. I’m going to check it out.” He stood and started off into the darkness. Sharon stared at his back for a moment before silently groaning and throwing off her blanket, tiptoeing past STRIKE and hurrying after Rogers.

“What did you hear?” she whispered, trailing behind his broad strides.

“The same chirping as before. I think the alternative bat nest must be somewhere nearby.”

“Great, more encounters with mutant bats,” she quipped and then the two were silent as they marched onward for several miles. Sharon was amazed by Rogers’ enhanced hearing, because it wasn’t until they were nearly on top of the bat nest that she heard the chirps and squawks of the bats.

She and Rogers hid in the shadows and looked down into the gorge that seemed to house the bats and Birely. Sharon gulped as she saw that massive bat down below. That thing could eviscerate her without even blinking.

“Thirteen, look!” Rogers nudged her and pointed to the center of the commotion. Standing at the heart of the whirling bats Birely and before him was an electronic, mother box of some sort. Sharon pulled out a pair of night vision binoculars. She zoomed in and saw the box with sharp clarity as its image was recorded and played up against the screens of the binoculars.

“I bet this is what is controlling the bats,” she whispered to Rogers as she handed him the binoculars. He nodded as he looked through them.

“Did these record it?” he asked and she nodded in reply.

“Alright, let’s get out of here before we’re noticed. I think I have a way of stopping this once and for all.”
“You sure this will work?” Rumlow inquired through the comm.

“It’s the best chance we have.” Rogers fired back from his perch atop the ravine. Beneath them was the cave that Birely and his bats were hiding in. His shield glinted in the early morning light.

“This is how it is going to go,” Rogers said, repeating the plan, “First, we draw the beasts out. STRIKE will distract the bats, allowing Thirteen to take out the control center. Leave the big bat to me. Any questions?”

Passive grunts and snorts traveled across the comm system as Rogers cocked his head towards Sharon’s hiding spot.

“Thirteen, care to do the honors?”

“With pleasure, Captain.”

She pulled her final dendrotoxin grenade, pulled off the top, and chucked down the ravine into the cave.

It worked like clockwork.

The screeching of the bats grew louder as they erupted out from the cave and began flocking the SHIELD agents.

Except for this time, they were prepared.

Gunfire erupted from STRIKE as they grappled down the cliff face of the ravine. A colossal screech came from below as the big bad bat came swooping up.

This was Rogers’ cue.

He unstrapped his shield from his back, secured it to his arm, and impeccably dove off the cliff, landing on the bat. It buckled beneath his weight, but it steadied itself and attempted to buck Rogers off.

In some ways, it was like watching the rodeo.

As far as distractions went, STRIKE and Rogers were doing perfectly. Sharon had yet to be spotted by the bats or Birely, who was standing down below commanding his bats with that mother box.

“Thirteen,” Rogers voice wheezed as he lobbed a punch at the bat’s eye. “Anytime now.”

“Give me a minute,” she hissed back as she crouched down at the edge of the ravine. STRIKE was holding their own against the smaller bats, but there were still too many. They’d see Sharon coming a mile away.

Time to improvise.
Taking a note out of Rogers’ playbook, she watched the ebb and flow of flying bats and saw a pattern forming. Now, she’d just need to time it right. Standing up, she moved back several paces to give herself the appropriate running room.

Counting down in her head she took a running start.

She fearlessly dove off the cliff face and went soaring down. The wind flew past her and slapped her in the face but she persisted and the moment of opportunity came.

She fell perfectly and managed to grab a hold onto one of the smaller bats. It crumbled from the unexpected weight but regained its flight pattern.

“Woohoo!” Sharon screamed in exhilaration as it flew her at fast speeds. Her bat darted past Rogers and his big boy, who was attempting to buck him off by slamming into the rock walls. Rogers was clinging to its neck, aiming punches and blows to its head.

STRIKE was scattered throughout the ravine, firing off guns and rifles, taking out one bat for every five. Sharon released her grip from the bat when it flew low near the ground and she landed roughly. She rolled herself to her feet and found Birely only twenty or so feet away, guarding the box like it was his life.

It probably was, seeing as it controlled the bats.

She took off in a run, pistols in her hands, clipped and ready to go. She ignored the screeching of diving bats attempting to grab her and trusted in STRIKE to get her where she needed to be.

Unfortunately, Birely saw her coming.

Just when she was five feet away he called down a swarm of bats to take her out. She lunged to the ground, rolling to safety behind a boulder. She wiggled down and curled up as claws scrapped against her legs.

“I need some help over here!” she yelled into her comm as she ducked another bat attack.

“I’m on it.” Rogers replied, seeming to have taken the reigns on his big bat. His legs were wrapped tightly around the beast’s neck and he was gripping its ears like horse reigns and with a jerk of its ears the big bat went diving down, driving off the smaller bats there were assaulting Sharon.

Not wasting any time, she jumped to her feet and charged Birely. The two went tumbling to the ground and she punched the man hard in the face. It was then she finally got a good look at his face, and the sight was enough to stop her short.

He was hideous, to put it politely.

The disease had left its mark. His skin was a peeling, scabbing mess of pus and pores. He looked like a painting that had dried out and was cracking. She imagined the elusive meteorite Birely’s girlfriend had mentioned in her 911 call also had something to do with the man’s decaying body.

Her musings had given the man enough time to flip her off. She went rolling across the ground into a crouch and turned to face the bat-man.

“Just give up,” she advised him, “This is a fight you can’t win.”

The man scoffed, a gleam of madness in his dark eyes. Truly, with the decay of his body, she imagined his mind was going just as quickly.
“Do not speak to me of victory, girl!” he screamed, his voice like nails on a chalkboard.

“Listen, Birely, we can help you – “

“Do not use that name with me! I am not Douglas Birely. I am Demonicus!”

“He’s what now?” Gutierrez spat as she shot one bat down.

"Villains these days,” Rollins muttered from his end of the valley. “They all need a shtick now.”

Birely, err Demonicus, no, never mind, she wasn’t calling him that, lunged at her. She deflected him as he pressed her backward away from the electronic box. He wasn’t a particularly skilled fighter, but he fought fearlessly and his adrenaline was proving difficult to go up against.

Rogers had been clear: incapacitate them man but don’t kill him.

“Can you hurry this up, Thirteen?” Rumlow growled as he somersaulted across the ground. "I’m getting real tired of being bat bait.”

“Yeah, well, I’m fighting a man with nothing to lose, so give me a moment.” She struck him in the face with her elbow and watched with satisfaction as his head whirled back.

“Well then,” Rogers called out from above as the big bat dove deep. “Give him something to lose.”

“On it,” she responded as he threw her into the rock wall. She bounced off it and took a running leap for his back. She landed, locked her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck and tightened.

He wheezed and fought back, backing her repeatedly into the rock wall, trying to dislodge her. She held on though, ignoring the pain that was erupting across her spine. Finally, he sagged and fell to his side, knocked out.

She rolled off of him and rushed to the box. The memory of the specs they had on it came to her head and she knew exactly where to poke and prod and she systematically began taking it apart. It short-circuited and sparked as she worked through it, burning her hand along the way. She swore but continued ripping wires and undoing screws.

Finally, she came to the last section and with a hard yank, pulled out a large red wire.

The box came apart.

It completely short-circuited and all of a sudden the tight formation the bats had been flying in dispersed as every bat regained its autonomy.

And the first thing they wanted to do? Get the hell out of there.

The condor size bats took to the sky, darting away as cheers broke out across the STRIKE team. Rogers, still fighting his bat, used his shield to sever its neck and the bat came tumbling down to the ground below, Rogers on it.

He landed neatly but the bat was toast.

Sharon smiled until a sharp knock came to the back of her head. She pivoted and found Birely standing there, a deranged look in his eyes.

“My bats,” he panted unbelievingly, “My precious bats.”
He set his mad look on her as she toughened her stance, “I’ll kill you, you bitch!”

He swung at her as she parried backward. It went on like this for several moments before he somehow got a hold of her neck and squeezed. But unlike her, he wasn’t looking to knock her out, he was aiming to kill.

With her vision going spotty, she grasped weakly onto his neck, forcing his head down towards her. Tucking her chin in, she pulled him down towards her as she reared her head up, rearing his head against the crown of hers.

The head butt left him seeing stars as he released her and staggered back, falling to the ground in a heap. Sharon sucked in a breath and was pleased when he didn’t move.

That would show him.

She turned and saw Rogers jogging towards her, his shield hanging off his arm. She raised her hand in a wave and began walking towards him. When he was only a few feet away, his eyes widened in alarm.

“Down!” he yelled and Sharon didn’t even question it. She threw herself to the ground as the shield went careening over her head and collided into something behind her. She swung her head around and found Birely laying sprawled across the ground, a pistol in his hand.

The shield pivoted back towards Rogers who caught it effortlessly and attached it to his back.

“You just saved my life,” Sharon whispered in awe as she stared up at the Avenger. He played it cool as he regarded her lightly and huffed out a laugh.

“Well, I thought that’s what partners did.”

Sharon felt her stomach warm as she stood.

“Partners, huh?” she asked with a small grin as Rogers surveyed the damage across the field.

“Yeah, well,” he scratched at his neck for a moment before looking her in the eye, “It’d be a pain to break someone new in now. So, I guess we’re stuck with each other.”

Sharon felt her lips curling up into a genuine grin, dimple and all.

“It’s not the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

A cough came from behind them as the pair turned to see that STRIKE had started clearing the field, Birely was bound and being shuffled towards the quinjet, and Rumlow and Rollins were crowded around a translucent, yellow rock.

“What do you think this yellow rock is?” Rollins asked as Sharon knelt down beside it.

“No idea, but don’t touch it. Rumlow, call in Damage Control, I’m sure they’ll tag it and bag it for research. I imagine they’ll also be very interested in Batty over there.”

She nodded to Rogers’ prize.

“On it.” The STRIKE Commander nodded as he stood.

Sharon and Rogers shared a glance before the two got to work of clearing everything up so they could head back home to DC.
Maybe this could work after all.

Chapter End Notes

Not going to lie, I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. I initially thought I would go the more realistic route (hostage scenario, warlord, etc.) but then I read up on Dr. Demonicus and I couldn't resist. Hopefully you guys enjoyed reading it.

Sharon and Steve, they sure get under each other's skins! I think though that it makes sense. They're a lot a like and they're wary of one another, so the bickering is pretty natural. Last chapter it was expressed that Sharon needs to tell Steve about her identity sooner rather than later, well, all I can say about that, is that it will definitely be later.

Also, I revised Agent 29 in Ch 7. I changed her looks and some of her personality. A new picture is posted as well, so check it out so you're not confused in the future.

I also had been planning to incorporate Sharon's iconic white tactical suit in this chapter, but with the mission I just didn't think it fit. But don't worry, it's on its way.

Thank you all again for the previous reviews! You guys are the bomb.com and I appreciate you all a lot. Please keep it up!

Pic time!

Location where the team's first bat encounter occur:

Sharon's updo:
Sharon’s jacket:

Sharon’s boots:
That Woman Is a Boss

Chapter Summary

“I expect something in return,” he waggled his eyebrows as his goddess smirked lewdly in return.

“I’m sure I can think of something,” she leaned closer to him, allowing him to view even further down into the valley between her two breasts. He gulped and licked his lips, locking eyes with the beauty as she waited.

“Well then, let’s have some fun. But first thing’s first. What’s your name, Sweet cheeks?”

This time the girl’s grin turned positively sinful as she stared right back at him, a hard glint overtaking her dark eyes.

“Agent.”

Chapter Notes

Warning: semi-graphic sex scene below.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 10th, 2012

Los Angeles

Club Climax, one of the most notorious clubs on the Sunset Strip, was electric that night as music pounded, sweat glistened bodies grinded brazenly against one another, and drinks flowed freely. Two levels of chaos, sin, and mayhem all packed into an industrially designed building.

The movement of dirtily dancing bodies was made even more hypnotic by the black lights. Neon colors popped and dazzled across peoples clothing, hair and makeup. Hardly anyone could speak because the bass of the music pulsated so strongly, one could feel the vibrations in their ribcage, pressing up against their erratically beating hearts.

The women were provocative in scantily clad clothing as they pressed themselves up against the strong muscles of the gyrating men; typical LA type: models, pretty faces with no substance underneath. Hands wandered, breaths quickened, and intentions were proclaimed.

What a night to be alive.

At the heart of this beautifully crafted pandemonium was Donnie Fanucci. A low level, street drug
dealer of...questionable substances. He knew a friend of a friend of a friend of the club owner and fortuitously found himself in the best seat of the house, at the bar overlooking the immorality below.

His eyes hungrily trailed after swaying hips and shaking derrieres. He licked his lips as he downed his third scotch and signaled to the bartender for another. As the glass was set down before him, he cocked his head to the side and was immediately pulled into a trance.

Like the Red Sea parting, she came towards him. An angel among mere mortals. A tall, slender body encased in a metallic leather mini dress. She wore fishnet stockings and knee-high, raven velvet boots. Her hair was an electric, bubblegum pink and her neon pink eyeshadow caught so beautifully in the black lights.

Donnie swore he had died and gone to heaven.

The goddess had sauntered up to the bar, one space away from the drug dealer, and in a wispy voice, asked the bartender, “Do you have a drinks menu?”

The laminated paper was passed her way as the beauty bent her head to read it over, leaning casually against the bar. This gave Donnie the perfect opportunity to admire the long lines of her body, the curve of her assets both front and back.

Taking destiny by the horns, he plopped himself into the seat next to the buxom beauty and gestured to the bartender.

“Whatever she’s having, it’s on me.”

The woman raised her face and blinked her doleful eyes at him for a moment, assessing him from head to toe before turning to the bartender with an easy grin.

“In that case, I’ll have one sex in the driveway.”

Donnie’s breath caught in his throat as she raised an eyebrow at him purposefully while handing the menu back over. She turned towards him fully and he took a moment to appreciate the slight dip of cleavage available to him as she tilted towards the bar.

“Thanks, stranger.”

He flashed her his most alluring grin, making sure his right dimple popped. He was happy for the blaring music, it gave him the excuse to lean into her so as to carry on a conversation.

“I haven't seen you around here before,” he yelled over the music, “This your first time?”

The woman nodded as a luminous blue cocktail was placed before her. She sipped it delicately before giving her full attention to Donnie.

“Yep, I just got into LA two days ago.”

“Ah, visiting?”

“No,” the beauty giggled as she tipped her head back and drank her cocktail. “Just moved here. It’s embarrassing, but, I came out to, you know...be a star.”

Donnie grinned as he leaned back casually. He knew her type. Thought she was something special in a small town in the middle of nowhere, comes out to the City of Angels and realizes she’s just a
small fish in a big, unforgiving pond. She’ll fade, taking on meaningless jobs like being a waitress or caterer…or worse, it didn’t take much for pretty girls like this one to walk the streets.

A girl like her though, she’d make some good money.

His eyes trailed up the curve of her breast, completely on display in that little dress.

Good money indeed.

“Well, sweetheart, you’re definitely the star of my dreams.”

The girl sent him a beguiling grin as she sipped on her cocktail, her lips in a perfect pout.

“So what brought you to LA, Donnie?” she questioned sweetly, batting her eyes at him.

The drug dealer blinked in confusion, “How did you know my name? I never said it.”

The girl blushed as she set down her drink and looked out into the sea of dancing bodies.

“I may have, um, known who you were when I came over.” Her voice now so bashful as she twiddled with her fingers nervously.

Donnie watched her warily as he glanced around to see if anyone was watching the pair closely.

“Why’s that?” he questioned as she looked up at him, biting her lip. He couldn’t help but admit he was tempted to bit it himself.

“Because…you know, people say you’re the guy to go to for the good stuff.”

A cocky grin overtook Donnie’s face.

“Ah, built up a reputation, have I?”

He leaned back and looked fully at the woman in front of him.

“What you looking for?”

“Anything for a good time,” she responded flirtatiously, her plump lips quirking up into a grin. Donnie felt a stirring in his loins as he subtly adjusted himself.

“I don’t do no charity,” he explained as both leaned into one another, close to breathing the same air. “I expect something in return,” he waggled his eyebrows as his pink goddess smirked lewdly in return.

“I’m sure I can think of something,” she leaned closer to him, allowing him to view even further down into the valley between her two breasts. He gulped and licked his lips, locking eyes with the beauty as she waited.

“Well then, let’s have some fun. But first thing’s first. What’s your name, sweetcheeks?”

This time the girl’s grin turned positively sinful as she stared right back at him, a hard glint overtaking her dark eyes.

“Agent.”

He didn’t even have time to process that when his head was slammed down into the bar. He dimly
heard the breaking of glass and a hot liquid pouring down his face. Next thing he knew he was flying across the club and landed in a pathetic heap on the floor.

He must have been thrown into some dancers, but no one paid him any mind. Violence was par the course for a place like Club Climax.

He shook his head and wearily stared up as his goddess turned demon spawn advanced towards him, the coquettish façade vanishing from her face. She grabbed his jacket and began dragging him towards the back exit.

What seemed like only seconds later he was being flung out into the alleyway, abandoned except for the two.

He landed a jumbled mess and blindly grabbed for his pistol. He got it on the second try and cocked it at the crazy bitch, only to find her aiming a Glock right between his eyes.

“Where the hell did that come from?!” he spat as she smirked, her bubblegum pink hair blowing in the wind.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

She lashed out and in an instance, he was sprawled across his back, his gun lying feet away, and staring up at the dark, LA sky. Hands gripped onto his jacket and he was roughly pulled to his feet before being harshly backed against the brick wall. The woman was in his personal space, arm pressing against his throat as she pressed him further into the wall.

“Oh, Donnie,” she mused as he weakly struggled against her unrelenting grip. “You really should have stuck to the simple stuff. But no, you had to get greedy. What are the kids calling it these days?”

She slammed him back into the wall as she pretended to think, “Oh, yeah, Toad Juice. Well, I’m very intrigued to hear about this new party drug. And so is my employer.”

Donnie spat at the pretty face, “I ain’t telling you nothin’!”

She chuckled for a long moment before releasing him, he slumped back against the brick wall, his legs wobbly and unable to support.

“Oh, sweetcheeks, that’s what they all say.”

It only took one punch to knock him out flat. Less than thirty seconds later he was handcuffed hog style as the woman stared down at him with an unimpressed gaze. She sighed, the pounding music from inside faint through the brick walls, before reaching up and pulling off the pink wig. Blonde hair came falling out as she blew it out of her face agitatedly.

She placed her hand on her ear and activated her comm.

“This is Agent 13. Target Acquired. Ready for extraction.”

“On it, Agent 13. Extraction in two.”

Sharon dropped her hand and looked around the alley.

Just another day at the office.
Sharon felt no shame as she sauntered through the halls of the Triskelion, still in her undercover garb. Agents had worn stranger looks than neon wigs and leather mini dresses.

Besides, if the male gazes (and some female) she was receiving were anything to go by, then no one was really complaining either.

She came upon the elevators and pressed the up button and waited patiently for the next available one. She fiddled with a hole in her fishnets absentmindedly as the door opened with a ping.

Standing inside was…Steve Rogers.

Of course, he was.

She nodded a greeting as she entered and listed off the 21st floor as her destination. Rogers raised his head and did a double take as he took in the entire look, blue eyes blown wide as he tried to make sense of it all.

Sharon couldn’t help but smirk at the Avenger. He was kind of cute when shocked beyond words.

“Captain.”

He raised his eyes from where they had been transfixed on her fishnets in confusion and blushed as he quickly looked away from his partner.

“A-Agent 13.”

Sharon bit her lip to stop an amused smile from emerging. Peggy had mentioned once that Rogers had a bit of a stammer when flustered. She gestured to herself and did a little twirl, knowing his eyes were following the wave of her pink wig.

“Just got back from an extraction. Had to dress up for the occasion.”

“Oh, y-yes…I see. Was it a…success?” he coughed at the slight voice crack and Sharon was benevolent enough to ignore it as she nodded with a beguiling smile.

“Quite.”

The elevator door opened on the 21st floor and Sharon moved through the doors easily, throwing a parting remark over her shoulder.

“Have a good day, Captain.”

She purposefully swayed her hips as she strode down the hallway, feeling Rogers’ eyes on her until the elevator door closed.

Peggy should have told her that messing with Rogers was oddly satisfying in every way possible. She made her way towards Stanford’s office, and as always, beat him to it. She dropped down into his desk chair and decided to have some fun with her handler.

She leaned into the desk, sitting in the most seductive pose she could muster, boos full on display, and waited for him to enter.

He came in with a bang.
“Happy Birthday Mr. President,” she cooed, doing her best Marilyn.

Stanford, as per usual, was not amused. “Out of the chair,” he ordered, more out of habit than anything else. Sharon pouted as she slumped back in the chair.

“You’re no fun, Stanford.”

She rose and the two switch spots as he threw himself into his chair, disrupting folders and stacks of paper. Fury insisted on having most everything digital, but Stanford preferred living in the Stone Age. He gave her a once over and furrowed his brows at her wig.

“Take off the wig. You look like some kind of anime character.”

Sharon complied and shook out her blonde bob as she tossed the wig aside. She hadn’t been much of a fan of it either.

“How was the mission?” he asked, already jotting notes down in the margin of his notepad.

“Successful.”

“Where’s Fanucci?”

“Probably getting a rude awakening in Interrogation.”

“Did he have the Juice on him?”

“A few milligrams. It’s bent sent to Forensics.”

“Excellent.” He tossed a folder at her as she caught it. “I want your mission report on my desk tomorrow morning.”

“Sure thing, boss.”

“Good. Now get.” He nodded towards the door as she jumped up, threw him a final grin, and slinked into the hallway. She hadn’t traveled far when she spied a familiar figure at the end of the hall.

She stopped short, taking in the sight of the broad shoulders and shaggy brown hair. A small grin threatened to emerge as she called out to the figure.

“Neal Tapper.”

The figure turned and a generous grin swept across his handsome, tan face. “Thirteen,” he greeted, walking closer to her with his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“I thought you were in deep undercover in Papa New Guinea,” Sharon said with a raised eyebrow as the two stood in each other’s orbits.

“Just got back this morning. Did you do all this for me? I have to say, it’s quite a welcome home.” He gestured to the leather dress, fishnets, and knee-high boots. Sharon huffed a breath as she crossed her arms over her chest.

“You wish,” she teased. “I just got back from LA. Took down a drug dealer.” He raised an eyebrow in interest, a playful glint in his light, green eyes. “Well, he got quite the
“Tapper,” an annoyed voice sounded from down the hall as Jasper Sitwell stuck his head outside his office.

“Debriefing. Now.”

The bald man disappeared back into his office as Neal sighed and Sharon chuckled, eyeing the man amusedly.

“You should go, wouldn’t want Daddy to get upset and spank you.”

Neal shuddered as he moved to walk past her, “Don’t even joke about things like that. I’ll have nightmares for weeks.”

As he moved past her, he paused and surreptitiously reached out, his fingers grasping onto her hip, sending pleasant shivers up and down her spine. He pressed closer to her, his lips grazing her ear as he whispered lowly.

“I want to see you tonight.”

Sharon’s eyes fluttered shut as she nodded and shot a glance up and down the hallway. It was empty, but it wouldn’t stay that way for long.

And the first rule of FWB was that no one talked about FWB, especially at work.

“My place,” she replied softly and he gave her a single nod, his gaze and hand lingering before he released her and headed into Sitwell’s office.

Sharon stayed in the hallway before forcing her libido down. She sucked in a breath and forced herself to walk away. She headed to the elevators and took it down to the 19th floor so she could begin work on her mission report. She definitely wouldn’t be working on it tonight.

Unfortunately for her, she had a redheaded, Russian assassin waiting for her in her office, sitting at her desk with her feet lazily up on Sharon’s desk as if it was hers.

“Nice look, Thirteen,” Natasha greeted with a Cheshire grin as Sharon paused in the doorway.

“Out of the chair,” she ordered and froze when she realized she sounded like Stanford. She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

She felt like every kid when they realize they are becoming their parents.

Natasha didn’t heed her warning but remained sitting at the desk, so Sharon stood in the middle of her office, glancing out to the Potomac absentmindedly, a grin still playing on her face.


Sharon shrugged and put her poker face on. “Can’t a girl enjoy the afterglow of a successful mission?”

Natasha furrowed an eyebrow suspiciously. “Afterglow, huh?”

Sharon once more shrugged as Natasha stood and began making her way to the door.

“I’ll figure it out, it’s just a matter of time,” the assassin warned as Sharon waved her off.
“I have work to do,” she held up her folder and was unsurprised when Natasha flipped her the bird before disappearing from her office as if she hadn’t been there at all. Sharon plopped down into her desk chair and stared at the folder before sighing and getting to work.

Paperwork. The exciting life of espionage.

Hours later found Sharon in her apartment, her club vixen outfit swapped out for leggings, a blush, silk kami and a lacy set of undergarments underneath. She looked put together without trying too hard. That was the key to this…arrangement.

One had to play it cool for this to work. It wasn’t about emotion or feelings; it was just good, fun (occasionally dirty) sex.

But that didn’t mean she acted like she needed it.

She was cool as a cucumber. She was indifferent and poised. She could be doing anything (or anyone).

A knock sounded at her door. She quickly ran her fingers through her bob, fluffing it out as she padded barefoot to the door. She put on her best-disinterested look as she opened the door and found Neal there, leaning casually against her doorframe. He wore form-fitting, dark washed jeans, a tight grey Henley that rippled in all the right spots, dark chest hair peeking out from the collar, and a worn leather jacket.

He had recently showered if his wet hair was anything to go by. And his facial hair, which had been unruly at SHIELD, had been tamed with a razor. His beard was more stubble than anything else.

He was too pretty for his own good, ruggedly handsome and all that. And he knew it.

What an asshole.

But such a pretty asshole.

“Screw it,” she muttered before reaching out, grasping his Henley, and wrenching him into the apartment. He went easily, a charming smile on his face as she slammed him into her closed door and all but attacked his mouth. One arm wrapped around her waist, the other tangling into her short hair as he changed the angle of her head and the kiss went from spectacular to hot damn.

“Excited to see me?” he cockily quipped when they came up for air.

“Shut up,” she directed, pushing his jacket off his shoulders as he helped. He smirked, green eyes twinkling in the dim lights of her apartment, as he picked her up. Her legs wrapped easily around his waist as he began directing them towards the couch. He fell back onto it, jostling the two, as Sharon landed in his lap, straddling her fellow SHIELD agent. She wasted no time in divesting him of the Henley and ran her fingers all over his torso, relearning ever rivet and dip of muscle.

“God,” she moaned as she set her hands on the main prize, “I missed your abs.”

It was true. She hadn’t touched those perfect muscles since March.

“You only like me for my abs,” he murmured into her neck. His lips making quick work of sucking
and nipping at the sensitive skin, all the while his hands palmed her ass, gripping and releasing leisurely as she ground down on him.

“Hell yeah I do,” she arched her neck back and sucked in a breath when he bit down, his tongue soothing the bite. His fingers snuck under the kami, tracing up and down her spine.

“Off,” he whispered into her skin. She held up her arms with a grin and he huffed out a laugh as he slowly inched the kami up, inch by inch, his hands leaving a hot trail on her body. When it finally was at her shoulders, he reached up and tossed it aside as his large hands cupped her breasts through her bra.

“Now these,” he murmured in awe, “These beauties are what I missed.”

Sharon ground down on him for the compliment and the two groaned in tandem. He reached behind her, expertly undoing her bra clasp and letting the garment fall to the side. His hands covered her breasts once more as he thumbed her rapidly hardening nipple. He waggled his eyebrows up at her before leaning down, enclosing her right nipple, with his warm, wet mouth.

The blonde spy moaned and threw her head back, her fingers running through his dark hair. With each swipe of his tongue and nip of his teeth, she bucked down against him, feeling the bulge growing in his jeans. She was panting when he finally pulled away, wrapping his arms around her waist.

“Bedroom,” he wheezed and Sharon nodded blindly, her eyes still screwed shut. He picked her up again and the two lumbered their way towards her bedroom, knocking into walls along the way. He tossed her onto the bed and she giggled as she bounced for a moment, her short hair fanning out behind her.

He covered her body with his as he cupped her behind and pressed his groin down against her front. Sharon sighed in contentment as he released her, his hands moving to the waistband of her leggings. She arched up as he began pulling them down, exposing the lacy lavender panties she had bought a few months with this reunion in mind. He tossed the leggings aside and hovered above her, watching her flushed face and battering eyes.

She gave an impatient whine and urged his head lowered as he chuckled, his breath warm against her skin.

“You sure are bossy,” he whispered as his hands clutched onto her pale thighs.

“I’m the boss,” she breathily responded before gasping as dropped his head and plunged his tongue into her folds. She gripped his hair tightly and fixed her gaze on the ceiling; pants and whimpers working their way out of her mouth with every expert flick of his tongue and his talented digits.

The anticipation of it made the high come quickly as her body recoiled and her orgasm swept across her body like unending waves as she cried and stuttered, not even uttering English at this point. Neal raised his head with a smug grin as she laid sprawled across her bed, her body still euphoric. He kissed her thighs lightly, his lips working up her torso before centering on her breasts as she started rocking against him.

“I want these off,” she ordered with a strained voice, her hands already tugging on his jeans. He nodded and moved away, leaving her cold as he shimmied out of both his jeans and CK boxer briefs. He covered her body again and she reached for him and enjoyed his immediate hiss of breath as her hand enclosed around him.
She had the veteran SHIELD agent at her control as she grasped and slid her hand up and down. He bucked into her, his head buried in her neck, his hands tight on her breasts, hard enough to leave marks.

She had him teetering on the edge when he batted her hand away and stared down at her. His hair was a mess and his green eyes were blown wide and dilated, his gaze hungry.

“I want to be inside you.”

Sharon moaned at the words and nodded quickly. He rolled away for his pants and pulled out a condom. He moved back to her side, handing her the packet. She ripped it with her teeth and pulled out the condom, and reached down, covering his member with it.

When he was ready, he braced above her, covering her with his body but keeping his weight on his elbows so as not to crush her. He nudged her legs apart and she spread out for him, opening herself. She bit her lip as he slowly sank in, the slight burn firing off every synapse in her brain. He gave her a few moments as she readjusted to him, to his girth and length that she hadn’t felt in months.

She nodded and he gave an exploratory thrust as she sighed deeply. It continued on that way for several moments as the two relearned each other’s bodies and each other’s rhythms. Soon it grew deeper and more intense, his thrusts more purposeful as he propelled into her tight heat. His mouth was everywhere: her neck, breasts, and shoulders as she wrapped her arms around his neck, her head thrown back, mouth open and eyes shut.

“Harder,” she commanded in between thrusts as she enclosed her legs around his waist, her heels digging into his back.

“Your wish is my command,” he panted back and changed both the angle and speed of his thrusts. She moaned her appreciation as she clung to him tighter.

It was hot and fulfilling, but she wanted more.

With her years of spy training, she flipped him onto his back as he stared up at her in hazy surprise, his eyes lidded with lust.

“Changing things up?” he whispered as she released her hold on her legs and sat up, perfectly saddling him.

“I told you,” she whispered before lowering herself down, bottoming out in one fell swoop. Both cried out in pleasure as she settled. She opened her eyes and smirked at him.

“I’m the boss.”

She raised herself and sank back down as his hands reached out, gripping her hips, anchoring her to him.

He was going to leave bruises, but Sharon didn’t care as she continued grinding down on him, feeling the delicious slip and slide of his member entering and exiting her. She whimpered when he thrust up and her head fell onto his shoulder. She picked up the pace, her hips moving erratically as one of his hands left her breasts and moved down, his fingers capturing that sweet spot in her.

She had no control as she snapped her hips, feeling her release coming soon. He stared up at her and nodded and she came with a loud cry. Her body moved without volition as she continued to ride him as her body rippled with pleasure. The tightening of her heat around him threw Neal over the edge as well and the two fell together, clinging to each other.
When the tremors stopped and his grip on her had loosened, she slid off of him with a hiss. The pair of spies flopped across her bed, a sweaty and satisfying mess of limbs. Sharon stared up at the ceiling as she struggled to regain her breath.

Minutes passed as their panting slowed and their breathing evened out. Neal rolled onto his side and off the bed, wandering into her bathroom. She admired his backside as he went. He came back a minute later with a warm washcloth and tossed it to her. She cleaned herself and threw it aside as he slid back into his boxer briefs and jeans. He reached into the pocket of the denim and pulled out a packet of cigarettes and a lighter.

How he could fit such bulky accessories into such tight pockets Sharon would never know, she mused as he pulled out a cigarette and made a motion to turn on his lighter.

“Hey,” she weakly protested, kicking him in the rear. “You know the rule: no smoking inside. Go out onto the balcony.”

He nodded distractedly, jumping over her chaise as he pushed open her slider door and moved out onto the small balcony she had.

She remained in bed, lazily enjoying the afterglows of their reunion.

Maybe she wouldn’t mind Neal’s long undercover missions if it felt like this every time they got back together.

Still, every high had to eventually come to an end. When hers did she slipped into an old t-shirt and ambled onto the balcony, her eyes immediately going to the Washington Monument off in the distance, a beacon in the night.

She leaned casually against the iron railing as Neal contentedly huffed on his cigarette, puffing out smoke intermittently.

“So I heard an interesting rumor while I was abroad,” he announced out of the blue as Sharon turned to the spy with a raised eyebrow.

“Do tell,” she replied as Neal smirked and flicked away the butt end of the cigarette.

“That you’re moving up the ranks and are the new partner to Captain America.” His tone was light and teasing as his green eyes flashed. Sharon sighed and nodded.

“The rumor mill is, for once, correct. I’ve been working with him since July.”

“Important woman working with an important man on important missions.”

Sharon huffed out a laugh as she looked down at Penn Ave idly. It was still a bustling street, even at this time of night.

“More like insane. Our first mission last week involved giant bats.”

Neal quirked an eyebrow, waiting for the punchline. When none came, he threw out a, “No way.”

“Yes way,” Sharon countered back. “Don’t ask, it’s a long, very weird story.”

Neal chuckled good-naturedly.

“The life you lead, Sharon.”
She startled at the use of her first name. It didn’t come up too often between the two. He called her Thirteen at the Triskelion and when they were together outside of it…well, he called her other things.

They weren’t in a relationship. It was purely physical. They wanted unattached sex and they had it in each other. But still, the rare occasions he used her name it always took her by surprise. Neal stepped back from the railing, cracked his neck resounding and nodded inside.

“I should get going. I have an early morning physical with Dr. Oukri.”

Sharon nodded, nonplussed by his quick departure. It was another rule, no sleeping over. They wanted each other’s bodies for sex, not cuddling. He gave her behind a swat as he walked inside, collecting his shirt and jacket. She heard the click of the front door and remained on the balcony for a few more minutes before her body took a chill.

She went back inside and collapsed on her bed. She stretched out, enjoying the pleasant ache in her muscles that only came after an exceptionally good round of fucking.

She was about ready to nod off when her phone beeped on her nightstand. She reached for it and really should not have been surprised to find a text from Natasha.

From Natasha:

_I know why u have your pathetic happy face on. Ur boy toy Tapper is back._

Sharon grinned and she quickly typed a reply.

From Sharon:

_Maybe ;)

It didn’t take long for the redhead to fire back a text.

From Natasha:

_U disgust me :( _

_I hope u got some, at least_

Sharon smirked with satisfaction as she texted back.

From Sharon:

_Oh, I definitely got some._

She set her phone aside and placed her hands behind her back as she stretched out across her bed, Some days, she really loved her life.
So, with this story, it's a bit non-linear. I would almost look at every chapter as snapshots of Steve and Sharon's time at SHIELD pre-Winter Soldier. So, there isn't one overarching plot or storyline, it's more so snapshots of their lives.

Neal Tapper is an actual comic book character. He's a minor SHIELD agent who dated Sharon at some point when her and Steve were broken up. I thought it would be fun to incorporate him into the story. Also, Toad Juice is from the comics as well.

Thank you for all the lovely reviews last chapter! I was worried how the bats would go over, but everyone seemed to like it. Please keep it up! Reviews are my fuel.

Pic time!

Sharon's pink wig:

Sharon's black light eyeshadow:
Sharon’s leather mini dress:

Neal Tapper:
“Who are you?” confusion clear in his voice as Sharon gestured to herself.

“I’m Indiana Jones! Famed archeologist and all around roguish scoundrel.” She winked saucily as Rogers rolled his eyes.

“Is he from a movie?”

“Only one of the greatest trilogies ever. I say trilogy, because the fourth one is absolute crap, so don’t waste your time with that.”

Rogers raised an eyebrow but slowly nodded.

“Okay?”

Sharon grinned as she crossed her arms over her chest, “You’d like him, he too fought Nazis.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

October 1st, 2012

Washington, D.C.

“Halloween! Halloween! Halloween! In this town we call home, everyone hail to the pumpkin song.”

Sharon opened her eyes, immediately alert despite the early hour. It was just before 6am and Sharon had a lot to do before heading into work.

She rolled out from underneath her thick quilt, landing on the wooden floor with silent feet as she stretched and cracked her neck, working out the kinks. She padded towards the kitchen and quickly got the coffee brewing; she would need it to be useful this morning. As the coffee brewed she wandered into her living room where it looked like a bomb of orange, black, green and purple had gone off.

Last night she had paid her storage unit in the underground garage of her apartment building a visit and had hauled up all of her Halloween decorations.

It was extensive.

Some people went all out for Christmas, but Sharon was a ghouls and ghosts kind of girl.

Fall was her favorite season (sweaters, scarves, leaves, pumpkin spice everything, etc.) and
Halloween was the holiday to end all holidays.

And every year, without fail, Sharon Carter went to town. She had the best decorations, the best candy, and the best costume.

She spent all month preparing for the Big Day, and this year was no different.

Which was why she was up at such an ungodly hour.

Once she had a cup of coffee (filled to the brim with pumpkin spice creamer) she got to work. She opened boxes, unloading decorations all over her living room.

There were pumpkins, skeletons, a witch’s hat, giant spiders and spider webs, and more.

She flung decorative pillows of Hocus Pocus and a black cat, hissing and back arched, onto her couch. Antique looking spell books were strategically placed on shelves and a witch’s cauldron was the centerpiece of her fireplace.

She propped a skeleton hanging off her living room TV and busted out her menagerie of streamer bats down the hallway leading to her bedroom and bathroom. Glowing orange pumpkin lights were illuminating her front door with a hanging Frankenstein’s Monster.

She stood and surveyed her work. She was nowhere near done, but it was a good start. She checked her watch and cursed at the time.

7:20am.

If she didn’t get going, she’d be late for sure. She scurried to her bedroom, quickly assembling into a cute, but holiday appropriate outfit before flitting into her bathroom, brushing teeth and hair and a quick makeup routine.

She hustled into her living room, heaving up a box of decorations for her office, and was out the door in a flash.

With some luck (and driving through several yellow lights) she made it to the Triskelion with three minutes to spare.

She lugged the box in her arms and cruised the elevator up to her office on the 19th floor of the Triskelion. She nodded to fellow agents and handlers as she meandered down the hallway towards her office.

As she passed Rogers’, music coming from inside gave her pause outside the open doorway.

“Brando, the King and I, and the Catcher in the Rye. Eisenhower, vaccine, England’s got a new Queen.”

She poked her head inside and found the Avenger seated at his desk, head bent down as he typed away at his computer. His office was woefully bare and sterile. It almost seemed as if he had never moved in. There was nothing personal, nothing screaming ‘Steve Rogers’. It made Sharon sad just thinking about it.

She cleared her throat to give him warning (though he must have heard her with his enhanced abilities) and his blond head popped up, blue eyes wide and questioning.

“I didn’t know you were a Mr. Long Island fan.”
Rogers wrinkled his nose in confusion and Sharon refused to believe it was adorable as she strolled further into his square office.

“Who?” he asked before seeming to realize where she was going with this. “Oh, Billy Joel? I don’t know too much of his work, just this and uh…the other one, about the piano man. I like that one.”

Sharon bit her lip from smiling as she quirked an eyebrow at Rogers.

“Everyone likes Piano Man, Rogers. It’s practically illegal not to. What has you listening to this? You’re not a music and paperwork kind of guy.”

It’s true. Rogers seemed to prefer silence and solidarity when it came to working. Sharon had tried the buddy system once with him only to have it completely crash and burn in under 15 minutes. She had given him a wide berth ever since.

Rogers flushed a bit as his eyes darted to his computer monitor as he explained sheepishly.

“Professor Jackson emailed me the link. During our session next week he plans on quizzing me by throwing out song lyrics and I have to explain their cultural importance.”

Sharon hummed in interest as she shifted the weight of her box. She hadn’t thought of that. Who knew Billy Joel would be imperative in world history?

“Einstein, James Dean, Brooklyn’s got a winning team. Davy Crockett, Peter Pan, Elvis Presley, Disneyland.”

“Sounds like fun,” Sharon replied with a perfect pout. “I’m almost sad he didn’t include me.”

“Why, because you don’t have a chance to rub your superior knowledge in my face?” Rogers’s teased, his face open and a hint of mischief curling in the corner of his mouth.

Things had been better since their first mission. They weren’t friends, but working together had proven easier than it had in July.

She responded with a smirk. “It’s the little things in life that bring me joy, Rogers.”

He chuckled before his baby blues darted to her box and he furrowed his brow in question.

“What do you got there?”

Sharon glanced down at her treasure trove before grinning and nodding in the direction of her office further down the hall.

“Oh, Halloween decorations for my office. I go all out every year.”

It was true. Hardly anyone else put any effort in except for the day of, but Sharon had her office looking like a haunted house for the entire month.

Trip, the big baby, always refused to come near it during October. To be fair, Sharon had got him good three years ago.

Rogers seemed perplexed as he checked his calendar and seeing that it still was only the 1st, turned to Sharon with questioning eyes.

“But Halloween isn’t until the 31st?”
“Halloween is more than just a single day, it’s a state of mind,” Sharon insisted as she gestured to herself. She wore a black and white patterned blazer with a burnt orange blouse underneath. A fashionably poignant homage to her favorite holiday.

“I don’t think it works that way,” Rogers countered as he leaned back in his desk chair. Sharon’s mature response was to stick her tongue out at him.

“Wait until the big day, bud. It’ll be glorious. You should prepare yourself, wouldn’t want you having a heart attack because your 1940s sensibilities can’t handle it.”

Rogers rolled his eyes and replied in perfect deadpan, “I think I’ll manage.”

“You say that now, but you haven’t seen grown women in kitten and nurses outfits. It’ll blow your mind.”

Sharon sing-songed as she backed out of the office and left the Avenger to his paperwork. She’d let him see for himself how much Halloween had changed since his heyday.

She hurried into her office and set her box down, placing her hands on her hips and surveying the scene.

She had a lot of work to do.

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October 10th, 2012

Richmond, VA

“All I’m saying, dear, is that I find it a bit ridiculous that you’d wear a shirt with paint splatters on it.”

Sharon groaned from her seat at the marble island in her parents’ kitchen. She was expertly peeling apples. She had come home for the weekend and yesterday had enjoyed a Carter Family Tradition: apple picking.

First, there had been delicious apples that Sharon had gorged on yesterday and today there would be apple pie.

Sharon couldn’t wait. Until then she was peeling apples and listening to her mother criticize her fashion choices.

“Mom, I told you, I bought it this way.” She gestured down to her grey chambray top, and yes, there was a smattering of white paint covering it.

Sharon thought it looked cool. No wonder her mother had a problem with it.

Amanda eyed the top for several moments before shrugging. “I guess it looks a bit…artistic in this light.”

That was as close to a victory as Sharon was ever getting. As she peeled her mother was hard at work on the crust. It was homemade, obviously. The Carters didn’t put up with that store bought
crap. They plowed through lard like champs.

It was go big or go home. Hell, that might as well be the Carter family motto.

Finishing peeling, Sharon began slicing the apples into thin slivers, under her mother’s observant eyes. Brody paced back and forth, his claws clacking over the wooden floors. He eyed Sharon intently, his furry, brown head ready for any scraps Sharon may drop.

When Amanda turned her back, Sharon quickly dropped a slice and he gobbled it up easily. Sharon whistled innocently when her mother turned back around and saw a smugly satisfied dog. She turned her dark eyes on Sharon who shrugged.

“Don’t look at me.”

“Stop feeding the dog,” Amanda ordered with a stern point before a smile bubbled up across her face.

The pair continued working and soon the pie was in the oven as the overpowering scents of cinnamon and nutmeg wafted throughout the Carter household.

Settling into the living room with glasses of Oaked Chardonnay, the two Carter women lounged. Brody stretched out on the rug, loose and long-limbed as he easily slipped into a nap. Sharon was on the couch, her legs tucked underneath her body as she wiggled her toes.

It was a nippy, cloudy kind of day, and autumn was felt in every breath as it was strong on the wind. Sharon loved these kind of days. Summer was hell on earth in the swamp that was D.C., winter oscillated between too much snow ( and the city shutting down) and then becoming disgusting slush that lasted for weeks, and spring was hardly enjoyed once the tourists showed up for the cherry blossoms.

But fall…everything was perfect in fall.

Amanda was content in her comfy chair as she turned to her daughter with a grin.

“Now, how about a movie?” she reached for the remote and began flicking through the channels. Sharon grinned from her perch.

“I’m thinking Practical Magic,” the blonde spy suggested with a grin as Amanda nodded.

Her mother was all about Nicole Kidman.

“You’re speaking my language, kid.”

A few minutes later the two Carter women were enthralled in the movie as the fall day passed them by.

October 16th, 2012

Eastern Market

“…and then I said ‘I’m sorry, Your Royal Highness, but gingers just aren’t my type.’”
The two women broke out into massive giggles right in the center walkway of the Eastern Market. They were bumped and prodded as other shoppers attempted to move around the pair of chortling spies. Sharon had to grasp onto her side she was laughing so much, she even reached up to wipe a stray tear from her eye.

“You did not tell Prince Harry he wasn’t your type!” Sharon insisted, poking Natasha in the side as the redhead slapped her hand away.

“If I’m lying I’m dying,” the assassin replied back with a grin. Nat had only returned yesterday from a short mission in Lesotho regarding a security issue surrounding the third in line to the British monarchy.

Natasha always got the best missions. It really wasn’t fair. Sharon spent her days with Rogers’ and Nat was out there charming princes.

Honestly, there was no justice in this world.

The best way to welcome Natasha back from her latest mission was the farmers market. It was a nippy fall day, the leaves already changing colors. It was a time for layering and sweaters, something Sharon was thrilled about.

Sharon had bundled up in a deep, burgundy pea coat that was stylish with numerous zippers and buttons. It was her only pop of color as she was wearing jeans and a grey t-shirt. Her blonde bob had messy beach waves, giving her volume and a different look than her normal, straight and sleek appearance.

Natasha was effortlessly casual and put together in a black, striped sweater dress, with a tan suede jacket thrown over it and black, leather booties. She was experimenting with her iconic red hair and had several black streaks woven throughout her bob of curly hair. Natasha, too, was a fan of Halloween and Sharon was excited to see her costume.

She had killed it last year as Leeloo from the *Fifth Element*.

The two strolled leisurely through the farmers market, stopping at stalls and booths. Sharon had been tempted to buy a woolen scarf and a nice, plump spaghetti squash. Natasha eyed the yellow squash speculatively as she paid for a pair of earrings.

“Why’d you buy a squash?”

“I have a great recipe for spaghetti squash and spinach casserole,” Sharon replied as she hugged the squash to her defensively. Natasha only raised an eyebrow.

“You suck at cooking.”

Sharon gasped in shock as she glared at her friend. “I do not! You take that back.”

Natasha only rolled her eyes as Sharon attempted to pinch her in revenge. She evaded the blonde spy’s hands easily. It didn’t help that Sharon was still holding onto the squash as if it was her firstborn child.

“You nearly burned down your kitchen trying to boil water!” she taunted as she ducked behind a rack of clothing.

“I told you, the fire alarm was acting up!”
“Tell that to the firefighters who had to come to your apartment.”

Sharon deflated as she remembered that event vividly. An instant later she was perking up as she pointed at the redhead.

“Yeah, well, I still got the number of the really hot one. So, in the end, I win.”

She stuck out her tongue and continued walking, squash in hand. Natasha caught up and linked arms with the blonde as she batted her eyes at her.

“Aww, did I hurt your feelings?” she cooed as Sharon attempted to shrug her off, but the redhead clung on like a leech.

“Why am I friends with you?” Sharon muttered as she held onto her squash tighter.

“Because if you didn’t have me, all you’d be left with was Rogers.”

“True,” Sharon responded as the pair shared sly grins. There was nothing more fun than having a partner in crime when it came to mocking the First Avenger. (The media had dubbed him this. It apparently remained a sore point with Tony Stark, or so Natasha claimed.)

“Hey, look!” Sharon exclaimed as vibrant color caught her eye. She hurried over to the stall and fawned over the eye-catching colors of chrysanthemums. She bought two bouquets and delighted over them as they were handed to her. It was a lot to juggle; two bouquets and a squash, but Sharon managed.

“These will look beautiful in my apartment,” Sharon gushed as she handed one over to Natasha, who took it with a raised eyebrow.

“I’m not carrying this for you,” she flatly remarked as she eyed the flowers with disinterest. Natasha wasn’t much of a flower person, or at least, that was the vibe she tried to give off. But Sharon knew better.

“You’ll have too, those are for you.”

Natasha’s head flew up, eyes momentarily wide before a neutral look graced her face. She blinked down at the bouquet gingerly held in her hands before eyeing Sharon suspiciously. The blonde knew it was best to keep her face open and welcoming if Natasha was to accept the gift without any fuss.

Seeing no ill will or jokes, Natasha gently ran her finger over the orange and yellow petals, a small smile coming upon her face.

Sharon liked it when Natasha smiled. It made her seem…at peace.

“Flowers, huh?” she said as Sharon nodded and the two continued walking.

“You’ll have to do better than that to get to third base with me. I just don’t put out, Carter,” the redhead teased expertly as Sharon broke out in loud laughter. She rammed her shoulder into Natasha who pushed her back and the two exchanged grins.

“Ooh, Nat, look! Caramel apples!” Sharon hurried to them as Natasha trailed after her like an exasperated parent.

“You’re like a child in a candy store.”
“Yeah,” Sharon threw over her shoulder, “But you love me anyway.”

She darted onto the stall and completely missed the fond smile Natasha sent her way as she raised up her bouquet and delicately sniffed their scent.

“Yes,” the redhead whispered to herself, “I love you anyway.”

____________________________

October 25th, 2012
Washington, D.C.

“I put a spell on you, because you’re mine,” Sharon sang softly to herself as she hurried around her apartment, making sure everything was in place. She had a very special guest coming over and everything needed to be absolutely perfect.

The doorbell rang and Sharon jumped up. She wiped her hands on her ripped jeans and adjusted her black, zip-up sweater. She hurried to the door with a big grin and threw it open.

“Daffles!” she exclaimed as her arms were immediately filled with a squirming mass of blonde curls.

At eight years old, Daphne Hobbs was bright, precocious and bubbly. The daughter of Sharon’s cousin, Cara, Sharon was proud to be Daphne’s godmother.

The Hobbs family lived in Bethesda, MD and Sharon was lucky she got to see Daphne grow up.

“Oh,” a dry voice said from the doorway as Greer sauntered in behind her niece. “I see who your true favorite is.”

Daphne giggled as she pulled away from Sharon to look up at her aunt.

“I still love you, Aunt Greer.”

Greer’s face lit up in a smile as she ruffled Daphne’s hair while moving further into the apartment. She eyed Sharon’s set up in her living room.

Pumpkin carving.

Sharon had been looking forward to this all week.

“Let’s get started,” she enthused as she ushered her goddaughter towards the table. It was covered in newspaper and three pumpkins sat atop it idly. Sharon had stencils and other things so that the three would have the coolest pumpkins around.

The three ladies set to work as they giggled and chitchat their way through their carving. Sharon couldn’t help but notice that Greer seemed a bit…down.

“What’s with the frown, chum?” she questioned as she scooped out pumpkin seeds. Greer only listlessly shrugged as Daphne set her wide eyes on Sharon.

“She’s having girl problems,” she whispered, even though Greer could hear her perfectly. Sharon
raised an eyebrow as she assessed her cousin who was glaring at her niece.

“Oh, girl problems? What kind of girl problems?”

“None of your beeswax,” Greer muttered just as Daphne cut in again.

“She likes a girl and doesn’t know how to tell her.”

“Stop spilling my secrets!” Greer bemoaned as she poked Daphne in the side. The girl giggled freely before going back to her pumpkin. Sharon was amused as she watched Greer with a smile.

“You like someone, huh?”

Greer blushed before shrugging and staring down at the table.

“It’s just a co-worker of mine.”

Silence followed the statement as Sharon waited impatiently. When Greer proved less than willing, Sharon kicked her underneath the table as the CIA agent yelped.

“Well, tell me about her!”

Greer glared as she rubbed her shin (such a baby, Sharon hadn’t even kicked her that hard) before sighing and giving in.

“There’s not much to tell. She’s just someone I work with.”

“And?” Sharon questioned as she set her pumpkin aside. It could wait. Gossip on Greer could not.

“And…she’s beautiful. She’s the most stunning women I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, that’s nice,” Sharon responded, unsurprised by this revelation. Greer had always appreciated attractive people, no matter their gender. Greer nodded, her expression turning dreamy as she continued, her words turning into a soliloquy.

“But it’s not even that she’s physically beautiful. She’s also so pretty on the inside. She’s kind, funny, and smart as hell. She kicks all the guys’ asses.”

“I’m telling Mommy you said a bad word,” Daphne butted in. Sharon cringed as Greer did the same. Greer’s sister would give her hell for attempting to corrupt her daughter.

“If you keep this between us, I’ll buy you ice cream on the way home,” Greer desperately offered as Daphne wrinkled her nose.

“With sprinkles?” she questioned suspiciously as Greer nodded.

“Deal.” The two shook hands on it and Greer turned back to Sharon.

“When I try speaking to her I get tongue tied.”

Sharon raised an eyebrow at this. Greer wasn’t the type to be anything but charming when it came to going after a conquest. This was actually kinda cute as she watched her cousin babble on about her crush.

“Don’t forget to tell her about Antonia’s eyes,” Daphne suggested during a lull in the conversation as Greer immediately launched into an impassioned monologue about how deep and rich Antonia’s
eyes were.

Sharon just sat back and soaked it in.

Time with family was always worth it.

________________________________________

October 31st, 2012

The Triskelion

“Nazis. I hate these guys.”

Sharon officially had the best costume she thought smugly as she walked through the halls of SHIELD, eyeing the creativity (or lack thereof) of her fellow agents. Sharon was a cutting figure as the one and only Indiana Jones.

From head to toe, she was the essence of the fictional archeologist who had a phobia of snakes. Clad in khaki, with an old school pistol, a whip, and his trademark fedora on; Sharon felt like digging for gold and kicking Nazi ass.

She wandered the halls seeing vampires, 1920s swing girls, hombres, and more. Barton, as usual, was dressed as Robin Hood (more *Men in Tights* than *Prince of Theives*), Hill was a perfect Holly Golightly, Neal was unoriginal as Rambo, and Natasha was sublime as Sally from the *Nightmare before Christmas*.

Sharon paused as she saw Rogers at the end of the hall. She had half expected him not to dress up, but there he was in his authentic 1940s army dress uniform. With his combed-over hair and earnest face, he looked as if he had just walked out of a film reel from the time.

Peggy had had a picture of him in that uniform, he had seemed awkward and self-conscious in it, just as he did now as he made his way down the hallway towards her.

“You know,” she said as greeting, “The point of Halloween isn’t to dress as yourself.”

Rogers ran his hand through his hair, nearly messing it up before shrugging, setting his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

Uninspired his costume may be, Sharon couldn’t help but notice how the tight, form-fitting jacket accentuated his broad shoulders and narrow waist.

His body was truly unfair. Honestly, he looked like an upside down Dorito.

Sharon made a mental note to tell that to Natasha later as Rogers peered at her. “Who are you?” confusion clear in his voice as Sharon gestured to herself.

“I’m Indiana Jones! Famed archeologist and all around roguish scoundrel.” She winked saucily as Rogers rolled his eyes.

“Is he from a movie?”

“Only one of the greatest trilogies ever. I say trilogy because the fourth one is absolute crap, so
don’t waste your time with that.”

Rogers raised an eyebrow but slowly nodded.

“Okay?”

Sharon grinned as she crossed her arms over her chest, “You’d like him, he too fought Nazis.”

“Someone’s got too,” Rogers quipped with a grin as he went on his way, Sharon smiling after him.

The rest of the day passed in a flash and the next thing Sharon knew she was in Bethesda waiting to take Daphne trick-or-treating. Cara opened the door, both arms filled with her toddler twins as Sharon cooed at them.

“Daphne will be down in a second. She’s so excited about this.” Cara said as Sharon grinned and made funny faces at her second cousins. Moments later footsteps came pounding down the stairs and Daphne leaped at her.

She was…Captain America.

Sharon sent a look to Cara who only shrugged good-naturedly.

“What? She saw it at Target and couldn’t be swayed from it.”

“Are all Carter women besotted with him?” she muttered to herself as Cara snorted.

“Please, as if you’re any better.”

Sharon glared at her cousin before her attention was swept up by Daphne. She did look pretty cute. In a hooded dress that was made up to look like Captain America’s suits. She had a bright blue mask, a shield at her arm and was wearing red vans.

“You ready to go, Daffles?” Sharon asked her goddaughter as the little girl nodded, grabbed her basket from her mother and pulled Sharon out the front door of the suburban home.

“We have so much candy to get, Aunt Sharon!”

“Well then, lead on, Captain.”

And off they went.

Chapter End Notes

Halloween is my favorite holiday, so why not have an entire chapter dedicated to it? :)

The last chapter didn't seem to go over as well. Which is sad to me, because I loved the club scene and how much of a badass Sharon was in it. Was it the sex scene? It was my first time writing a graphic one, and if it makes the majority of people uncomfortable or disconnected from the story, I can always be more vague with them going forward. Also, Neal is just a FWB, there's nothing romantic there...yet. For the Staron fans, it just means the journey there will be wrought with tension. But who
doesn't love tension?

To everyone who has reviewed, thank you so much! I really appreciate it, especially my regulars! Please keep it up! It gives me the motivation to keep writing.

Pic time! There's a lot this chapter.

Sharon's Halloween themed outfit when talking to Steve:

Sharon when baking an apple pie:

Sharon at Eastern Market:
Natasha at Eastern Market:
Sharon while carving pumpkins:

Sharon and Daphne:

Sharon as Indiana Jones:
Natasha as Sally:

Clint as Robin Hood:
Chapter Summary

“Excited to be back?” she asked, coming up to Rogers’ shoulder. He flinched and turned to her in surprise, his eyebrow quirked in confusion.

“Excuse me?” he asked warily as if trying to discern her angle. Such a paranoid, that one.

“It’s been awhile since you were last in London, right? You came after your exploits in Azzano. You formed the Howling Commandos here.”

“How did you know that?” he questioned, his voice more suspicious than anything else.

“I saw it in a documentary.” She lied smoothly, not even blinking or stumbling at his inquiry.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 3rd, 2012

The Triskelion

“Betty.”

Sharon looked up, glancing around the break room and only seeing Rogers across the table from her, sipping his coffee and tapping away on his tablet. Sharon shrugged and went back to cleaning her Glock.

It had been a slow workweek at SHIELD. Sharon and Rogers hadn’t seen much action since the week before when they had performed a routine mission and extracted a fanatic from Saudi Arabia. All they had done since returning (bar Halloween) was training and field exercises.

“Emma.”

Sharon looked up again and recognized Rogers’ voice, but the man was diligently studying his tablet and had given no signs of speaking. She watched him suspiciously for a moment before once again going back to her Glock, making sure it was perfectly polished.

“Abigail.”

Sharon threw down her gun and rag, glaring at Rogers as he sat there, baby blues peering at her innocently.

“What are you doing?” she demanded as he arched an eyebrow in faux surprise.
“Me? I’m sitting here enjoying a cup of coffee.”

Sharon scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “So, you’re not the one spouting off random names into thin air?”

Rogers shrugged and went back to his tablet, “Must have me confused with someone else.”

“There’s no one else here!” Sharon gestured wildly to the empty break room as Rogers sipped his coffee, a hint of a smile curling at his lips.

“Don’t know what to tell you, partner.”

The female spy rolled her eyes before once more picking up her Glock and went back to cleaning it. Silence remained between them, though Sharon couldn’t help but glance at the super soldier every so often, wanting to catch him in the act. He gave no outward sign of noticing her scrutiny, but she knew him better than that.

She had her head bent low as she ran the rag over her pistol, making sure it gleaned in the artificial light of the breakroom. It was only when she put at ease that it was ruined.

“Grace.”

“I swear to God, Rogers-”

Her tirade was cut short as her SHIELD phone beeped within an incoming message. Sending one final, thunderous glare towards Rogers, she swiped her phone and read the message. Sighing, she put her phone away and started cleaning up. Rogers watched with a raised eyebrow.

“That was Fury. He wants to see us in his office, ASAP.”

Rogers snapped a single nod, before throwing back the remains of his lukewarm coffee and placing the mug in the sink. The two blondes walked side by side towards the elevator and rode up in silence. Throwing a nod towards Fury’s secretary the pair entered the vast space and found the SHIELD director standing idly by his windows overlooking the Potomac.

“Captain Rogers, Agent 13,” Fury greeted, turning towards the twosome.

“What’s the situation, Nick?” Rogers asked, immediately in Captain America mode. He stood at parade rest in front of Fury’s glass desk, imposing even in his dated clothing.

“We have a dilemma in London,” he began candidly, swiping his hand as hologram images of news reports emerged above his desk. Sharon tilted her head, taking it all in as Fury continued speaking.

“In the last three days, three Underground stations have been bombed: Waterloo, King’s Cross St. Pancras, and Victoria.”

Images of the three stations flashed by, showing billowing smoke and fiery damage.

“Any casualties?” Sharon asked.

“Injuries, mostly. Only one death so far; the victim was an elderly man.”

“We got any suspects?” Rogers questioned, crossing his arms over his chest as he took in the images with an intent gaze.

“Not yet,” Fury responded. “Security footage is being combed over but they haven’t proved
fruitful.”

“Any motive?” the super-soldier inquired as he brought a hand up to flick through the images.

“Just this,” Fury curled his hand as a new picture appeared, hovering in thin air. “It’s been left at the scene of all three crimes. We’re running forensics on it, but nothing’s come up.”

It was a Guy Fawkes mask.

Rogers raised an eyebrow in puzzlement. Fury nodded to Sharon, who was happy to cut in.

“It’s a mask of Guy Fawkes. One of the conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.”

“Gunpowder Plot?”

“It was an attempt by a group of Catholics to bomb the House of Lords during the State Opening of Parliament,” Sharon continued. “Had it succeeded it would have killed King James I and placed his daughter on the throne. The conspirators believed she’d be much more receptive to their religion.”

“I’m guessing it didn’t succeed,” Rogers deduced.

“Correct. It was found out the night before. Fawkes hanged and other conspirators were captured, tried, and killed.”

“So, whatever this is, it’s religious?” Rogers asked his eyes on the mask. Sharon shrugged as she replied.

“Not necessarily. Fawkes has become a popular symbol of anti-establishment and anti-government protests around the world, including the Occupy movement last year.”

Rogers wrinkled his nose in confusion as Sharon sighed. She’d have to get him up to speed on that later.

“I’m with Agent 13 on her assessment that this is a political statement,” Fury injected. “These bombings started on November 1st and have been occurring each day since. Each event is an escalation of the one before, bigger and with more lives at stake. It’s leading to something.”

“Bonfire Night,” Sharon whispered as Fury nodded in her direction.

“Bonfire Night,” he asserted.

“Bonfire Night?” Rogers inquired.

“It’s an annual celebration of the foiling of the plot by starting bonfires throughout the city. There’s fireworks, music, parades, and people wandering around in those masks. It occurs every year on November 5th, meaning—”

“Meaning,” Fury cut in gravely, “That if we don’t figure this out by that day, we could be in for something nasty.”

Rogers steeled himself as he glanced across the desk towards Fury. “We’ll handle this.”

Fury snapped a nod, linking his fingers together. “That’s what I like to hear. You won’t be doing this alone. MI5 wants in on this and seeing as it is their home turf, I can’t dissuade them. You’ll be coordinating with Agent Brian Braddock. Try and play nice.”
He regarded his two agents for a long moment before sighing, “I don’t think I need to remind you of the potential severity of this situation. If we fail in capturing this perp, a lot of people could die.”

“We won’t let that happen, sir,” Rogers responded strongly, his jaw squared and posture imposing.

Sharon nodded in earnest. “What he said.”

Fury nodded. “Good. Commander Rumlow and STRIKE Team Bravo are awaiting you in Hangar Two. Happy hunting. Also, when you’ve found the guy, enjoy a day of sightseeing. It’s on me.”

He sent a subtle look towards Sharon who just as subtly nodded back gratefully. The encounter went unnoticed by Rogers, who just nodded to Fury.

With pit stops to their offices to pick up their duffle bags and weapons, the two made good time to the hangar and saw their STRIKE team boarding the awaiting quinjet. Rogers gestured for her to go up the ramp first.

“After you, Claire.”

Sharon whirled around and stared incredulously at the Avenger as he came up behind her.

“Okay, what’s with the names? Just call me Thirteen like everyone else does.”

Rogers shrugged as he tossed his duffle bag to the side and set down his shield. He sent a nod to Rumlow before turning back to her, casually leaned back against his locker.

“I’ve never addressed anyone as a number before. I don’t like it.”

Sharon huffed, blowing her bangs in the process as she batted them away.

“Clearly you’ve never spent any time with MI6 operatives. Double-Oh-Seven? Jackass.”

Sharon had only met the infamous James Bond once, years ago when she had accompanied Aunt Peggy to a conference involving intelligence agency directors. M had been a delight, meeting a woman just as strong and no-nonsense as Peggy. But James Bond…he had been something else. Sharon had never known so much swagger and self-satisfaction could exist in a single body before meeting the MI6 operative.

Hopefully, he wouldn’t be skulking about on this mission. He always seemed to show up at these kinds of things.

Sharon placed her stuff in her locker, seated herself and buckled up as the quinjet got airborne and shot up into the sky, leaving the Triskelion behind.

A little under 30 minutes later the quinjet was cruising into London, soaring over the River Thames. It was a typical London day, overcast with scattered rain occurring throughout the day. Sunlight attempted to break through the clouds cloaking the metropolis.

Looking out over the city brought back memories of hot earl grey tea, foggy mornings tromping through the dewdrop grass of the Carter Estate, and the familiar scratchiness of Sharon’s favorite woolen blanket that she always cocooned in when coming to England. In Peggy’s prime, she and Uncle Daniel had brought their brood and extended family to the UK to enjoy holidays and summers.
Now, Peggy was on eternal bedrest in Arlington. She wouldn’t return to England until…well, until the end.

Her daughter, however, Jillian O’Connor, served as Ambassador to the United Kingdom and lived in Peggy’s childhood home alongside her husband.

Sharon peeked at Rogers and found him staring out the window as well, his face unreadable as he took in the sights of London. He too seemed to be lost in long ago memories. The city had to look like another world in comparison to the last time he had stepped foot in the Big Smoke.

Speaking of which…

“Excited to be back?” she asked, coming up to Rogers’ shoulder. He flinched and turned to her in surprise, his eyebrow quirked in confusion.

“Excuse me?” he asked warily as if trying to discern her angle. Such a paranoid, that one.

“It’s been a while since you were last in London, right? You came after your exploits in Azzano. You formed the Howling Commandos here.”

“How did you know that?” he questioned, his voice more suspicious than anything else.

“I saw it in a documentary,” she lied smoothly, not even blinking or stumbling at his inquiry.

“You watched a documentary on me?” his voice was incredulous as Sharon shrugged and studied her nails nonchalantly. She’d need a manicure soon. She deserved that.

“I like history.” She remarked casually. Rogers stared at her for a moment, scrutinizing her answer, before apparently satisfied and turned away.

“Landing in two minutes,” the pilot announced from the cockpit as the quinjet came to life, STRIKE assembling and gathering their belongings. Sharon slipped into her jacket as the quinjet prepared its decent at London Heliport, right off the Thames. STRIKE had assembled around the hatch as the quinjet landed with a slight bump.

Rumlow angled towards Rogers with an amiable smirk, “I think you’ll find yourself popular here, Cap.”

Rogers rose an eyebrow as he collected his shield, “And why’s that?”

“Back after WWII ended Britain tried to create its own breed of super-soldier. It never worked, of course.”

“That’s ‘cause you can’t ever trust a Brit to get the job done. It’s all about ‘Merica!” Patterson, a boy from a small town in Mississippi hooted from the back as STRIKE broke out in howls and cheers. Sharon rolled her eyes as the hatch opened and she and Rogers were the first to walk out.

Waiting for them was a caravan of sleek, black range rovers and men in suits.

“You have to admit, it’s an intriguing idea,” Sharon announced as Rogers eyeballed her. “Every country having their own super-soldier prancing around in their flag colors exuberating the values and virtues of their homeland.”

Rogers was impassive as he stared ahead, “I guess.”

“What would they call the British one? Admiral UK? Captain Britain?”
“I haven’t the strangest idea,” the Avenger muttered just as they came face to face with a man. He was tall, over 6 feet, standing with hunched shoulders and his hands on his hips. He had rugged features and disheveled blonde hair. He had frown lines at the corner of his mouth and crow’s feet by his eyes, and he looked to be toeing the line of exhaustion but was pushing his body on anyway. He wore an ill-fitting and rumpled suit, but it was plain to see he was a field agent who’d wouldn’t have any trouble going toe-to-toe with someone if the situation called for.

“Agent Braddock?” Rogers guessed as they stopped in front of the man. He gave a single nod.

“That’d be me,” the man replied with a poignant middle-class accent. “I’m guessing you’re Captain America?”

“Guilty as charged.”

“The shield gave it away,” Braddock admitted, sticking his hands in his pockets and eyeing his American compatriots in an unimpressed manner. He turned his blue eyes on Sharon.

“And you are?” his tone was bordering on rude, but the female spy ignored it, putting her best foot forward.

“Agent 13 of SHIELD Special Services.” She reached her hand out to shake but was rebuffed as Braddock ran a hand through his tousled hair agitatedly.

“Look, I’m going to be honest with you lot. We don’t need any assistance from you bloody birdwatchers. We can protect our own.”

Sharon blinked at his frankness as she and Rogers exchanged looks.

“Well respectfully,” Sharon replied, best foot forward be damned, “We wouldn’t be here if that was the case.”

Braddock opened his mouth to retort, but Rogers was quick to jump in.

“What my partner is trying to say,” he tossed a look to Sharon, who ignored him, “Is that all we want to do here is help. We don’t intend on causing any problems.”

“Really?” Braddock questioned quizzically, “What did you call that mess you and your Avengers made in New York? Looked like a right problem to me.”

Now Rogers was just as defensive as Sharon had been only moments before, his nostrils flaring as he squared his shoulders.

“Well, you might call it a problem, but I call it saving the world. But if you think you can do better, please, be my guest.”

Braddock stared at the pair for a moment before chuckling, “Guess I deserved that.”

“Look,” Rogers interjected, “We can stand here all day comparing egos, or we can get to work. I know what I want to do. How about you?”

Braddock nodded and beckoned to the cars.

“Your chariots await.”

Signing over to STRIKE, the SHIELD agents began heading towards the range rovers. Sharon looked around as Braddock led her and Rogers to one.
“You say you’re with MI5? You sure it’s just you chaps? James Bond isn’t skulking around somewhere is he?”

“Double-Oh-Seven?” Braddock asked before scoffing, “What a jackass.”

“That’s what I said!” Sharon glanced triumphantly at Rogers, who just shook his head and held the car door open for her. She slid in, Rogers following as Braddock hopped in the passenger and then the range rover was off.

It began raining as the convoy of range rovers crossed Albert Bridge and proceeded west on the Chelsea Embankment. Sharon looked up at the overcast sky as the sleek SUVs drove towards MI5.

The range rovers pulled to a stop outside the MI5 headquarters and Braddock whisked Rogers and Sharon to their technological hub where security footage of the bombings was being analyzed.

“Where are we with identifying any potential suspects?” Rogers questioned, his tone insistent as he placed his hands on his hips. He had noticed more than anyone else the stares and whispers he had received from the MI5 agents. It seemed that even their Britishness couldn’t stop their awe from showing on their faces as they took in the sight of a superhero.

“We received a hit while you were landing,” Braddock intoned as an image of a burly looking man appeared on a computer screen. He was muscled and had the war-torn face of a soldier.

“Ross Horton, a former lieutenant in the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. He was dishonorably discharged when it was learned he was selling arms illegally to our enemies. Before he could be arrested for treason, he went on the run. He’s been dealing arms ever since with a nice flair of anarchy on the side.”

“That would explain the Guy Fawkes mask,” Sharon mused.

“What you dealt with him before?” Rogers asked Braddock who nodded.

“Two years ago we apprehended him attempting to bomb Buckingham Palace during a state dinner with the majority of the Royal Family inside it. Had he succeeded Lady Louise Windsor would be on the throne.”

“God save the Queen,” Sharon whispered to herself and felt vindicated when she noticed Rogers’ lip curl up. She’d take the small victories.

“So, his goal is a destruction of the British state?” Rogers inquired. Braddock whistled, scratching at the five o’clock shadow on his chin as he turned to the two SHIELD agents.

“Honestly,” he began in a weary voice, “I think he just wants the world to burn. Whether it’s here or in some other part of the world. Hell, he probably enjoyed that alien invasion in New York. Probably hates you for stopping it.”

“Well, he’ll hate me even more when we stop him here,” Rogers easily countered as he steeled his eyes.

“Do we have any known locations?”

At the question, Braddock turned a tinge sheepish as he nodded the two American blondes to the side, away from the star-struck gaze of his peers.

“Look, we got off to the wrong foot initially, and for that, I apologize. But I have an increasingly
frenzied public who want answers and more importantly security. Security me and my team are hell-bent on providing for them.”

“And all we want to do is help,” Sharon interpolated, not liking where this conversation was going.

“We are most appreciative of that,” Braddock insisted, “But all of the reports we have so far give no indication that this is anything more than a one-man job. Horton’s a loner, he always has been. He won’t have a team with him. This really isn’t a job for Captain America and SHIELD.”

Rogers’ gaze went glacial as he glared at the MI5 agent.

“Are you saying,” Rogers spoke slowly as if speaking to a child. “That you want us to sit this one out?”

“Hole in one,” Braddock hailed. “I hope you can understand my reasoning for this.”

Rogers huffed up like a wind in sail and looked ready to unleash a long tirade before Sharon butted in, placing a hand on Rogers’ arm.

“We completely understand,” she said docilely. “You have to do what’s best for your people. We can get behind that, can’t we, Captain?”

She didn’t give Rogers a chance to respond before continuing, “In fact, we were up for some vacation days anyway. We may just stick around, sightsee, be proper tourists.”

Braddock nodded distractedly, his attention more so on the monitors than the two SHIELD agents.

“Great, sounds good. I’ll have my men show you out.”

Rogers glowered as the two were escorted out of Thames House. The rain had subsided but it was chilly as they stood overlooking the Lambeth Bridge. Rogers whirled on Sharon, his gaze thunderous.

“I can’t believe you let that man steamroll us!”

Sharon rolled her eyes. “Hardly.”

“Oh, then what was that?” Rogers angrily pointed towards the front doors of the MI5 headquarters.

“That was me seeing a wall. While you were content to spend all day ramming into it, I decided to scale it.”

Rogers stared at her, eyes nearly bugging out of his head as he tried to work through her metaphor.

“Beg pardon?” he finally stuttered out and Sharon couldn’t help but find it endearing.

“Look, just tell me one thing, when the known location flashed on the screen for a hot second, were you able to get a look at it?”

Rogers furrowed his brow, recounted the previous events in his mind and perfectly saw the address in his mind. He gave a single nod to his partner who gave a smug smirk in return.

“Well then, Rogers, what do you say about doing our own investigating?”
November 4th, 2012

London

“Are you sure you had the address right?” Sharon questioned for the umpteenth time as they wandered further into the increasingly bad part of Hackney.

“As I told you repeatedly, yes. Eidetic memory, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sharon muttered. “You’re practically a certified genius, I remember.”

The pair had left STRIKE at the safe house monitoring Tube stations to see if Horton would strike again. So far nothing had occurred. They were dressed in civilian clothing, Rogers in his usual plaid garb, his shield surprisingly hidden beneath his jacket. Sharon was cozy in a grey, knit pullover, ashen skinny jeans, and suede knee-high boots. It was a very London look and Sharon was a pro at blending in when the situation called for it.

They were about to turn the corner onto the street of Horton’s last known address when Rogers jerked her back, pressing her into an alley.

“Excuse you,” she wiggled out of his grip as she turned toward him questioningly.

“Braddock and his men are staking out the property. I didn’t want us being spotted,” Rogers explained.

Sharon cursed under her breath. They had been under the belief that Braddock and his men would busy themselves with monitoring Underground stations so as to stop any potential bombs, leaving open Horton for the two of them.

Clearly, they had misjudged Braddock.

“What’d you see?” she asked as Rogers recounted.

“Two vehicles, nondescript. I imagine two in the building across the street monitoring from the windows. Someone across the way doing yard work. I also imagine vehicles will be on standby if Horton makes an appearance.”

“So, there’s no walking up to the front door,” Sharon surmised as Rogers nodded in acquiesce.

“Well,” Sharon drawled, “We’ll just have to go through the back.”

Rogers raised an eyebrow as Sharon gave a vulpine smile, “Trust me, Rogers. This will be fun.”

With some expert sleuthing, the two made it to the back of the building without any of Braddock’s team catching sight of them. The building was a decaying, rundown pub that had seen better decades. Its windows on the ground level were boarded up and the ones above it were shattered and broken. It was a three-story brick building.

Rogers walked up to the back door, boarded up with cardboard as he pressed his ear against it. He pulled his head away and looked towards Sharon.

“There’s a definite clicking going on in there. My guess is that it’s some kind of alarm system. We go through here, we’ll tip him off and he may never return.”
Sharon nodded and looked up, her eye-catching sight of a third story window. She glanced at Rogers then back at the window.

Hmm, that could work.

“Hey, Rogers,” she called to him as he looked at her, she pointed up with a grin. “Give me a boost.”

He followed her finger and smirked as he caught onto her line of thinking. He kneeled, placing his hands together to give her proper leverage.

“After you, Emily.”

She stared at him as he nodded.

“You’re right, you don’t look like an Emily.”

Sharon rolled her eyes but took a running start. She jumped, her foot landing in Rogers’ hold, and he propelled her up as easy as throwing a baseball. She might as well have weighed nothing to him. She flew through the air, her stomach rolling, as she landed easily on the third-floor window sill in a crouch.

She peeked inside, seeing no sides of any wiring of an alarm attached to the window. She jigged the rickety window open and with some creaks and groans, it complied. She threw a thumbs up to Rogers and he began scaling the wall easily, his shield sticking out from underneath his jacket. She slipped inside and the rotted wooden floor creaked beneath her weight. Rogers joined her a moment later as the two stood in the middle of Horton’s…lair, or so it seemed.

Spread out around the room were maps, blueprints, and more papers. Weapons were scattered throughout the space, and while a fair amount were normal guns and rifles, others seemed to not be regulation. They seemed rather foreign to Sharon and she was concerned with what they could do.

Braddock had said that Horton had many friends on the black market when it came to arms.

Her attention was drawn to a schematic of the Palace of Westminster and in particular the House of Lords. Around the blueprints were many handwritten notes about bombs.

Sharon blanched as she realized what he was occurring.

“Rogers,” she shakily called out as he joined her, “I think I know what his ultimate goal is. He’s not just taking inspiration from Guy Fawkes, he’s copying him.”

She turned to look at Rogers with wide eyes.

“He wants to bomb the House of Lords on Bonfire Night.”

Whatever Roger was going to say in reply was cut off as he frowned at the floor beneath them.

“Someone’s here,” he whispered and sure enough, a moment later the front door swung open, echoing through the empty space of the pub. Rogers pushed Sharon back against the wall, silent and graceful as a panther.

The pair listened in anticipation as the footsteps moved throughout downstairs before coming up the ramshackle staircase. All the while Rogers was slipping his shield out from beneath his jacket, readying on his throwing arm.
Just as the footsteps were nearing the doorway of the room they were in, Sharon shifted her weight and internally cursed when the floor creaked beneath her.

The footsteps paused outside the door.

She reached for her pistol and undid the safety. Whatever was about to come from that door, it wasn’t going to be pretty.

*BANG.*

The door blasted open, falling off its hinged as Horton burst into the room. He was even bigger in person than his pictures had conveyed. A massive body, he was clearly a man who had seen battle.

He easily ducked Rogers’ shield as it bounced around the room, coming back to Rogers. In his arms was an enormous rifle. He aimed it at the two blondes and fired. Instead of bullets, it was air. It traveled in waves at supersonic speed and rammed into the two.

It felt like Sharon’s eardrums were ripping themselves apart and the ringing in her head was immense as she fell to her knees, her hands gripping her head. She may have been screaming, but she wasn’t entirely sure because she couldn’t hear or think anything beyond the pain in her head.

Rogers ducked the two of them behind his shield, his grip shaky due to the sonic weapon, he was nowhere near affected the same way Sharon had been, but it didn’t help Sharon. She was convulsing as the rifle remained pointed at them.

Rogers threw his shield again and this time it hit its target. Horton dropped into the hallway, his rifle no longer aimed at the pair. Sharon gasped for breath, her ears still ringing as she shook uncontrollably.

“Thirteen! Thirteen!” Rogers bellowed, his voice cutting through the pain as she stared up at him. Horton was getting to his feet and tearing down towards the staircase and outside Rogers’ could hear sirens descending on the abandoned pub. Braddock and his men, if the super soldier had to spare a guess.

He gripped Sharon by the shoulders, forcing her to look up at him. Her ears weren’t bleeding, so he took that for a good sign that the damage wasn’t permanent.

“Are you okay?” he questioned insistently, shaking her when she didn’t immediately respond. She jerkily nodded before pointing towards the hallway.

“Go!” she yelled and Rogers was after him like a cat catching a mouse. He crashed through the decaying pub, nearly bouncing off a wall as he thundered down the stairs. Horton was already out through the front door, his gun aimed at Braddock and his men who were charging out of their range rovers.

They turned their pistols on the anarchist, not understanding what was in store for them. When the sonic rifle was aimed at them, they buckled just as easily as Sharon had. The MI5 agents fell to the ground, screaming and shaking as Horton passed through them like the Red Sea.

Upstairs Sharon had finally regained control of herself as she pushed herself to her feet. Her eyes caught sight of Rogers’ shield discarded on the floor. She lunged for it and went tearing to the front of the pub. Luckily for her, the window up there was broken and open. She poked her head out and saw Horton, having taken down Braddock and his men, beelining for one of the range rovers, Rogers on his heels.
“Rogers!” She yelled, “Catch!”

She had seen Rogers throw his shield hundreds of times. How hard could it be? Disorientated as she still was, she flung the vibranium shield with all the energy she could muster.

It went everywhere except towards Rogers.

Ricocheting off nearby buildings it finally embedded itself in a wall way off course from Rogers.

“Crap,” she muttered to herself, watching as Horton got away in the range rover, Rogers chasing after him at his enhanced speed.

Sharon shakily collected her pistol from the ground and hurried down the stairs, nearly tumbling down them due to her shakiness. When she came outside, Braddock and his men were trying to collect themselves off the pavement, looking even worse than Sharon had.

She paid them no mind as she hurried to an unoccupied range rover. She ignored Braddock’s yell, hopping into the driver seat, shifting into gear and tearing off after Rogers and Horton.

It wasn’t hard to find the two, they left a path of destruction in their wake.

She watched as the range rover and Rogers disappeared down an alleyway. She continued onward, attempting to cut Horton off before he could get to the main roads. She drove fast and wild, passing beleaguered cars and pedestrians. She nearly ran over an elderly woman with her sharp left turn.

She slammed on the brakes at the head of the alley, hoping to bracket Horton in, but he was a man on a mission and he would not be stopped. His range rover slammed into her's as she knocked hard into her door. She went flying past her down the street as Rogers came to a halt beside her battered SUV, out of breath. He was leaning over, hands on his knees as she worked down the passenger window.

“Get in!” she yelled. He was quick to follow orders, slipping into the left-hand side of the car. She whammed the car back into drive and they were off after Horton. They sped around the traffic, getting ever and ever closer to downtown London. Horton’s range rover was always in front of him as they tailed him.

She rammed into his bumper, but it did nothing to slow him down.

“Are you wearing a seatbelt?” Rogers yelled to her as she kept her eyes on Horton.

“What?” she yelled back.

“Seatbelt? You wearing one?”

“Oh, for the love of God, Rogers!” she testily replied bracing herself as they raced over a speedbump.

The range rover got airborne before crashing back down onto the pavement. Sharon nearly went flying out of her seat but held onto the wheel.

There was a cacophony of car horns as they cut people off and ran more than one red light. They stayed hot on Horton’s trail. There was no way he was getting away from them.

If Sharon’s sense of direction was correct, they were getting closer to London Bridge. She imagined he’d try and lose them there. Seeing an opportunity to stop this once and for all she made
an abrupt right onto a one-way street, which was, of course, heading in the opposite direction than they were.

Cars and people in front of them scattered as their range rover clobbered through the street. The window shield was splintering beyond repair and it was growing increasingly difficult to see through its cracks.

Sharon veered left down an alleyway hoping it’d get them to the main street and put them ahead of Horton for once so that they could block him in.

“We’re not going to fit,” Rogers screamed as the opening of the alley grew closer and closer.

“We’re going to fit!” she shrieked back.

The range rover plowed ahead through the opening. It was such a tight squeeze that sides of the range rover scraped against the walls. Sharon just kept her foot on the gas and they blazed through, charging onto the main street and nearly taking out a hackney carriage.

“See, I told you we’d fit,” she said to Rogers’ ashen face. He was gripping the seat tightly.

Their detour put them parallel with Horton, the two range rovers racing side by side as London Bridge loomed ahead of them. Horton rammed into them hard, nearly sending them into the sidewalk. She rammed him back and their bumper game continued onto the bridge, their tires squealing as the headed over the Thames.

Sharon almost had Horton, but their two lanes were turning into one and if she didn’t give in, she and Rogers would be swimming in the Thames. She slammed on the brakes as their range rover went careening into the opposite lane of traffic. The last thing she noticed before they crashed was Rogers’ arm catapulting in front of her, bracketing her in and keeping her locked in place.

Several minutes later she came back to consciousness. The airbag in front of her had deployed and had since deflated. Her entire body felt wrecked as she heaved in deep breaths. She reached up, feeling a gash at the top of her head. Pulling back her fingers she found blood coating them. Her ribs were screaming at her and glass was sprayed across both her and Rogers.

Speaking of Rogers…

“You’re bleeding!” she cried hysterically, the shock already setting in. “You’re a super-soldier, why are you bleeding?” she grasped his arm, turning to see it better, even if her body protested the action.

It was true, his right arm was bleeding freely with pieces of glass embedded into his skin. He retracted it from her grip, several bruises blossoming across his face as he glanced at her.

“You weren’t wearing a seatbelt,” he said it as if that solved everything. Maybe it did. Her brain was too fuzzy to make sense of it.

Rogers kicked out his door and pulled himself out of the SUV. In the distance, he could hear sirens wailing towards them and a massive traffic jam was already taking place on the bridge. He was relieved to see that had crashed onto the bridge railing instead of a car. That reduced the chanced of casualties.

He went to Sharon’s door, ripping it off and delicately pulling her from the car. He let her lean against him when she proved unstable on her feet. He sat her down on the road, checking her head wound.
He wasn’t a trained medic, but to him, it seemed more like a bleeder than anything else. It didn’t take long for an ambulance to arrive on the scene and he directed them to Sharon as he stood off to the side, pulling shards of glass from his arm.

He was trying to be quick with it before the skin healed with the shards still inside him. That’d be a real pain to deal with. He had just finished pulling all of them out when Braddock charged through the scene, his murderous gaze set on Rogers.

“Not a problem?!” the MI5 agent bellowed, his accent even thicker than normal as he rounded on the Avenger, “All you’ve done is cause problems. Because of you, I have several million dollars’ worths of damages to deal with. And Horton escaped! Who knows where the hell he’s going now!”

“We might not know where he’s gone, but we know his target. He’s going after the House of Lords. And he hasn’t targeted an Underground station today,” Rogers said easily.

Braddock scoffed and looked near to pulling out his own hair, “Think again, Captain America! While you and blondie over there,” he nodded to Sharon who was having her ribs bound, “Were reenacting The Fast and the Furious, Oxford Circus was bombed. And this time he left more than just the mask.”

A tablet was slammed into Roger’s chest. He scrambled to catch it before it tumbled to the ground. He held it up and sighed as he took in the picture of a handwritten note. It was a simple sentence.

You can’t win.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone enjoys this chapter. I was a bit fearful to write it because when I came up with the broad idea, a Guy Fawkes bombing, it sounded so easy, but putting it together to have it make sense and be somewhat realistic has proven difficult. Hopefully it seems like something from the comics or movies. That's all I can hope for.

Fun fact: Brian Braddock, in the comics, is Captain Britain. While he doesn't exist in the MCU, I decided to have some fun with his character and incorporating him as an MI5 agent. Ross Horton is also one of Captain Britain's antagonists, but is revamped for this story.

The bit with Sharon and the shield is taken directly from the comics. I thought it was funny and added some fun to the chapter. Steve will have to teach her how to throw that glorified frisbee.

Thank you to everyone who has been reviewing! It means everything to me. Please keep it up!

Pic time!

Brian Braddock:
Sharon's outfit:

Horton's abandoned pub:
Remember, Remember, the Fifth of November

Chapter Summary

“We are a go in three…”

Everyone leaned back, assuming the scaling position. Sharon felt the wind at her back as she held onto her line. She breathed in deeply. It was just like rock climbing…

“Two.”

She peeked a glance at the London Eye as the fireworks continued erupting across the sky.

“Remember, remember, the fifth of November.” She whispered to herself.

“One.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 5th, 2012

London

“Thirteen, do you have eyes on any suspicious targets?”

“Negative,” Sharon answered lowly, sipping on her earl grey tea. She was standing at the railing overlooking the main hub of Liverpool Station. She glanced up, her eyes drawn to the glass ceiling and the scattered sunlight fighting its way through the thick and impending clouds canvassing the city of London.

She, Rogers, and half of STRIKE were positioned throughout the station, tracking any shady characters or actions. Following Horton’s pattern of targeting the busiest Underground terminals, they had been brought to Liverpool Station.

Sharon watched with narrow eyes as people scurried this way and that throughout the depot. She checked her watch for the umpteenth time.

10:07am.

She sighed and brought her hand up to her ear and looked down, not drawing attention to herself as she spoke.

“We’re past the peak hours of service. All the other bombings occurred between seven and nine in the morning. Whatever Horton is planning, it’s not bombing Liverpool Station.”

Several moments passed before Rogers chimed in from his perch down at the railways.
“Agreed. STRIKE, rendezvous back at the safe house. Thirteen and I will scope out the House of Lords and check in with STRIKE there.”

There were words and grunts of confirmation. Sharon lowered her hand and glanced down, immediately recognizing the form of Agent Braddock as he stalked through the terminal.

“Captain, we have company,” she advised Rogers just as Braddock looked up, locking eyes with her. She offered a cheeky wave as she sipped her tea. The MI5 agent scowled before beckoning her down with a two finger point. Sharon sighed, pushing herself off the railing and making her way down the nearest stairs.

“On my way,” Rogers replied in her ear as she reached the bottom of the steps, her ribs crying out at the movement. She’d need some aspirin after this.

Braddock seemed even more worn down than the last time she had seen him. She doubted he had slept at all the night before if his pale countenance and the dark shadows under his eyes were any indication. He was wearing the same, ill-fitting suit as yesterday, and it was in an even sorrier state of despair.

“Agent Braddock, fancy running into you here,” she greeted cheerfully as the man sent her a black look.

“Quite. Where’s the big guy?” he demanded, craning his head and looking all around. He needn’t exert the energy because Rogers arrived then, right at Sharon’s shoulder.

“Braddock,” he addressed politely, keeping his face perfectly bland as he tucked his hands into the pockets of his dark trousers.

“You two didn’t have enough fun yesterday destroying a good portion of London, you felt the need to try your hand here?” Braddock questioned as Sharon frowned.

“I wouldn’t exactly call yesterday ‘fun.’” She pointed up to the gash on her forehead that had been neatly stitched by a paramedic. That paled in comparison to her bruised ribs and the plentiful amount of cuts and scratches across her body thanks to the glass of the range rover that had showered her and Rogers when they had crashed.

Rogers, for his part, appeared nearly healed. Just the bruise on his check, which was a delicate pink as it continued fading. Sharon reckoned it would be entirely gone by the afternoon.

Braddock made a dismissive noise as he regarded the two SHIELD agents. “You Americans, you never know when to stay out of things.”

Rogers’ nostrils flared and he puffed out his chest, ready to unleash a torrent upon the MI5 agent. He was cut off from his impending rant when Sharon sent a hard elbow jab to his ribs. He glared at her but remained silent as she mediated.

“That may be, but that’s not the point.”

“Enlighten me to the point then.”

“You’re no closer to getting one over Horton than we are,” Sharon elucidated. “The only way he’s stopped from bombing your seat of government is if we work together and we take this son of a bitch out.”

She flipped her hair over her shoulder, ineffective as it was due to its bob length. But it was the
statement behind the gesture that she was hoping to convey as she planted her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow challengingly to Braddock.

The Brit stared hard at the two blondes before sighing and raking a hand through his unruly hair and scratching at his chin. He huffed out a breath as he nodded to himself.

“You’re right,” he admitted begrudgingly. “Pride is a terrible thing in a situation like this. Alright, we do this together, but no more going off script. This is my territory and you’ll be following my lead.”

Sharon glanced at Rogers and urged him with her eyes to take the olive branch for what it was. The Avenger rolled his eyes before giving a curt nod.

“We can do that,” he stated through his teeth as Sharon tampered down her urge to grin at Rogers’ stubbornness.

Braddock looked at the two, “Well then, we’ve had no sign of Horton since your ill-advised car chase, a government entirely besieged from fear that their seat of power will be bombed, for Christ’s sake’s the Queen has been removed to Windsor, and in less than 12 hours the celebrations for bloody Guy Fawkes Night will begin. This is quite a mess we find ourselves in. You two have any constructive ideas?”

Rogers and Sharon shared a look before Rogers slyly smirked and remarked casually.

“We may have one or two.”

It was quiet in Sharon’s bedroom as she prepared for the impending mission. Hours spent planning with Braddock and his men had placed a shaky, somewhat hazardous, definitely dangerous plan in motion.

So, just one’s typical day as a SHIELD agent.

It seemed out of the norm for Braddock though. It was rather cute seeing how out of his depth he seemed the more Rogers and Sharon extrapolated on various ideas and contingencies.

But the time had finally come to see the mission through.

Sharon reached for her duffle bag and pulled from it, carefully folded, her SHIELD tactical suit. A small smile played across the agent’s face as she unfolded it, revealing the white beauty beneath.

It was an odd thing, having a fair suit over the traditional black suits that agents like Natasha favored. How could one be stealthy when decked out in white? Well, Sharon concurred that she would never be able to disappear into the shadows like many of her contemporaries. However, she had long ago proved that she was deadly enough at her job that she could still knock her enemies off their feet even if they could see her coming for them.

She smiled as she remembered the fit Stanford had pitched, only having been her handler for a total of three days, when she brazenly told him she would be forgoing the usual SHIELD garb for her own design. He had been bouncing off the walls with the way he had yelled at her; his face had gotten so red and apoplectic; at one point she had feared he’d have a heart attack and leave her hander-less.
She ran her fingers over the Kevlar as she took in the sight of the suit fully. Its coloring wasn’t pure white snow, but rather an off-white that had cadet grey lining up the torso, following the zipper to her collar and shoulder pads. On both shoulders, etched into the resilient material, was SHIELD’s emblem. The grey lining continued on the underside of her arms and the inside of her thighs and legs.

Sharon easily slipped into the uniform, it clinging to her as familiar as a second skin. She tugged the zipper up, and unlike Nat who enjoyed a tease of cleavage, Sharon pulled the zipper all the way up to her neck.

She perched herself at the end of her cot and sank her feet into her tall wedge boots, buckling and lacing at the appropriate spots. Her boots had an ingenious design of easily holding, and cleverly disguising her pair of stun batons. She could easily pull them from their quivers when needed.

Sharon stood and tugged on her dark leather, fingerless gloves. She clenched her fists, did a few quick jabs as the leather formed to her skin. She turned to her leather bag and pulled out her sleek, utility belt that had two drop leg thigh holsters hanging from it. She secured it to her waist and it rested crookedly snug against her hips as she strapped in the two holsters and secured her guns to them.

The only personal touch her suit had was the 13, in Roman numerals, inlaid into the belt. It was a small way of keeping her autonomy in the machine that was SHIELD.

Armed and ready for a good fight, Sharon headed out of the room into the main living space of the cramped and crowded safe house. STRIKE was there and ready to go, murmuring amongst themselves as they compared gun sizes.

Typical STRIKE.

Rogers was at the heart of the mayhem, in his steal suit, but still un-helmeted and shield resting at his feet as he conveyed last-minute reminders to anyone who’d listen to him. Sharon easily moved through the crowd of STRIKE thugs to come up to Rogers’ side.

He glanced at her before doing a double take at the site of her white suit. He had yet to see her in it. Sharon raised an eyebrow as she checked her holsters.

“What? Did you think you were the only one with a cool suit?”

Rogers looked away, clearing his throat before remarking, “No. It’s a…it looks nice on you.”

Sharon didn’t have the heart to tease the Avenger. She just smiled and nodded as Rogers reclaimed his famed composure and turned to the room at large. With a sharp look from Rumlow, all of STRIKE Team Bravo fell silent as they watched Captain America take command of the room.

“Listen up, we only have one chance of this if we’re going to save lives and a London landmark. I need everyone on their A-game, you hear me?”

He was met with a cacophony of grunts, hoots, and stomping of feet.

“Well then, let’s do our job.”

Despite the previous bombings, London was in full swing as its citizens loudly and energetically
celebrated Bonfire Night. Parades were occurring throughout the city, fires were blazing, casting orange shadows flickering across windows and down alleyways.

A fair share of the London population was wearing the iconic Guy Fawkes mask as they pressed themselves up against the banks of the River Thames and eagerly anticipated the big display of fireworks that would commence above the river.

Sharon idly watched the festivities below from her perch atop the House of Lords. It was a brisk, windy night and her hair was fluttering in the breeze as she stood huddled among Rogers and STRIKE. Braddock and his men were providing the ground support, keeping in contact through their walkie-talkies that had synced up to SHIELD’s secure channel.

Sensors were located all throughout Westminster, so if Horton so much as even breathed funny upon entering the palace, they would know it.

All day MI5 had been rooting throughout the famed building, searching for a cache of hidden bombs, but they had turned up nothing.

If Horton was truly planning to bomb the UK’s Parliament, he was bringing the goods with him. Sharon didn’t know if she should be alarmed by the thought or not. If he had sonic weapons up his sleeve, what else was in his arsenal?

“Braddock, do you have eyes on Horton?” Rogers questioned from across the rooftop.

“Negative. It is all clear. Any activity from your viewpoint?” the Brit questioned in Sharon’s ear as Rogers’ sighed and once more looked down at the sensor readings. Nothing had changed in the last two minutes that he had checked.

“Nothing on our end. We’ll keep you updated,” Rogers responded before lowering his hand as he rechecked that his shield was securely strapped to his back.

Suddenly an eruption of sound and color swept across the sky. Everyone on the roof tensed, reaching for weapons before belatedly realizing that the firework display had finally begun. Sharon chuckled to herself as she holstered her pistol and turned towards the Thames and watched with interest as fireworks of every shape and color burst across the night sky.

She could hear the cheering and awe coming from the people below. The fireworks highlighted the city, illuminating the SHIELD agents as they waited upon the rooftop.

It was about halfway through the show when Rogers’ tablet went off with a warning. Everyone turned to attention as Rogers overlooked the information. His body tensed and he looked up, giving a pointed nod.

Someone was below them in the House of Lords.

Sharon reached up for her ear. “Braddock, be advised, we have movement below. Be on standby.”

“We’re on our way, bird. We’ll await your signal.”

Everyone was moving in position as Sharon headed to the eastern edge of the roof. The gambrel of the House of Lords sloped down on both sides, so the SHIELD agents carefully slid down to the edges. Sharon glanced over her back and saw a cement courtyard below.

It’d be quite the nasty fall.
The booms of the fireworks reverberated throughout her body as she unsheathed her grappling hook from her belt and dug it snugly into the paneling of the roof. Once it was secured she leaned back on her haunches, ready for the countdown.

The SHIELD agents were split evenly as they lined the fringes of the roof, all securing their lines. Rogers was right across from her and would enter the building through the western windows.

Rogers looked around, seeing his team ready before he raised a hand to his ear, activating his comm.

“We are a go in three…”

Everyone leaned back, assuming the scaling position. Sharon felt the wind at her back as she held onto her line. She breathed in deeply. It was just like rocking climbing…

“Two.”

She peeked a glance at the London Eye as the fireworks continued erupting across the sky.

“Remember, remember, the fifth of November," she whispered to herself.

“One.”

Everyone dropped backwards over the edge. The wind whirled past Sharon as they plummeted down the sides of Westminster. She bounced off the walls until finally, they reached the stained glassed windows.

It was a spectacular crash of glass as the SHIELD agents came barreling in through the famed windows. Sharon unhooked her line and landed in a roll on the balcony seating above the main floor of the House of Lords.

She made eye contact with Rogers across the way as they and STRIKE situated themselves in the balcony seating.

The large wooden doors at the far end of the hall burst open and Braddock and his men charged in, baring their guns.

Standing at the center of all this chaos was Ross Horton.

Or at least, Sharon theorized it was Ross Horton.

It was hard to tell with the mask. He, like half of London, was adorned with a Guy Fawkes mask, though his was more militaristic and Sharon had no doubt it was bulletproof. He was also decked out in sleek Kevlar, his own personal arsenal strapped to his person.

If he was surprised by the ambush of MI5 and SHIELD alike, the terrorist didn’t show it. One would think the vast array of weaponry pointed at his head would give him a moment’s pause, but alas, it did not.

He rolled out a grenade and threw himself to the floor.

“Get down!” Sharon yelled, flinging herself to the ground behind the intricate, engraved balcony railing. The grenade went off, sending out a burst of sonic energy that came as blue waves.

Those unlucky enough to be standing in its path were tossed back like ragdolls as they smashed into walls and the red leather couches that belonged in the House of Lords.
Half of Sharon’s STRIKE party was down for the count. She looked over the balcony, seeing Rogers uncurling from behind his shield. Her brown eyes darted to Braddock and his men. Braddock was struggling to his feet, but nearly all his men were concussed or knocked out, laying sprawled across the hall.

She and Rogers exchanged looks and a nod before both catapulted themselves over the sides of the balcony, landing in front of Horton on the main floor.

“This doesn’t have to end this way,” Rogers advised, raising one hand nonthreateningly, but keeping the other secured to his shield.

“It was always going to end this way,” Horton replied, his true voice hidden behind a vocal scrambler. It gave his voice an unnatural quality as he spoke. He pulled from his pocket a small device and the two blondes tensed.

This was the detonator for the bomb.

If Horton pressed it, the House of Lords and all of them would go up with it.

They couldn’t let that happen.

Rogers threw his shield just as Sharon lunged forward. The shield knocked Horton back a few steps and he dropped the detonator out of shock. Sharon crashed into him, taking them both down to the ground as she immediately began punching him in the torso and throat, trying to weaken him.

Horton was too quick though and kicked her off his chest, flipping her backward as she landed hard on the ground. She rolled to her feet and aimed a swift kick to his chest and he went flying backward.

Rogers had reached for the detonator and had just reached for it when Horton had gotten a hold of Sharon and lobbed her at the super soldier like she was a baseball. The two blondes collided and hit the floor, the trigger flying across the room.

Horton jumped for it but was beat by Braddock, who had finally regained composure of himself. He held on tightly to the trigger and had his pistol cocked right at Horton. The terrorist paused, trapped between Braddock and Rogers and Sharon.

The three blondes encircled him, practically the only two people left standing.

“It’s over, Horton,” Braddock asserted as Sharon aimed her pistol at Horton’s back and Rogers had his shield at the ready.

The man had tricks up his sleeves, but he was no match against the three of them in such close combat.

Sharon watched warily as Horton’s hand went to his back pocket. She tightened her grip on the gun, fingering the trigger.

“Oh, Braddock,” Horton taunted in that eerie voice of his, “It’s only begun.”

In a flash he had pulled another device out of his back pocket and clicked the button before any of the three could stop him.

Sharon braced herself for the heat and fire of an explosion. But that’s not what happened.
London went dark.

She could hear the surprise screams and wails from along the River Thames as the entire city blacked out.

Somehow, someway, Horton had just created the largest power outage in London’s history.

The House of Lords was plunged in darkness, the darkness so thick Sharon couldn’t even see her hand in front of her face.

She rustled through her belt and pulled out an LED flashlight turning it on as its blue light shone through the hall. It flashed onto a blinking Braddock and a confused Rogers.

What it didn’t show was Horton.

He was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Finally got this chapter out. It has been a mammoth to write. I initially had more than this chapter, but it kept going on and on, that I've decided to split them up into two separate chapters. Legit, I was already on Pg 13 and only 2/3 of the way through. I am cursed with rambling on and on :(

We finally get to see Sharon's iconic white tactical suit! I've been waiting to bust that bad boy out. The picture I am using, and the inspiration for Sharon's suit, is all from Vylla Art, who has made some incredible fanart for the MCU and other fandoms. You can check out their art both on Tumblr and Deviant Art.

I hope Sharon's fighting abilities are coming off good. It's been hard toeing the line of having her be very competent, but also not at the same level as Steve or Natasha. Or rather, she's just as good as them, but in other ways. I want Sharon capable, but also realistic. I also think, since her and Steve are still feeling each other out, they're not yet at peak fighting abilities. Once they can read each other like a book, I think then Sharon will come more into her own as a fighter. I want her to be a badass and I hope she is coming across that way and seems capable of taking on big threats in the present and in the future.

As always, thank you so much for the previous reviews! All of you are amazing :)

Alright, enough with my rambling.

Pic time!

Sharon's white tactical suit:
I Keep Going to the River to Pray

Chapter Summary

“Are your missions always like this?” he asked breathlessly as Rogers shrugged.

“Something like this.”

“Your world is weird.” The Brit asserted and the laugh Sharon had been holding onto broke through. She laid across the tracks, giggling loudly. Braddock joined in and even Rogers allowed a grin to come across his face.

“Whew.” Braddock murmured as he wiped his eyes, his chest rising up and down rapidly, “I need a drink. What about you two? Let’s go to a pub.”

Rogers stared up and gave a contemplative nod before looking to Sharon, “I could do with a drink. What about you, Amanda?”

Sharon groaned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 5th, 2012

London

They heard a door crash open from outside the hall and Rogers was after him in a flash, his quick strides taking him out of the room in a manner of seconds.

“Come on!” Sharon yelled to Braddock as they followed at Rogers’ heels. It was crazy how absolute and complete the darkness was. If it wasn’t for Sharon’s flashlight she and Braddock would be running into walls and tripping over chairs as they raced through the ornate corridors of Westminster.

Rogers and Horton were a blip in the distance. They ran eastward, towards the river, before crashing through a door and landing in the outside café on the banks of the Thames.

Rogers and Horton were there.

Horton had unleashed that same sonic rifle he had used on the pair at the abandoned pub the day before. He had it aimed at Rogers, who with his shield, was deflecting the brunt of the force of the weapon. It ricocheted off his shield, blue waves crashing against it and petering away. Rogers was straining to fight off the continuous assault, his body taut as he pushed back against the force of the weapon.

Sharon reached for her ionized air cannon. It was the same shape and weight as a pistol but had the ability to knock the intended target unconscious. She aimed perfectly for his head and gripped the
The airwaves hit Horton perfectly and he stumbled back a few feet, lowering the rifle. He did not, however, become unconscious.

He threw another grenade and took off running. Sharon grabbed onto Braddock’s bulletproof vest and threw him to the ground, covering him as the grenade went off. She kept her head low as glass shattered and chunks off the brick wall came tumbling down. Once the blast subsided, she rolled off and raised her pistol.

The angle was poor and she wasn’t going to be able to take him out, but maybe she could slow him down.

She fired and the bullet got him at the back of his calf, nicking his soleus muscle. Horton stumbled forward, nearly tumbling to the ground, but regained his fast paces as he sprinted away.

Rogers jumped up and took off after him. Sharon and Braddock following suit at a much more human speed.

The chase continued along the River Thames, London entirely blacked out before them. The trio lost Horton as they came upon Great George Street, right at the entrance of the Westminster Bridge. The street was filled to the brim with Bonfire Night revelers who were now in a state of panic at the unexpected power outage.

It was a sea of blue light as the celebrants held up their cell phones, trying to illuminate the night. Even worse, the vast majority of people were wearing Guy Fawkes masks.

Sharon knocked into a suspicious character and pushed off his mask. Befuddled green eyes blinked back at her as she scowled and pushed the man away. She kept pushing through the fearful crowd, unmasking Guy Fawkes imposters and continuously coming up empty.

“I’ve got nothing,” she growled into her comm as Braddock came up to her side. Rogers pushed his way towards them as they looked bleakly around.

They’d lose Horton if they continued this way.

Rogers contemplated as he smelled…iron. His eyes were drawn down to the street and he noticed a thin trail of blood leading towards Westminster Station.

“He’s heading to Westminster Station!” he yelled before taking off in a sprint, the other two agents keeping pace behind him.

They raced through the entrance of the Tube station, and even in the vast darkness, could see Horton limping towards the escalators leading down to the railways.

He turned and after catching sight of the three blondes, pivoted on his heel and forced his body forward. He came to the escalators, not working due to the power outage, and his eyes were drawn to the chromatic escalator system.

The paneling in between staircases was almost a perfect slide with how sleek it was. Horton flung himself onto it and went sliding down the escalator.

Rogers wasted no time and followed him down.

“Are they absolutely mental?!?” Braddock screamed as he and Sharon made it to the escalators.
“Knowing Rogers, probably,” she replied before beginning to race down the escalators the old fashioned way, Braddock at her heels.

“Get out of the way!” she yelled, shoving frightened passengers this way and that to make it to the bottom of the makeshift stairs.

Horton went flying off the escalator and landed in a heap on the linoleum floor. He groaned and rolled to his feet just as Rogers landed perfectly from his ride down. The two were off and running as Sharon and Braddock finally made it through the sea of pedestrians.

“They’re heading to the rails!” Sharon yelled, following the path of destruction Horton and Rogers left in their wake. They made it to the rails, finding it deserted with no incoming trains, as Rogers stood at the end, his head swiveling back and forth as he looked up and down the tunnel.

“Where is he?” Sharon asked, skidding to a stop next to Rogers. Braddock was hunched over, hands on knees, as he forced breaths into his body. He had run more in the last ten minutes than he had during the year. He’d really need to up his cardio game. Rogers and Agent 13 were making it look easy.

What did SHIELD do to its agents? Bloody hell.

“I don’t know,” Rogers admitted through gritted teeth. “I lost him.”

The Avenger turned to the pair and made a game plan, “Thirteen, Braddock, head down the tracks towards St. James Park. I’ll go towards Embankment. If one of us sees Horton, engage carefully and alert the others to his location. Let’s take this son of a bitch down.”

Sharon and Braddock nodded and the three leaped down onto the tracks and split up. The tunnels were vast and seemingly unending as she and Braddock jogged down them, her flashlight bouncing all around, creating an eerie glow. Sharon shuddered as she heard the telltale skittering of rats. It seemed London was even immune to rat infestations.

Down Steve’s way, he was using his enhanced vision to trot along the metal rails. He had his ears perked up, listening for any sounds that would lead him to Horton. He was following the sound of running water when he stepped down upon the railway track.

Click.

Steve froze, sucking in a breath. He glanced down and found that he was standing on some kind of device that was embedded into the metal railways. Steve’s body was as rigid as a statue, barely breathing as he remained rooted to the spot.

“Captain, do you have eyes on Horton?”

Thirteen’s voice rang in his ears as Steve swallowed. He didn’t know if responding would create enough of an imbalance to activate the device.

“Captain?” A hint of worry creeping into Thirteen’s voice, “Answer me.”

Steve exhaled and he must have shifted somehow because the next thing he knew the device came to life and he was immediately entrapped in a cage of electricity. It flowed freely, like blue zigzags darting all around him.

Steve fell to his knees as the electrical currents pierced him, flowing through him and using his as a conductor as the charges flowed throughout the railway tracks.
He felt blinding heat and his body was paralyzed as he vibrated in place, the electricity humming all around him. He bit his lips refusing to scream as wave after wave of pain slammed into him.

As he convulsed on the railway track, Horton emerged from the shadows.

“It seems I’ve caught my perfect prey,” the digital voice announced with some akin to glee. The head tilted and the slanted eyes regarded Steve blankly.

“You have nearly a billion volts of electricity surging through you,” Horton remarked as he watched Steve writhe. “More than enough to kill an average human in a manner of seconds. Let’s see how long it takes to kill a super-soldier, shall we?”

This time Steve couldn’t resist screaming.

Sharon jerked her head, turning to the direction of where Rogers had disappeared. Braddock peered at her curiously.

“Do you hear that?” she asked softly. Braddock cocked his head before shrugging.

“I don’t hear a thing.”

Sharon nodded unconvinced and had only taken a few steps forward when the sound echoed again, bouncing off the circular tunnel.

It sounded like…screaming.

“Rogers,” she whispered, sharing a look with Braddock before taking off, darting down the track, her feet slapping against the metal rails.

As the two blondes neared Rogers’ last location they could see an ever-growing, blinding light in the distance.

“Is that a train?” Sharon asked worriedly as Braddock shook his head.

“The Tube stops working when there are power outages.”

“What is it then?” she demanded as the blue light came closer and closer.

“I don’t know,” he stated, voice rising with panic. “But it’s coming our way!”

As it neared them, Sharon finally saw it for what it was. Electrical currents coasting through the railways. The same railways she and Braddock were standing upon.

“Get off the tracks!” she yelled, gripping Braddock and flinging him into the dirty and damp wall. She pressed him into the wall, their feet standing upon dirt, as the blue electrical currents sailed by, illuminating the tracks as it raced past the two.

She released Braddock. “Stay off the tracks,” she warned before hurrying forward, hugging the tight space between the wall and the tracks as she tried to get to Rogers as quickly as she could.

She gasped as she saw him. He was enclosed within…an electrical cage. Horton had rigged up several conductors in the tracks and the ceiling of the tunnel and when activated it created a cage of free-flowing electricity, the same electricity charging through Rogers’ body.

He was slumped over, the shield lying flimsily right outside the perimeter of the prison. From this angle, Sharon couldn’t tell if he was unconscious or dead.
Rage boiled through her as she tore her eyes away from her partner and set her hardened gaze on Horton. He was watching his display hungrily and had not yet noticed the two additions. She reached for her gun and wasted no time in firing on the terrorist.

The bullets bounced off his suit as the masked man turned towards her. Seeing that it was useless she threw her gun to the side and reached for her two batons. Once they were in her grip, she brought her arms down and the two weapons extended to life, blazing with electricity.

“Help Rogers,” she ordered Braddock before charging Horton. He danced backward as she attacked him with a quick series of blows. Seeing the break between his suit and his mask, she brought her baton down hard on his neck.

He yelled as the shocks penetrated him.

“It’s not fun when you’re the one being electrocuted, isn’t it?” she sneered, bringing down the baton down again. Horton was quick though and swept her feet out from under her as she landed roughly on the ground.

As Sharon fought Horton, Braddock was desperately searching for a way to free Rogers. His eyes were drawn up to the conductor at the ceiling of the tunnel. It was the main structural element of the electrical cage.

Braddock surmised that if he could destroy it, the cage would fall apart, freeing Rogers from the charges.

He pulled out his gun and fired upon the conductor. The bullets just ricochet off, darting around the tunnel. Sharon yelped as a stray one nearly hit her. She had enough time to send a glare to Braddock before roundhouse kicking Horton in the face. She tackled the man to the ground and began pummeling his face.

Braddock looked around the tunnel, looking for anything that could help him. He raised an eyebrow as his eyes landed on Captain America’s shield.

That might just work…

He lunged for the vibranium shield, internally marveling at how lightweight and aerodynamic it was, before standing and looking up at the conductor. Wringing his arm back, he chucked the shield for all it was worth. It hit the conductor, rattling the device but not bringing it down. The shield landed with a thud a few feet from Braddock.

He picked it up and threw it again and again, each time weakening the conductor. Finally, with a spot-on toss, the conductor groaned and retracted from the top of the tunnel and tumbled to the tracks below.

The electrical trap immediately went out, leaving Captain America sprawled across the tracks, his shield resting innocuously a few feet from him. Braddock hurried to the American icon’s side and pushed at his shoulder, rolling him onto his back.

He pressed his fingers to his neck, eyes narrowed in concentration as he searched for a pulse. Several tense moments passed before Braddock felt it.

Beat…beat…beat…

“Good chap,” he murmured to himself, shoulders slumping in relief as Rogers began moving beneath him. He retracted his hands as the Avenger groaned and blinkingly opened his eyes.
“T-Thirteen?” he whispered, voice hoarse.

“She’s taking care of business, mate.”

Braddock looked over his shoulder to see Agent 13 holding her own against Horton. He turned back to Rogers and helped pull him into a sitting position. Rogers’ eyes were drawn to the device beneath him that had triggered the electrical cage in the first place.

“We need to defuse this,” he asserted, already reaching for his shield. He painstakingly crawled towards the landmine like object. He kneeled before it, shield raised as he glanced at Braddock.

“You might want to take cover.”

And with that, he brought down his shield. Hard.

Sharon, ducking a blow from Horton, had her hands up to block his fists when the blast erupted from behind the dueling pair. A sonic boom went up, shaking the tunnel to its core. Its blue waves slammed into Sharon and Horton, sending them flying off their feet and into the walls. Sharon’s head smacking the brick as she slumped down to the ground.

Rogers and Braddock, respectively, were also slumped across the tunnel. Braddock in a fetal position and Rogers still clutching his shield.

Sharon’s world was spinning as she came back to, groaning as she pushed herself to her knees. Her eyes immediately sought out Horton and found him also struggling to regain control of his body and senses.

He was also staring at something intensely. She followed his gaze to her gun. It still had several bullets in it.

The two locked eyes and both lurched for the pistol. Sharon had a grip on it before, but Horton pulled her back several feet. She twisted out of his grasp and landed a kick at his chin, throwing his head back. She crawled to the gun and was holding it when Horton tackled her. He landed a punch at the corner of her head as she fell back.

He reached for the gun, forced himself into a standing position and held it aimed at her head. She futilely tried to drag herself away, but there was nowhere to go.

His hand didn’t even shake as he held it right between her eyes. She closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable.

*BANG.*

Sharon flinched, expecting searing pain. But all that followed was the thud of a body hitting the ground. She snapped her eyes open to see Horton lying there, eyes lifeless and blood flowing out of his head. He twitched her nose as the strong smell of iron burned her nostrils.

She looked up and Braddock was wearily standing there, gun in hand. He seemed to be in shock as he stumbled away and collapsed upon the tracks. Rogers was still laying there catching his breath.

Sharon felt a laugh bubbling in her throat as she laid back down, her body was still running on adrenaline so she felt light and airy, but she knew she’d crash hard soon and that would be an absolute pain.

Literally.
She had probably broken something in her embrace with the wall.

Braddock, suit entirely ruined from being on the ground so much, stared up at the tunnel ceiling as the three laid there in near complete darkness.

“Are your missions always like this?” he asked breathlessly as Rogers shrugged.

“Something like this.”

“Your world is weird,” the Brit asserted and the laugh Sharon had been holding onto broke through. She laid across the tracks, giggling loudly. Braddock joined in and even Rogers allowed a grin to come across his face.

“Whew,” Braddock murmured as he wiped his eyes, his chest rising up and down rapidly. “I need a drink. What about you two? Let’s go to a pub.”

Rogers stared up and gave a contemplative nod before looking to Sharon. “I could do with a drink. What about you, Amanda?”

Sharon groaned.

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**November 6th, 2012**

**London**

Sharon had never been more thankful for a day off then she was now. Her entire body hurt, no matter how many ibuprofens she was popping. Part of her just wanted to stay curled up underneath a blanket with tea and a Jane Austen novel.

Alas, she had things to do today.

She was sitting on her cot in the safe house, hearing the yells of STRIKE from the living room. They were cheering on a football match. European football, of course.

She was typing on her tablet, quickly filling out her absentee ballot and sending it into SHIELD, so they could pass it on to the appropriate sources.

After that was done she pushed herself to her feet ignoring the twinge of her ribs. She went to her small closet and pulled out a dark, leather trim trench coat. She slipped into it, zipped it up and then tied the sash around her waist into a delicate bow.

She slid into some ankle booties, threw on her purse and walked out into the living room. STRIKE was scattered all throughout the space, drinking beer and eating crisps as they cheered on whatever teams were playing.

Soccer had never been her forte.

“Alright, alright, you mongrels,” she yelled overpowering their noise as they looked at her, “It’s Election Day! Make sure everyone is sending in their absentee ballots to SHIELD so you can get your vote on. Especially you, Rogers,” she directed to the Avenger who was at the rickety table
near the kitchenette, “We can’t have Captain America not doing his civic duty and voting for the next president of the United States.”

“Where are you going?” Rogers questioned from his corner just as STRIKE cheered on a goal.

“Sightseeing,” Sharon replied smoothly without even batting an eye. Rogers raised an eyebrow and glanced out the small kitchen window to see a sleek range rover parked there.

“Don’t crash this one,” he advised as Sharon rolled her eyes.

“Ha-ha. Hilarious.”

She gave a final wave to the group before departing from the unassuming safe house and heading to the range rover. She slipped into the driver’s seat, securely buckled herself in and put the car into drive as she was off.

She fiddled with the radio and got some music going.

“One cold day cold plays out like the band’s name, I know can’t heal things with a handshake.”

Driving through London was surprisingly easy. The city was a virtual ghost town. Power was still out throughout large portions of the city and it seemed not many people wanted to deal with intersections and roundabouts on a day like this.

Sharon found her way out of London and heading south on the A23. She enjoyed the brisk drive with its grey skies and a crisp breeze that made the trees dance.

It took little more than an hour as she arrived just outside a little town named Caterham. She turned off the main roadways and took a private street, shrouded with overhanging trees. Sharon settled comfortably, she had been on this road many times before and she knew where she was going.

Carter Manor.

She had spent many a summer day here, sun high in the sky, grass up to her knees as she ran throughout the forests, and on snowy winter days wrapped in blankets in the ancient library listening to stories being told.

Since Peggy’s illness, this was the only place she truly felt her aunt’s presence, even if she was only here a rare occasion.

She pulled up to the circular driveway and parked her SUV before a red bricked manor home. Its presence loomed large before Sharon as it stood sturdy and strong, just as it had generations before her.

She left her range rover behind and instead of immediately heading inside, she trekked across the grounds, her boots becoming wet across the damp grass. She tucked her hands in her pockets as a strong breeze ruffled her short hair. She ignored the nip of the cold and continued on her way, moving through the trees before finally coming to a clearing.

In the open space was the family cemetery. Generations of Carters were buried here. She carefully threaded past ancient tombstones, weathered down by age and time, as she came to the ‘newer’ ones.

She came to a stop at a set of matching tombstones. She removed her hands from her pockets and knelt before the twin stones, placing a hand on both, greeting the pair with soft touches.
“Hi Grandpa, Grandma,” she whispered as she looked down at the two names etched into the stones.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Michael Allen Carter</th>
<th>&amp;</th>
<th>Marjorie Felicity Carter</th>
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Sharon had the misfortune of never meeting her grandparents, they had died years before she was even a thought in both of her parents’ minds. All she had was her father’s faint memories and Peggy’s stories of how valiant of a hero Michael had been during the War. He had been declared KIA but had surfaced years later after having faked his death to go undercover first in Germany then Russia.

He had finally come home in the ‘50s and after being walloped by a furious Peggy, he had been accepted back into the family fold. Peggy had offered him a role in SHIELD, but he had been so disillusioned by years of espionage that he had declined, took over control of the Carter Estate, married a nice girl and had two rambunctious children.

He had been set to have an average yet ultimately fulfilling life. That had changed when in 1967 both he and his wife had perished in a tragic sailing accident in the English Channel, leaving behind two orphans.

Peggy and Daniel had been quick to pluck Harrison and Judy up, moving them to Arlington where they lived with their daughter, Jillian.

So, while Sharon had never met her grandparents, she knew they had been good people. They had created the gentle yet inquisitive man that was her father. And she’d always love them for that.

She spent a few more minutes with her grandparents’ graves, enjoying the silence and peacefulness the cemetery provided. This was one of the quietest places on the numerous acres of lands.

After a while, Sharon stood and walked over to the newest grave, only ten years old.

<table>
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<th>Daniel Andre Sousa</th>
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<td>1919 – 2002</td>
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Sharon bit down a lump in her throat as she traced her fingers over the engraving.

“Hi, Uncle Daniel, I’m sorry it’s been awhile. I’ve been busy,” she began haltingly. She rocked onto her heels, hands stuffed in her pockets as she spoke freely as if he was there, listening to her with that soft expression on his face, cane leaning in his lap.

“A lot’s happened, actually. You’ll never believe it, but Steve Rogers came back to life. I know, crazy, right? Oh, and there also was a near alien invasion, but don’t worry, it was handled. But more about Rogers. I’ve met him, I work with him actually. It’s weird.
“He doesn’t know who I am. It’s for the best...I think. He’s...different from what I was expecting. I always knew he was more than just Captain America, but...he both is and isn’t the man Aunt Peggy used to describe in her stories. Sometimes, I see a flash of it, and I’m struck to the core because it’s like a dream in black and white that suddenly becomes technicolor. It knocks me sideways and leaves me in awe.

“But then it fades away and he becomes this...shell. I don’t know. The man was frozen for nearly 70 years, maybe I need to cut him some slack. He’s one of the most frustrating people I’ve ever met, and I work for Nick Fury, so that’s saying something. I don’t even know how to behave around him half the time. He sets me on edge, makes me second guess myself. Which, no surprise, I hate. I’m used to being in control, but he takes me by surprise, the bastard.”

Sharon sighed as she ran a hand through her hair, “I just, I want to crack him open, you know? I want to open him up and examine all the spaces inside of him, the broke ones, even the dark ones he wants to hide. I guess...I just want to understand him. He is...fascinating. Ugh, I’m not making any sense.”

Sharon shook her head and looked away, taking in the rolling hills and forested grounds. She turned back to Uncle Daniel’s grave and sighed.

“Sorry for the word vomit, Uncle Daniel. You’re just a really great listener.”

Her head snapped up as she heard the crinkling of leaves behind her as a cheery voice rang out, “I wondered who was parked outside.”

Sharon pivoted and broke out into a grin at the sight of her aunt, Jillian O’Connor. The daughter of Peggy and Daniel. Jillian was a perfect combination of her parents, sharing their dark locks and eyes. She had the no-nonsense disposition and backbone of steel of Peggy and the sharp, analytical mind as well as the gentle softening of Uncle Daniel.

“Aunt Jillian!” Sharon beam as she hurried over to the middle-aged woman and hugged her warmly. The embrace was reciprocated and Sharon buried her nose in Jillian’s thick tresses of hair that smelled like bluebells, jasmine, and strolls through the early morning mist.

Jillian slowly pushed her away, keeping her hands on Sharon’s shoulders so she could get a good look at the young woman. She frowned at the bruises, cuts, and stitches decorating Sharon’s face.

“Getting into trouble are we?” she asked, cupping Sharon’s cheek as the blonde smiled tiredly.

“You should see the other guy.”

“I already have. I saw all the fun you were having in London on the news.”

Sharon’s face reddened as she shrugged sheepishly. “Technically, that was all Horton. We hadn’t anticipated the power outage. And besides that, we stopped a landmark from being bombed, so, we win.”

Jillian arched an eyebrow as she lowered her hand, “We? I take it you mean you and Captain America?”

Sharon blushed even further as her eyes darted away, “Saw him, did you?”

“His shield is rather hard to miss.”

Sharon nodded in acquiescence. They really needed to tone down the colors on that thing. There
was nothing inconspicuous about it.

Jillian’s lips curled into a smile as she wrapped an arm around Sharon and began directing the pair back towards the manor.

“It seems you have a story or two to tell. Come on, your uncle was just putting on some tea.”

Sharon relaxed into Jillian’s hold as they moved towards the manor, the window rustling the leaves behind them.

Steve sat listlessly at the makeshift table in the safe house. It was finally and blissfully silent. STRIKE, after the football match, had decided to go drinking at a neighboring pub. Steve had turned down Rumlow’s sincere and earnest invitation and now found himself alone.

He sighed as he tossed aside his tablet. He had been inattentively flickering through various websites and had even fooled himself into believing he would get a head start on Professor Jackson’s newest essay before finally conceding defeat. The thing about being a soldier was knowing when to surrender, and Steve was waving the white flag.

Fury had granted them a rare day off and here Steve was, sitting inside as his compatriots enjoyed their time. Even Thirteen was out there, playing tourist, or something like that. She had looked like a woman on a mission when she had taken off hours before. If Romanoff was here, she’d more than likely be calling him a ‘wet noodle.’ Whatever that meant.

Steve sighed, stood from the table and reached for his brown leather jacket, shrugged it on and headed out.

He wandered the streets, cruising his way through various hotspots. He stayed away from attractions such as the London Bridge and Big Ben because he had seen them years ago when he had been here during the war. But he had stopped and stared up at the London Eye for near half an hour, marveling at the large Ferris wheel.

Bucky would love something like that…

Steve bit his check and moved on. He blended easily into the thick crowds. The people of London not caring for Captain America the way US citizens did. It was a blessing in disguise for the super-soldier as he kept to himself, avoiding eye contact and keeping his shoulders hunched as a way to appear small.

London may have changed drastically in the years he had been sleeping but he still found his way easily enough, and without thinking he allowed his feet to guide him as he trekked all over the city, the serum stopping him from ever growing tired.

He finally looked up from the pavement as he came to an industrial section of the city. His feet had come to a stop right in front of a modern office building; all glass and chrome and it raised itself into the sky.

It hadn’t always been office though, long ago it had been a pub.

The thing about Steve’ mind, thanks to Dr. Erkine’s serum, was that he remembered everything.

And not in some abstract way, no he remembered every image, word, and smell as vividly as he
had in the moment. The past was never really the past when he recalled it in perfect clarity as if it were his present.

As he stared at the office building it morphed and changed, becoming that same pub that some of Steve’s most profound moments had occurred in. It’s where he had fallen in love and where his heart broke beyond repair.

Yellow.

Yellow was the color of the pub as Steve placed a round of beers before the smiling and mischievous faces of Dum Dum, Monty, Gabe, Morita, and Dernier.

All around the table was laughter, enthusiasm, and happiness as music played all around them.

“So, let’s get this straight,” Dum Dum began incredulously, his mustache arched.

“We barely got out of there alive, and you want us to go back?” Gabe cut in smoothly as he drank from his glass. Steve gave a single nod.

“Pretty much,” he truthfully replied.

“Sounds rather fun, actually,” Monty stated with his posh accent. Morita belched soundly as he pounded his glass on the table. “I’m in.”

Gabe and Dernier muttered to each other in rapid-fire French before Dernier chuckled and shook Gabe’s hand. The African American man turned to the Captain with a grin.

“We’re in.”

Dum Dum stared around at the men around him before snorting and shrugged his broad shoulders.

“Hell, I’ll always fight. But you got to do one thing for me.”

A playful glint was in the ginger’s eyes as Steve leaned forward. “What’s that?”

“Open a tab.” Cheers sounded and Steve laughed as he stood.

Dusky orange.

Dusky orange was Bucky at the bar, cloaked in shadows and dim lighting as he sat curled up on a bar stool. He was in too large of a uniform, hair tousled and laying limp, not slicked back, dark shadows under his eyes, highlighted by his too pale skin.

If only Steve had known then what was to come...

Bucky, ever the showman, forced a grin that bordered on a grimace as Steve sat beside him.

“See? I told you. They’re all idiots.”

Bucky stared down into his own empty glass, grey eyes contemplative as his left hand, knuckles bruised and scraped, clutched onto the glass.

“How about you?” Steve inquired, asking without really asking. “You ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?”
It was a set conclusion that Bucky would stay there, in Europe, with Steve. They had always been Bucky & Steve, and Azzano had proved, more than anything, that only terrible things happened when they were separated. Against popular opinion, Steve looked after Bucky just as much as Bucky looked after Steve. Bucky was just more vocal about it.

So Steve knew Bucky would stay with him. He’d be too worried otherwise, now they Steve had a body to back up his mouth.

Still, for a moment Bucky’s eyes flashed before a smirk arose at the corner of his jaw.

“Hell, no,” Steve blinked but Bucky continued fondly, “That little guy from Brooklyn, who was too dumb to run away from a fight. I’m following him.”

Steve warmed and he had to look away so not to do anything embarrassing, like knocking his best friend down in a bear hug. The moment passed as Bucky spoke teasingly.

“But you’re keeping the outfit, right?”

Steve bit down the laugh bubbling in his throat as he glanced at a poster of him from his USO tour, body on display in tights and shorts.

“You know what?” he began, “It’s kind of growing on me.”

Red.

Red was the scarlet dress, the surging of blood throughout Steve’s body, and the blush on his cheeks as he set eyes on Peggy.

She parted the sea as she sauntered through the pub, all activity outside of her coming to a standstill. She acted as if she wasn’t even aware of the attention, she only had eyes for Steve.

She came to a stop before the awed Captain. Bucky had engaged her in conversation but it was truly Steve that she was speaking to as the topic of dancing came up.

“I do, actually,” Peggy demurred as her brown eyes locked with Steve. “I might even, when this is all over, go dancing.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Bucky, ever the flirt, inquired with an eyebrow waggle. If Steve had been more aware of anything outside of Peggy, he would have noticed how flat Bucky’s tone had been. As if he had been acting at being himself.

But Peggy consumed him as he marveled at the sight of her. That she was there, looking back at him with something akin to hunger in her dark eyes.

It was to Steve that she said this, “The right partner.”

That was all it took for Steve to irrevocably fall over the edge for one Peggy Carter. He had been a little in love with her the first time he had seen her knock someone out, but now he knew, she was it for him.

He loved Peggy Carter.

He was a goner.

Grey.
Grey and bleak were the bombed-out pub, several years later, as Steve sat among the ruins and rubble. He had grabbed a bottle of whiskey from behind the bar and had steadily been working his way through it, impossibly trying to get drunk as a skunk.

It wasn’t working.

His body had been wracked with sobs, tears, and snot running down his face, and he had depleted any tears he had left, but it didn’t stop the pain from piercing him like a sword.

Bucky was dead.

He hadn’t caught him. He had let him fall to the ravine below.

God, it was his fault...

He choked on a sob as Peggy sat herself down next to him. He only glanced at her before pouring himself another glass, chucking it back. It momentarily burned his throat, and for a second he felt the warming of alcohol, the fuzziness in his head, his gaze turning bleary. But then the serum kicked in and he was tragically sober.

“Dr. Erskine said that,” Steve haltingly began as his hand shook. “The serum wouldn’t just affect my muscles, it would affect my cells. Create a protective system of regeneration and healing. Which means,” he stared down at the bottle forlornly. “I can’t get drunk. Did you know that?”

Peggy nodded once and folded her hands in front of her. “Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person. He thought it could be one of the side effects.”

She stared at Steve for a long moment, before saying softly, “It wasn’t your fault.”

Steve bitterly chuckled as he asked, “Did you read the reports?”

“Yes.”

“Then you know that’s not true.”

Even now, Steve could still see Bucky falling, his screams echoed throughout Steve’s head, pounding behind his eyes.

He shivered and had to stop himself from completely shattering the glass in his grip.

“You did everything you could,” Peggy asserted, both soft and determined at the same time as she addressed the super soldier.

“Did you believe in your friend?” she pressed. “Did you respect him?”

Steve looked at her before harrowingly nodding.

“Then stop blaming yourself,” the SSR agent asserted strongly. “Allow Barnes the dignity of his choice. He damn well must have thought you were worth it.”

White hot.

White hot, like a supernova, was the rage he felt towards Hydra. It surged through him, alighting his blood and setting fire to his soul. And just like a dying star, his fury threatened to consume everything around him. Every memory and smile of Bucky was ashes. He wasn’t a bully and he didn’t hate, but they had taken Bucky from him and he damn well was going to make sure he’d take
everything from them in return. His hands formed a fist, his knuckles turning white and his palms bleeding as he steeled his body and mind.

“I’m goin’ after Schmidt,” he declared to Peggy as she watched him with calculating eyes.

“I’m not gonna stop till all of Hydra is dead or captured.”

This was his solemn vow. He’d wipe them off the earth, for Bucky.

Peggy watched him before whatever she was searching for within him was found. She nodded once.

“You won’t be alone.”

But he was alone. He was a Man out of Time. Steve flinched as he felt wetness at the corners of his eyes. He wiped them away, gave one last look across the street at the office building, before turning on his heel and walking away.

November 7th, 2012

Over the Atlantic

“It looks like President Ellis was reelected,” Ramsey, a STRIKE member, announced from near the cockpit of the quinjet as it glided across the Atlantic, heading back to DC and the Triskelion. After a debriefing and quick goodbye that morning with Braddock, the SHIELD agents were heading home.

Sharon lounged comfortably in her chair, comfortably outfitted in dark wash skinny jeans, a black wool sweater with intarsia check patterned elbow patches. In her lap was a brand new copy of *The Casual Vacancy*, which she had been reading since liftoff.

Rogers was across from her, shield at his feet, as he stared ahead, content to do that for the duration of the short flight. She glanced at the Avenger and caught his eye.

He raised an eyebrow, “Yes, Thirteen?”

Sharon shrugged as she went back to her book. “Nothing.”

“You sure about that, Brittany?”

Sharon rolled her eyes, marking her place and closing her book, as she turned fully towards Rogers, pointing at him.

“Alright, Rogers, I’ve about had it with the names-”

She was cut off as her personal cell phone went off from inside her duffle bag. She pulled it near her and fished out the phone, eyes widening when she saw the caller ID.

**Aunt Peggy**

With a quick glance at Rogers, she pressed the call button and stood. She walked away from
Rogers, nearing the cockpit as she kept her head down, avoiding the gaze of STRIKE members. “Hello?” she answered softly.

“Hello dearest,” Peggy greeted, her voice warm and as rich as honey. “Hi,” Sharon responded as she glanced at her watch. They had left London just after 8am, which meant it was past 3am in the States.

“You’re up late,” Sharon surmised as she leaned against the quinjet’s sloped, metal wall. She rested her phone on her shoulder and crossed her arms over her chest, her back to Rogers and the rest of the cabin.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, now worried. She was mentally going through the various side effects and consequences of Alzheimer’s and thinking through what could be bothering Peggy at such a late hour.

Peggy’s deep laughter cut off her increasingly panicked thoughts as Sharon furrowed her eyebrows.

“I’m right as rain. I’ve been put on a new medication, it was thought that it might switch up my sleeping hours as I adjusted. I’m rather enjoying it, to be honest. There’s a marathon of Dateline on TV. It’s quite fun to watch.”

Sharon giggled as she fondly rolled her eyes. “You just like figuring out the culprit earlier than the detectives.”

“It’s the little things in life that bring me joy, dearest. It also doesn’t hurt that Lester Holt is an absolute dish.”

Sharon couldn’t stop the burst of laughter that swept out of her. She folded in on herself as she continued talking to her aunt.

“Younger man, huh? You’re such a cougar,” Sharon teased playfully.

“What the bloody hell is a cougar?”

Sharon was beaming as she responded, “I’ll tell you sometime. In fact,” she glanced around and then spoke into the phone, “I’m coming back from a mission today. How about I swing by and visit you this afternoon.”

“I’d love to see you. And I want to know everything that happened in London.”

“You know everything, don’t you?” Sharon questioned, not even surprised that Peggy was keeping up with the news. On Peggy’s good days, she was as sharp as a tack.

“It comes with the territory, dearest.”

“Yeah, yeah, rub it in. Alright, I should let you go. Try and get some sleep.”

“I’m making no promises. Fly safely.”

“Yeah, love you. Bye.”

Sharon hung up the phone and returned to her previous seat. Rogers was watching her curiously as she seated herself.
“My aunt,” she said as she put away her cell phone. “She’s kind of an insomniac.”

Rogers nodded and settled more into his seat as Sharon watched him.

“Alright, getting back to our previous conversation,” she started as Rogers looked at her, “You know the odds of you guessing my name are slim to none, right? There are hundreds of thousands of names in the world. It’d be like picking a needle out of a haystack.”

Rogers shrugged. “I like seemingly impossible challenges.”

“Of course you do,” Sharon replied with a huff. That was a very Rogers way of thinking.

“You’re not going to stop, are you?” she asked.

Rogers shook his head. “Not till I figure it out.”

Lovely.

Sharon settled back into her seat pensively as she crossed her legs. She looked at Rogers, an idea forming in her mind.

“So, how about this,” she began, leaning forward. “You keep playing the Name Game and if, and I mean that’s a big if, you guess it correctly, I will tell you truthfully that you got it.”

Rogers regarded her suspiciously for a moment before asking, “What’s the catch?”

Sharon grinned as she replied, “When we get back to the Trisk, you start giving me lessons on how to throw that frisbee of yours. I mean, that thing defies the nature of physics.”

Rogers blinked before a small smile emerged. “You got yourself a deal.”

The two shook on it.

And that was that.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! Finally got this bad boy finished. It has been a bit of a struggle, but I'm happy to be moving past it. I really can't wait to get to the second story so we can begin incorporating the Winter Soldier story line in. But all good things come in time. I also couldn't help myself with some CATWS foreshadowing.

When I was looking for a middle name for Daniel, I researched his last name and found that it was Portuguese. So I gave him a Portuguese middle name. I like headcannoning him as someone who would have Portuguese in his lineage.

Thank you so much for the reviews! It warms my heart reading them. Please keep them up!

Pic time!
Sharon trench coat:

Carter Manor:

Jillian O'Connor
Sharon's sweater on the quinjet:
The First Snow Is like the First Love

Chapter Summary

“People are staring at you not because you’re a national icon, but because you’re a fine specimen of man.”

A blush immediately came to his cheeks as he stared at her uncomprehendingly, “What.”

Sharon had to bite back her giggle as she gestured to the Avenger, “Plainly put: you’re hot. You’re Greek statue level of hot damn. And the natural thing to do when faced with such hotness is to ogle. Particularly your ass.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*December 3rd, 2012*

*Washington, D.C.*

“Yo, I’ll tell you what I want, what I really, really want. So tell me what you want, what you really, really want.”

Sharon groaned loudly in the darkness of her room as she groped blindly for her cell phone. After several failed attempts and the knocking of her book club book off her nightstand, her hand finally made contact with the annoyingly singing device.

She swiped her thumb and the phone went silent in the palm of her hand. The blonde curled back beneath her mountain of blankets, trapping the heat that had been building all night. She wasn’t yet ready to leave her toasty cocoon for the cold, cruel world outside.

The last week had been bitterly cold and windy in the Nation’s Capital. Last night, the prediction had been that DC was to get its first snowfall. It was the promise of snow that had the spy finally rising from her bed 15 minutes later. Sharon shivered as she hurried to her dresser, pulled out wool socks and a thick sweater. In the winter she had always enjoyed keeping her heat in the low 60s at night, leaving more opportunity for layering and burrowing.

It made mornings rough though.

She wiggled her toes within her socks and lightly padded out of her room and down the hall towards the living room. She stumbled her way to the windows and pushed aside the golden curtains, revealing a dark and deserted street below.

It was covered with snow.

It couldn’t have been more than three to four inches but it was enough to turn DC into a ghost town. The snow was unmarred by footprints or car tracks.
Which meant….

Sharon pivoted on her socked foot and reached for her TV remote. Grabbing it, she clicked the power button and watched as her wall mounted flat screen came to life in Ultra HD. She went to the nearest news channel, dropping down on her plush, L shaped couch as the newscast flickered on.

Sharon watched with interest as various school districts flashed at the bottom of the screen. All closed.

Now, what about the government…ah, yes.

Closed.

All of DC was shut down for the day.

Sharon pumped her fist in unrivaled joy. While SHIELD was an extra-governmental agency, and didn’t automatically close when the rest of the government did, on days like this, when the streets were closed and unplowed and the Metro was hardly running, Fury didn’t stand a real chance of enforcing his employees of actually coming in.

So, in laymen terms…Sharon had a snow day.

Now, three to four inches may sound like children’s play in states like Michigan and Minnesota, but that was life or death in DC, literally. The city always came to a standstill and people bunkered down like a blizzard was coming. The night before, Sharon had even stacked up extra food and snacks in case such a thing would occur.

An honest to God squeal came out of her mouth as she threw herself back down on her couch, reaching for the nearest throw and curling underneath it. She switched the TV to some weird reality show and allowed herself to relax.

Throughout the morning she drifted in and out of naps, the TV background noise as she slept lightly, her mind still tracking the noise in her sleep, ready to alarm her if something ever seemed off. Of course, since she was nowhere near as paranoid as Natasha or Barton, her sleep was never disturbed as she remained sprawled across the couch, bundled up in warm bliss.

Finally, at around 11am, she finally emerged from her nest and shuffled to the kitchen, ready for her caffeine. As her coffee brewed Sharon went about preparing one of her few specialties: Nutella stuffed pancakes.

It was her day off, she was damn well going to enjoy every moment of it.

She sipped her coffee as she finished up her pancakes, piled them high on a plate, smothered them with syrup and placed a few strawberries on top to be healthy. She moved back into the living room, plopping down on her couch and kicking her feet up on the coffee table as she ate her brunch. She switched the channel to TLC and indulged in a Four Weddings marathon.

Several episodes later found Sharon sitting cross-legged on her couch working on knitting a royal navy scarf. Her mother had taught her how to knit years ago and Sharon secretly found the repetitive nature of the hobby soothing. She rarely had time for it though and was happy to make some progress on the scarf. She had been slowly working on it since last March.

Suddenly, the sound of her doorbell cut through the noise of the TV and the faint clacking of her knitting needles.
Sharon looked up, surprise marring her face. She sat still on her couch, breath caught in her throat, startled as if someone was standing in the room with her.

She remained still as a statue for a long moment.

The doorbell rang again, followed by a quick and punctuated series of knocks. Wait a moment…

Was that Morse code?

Knowing who was out there, Sharon rolled her eyes and tossed aside her scarf, stood from the couch with a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She took her time heading to the door and put on her best-unimpressed expression as she opened it.

Natasha was standing there in a parka, head covered with a blue and white beanie, a red pom-pom on top. Her red curls were a wild mess as they stuck out from the hat and the assassin’s cheeks were tinged pink from the wind and cold.

In her arms were several bags of provisions, snacks as far as Sharon could see. Sharon raised an eyebrow as she leaned on her door frame. Natasha seemed equally as unimpressed with Sharon’s casual wear as she rolled her green eyes and shifted the weight of her bags.

“You going to let me in or not, Carter?”

Sharon stepped aside and the redhead wasted no time in shoving her way in, water trailing after her over Sharon’s hardwoods. Natasha sauntered towards the living room, dropping her bags on the coffee table and stripped off her various layers, leaving her in an oversized, faded purple hoodie and leggings with polka dotted socks.

The assassin glanced around the living room as she assessed her surroundings. Her green eyes quickly took in the sight of Sharon’s nest on the couch, the knitting needles laying there idly and the TLC marathon on Sharon’s TV. She huffed an amused breath as her eyes moved towards the blonde.

“Living large, huh?”

Sharon snorted and wrapped her blanket around her further as she shuffled towards the couch and plopped down on it.

“What can I say? I live dangerously. What are you doing here, Nat?”

The redhead rolled her eyes as she started sorting through the bags. “I thought it was obvious. I’m saving you from yourself. Here, pick a movie.”

“Oomph!” Sharon groaned as a particularly heavy bag landed in her lap. She glared at Natasha before opening the bag and looking through the assortment of DVDs.

“Bio-Dome, Don’t Tell Mom the Babysitter’s Dead, Last Action Hero, Cool As Ice. Nat, did you rob the dollar bin at Walmart?”

“Shut up and pick something.” Natasha countered as she arranged snacks across the table.

“Encino Man, Airheads, Mrs. Winterbourne. Do you have a Brendan Fraser kink I don’t know about? Because I’m all about The Mummy.”

Natasha groaned, “Carter.”
Sharon held up her hands defensively. “Alright, I’ll pick something.”

After some internal debate, Sharon went with a well-worn classic: *The Mask*.

As the movie progressed Sharon took up her knitting and from seemingly out of nowhere Natasha produced crochet needles and began working on a pair of forest green mittens.

*Nothing but Trouble* found the spy pair knee deep in junk food as they munched on chips, cookies, and candy.

They were in their spa phase when *The Brady Bunch Movie* played. Sharon’s skin was tingling beneath her mud mask while Natasha rocked a sheet mask that alarmingly had her resembling a panda.

Sharon yawned as she put *Mystery Science Theater 3000: The Movie* in and plopped down on the couch. The sky was darkening and she hadn’t left the couch in hours. Her nose twitched at the smell of nail polish as Natasha’s left foot dropped onto her lap. The redhead wiggled her toes as Sharon looked at her questioningly.

A bottle of scarlet red nail polish was pushed into Sharon’s hands.

“Paint my nails.”

Sharon sighed but dutifully opened the bottle and began painting Nat’s big toe.

“I thought it was Barton who waited on you hand and foot.”

Natasha smirked as she made Sharon’s life difficult by shimmying her toes.

“Wouldn’t you like to know how Clint waits on me.”

The blonde gagged but continued painting. Natasha watched for a moment before apparently realizing that she was in good hands. The redhead leaned back, her head cushioned on a pillow as she closed her eyes and relaxed (or relaxed as much as she was able to).

Her mouth twitched into a small smile as she heard Sharon softly humming while she worked, the noise of the TV washing over the pair.

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**December 7th, 2012**

**The Triskelion**

Rogers wasn’t sleeping.

Or at least that’s what Agent 29’s weekly report had Sharon believing as she read over it in her office. It was a murky, grey day and the Potomac below was dark and choppy. There was a strong breeze outside, even from her higher vantage she could see trees whipping this way and that. Sharon shivered slightly, the downfalls of working in such a modern building with so many windows and not enough insulation.

She curled further into her suede, olive green jacket as she tugged at her cream turtleneck beneath
the jacket. Her bright, blonde hair was half up and half down as she worked her way through Twenty-Nine’s report.

It read like the previous ones had.

Rogers wasn’t sleeping…much. According to Agent 29, Rogers either went to bed early only to awaken at around one or two in the morning and stay awake until leaving for his morning jog, or he would stay up until three or four in the morning, crash for an hour or two and then depart for his run.

Either way, the big guy was only averaging one to three hours of sleep a night, four if he was lucky. Dr. Oukri had theorized that with the serum, Rogers required less sleep than a normal human being, a theory Rogers backed from his experiences in the War. He could get by on less sleep and still be fully functional…but still. He was hardly sleeping. And as reported by Agent 29 he occasionally suffered from…nightmares.

He wasn’t a screamer or a yeller. He seemed to suffer in silence, the same stoniness he possessed in his waking hours bleeding over into his sleeping ones.

A bug was located outside the hallway of Rogers’ room after Sharon had insisted the one inside be removed, the bug was able to capture sounds occasionally: a muffled groan or a deep gasp.

It was faint and Agent 29’s observations were based on conjunction more than anything else, but the few times she had heard such sounds, the noise of Rogers shuffling out into his living room followed shortly.

So, she may be onto something with the nightmares.

He was a soldier, for crying out loud, nightmares and PTSD would not be a foreign ailment to the super-soldier.

But he was a super-soldier.

Sharon didn’t specialize in genetics, in particular, Rogers’ enhanced genes, so she had no idea if he could suffer such things as PTSD like many of his fellow army veterans.

Sharon sighed as she pushed the report away and massaged her temples to push away the impending migraine.

It was too early in the morning to be so concerned with Rogers.

Alas, a job was a job.

After sipping her coffee, she forced herself to shove down the feeling of misgivings coiling through her stomach as she pulled out Dr. Abbot’s summary of Rogers’ mental wellbeing. Each time she had to read them she felt her skin crawl and had to suppress the urge to throw herself out her window to the Potomac below.

She understood Fury’s reasoning for the breach of privacy; SHIELD operated best when in the grey, but she hated being an accessory to it.

She sucked in a deep breath and opened the folder, her dark eyes quickly scanning through the report. The quicker she read through it the quicker she could forget about it…until the next one came, that is.
She was reading so quickly that when she came upon one word she stumbled past it before her brain caught up. Her eyes immediately went back to the above sentence as she read it slowly, breath caught in her throat.

...Captain Rogers displays several symptoms of clinical depression...

Depression.

Depression.

Oh, God.

Without thinking it through, Sharon was on her feet and hurrying out of her office, urgency chasing at her heels as she headed to the elevators. Once inside she barked out the 11th floor to the control panel and paced the confines of the elevator shaft as it descended. Once it halted and the doors opened she marched determinedly towards Dr. Abbot’s office.

Her fist banged on the closed door and a moment later she heard an accented voice call out, “Come in.”

Sharon pushed herself into the room feeling like a caged tiger all at once. She hadn’t had a rational thought since reading that blasted sentence in Dr. Abbot’s report and now standing in the therapist’s office, flushed and a thousand thoughts rushing through her, Sharon felt as sheepish as she did undeterred.

Dr. Abbot appraised Sharon from her desk, her eyes as calculated as Natasha’s when the assassin was sizing up the opposition.

“Agent 13,” Dr. Abbot greeted in a posh British accent. “What brings you here today?”

“I got your report on Captain Rogers,” the words poured out from Sharon as blinked rapidly. Dr. Abbot cringed as she sat back, seemingly as uneasy about writing up such reports as Sharon was reading them.

“Ah, yes,” the psychologist admitted, a weary look across her sharply lined face. “Were you confused by my assessment?”

Sharon’s head bobbed erratically as she nodded, blonde hair flying as she agitatedly tucked it behind her ears.

“You said…you think he’s d-depressed.” Sharon couldn’t help but stutter the word as she forced herself to calm down and be a goddamn adult about this.

Dr. Abbot sighed as she laced her fingers together atop her glass desk.

“Yes, I did,” the psychologist admitted, a weary look across her sharply lined face. “Were you confused by my assessment?”

Sharon, who had finally gained control of her breathing (and the rest of her body) breathed in deeply before asking, “How?”

Dr. Abbot arched an eyebrow, “How what?”

“I mean, how do you know he’s depressed? Not to say you’re not good at your job,” Sharon asserted quickly when Dr. Abbot frowned. “But Rogers…he’s not like anyone else, can he
be...depressed?"

“Any human can experience depression, super-soldier or not. Captain Rogers is no exception. And as for the signs…”

Dr. Abbot stood and came around the desk, propping herself on it as she crossed her arms over chest, meaning business in her pencil skirt, blouse, and heels.

“Captain Rogers displays several symptoms: feeling isolated or withdrawn, lack of interest in things that once brought him joy, fatigue as shown in Agent 29’s reports of his comings and goings within his apartment.”

Sharon nodded to herself, brain quickly racking through her encounters with the Avenger. Dr. Abbot’s analysis, was, unfortunately, adding up. How had she not seen it before? The signs were glaring now that his therapist had pointed them out.

“And he is experiencing guilt.”

Dr. Abbot’s words knocked Sharon out of her thoughts as she looked at the psychologist.

“About what?” Confusion evident in her tone as she placed her hands on her hips, her knuckles cracking nervously as she flexed her hands.

“About his friend, Bucky Barnes, and the way he died.”

It was like having a bucket of ice water poured on her as she stayed rooted to the spot, staring at Dr. Abbot, baffled. She couldn’t even process the sentence or the sentiment behind it.

“But everyone knows that wasn’t his fault,” she stated, her voice sounding weak and unsure in the confines of Dr. Abbot’s office. The Brit shrugged from her spot on her desk as she looked steadying at the SHIELD agent.

“Yes, we know that," she gestured to the two of them. “However, it seems that isn’t quite so clear to Captain Rogers.”

Sharon knew how Bucky Barnes had died. Hell, everyone who had taken US History in high school knew how Barnes died. He had tragically fallen from a train when Rogers and the Commandos were attempting to apprehend the Red Skull’s right-hand man: Armin Zola.

It had been an accident. According to the Howlies, who hated talking about the morbid subject and only did so mournfully when extremely intoxicated, there had been nothing Rogers could have done to save his friend.

“Well, aren’t your sessions helping him realize that it was just an accident?”

Dr. Abbot was too prim and proper to roll her eyes, but it was a near thing as she straightened and regarded Sharon with a cool expression.

“You can’t force people to see reason, they have to want to get there on their own.”

Sharon huffed a breath and ran her hands through her hair. Sharon was a problem solver by nature and she hated coming upon brick walls. She could do this, if she couldn’t get through it, she’d just have to try and scale it.

“Isn’t there medication he can take? Anti-depressants?”
Sharon didn’t know much about depression outside of those soap opera commercials for medication, but that didn’t stop her from throwing everything at the wall and seeing what would stick.

Her suggestion was met with a snort from the therapist.

“Hardly. Medical is having enough troubles attempting to synthesize pain medication that Captain Rogers’ body won’t burn through in under five minutes. Anti-depressants suitable for a super-soldier are the last thing on their mind.”

God dammit it.

She couldn’t go through the wall and she couldn’t climb it. What? Was she expected to blow it up? She clenched her hands into fists as she stared pleadingly at the psychologist.

“What can I do?” she earnestly implored as Dr. Abbot’s face softened.

“Be there for him,” she advised softly. “Be more than just his partner. Actually be there. He needs a friend more than anything.”

Sharon felt her heart shutter within her chest as she played with her fingers restlessly.

“I’m not Rogers’ friend, I’m his partner. I’m supposed to have his back at SHIELD. It’s not meant to go beyond that.”

Sharon didn’t think she could survive it going beyond that if Rogers even would ever let her in.

Dr. Abbot chuckled lightly as Sharon furrowed her brows. “I’m afraid, Agent 13, it’s already gone beyond that.”

Sharon bit the inside of her cheek as she appeared puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you?” Dr. Abbot gestured to the office as Sharon shifted her weight, lightly swaying in place.

“I’m his partner, it’s a part of the job.”

“I don’t see Director Fury or Agent Romanoff breaking down my door due to concern over Captain Rogers’ mental state. Whether you’re ready to face it or not, you and the Captain are more than just partners. You clearly care for him and his wellbeing. He needs someone like that in his life, and it appears that he has it in you. The question is, what will you do about it?”

December 10th, 2012

Washington, D.C.

This was, undoubtedly, a stupid idea.

Yet here she was, standing outside Rogers’ door on a Sunday with a plan in mind to cure Rogers’ depression. Okay, so thinking she could cure this with one outing was beyond optimistic, but maybe this would be the step in the right direction to turning Rogers around.
Dr. Abbot believed that Rogers was feeling isolated and no longer cared for things that he used to, well, Sharon would show him that he wasn’t alone and that he could love life again.

Or this could go horribly wrong.

That was a valid option as well. Luckily, she was a woman with contingency plans.

So, here she was, bundled up in a dark jacket, long scarf, and black beanie, ready to take Rogers on a…playdate of sorts. The first of many, if she had anything to say about it.

Sharon mentally collected herself, centering herself and summoning a smile upon her face as she reached up and rapped lightly against Rogers’ door. It took several moments for the door to open, revealing a slightly bewildered Rogers. He was dressed casually in his usual 1940s attire, hair parted precisely. He raised an eyebrow as he took in the sight of Sharon, rosy cheeks and all.

“Samantha, is there an emergency at SHIELD?” His body was tense, ready to jump to action should the occasion call for it. While endearing, Sharon couldn’t help but roll her eyes as she pushed her way into his apartment.

“Not my name and nope, no emergency.”

Rogers looked at her, baffled by her presence in his home as he closed the door and turned towards her. The two remained standing in the hallway, a tinge uncomfortable, as both avoided eye contact. Rogers stuffed his hands in his pockets as Sharon glanced around surreptitiously. Nothing had changed since her first visit her when Agent 29 and SHIELD had been putting the finishing touches. Her eyes darted up to the textured ceiling, knowing where the bugs were hidden.

Poor Rogers. He didn’t even have a clue. He was too trusting, that was his problem.

Rogers’ cleared his throat and Sharon’s eyes darted back to him as he brought a hand up to his neck and rubbed self-consciously.

“So, if there’s no emergency, what brings you here?”

Sharon blinked quickly. Oh, right. She had a purpose for her madness.

“I was in the neighborhood.” Rogers’ eyebrow raise showed that he didn’t believe that little white lie. “I’m on my way to the Phillips Collection, it’s an art gallery. I have it on good authority that you’re a fan of such things. I figured we could go together.”

Whatever surprise Rogers felt at the statement vanished quickly into his usually impassive face. He looked at her for a moment before looking away.

“That’s kind of you, but I’m busy at the moment.”

Sharon glanced behind here to see the TV blaring infomercials. She turned back to Rogers with an unimpressed expression and he looked decidedly sheepish as he rubbed at his neck.

“Alright, I’m not busy, but-”

“No buts,” Sharon cut in with a grin. “You need to get out there, Rogers, and enjoy life. And what better way than enjoying a day looking at art? I won’t take no for an answer.” She stated firmly and luckily for her, Rogers wasn’t up to fighting the inevitable. He sighed as he glanced down at himself.
“I’m not really a fan of going out, people always seem to recognize me and well…”

He didn’t have to say more. Sharon was well aware of the fanfare and star-struck expressions that followed Rogers around wherever he went. It happened at the Trisk often enough that it must be default out in the real world.

“Don’t worry, Rogers,” Sharon assured as she rifled through her bag. “I got that covered.”

With some maneuvering, she finally found what she was searching for. “Aha!”

She was quick to give him some dark, aviator sunglasses as well as a baseball cap. Rogers stared down at the items in his hands before glancing at Sharon.

“The Mets?” he asked as he took in the logo of the hat. The female blonde nodded as she placed her hands on her hips and smiled slyly.

“I thought it was too soon for the Dodgers.”

Rogers contemplated it before sighing and slipping the cap on, covering his blonde head.

“At least it’s not the damn Yankees.” He also slipped on the sunglasses and glanced at himself in his hallway mirror. It wasn’t much in terms of disguises (Sharon could be much more elaborate when the situation called for it) but it would get the job done of having Rogers blend into his surroundings.

He waved her to the door but she planted her feet and looked him over appraisingly.

“You need a jacket,” she surmised as Rogers glanced down at himself.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her, his serum keeping his body temperature several degrees higher than the average human. According to Natasha who got up close and personal with him during sparring sessions, he was like a walking, talking furnace.

“Rogers, we want you to blend in. You won’t blend in walking around in a single layer in December. Grab your leather jacket at the least.”

Rogers sighed but removed his jacket from the hall closet and slipped into it.

“You happy?” he snappily quipped as they stepped into the hall and he locked the door behind him.

“Very,” Sharon replied, waiting for him. The two kept quiet as they shuffled down the stairs of Rogers’ apartment building and landed outside. It was a sunny day with no clouds and little to no wind. Sharon tugged on her gloves as they began walking down Q Street, passing the Argentinean Embassy.

The stroll to the Phillips was less than 10 minutes. Sharon paid for the tickets (she was nice like that) and allowed Rogers to take the lead as they meandered through gallery after gallery. Rogers had ditched the sunglasses but kept the cap on, keeping his shoulders curled in as they took in painting after painting.

Sharon wasn’t the biggest art fan herself, but Peggy had always spoken fondly of Rogers’ ability to draw and sketch. In fact, an Original Steve Rogers Masterpiece™ had hung in Peggy’s home office all the years she had lived there. It had been a charcoal sketch of the French Alps, lifelike and serene in Rogers’ rendition. Sharon remembered lying on the floor, books, and toys scattered
around her, and often staring up at the framed drawing.

Rogers spent more than a fair amount of time in the Rothko Room. Sharon didn’t know what the appeal was, she just saw color blocking, but Rogers studied the three paintings with avid interest, something simmering in his blue eyes.

He nodded to her when he was ready to move on and brought out his cell phone and began typing away on it as they moved on into the next room. Sharon tried to look over his shoulder as she asked, “What are you doing?”

“Looking up Mark Rothko,” he replied absentmindedly, eyes still on his phone. “His work is intriguing.”

Again, all Sharon saw was colorful blocks. But to each his own.

“That’s one way of putting it,” she muttered lightly as she suddenly noticed the search engine he was using. She stopped dead in her tracks as Rogers turned towards her with an eyebrow raise.

“God, you use Yahoo?” she questioned despairingly as he blinked at her. “What has life done to you?”

“What’s wrong with Yahoo?” Rogers questioned innocently.

“Everything, Rogers, everything.” She grabbed the phone from his unsuspecting hands and quickly reprogrammed it to Google.

“You’ll thank me,” she promised as she handed back his phone. He took it and pocketed it as they came upon Luncheon of the Boating Party. Sharon was more a fan of work like this, she could appreciate the texture and colors as she took it in silently. Rogers also seemed fascinated by the painting as his eyes skimmed over it, watching it with pinpoint accuracy as if he was memorizing every last detail.

Sharon glanced at him after nearly fifteen minutes of silent contemplation. Time to execute Phase 2 of her brilliant plan. Phase 1 had been getting Rogers here, two was reigniting his hobby of sketching.

“You know,” she began as Rogers looked at her. “You could always take up drawing again as a hobby.”

Rogers’ eyes narrowed suspiciously. “How did you know I like to draw?”

The panic button went off for a moment in her brain before she recovered.

“I saw it in a documentary once,” she stated smoothly as Rogers raised an eyebrow, a wary glint still evident in his gaze.

“You’ve watched a lot of documentaries about me,” he remarked skeptically as Sharon realized she had already used the excuse in London. Damn. Now he thought she was some weird stalker.

“As I said,” she countered back, “I like history. And it was the same documentary.”

Rogers nodded, unconvinced before glancing back at the painting, his expression guarded as he turned away.

“Don’t have time for it,” he said quietly and walked away, leaving Sharon behind. She watched him
go and blew out a frustrated breath, ruffling her bangs.

When she caught up to Rogers he was admiring a different piece, though his posture was rigid and he had ducked his head to avoid making eye contact with anyone else. Sharon scrunched her face as she looked around and…yep, he was getting a fair amount of looks.

From women. And a young male college student.

Sharon chuckled to herself as she came up to Rogers’ side.

He looked around cautiously before whispering hotly, “People are staring at me. The disguise isn’t working.”

Sharon bit back her smirk as she looked at the super-soldier. “It’s working just peachy, Rogers. Calm your roll.”

“But-“

“People are staring at you not because you’re a national icon, but because you’re a fine specimen of man.”

A blush immediately came to his cheeks as he stared at her uncomprehendingly. “What.”

Sharon had to bite back her giggle as she gestured to the Avenger. “Plainly put: you’re hot. You’re Greek statue level of hot damn. And the natural thing to do when faced with such hotness is to ogle. Particularly your ass.”

“What?!” he yelped loudly before clamping a hand over his mouth, eyes darting around.

“Hmm,” Sharon hummed teasingly. “I’m surprised as well at all the attention your derriere is getting, it’s pretty flat.”

“You’ve been checking out my ass?!” Again with the yelping.

“Only for scientific reasons.” She looked at his backside to prove a point. “And to be honest it’s not much to write home about. It’s flat, not conducive to grabbing.”

Rogers scowled as he turned away from her, effectively hiding his butt from view.

“I hate you,” he gritted out between clenched teeth. His expression only grew fouler as Sharon laughed loudly in his face. When she had finally calmed down she glanced at her watch and was surprised to find that more than two hours had passed.

How time flies…

She peeked at Rogers, who had yet to recover from their ass conversation.

“We’ve been here awhile. Ready to head out?”

Rogers glimpsed around and promptly dropped his gaze when he made eye contact with several…enthusiastic bystanders.

“Yeah, let’s go,” he muttered and led the way out. Sharon watched him go with a sigh.

It was undetermined if this playdate had been a success or not.
So sorry this is so late, everyone! I was a bridesmaid in my friend's wedding last week and it took up a lot of my time and after that I was just fighting laziness to get this done. Hopefully it is worth the wait.

Sharon has just created the 'baseball cap as a suitable and totally inconspicuous disguise' era that Steve displays CATWS and beyond. If only she knew the monster she was creating... :)

Also, with Sharon's reaction to Dr. Abbot's assessment that Steve is potentially displaying signs of depression, the big thing I am trying to get across is that Sharon is very reactionary in regards to Steve. She just feels a lot when it comes to him. She's not trying to process why, but clearly he is important to her, hence why she immediately went into fix-it mode. She wants him better, but she can't put words to why she wants that. I hope it's coming across how already connected the two are, even if they fight it and are divided due to certain secrets being kept.

Enough with the rambling, pic time!

Sharon's outfit when discussing Steve with Dr. Abbot:

Sharon's outfit on her and Steve's playdate:
Knock Me off of My Feet All Week

Chapter Summary

“Impressive shot, Barton.” He clapped him on the back and the archer tried to not buckle under the weight of Captain America’s strength. Clint was about to call out to Thirteen to follow the jet down when a curious thing happened below.

The jet’s door opened and Clint and Steve huddled together to peer down at the sight of a dark blob (most likely a person) appearing outside the door.

“Is that,” Steve questioned as the blob held up something long and black on its shoulders, “Is that a bazooka?”

Clint groaned as he slowly nodded his head, “Aww shit.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 21st, 2012

Above the Zhangjiajie National Forest Park

“Turn left.”

“Yes, I got it.”

“You need to dodge that sandstone pillar.”

“I see it.”

“You’re going to lose ‘em.”

“Who’s flying? Oh, that’s right, me,” Sharon retorted from the pilot seat of the quinjet, her brown eyes glaring up at Natasha who had been hovering for the duration of their high-speed air chase. Natasha raised her hands with a shrug and took a step back. Sharon scowled and turned back to the job at hand, but not before muttering, “God damn backseat drivers.”

The blonde turned her attention back to the situation at hand. What had initially been deemed an ‘easy’ mission in China had turned into anything but.

It was supposed to be a straightforward security mission, guarding the single largest sample of painite, the world’s rarest mineral as it was transported from Changsha to Shanghai. At just a little over 31 carats and worth $180,000 per carat, clocked the gem at just over $5.5 million. It’d be worth even more on the black market.

So, long story short, it had been stolen during the envoy and here they were, zooming through the famed Zhangjiajie mountain range chasing after a Hawker 400 jet. Below them was a natural
phenomenon Sharon had never even knew existed. Massive quartz and sandstone pillars rising up from the ground, reaching for the sky. The quinjet weaved and wove through them as Sharon fought to keep the jet in eyesight.

And was she getting to enjoy even a lick of it? No. No, she was not.

“Are we any closer to the target, Thirteen?” Rogers asked through the comms as Sharon slid the quinjet narrowly through a passage between two of the pillars. The quinjet groaned from the maneuver but Sharon had it flying smoothly a moment later.

Rogers and Barton were sequestered at the back of the quinjet, waiting for Sharon’s signal to bring down the jet.

“Almost,” she replied carefully as she watched the jet dive down, flying above the treetops of the sprawling forest below, disappearing into the mist. Sharon glanced up, seeing the colossal sandstone towers above them.

An idea began forming in her mind as she spoke into her comm.

“Barton, can you get a clear shot of the jet?”

“You get me where I need to be and my arrow will do all the work.”

Sharon smirked. “Just what I wanted to hear.”

Natasha raised an eyebrow from her place at Sharon’s shoulder.

“What are you thinking?” the redhead asked as Sharon pushed down on the throttle and jerked back on the wheel.

The dashboard came to life as the quinjet climbed higher, its altitude increasing quickly. Natasha had to plant her feet on the ground and grip onto Sharon’s seat as the quinjet flew higher and higher.

“You’re not going to make that peak,” Natasha noted as Sharon too saw the problem ahead. The quinjet would either breach the surface or scrape against it.

“Have some faith, Nat,” Sharon chocked out as the quinjet groaned at such quick ascension. The entire spacecraft was shaking as they continued climbing. Sharon pulled back on the wheel and with just a scant few inches of space to fill, the quinjet passed over the peak of the pillar.

Sharon heaved a sigh of relief as the quinjet straightened and hovered in place above the valley below, waiting.

“See, we made it,” she remarked to Natasha who rolled her green eyes but clapped Sharon on the shoulder. The blonde’s eyes moved to the radar and a moment later it lit up with the Hawker 400. Sharon looked down and...yep, there it was, breaking through the mist below. Sharon put the quinjet into motion as it flew above the jet, perfectly parallel.

“Ready when you are, Barton,” she instructed through the comms.

“On it,” the archer replied as he and Rogers ambled towards the ramp. Steve hit the button and with a beeping alarm, the hatch opened as air whistled into the aircraft. Clint ignored the kickback and force of the wind as he moved towards the ramp, stepping out onto it.
Below the quinjet, the jet was flying several hundred feet below, completely unaware that it had become the mouse and them the cat in their little game. Clint watched it intently for several moments, his eyes evaluating all weak points as he reached up and sorted through his quiver.

“You got this?” Steve hollered over the wind. Clint hid a smirk as he continued looking down, his hair ruffling in the strong breeze.

“You doubt my abilities, Cap?” he joked dryly. “I’m hurt.”

Without even looking, he found his explosive-tip arrow. He pulled it from the quiver and slotted it into his bow. Tapping against his arm guard, he pulled back gracefully, the string humming in his left-handed grip.

“Keep it steady, Thirteen,” he instructed through the comms.

“You got it, Hawkguy,” Thirteen teased, using his popular misnomer that seemed to have permeated social media. He could hear Natasha snort through the radio as Steve raised an eyebrow questioningly.

“Be an Avenger,” Clint muttered to himself as he eyed the Hawker 400. “It’ll be fun, they said. They’ll call you Hawkeye, they said. Hawkeye my ass.”

He lined up his shot, inhaled gently and released. The arrow went spiraling down, down, down. Right into one of the jet’s propeller engines.

“Three, two, one…”

Right on time, the engine exploded in a fiery blaze as the jet began to falter and fall. Steve whistled from next to Clint.

“Impressive shot, Barton.” He clapped him on the back and the archer tried to not buckle under the weight of Captain America’s strength. Clint was about to call out to Thirteen to follow the jet down when a curious thing happened below.

The jet’s door opened and Clint and Steve huddled together to peer down at the sight of a dark blob (most likely a person) appearing outside the door.

“Is that,” Steve questioned as the blob held up something long and black on its shoulders. “Is that a bazooka?”

Clint groaned as he slowly nodded his head. “Aww shit.”

The bazooka went off and a rocket was coming right for them. Clint lowered his bow, turned and yelled towards the cockpit.

“Thirteen, swerve!”

The quinjet immediately lurched hard to the right, Clint and Steve crashing into the wall. It was too late though, and the rocket collided with the quinjet’s left wing.

Alarms were blaring and the wind was howling as the quinjet bobbed precariously for a moment before spiraling down, smoke and debris following in its wake.

“We lost turbojet engine one,” Sharon announced from the cockpit as she fiddled madly with the controls, trying to regain control of the aircraft. Natasha was at the wings inspecting damage as
Clint and Rogers bounced around in the back.

Sharon watched with a heavy heart as the second turbojet engine went out. All they had left was the aerospike engine, but that wasn’t going to hold them.

“We’re going down!” she yelled out as the quinjet coiled further and further. All Sharon could do was follow the Hawker 400’s trajectory down so as to keep them in eyesight.

They couldn’t lost that painite.

“Should we bail out?” Barton asked through the comms.

“No time,” Natasha asserted as she marched up to Sharon and strapped herself into the copilot seat.

“Romanoff’s right,” Rogers interjected, “We’re going down with the ship.”

Sharon was fighting for control of the wheel as the quinjet rattled and whined the faster they fell towards the forest canopy below.

“That’s such a poor Titanic reference,” she hissed as Natasha finished buckling her seatbelt.

“Good going, Thirteen,” she teased, but the smirk on her face was more for show than anything else as she gripped on tightly to her seat.

“How is this my fault?” Sharon shot back. Her eyes were glued ahead, watching as the ground grew closer and closer. The jet crashed below them in and collapsed upon hitting the ground.

“Hold onto something!” the blonde yelled through the comms, as she guided the quinjet, to the best of her abilities, to land in a somewhat stable position.

It crashed into the trees as she and Nat were thrown forward, their seatbelts being the only thing keeping them in their seats.

The quinjet gave a metallic scream as both wings were torn off from crashing into the trees. The glass in front of them splintered and shattered and it was a rocky ride down until the quinjet finally smacked into the ground, gliding forward, leaving a wake of destruction in its path.

It was a smoky and electrical mess as the SHIELD agents finally got their bearing inside the wrecked aircraft. Sharon’s entire body felt sore and she reached up to her forehead and, yep, there was blood. Excellent.

She glanced up and noticed the Hawker 400 in the distance, a couple hundred feet away. Its thieving occupants were starting to emerge from the wreckage.

“We got hostiles at 12 o’clock,” she announced to her fellow agents as she unbuckled her seat belt and stood up on wobbly legs. Natasha was already up and moving, pulling her gun from her leg holsters.

The two women marched through the shambles of their quinjet to see Rogers pulling Barton into a standing position.

“Let’s finish this,” Natasha remarked casually, a hard glint in her eyes as she paraded past the two men.

A ramshackle group of six or seven men was treading towards them, guns out and ready to fire.
“Barton,” Rogers ordered as he detracted his shield from his back. “Put ‘em in the dark.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Barton pulled out two arrows, lined them up and released. One arrow landing at the sides of the group. A moment later smoke bombs erupted, leaving the thieves in a thick haze as they coughed and wheezed.

Seconds later, the S.H.I.E.L.D agents watched as the silhouettes of the thieves began weakly breaking through the smog. Rogers swung back his arm and let his shield fly freely as it swooped through the smoke, taking out three of the assailants with a sharp, metal clang. The shield volleyed back towards the Avenger as he grabbed it and tucked it into his arm. Natasha raised her arms and with such scarily accurate precision, took out two of the thieves with kill shots to the head.

Two left to go.

Sharon glanced at Rogers, who was standing several feet behind her. Ah, that could work.

“Rogers,” she yelled as he turned his head towards her, “Shield!”

It took a moment for the dots to connect in his head but they did. He immediately kneels and hoisted his shield above his shoulders. Sharon took a running start, her feet pounding against the forest floor, before leaping at Rogers. She landed on the shield and then was thrust forward as Rogers pushed and propelled her. She went soaring through the air, flipping past the two remaining thieves and landing on her feet behind them.

With two quick shots of her pistols, the two men fell to the ground. Silence fell upon their spot as the smoke thinned and dissipated. Sharon looked intently at the fallen bodies, waiting to see if any was conscious and planning something. When several moments passed with nothing, Sharon’s stance relaxed.

“All clear,” she announced through the comms as she holstered her guns. Nat, Barton and Rogers pushed their way through the smoke and began checking the bodies for the gemstone.

“Found it,” Natasha remarked after patting down the so-called ‘leader’ of this misfit group of crooks. The redhead stood, holding the crimson mineral up to the sunlight and admiring its glean. It truly was a thing of beauty.

“Call it in, Thirteen,” Rogers ordered from his side of the clearing as he hooked his shield onto his back. Sharon nodded and reached up for her comm.

“Agent 13 to S.H.I.E.L.D, do you copy?”

“Reading you loud and clear, Agent 13,” Hill’s voice announced through the static as Sharon turned on her feet.

“The mission is a success and we have the Package. As well as a few casualties.” She glanced down at the scattered bodies before looking away.

“Excellent. We are sending you the coordinates for the Argonaut. Rendezvous with it above the Yellow Sea and await further instructions.”

“Negative, Hill,” Sharon replied calmly. “We met with…unfortunate circumstances. Our quinjet’s down. We’ll need extraction. The tracking beacon on the quinjet should still be fully operational and transmitting our current location.”

Silence followed on Hill’s side for a long moment before the Deputy Director could be heard
sighing.

“That’s the second quinjet this quarter, Thirteen. They don’t grow on trees you know,” Hill remarked with just a twinge of exasperation.

“And just like the last quinjet, this too wasn’t our fault. Now, are we getting a ride out of here or not?”

“We’ve located your position. Extraction in the next fifteen minutes. Hill out.”

Sharon lowered her hand and turned towards the three Avengers.

“Our taxi’s on its way.”

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December 22nd, 2012

Above the Yellow Sea

Life on a Helicarrier was always a bit…chaotic. There was just something about confining several hundred SHIELD agents into close quarters that just added a frantic energy to things, even when the situation was a calm one.

The Argonaut, for example, was on a routine flyby over Asia, in particular, monitoring a situation in North Korea. Its occupants, however, were going a bit stir crazy. Most likely due to the impending holidays. Fury had claimed that holiday decorations had no business being on a Helicarrier, but Sharon was pretty sure she had seen some mistletoe lurking about as she had walked the narrow hallways earlier, dodging her way through tinsel and glitter.

She was outfitted in typical ‘casual’ SHIELD apparel, a black Under Armor long sleeve shirt with the SHIELD crest pressed into her shoulder, form-fitting black leggings and black wedge boots. She also had her guns hidden on her person as well.

She, Rogers, Natasha, and Barton were enjoying some down time before being shipped back to the States. They were situated in a small rec room. Rogers was sprawled out on the couch, tablet in hand as he worked on his mission report. Natasha was diagonal to him in an armchair as she sat hunched over the coffee table, eyes fixated on her guns as she cleaned them with sharp precision.

Sharon and Barton were on opposite sides of a ping pong table, playing each other idly. Unfortunately for Sharon, Barton’s aim was as true as always and he was kicking her butt as the ball bounced back and forth across the table.

“Ugh!” Sharon groaned as the ball went flying past her once again. Barton smirked as he flipped his paddle, catching it easily.

“I win again. What was it, Thirteen? Ten to one?”

Sharon rolled her eyes as she bent over and picked up the ball, preparing to volley it.

“I’ll make a comeback, just you wait.”
She raised her hand to hit the ball when a burst of activity occurred in the hallway. All four swiveled their heads to the open doors as SHIELD agents ran this way and that, clamoring past each other and yelling excitedly, their voices all coming together to create a clang of noise that echoed throughout the metal hallways.

Natasha arched an eyebrow from her perch, Rogers sat up slowly and Barton’s relaxed posture tensed.

“What’s going on out there?” Sharon asked, a note of unease underlining her question.

“I don’t know,” Rogers replied with narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw. “But I want to find out.”

He stood and strode purposefully from the rec room, the other three following in Captain America’s wake. They pushed their way through the cramped hallways, following the trail of SHIELD agents. They landed in a control room and saw a swarm of agents crowding around a monitor system, a news broadcast airing on the TV.

The four pushed their way to the front, and with Rogers and Natasha there, SHIELD agents parted like the Red Sea. The four stood before the monitors watching the report as a woman on site at a bombed location spoke to the camera.

“I’m here, at the famed Chinese Theatre which has been the location of a horrific bombing. The cause of the explosion is still unknown and the number of casualties is rising. Reports are coming in stating that some bodies were completely incinerated by the blast. The Mandarin has claimed responsibility for the bombing.”

The screen changed to two broadcasters in a studio as one began speaking.

“We have footage from earlier today of Tony Stark leaving the hospital. It is believed that Stark Industries Head of Security, Happy Hogan, was injured in the bombing.”

Natasha’s eyes went wide as she took in the words. Happy may be just short of being a buffoon, but his loyalty and tenacity were second to none.

“Mr. Stark had these fighting words for the bomber…”

The screen changed to show a video of Tony Stark, standing in front of an audacious sports car with reporters herding around the billionaire.

“Hey, Mr. Stark!” a young reporter yelled from the crowd. “When is somebody gonna kill this guy? Just sayin’.”

Stark whirled around, eyes stormy behind his trademark sunglasses, as he lowered the shades and spoke clearly and succinctly to the camera.

“Is that what you want? Here’s a little Holiday greeting I've been wanting to send to the Mandarin. I just didn’t know how to phrase it until now. My name is Tony Stark and I'm not afraid of you. I know you’re a coward, so I've decided that you just died, pal. I'm gonna come get the body. There's no politics here; it's just good old-fashioned revenge. There's no Pentagon; it's just you and me. And on the off-chance you're a man, here's my home address: 10880, Malibu Port, 90265. I'll leave the door unlocked.”

Iron Man pivoted on his heel, disappeared into his car and was gone in a screech of tires as the screen changed back to the studio. Rogers sighed nosily at Stark’s blatant tone and threats.
“Typical Stark,” Barton muttered from the edge of their group, arms crossed over his chest.

“Is he trying to get himself killed?” Rogers asked from his spot as all eyes pivoted towards Natasha. She was the one who had spent the most time with Iron Man, after all.

The redhead huffed out a breath and said consideringly, “With Stark, one can never know.”

“Who is the Mandarin?” Sharon inquired from where she stood. The four shared glances and shrugs when the news report came to life with large letters flashing across the screen.

**BREAKING NEWS**

The screen then portrayed Stark’s famed cliff side, Malibu mansion.

With a missile coming right towards it.

“Oh my God,” Sharon breathed out as everyone in the room fell silent watching the scene unfold in real time.

The rocket crashed through the floor to ceiling windows and they watched as the mansion was rocked to its foundations, smoke billowing out of the house. The camera turned to show three helicopters descending upon the palatial estate, opening fire on the home.

All they could do was watch in horror as a barrage of missiles reigned down upon the mansion, smashing it to bits as the house threatened to collapse upon itself.

“Do you think he’s in there?” Sharon questioned Rogers as everyone watched in shocked fascination.

Seconds later a piano came hurtling out of the wreckage, hitting the middle helicopter head on as it exploded and spiraled down to the ocean below.

“Oh, he’s there,” Natasha replied from next to the blonde.

A blast came from inside the estate and crashed into one of the helicopters, knocking it out of the sky. However, the wind knocked it right into the crumbling mansion. Everyone in the room winced as it hit the building, right where the blast had come from.

More missiles crashed into the cliffs below the mansion, sweeping the rock out from under it as it plunged downward. The mansion began breaking apart and crumbling upon itself. Sharon watched with dread as cars and furniture poured out from the seams, falling into the ocean below.

And with a sickening groan, the entire structure hurtled down the cliff and into the water. It was so silent, a pin could have dropped in the room and everyone would have heard it as the SHIELD agents watched the newscast.

No one could have survived something like that…

Not even Iron Man.
Thank you so much for the wonderful reviews from the previous chapter! I love such in depth reviews, they're amazing. Please keep reviewing, the kind words mean more than you know. You all rock!

It was fun adding Clint to the Sharon/Nat/Steve mix and see him interact with Steve. I hope to include Clint more moving forward and dive more into his characterization. Making it a mix of what we've seen from the comics and movies.

We also got a little taste of Iron Man 3. That will continue into the next chapter. I'll try and make it plausible why the Avengers wouldn't have been present when the President of the United States is kidnapped. Since, you know, that's a big deal.

Once again, what was meant to be one chapter is now split into two. Writing this one just became too unwieldy and so I've split it up. I hope to have the other half out soon.

Sharon using Steve's shield as a soundboard was totally inspired from the new Wonder Woman movie. It's an incredible movie, and if you haven't yet seen it, I highly recommend it. We need more female power out there.

No pics this time.
Chapter Summary

“Like I said, it’s commendable but not needed. You requested holiday leave back in November and I’m giving it to you now. You’ve been working hard, take the break.”

He patted her shoulder before moving away, leaving Sharon standing there in silent disbelief. She was just wrapping her mind around Fury’s words when he turned back to her.

“Don’t take it personally, Thirteen.” He advised smoothly as a small smirk appeared in the corner of his mouth.

“This is a job for the Avengers.”

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

*December 22nd, 2012*

*Washington, D.C.*

The quinjet was controlled chaos as it glided into DC, making a beeline for the Triskelion. All computer screens were up and running as interference was being run back to the Trisk, information flying in at the drop of a hat.

At the center of this chaos stood Steve Rogers with his broad shoulders squared back in parade rest.

“Natasha, what do we know about the Ten Rings?” he asked as Natasha swerved her chair around and began reciting.

“They’re a centuries old terrorist organization, going all the way back to the Middle Ages. By the beginning of the 21st Century they’ve been operating primarily out of Afghanistan. They’re responsible for Stark’s kidnapping back in ’09. This year alone they’ve been responsible for nine bombings, though the public is only aware of three.”

Rogers nodded and turned towards Sharon, who was madly typing away on a computer as pictures darted across her monitor.

“And the Mandarin?”

The blonde spy turned towards Rogers. “He is the leader of the Ten Rings. According to legend, only a few within the organization have ever met him. He’s practically a myth to his disciples.”

“And the viral videos?”

One was playing in the background of a bombing as the Mandarin appeared in flowing robes,
bracketed by his followers who were brandishing firearms and chanting in Arabic.

“We’ve been scanning them, initial reports have its point of origin coming from somewhere in Pakistan. SHIELD has also been running facial and vocal diagnostics on the Mandarin, but no matches so far. It’s like he never existed before the videos.”

Rogers hummed in acknowledgment as he reached up to scratch his chin in contemplation.

“So the question is, what did they want with Stark?”

Clint snorted from his spot, leaning against the hull with his arms cross over his chest. He pushed off from the spot and walked forwards saying, “The Ten Rings and Stark have had it out for each other ever since Iron Man appeared on the scene. They went dormant when Stark began consulting for SHIELD. Any time they’ve cropped up since then, War Machine – excuse me, Iron Patriot – has taken care of it and they’ve gone back to ground. It looks like they were finally tired of hiding.”

Rogers opened his mouth but was cut off by the gentle bump of the quinjet landing. He turned back to the three and stated commandingly, “Pack it up. We’ll continue this inside.”

The hatch opened as Sharon saved her work and sent it onto the shared drive the four had created alongside SHIELD’s Intel. She stood, throwing her backpack over a shoulder and trailed behind Natasha as they marched out of the quinjet.

Waiting for them with rigid backs and somber expressions were Fury and Hill.

“I take it you’ve seen the news,” Fury greeted, as inscrutable as ever. Rogers scoffed as he came to a stop in front of the man.

“Cut the bullshit, Fury. What do you know?”

Fury only arched an eyebrow at Rogers’ brazenness before tilting his head towards Hill and giving her a single nod. The brunette cleared her throat and began speaking.

“We have everyone on it. Our base of operations has been situated in Conference Room 5 where agents are triaging through reports. Sitwell is on location in California, feeding us back ongoing information as well.”

“How’s Pepper?” Natasha questioned, a concerned gleam in her green eyes as the group of SHIELD agents began walking towards the door.

“Shaken but uninjured,” Hill replied as she walked briskly. “She’s been provided a police escort.”

“Any news on Stark?” Rogers questioned from Hill’s side as the Deputy Director shrugged.

“If he’s still kickin’, he’s not talking to us.”

Sharon made to follow the quartet but stopped at the sound of Fury pointedly clearing his throat. She turned towards the man as he folded his arms behind him.

“Thirteen, a word.”

Well, this couldn’t be good.

Sharon gripped the straps of her backpack momentarily before relaxing her hands and allowing them to fall to her sides. The chatter of her fellow SHIELD agents quieted as they exited the
“Yes, Director?” the blonde asked as she stood in front of the man, ignoring the crispy, chilly air.

“While I appreciate your eagerness in aiding in the search for Stark, it’s unnecessary.”

Sharon furrowed her eyebrows in confusion as she replied, “Look, I know I don’t know the guy, but he’s an Avenger. I’m more than happy to help –“

“As I said, it’s commendable but not needed. You requested holiday leave back in November and I’m giving it to you now. You’ve been working hard, take the break.”

He patted her shoulder before moving away, leaving Sharon standing there in silent disbelief. She was just wrapping her mind around Fury’s words when he turned back to her.

“Don’t take it personally, Thirteen,” he advised smoothly as a small smirk appeared in the corner of his mouth.

“This is a job for the Avengers.”

With another nod the director of SHIELD was gone, Sharon staring after him.

December 24th, 2012

Breckenridge, Colorado

Tony Stark Presumed Dead

Sharon stared down at the newspaper before sighing and turning the page as she flipped through the paper idly. Nothing else caught her interest besides a small article on page 17 recounting some strange happenings in Tennessee. With a huff, she pushed the paper aside and swiveled on her bar top stool and surveyed the scene before her.

After Fury had all but kicked her out of SHIELD she had ended up going on her previously planned holiday vacation.

Which was how she had ended up in a large and spacious ski lodge in Breckenridge, Colorado.

It was a Howling Commandos Legacies’ tradition to have big holiday blowouts with the ‘family’. Not that everyone was present, no way could anyone house more than a hundred people easily.

But still, more than fifty were bunkered down in the ski lodge.

It had been purchased years ago by Anne Walker (nee Dugan) and her husband. They had been kind enough to forgo holiday travelers and had opened their doors to the craziness and hilarity that was the Legacies all getting together.

In the corner Sharon’s mother was having a girl chat with the other women, trying to convince Anne of the advantages of Feng Shui or something like that as they sipped warm cider. Sharon’s dad and the men were grouped around the roaring fireplace sharing previous ski injuries. Harrison
had a spectacular one of the time he broke his ankle in three places. It was the stuff of legends and Sharon felt like squirming just thinking about it.

She had back her shudder and turned her head to see Trip boasting about his latest mission. He was all flailing arms, gigantic smile and bellowing voice as he recreated the story in perfect detail. He was the hero saving the day, of course. Sharon smiled as she looked away to see Greer schooling several of their cousins in poker. The blonde vixen was all sharp smiles as she won more and more money. She was such a shark.

Daphne and more of the great-grandchildren were a dogpile on the floor in front of the ancient TV as it played *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* (The animated classic, of course, they weren’t heathens.)

Despite Sharon’s anger at Fury’s frank dismissal, she had to admit, the man had had a point. She had been in dire need of a vacation. She had spent yesterday skiing the slopes and she had felt alive whipping down the hills, the icy breeze slapping her cheeks until they were pink and raw.

She forgot sometimes that there was a world outside of the mayhem that was SHIELD. But that’s why she valued times like this so much with her large and vastly extended family.

She wasn’t like Barton and Natasha who had joined SHIELD out of guilt or some weird sense of obligation. She also wasn’t like Rogers who joined because he didn’t have anything else in his life that was worth pursuing.

Sharon had many talents. She could have done many things with her life (as her mother loved to remind her). She didn’t need SHIELD.

But that didn’t mean she didn’t want it.

Ever since she had been a girl, leaning on Peggy’s knees as the woman told her tale after tale of SHIELD, Uncle Daniel interjecting with his jovial smile and twinkling eyes, she knew SHIELD was where she wanted to belong.

She had never regretted joining SHIELD. Not even with Rogers involved.

But that didn’t mean SHIELD was her life, or that it should be.

She had a life outside of SHIELD. It was just nice to be reminded of it from time to time. Like now.

She just wished Rogers understood that. The man had no life at all outside of SHIELD.

Her eyes glanced to the floor to ceiling windows that looked out to a snowy forest, the ski slopes off in the distance. A light snow was falling and several snow families had been erected that morning, followed by a vicious snowball fight, which Sharon’s team had totally won (suck on that Greer!). It was so pure and calm, so far from the business of DC.

Sharon stood and stretched, sighing in satisfaction as her shoulders popped loudly. She looked down at her sweater and had to grin at the sight of the atrocious piece of clothing.

*Another Legacies’ tradition: ugly Christmas sweaters.*

Sharon had her mother to thank for this year’s beauty. It was a green and red monstrosity covered in bows and cats wearing Christmas hats.

It was an ugly thing and Sharon loved it.
She sent a quick Snap of it to Catherine, knowing her friend would enjoy it in New York.

She shuffled towards the kitchen, her fuzzy socks rubbing against the carpet. Maybe she could shock someone…

She wandered in and spotted someone at the fridge chugging back eggnog.

“Going hard already, Kev? It’s just past noon,” she joked as the guilty party turned to her with a sheepish grin. He lowered the carton and wiped his mouth on the sleeve of his sweater. It had Chewbacca in a Christmas hat on it.

Keven Morita, the exact doppelganger of his grandfather (so much so it was scary), smiled as he set the carton back in the fridge and shut the door.

“Eggnog is the only way to get through functions like these,” he said with a little laugh as he leaned against the counter. “Give it another hours and they’ll be breaking out the karaoke.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” Sharon replied with a teasing grin as she pulled her secret stash of puppy show out of the cupboards, “I’ve been practicing my Pat Benatar all year. I’m gonna kill it with Love Is a Battlefield.”

Kevin groaned as she Sharon opened her baggy and tossed a handful of that peanut butter, sugar-coated goodness in her mouth. God, it was like crack to her.

Sharon grinned at him as she continued munching casually.

“Hey, didn’t you just get a new job? Do I need to be congratulating you?” Sharon swore she had heard the gossip through the Facebook group. That or her mother had mentioned it on the plane when they had flown in. Kevin preened with pride as he nodded.

“You’re looking at the newest principal of Midtown School of Science and Technology.”

“Good for you, Kev!” Sharon enthused as she good-naturedly punched him in the shoulder. “Look at you, educating New York’s best and brightest.”

“More like discipline them,” he responded with a chuckle. “For a bunch of geniuses, they can sure be incredibly dumb sometimes. Just before the break some freshman nearly blew up a chemistry classroom.”

“Wow,” Sharon uttered as she reached for more puppy chow. “Looks like you have your work cut out for you.”

Kevin nodded before a mischievous smile appeared across his face, “Well actually since I’ve been there I received this shipment of insightful school PSA’s. They’ve been quite helpful. In fact, they have a very familiar face appearing in them.”

“Oh?” Sharon responded with a gleeful smirk. She knew where this was going, oh boy did she.

“Oh-huh,” Keven replied. “Our favorite red, white and blue wearing Avenger.”

He threw his head back and began singing off key, “Who’s strong and brave, and here to save the American Way?”

“Who vows to fight like a man for what’s right night and day?” Sharon echoed back with her hands around her mouth for projection.
“The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!” The two cried out in unison before dissolving into giggles and booming laughter. When it finally subsided Sharon was wiping tears from her eyes as her side ached.

“And you said you weren’t looking forward to karaoke,” she got out though stuttered breaths as she rested against the counter for support. Kevin only shrugged, a lingering smile on his face.

Minutes later Sharon was padding back into the main living space humming along to the Christmas music coming out of the speakers. She scurried past the ten foot Blue Spruce, done up the nines with lights and ornaments. She made a beeline towards the kids and plopped down on the floor next to them, pulling Daphne into her lap.

“Aunty Sharon,” the girl squealed as Sharon pinched her sides playfully. “You’re tickling me!”

“Oh, am I?” she questioned as she tickled harder, the girl a squirming mess on her lap. “Well how about now?”

The girl giggled loudly before Sharon gave up and pulled her goddaughter close to her chest. Daphne sighed and snuggled in as Sharon watched the movie with the rest of the children.

They had just come to the part of the Grinch returning all of the Who’s belongings when the screen jumped immediately to a news broadcast.

**BREAKING NEWS**

The words flashed across the screen as the children surrounding Sharon cried out in disappointment.

“I want the movie back!” A Jones great-grandchild cried as Sharon shushed them and stared intently at the screen.

A middle-aged blonde woman appeared behind a news desk as she began speaking in a grave tone, “*Reports are just flying in now that Air Force One is down. I repeat, Air Force One is down.*”

Sharon felt her heart drop as she stared uncomprehendingly at the screen. Like a vacuum, the cheer and goodwill of the holidays disappeared from the room as every adult turned towards the screen in shock and horror.

“The plane blew up midflight and it is unknown at this time if President Ellis survived. We have exclusive footage of the Iron Patriot flying away from Air Force One just moments before it blew.”

Footage popped up on the screen and indeed a red, white and blue blur could be seen jetting away from the aircraft. Sharon couldn’t believe that the government’s superhero would leave the president behind in a time of a crisis.

Sharon had never met Colonel Rhodes, but according to Natasha, he was a stalwart ally who kept Stark in check.

“*Miraculously enough,*” The broadcaster continued in a breathless voice. “*Several of Air Force One’s staff survived and were found unharmed in the water below. They are claiming that they were rescued by the one and only Iron Man.*”

Well, look at that.

He wasn’t dead after all.
The news coverage continued but Sharon was already tuning out the words. She gently set Daphne aside before bounding to her feet and reaching for her cell phone. Trip and Greer were already on theirs. Sharon dialed the familiar number for SHIELD and wasn’t completely surprised when the line beeped with a busy signal.

SHIELD would be on high alert now and if you weren’t already at a base or on a helicarrier, you’d be damned trying to get in contact with the agency.

Sharon turned off her phone with a huff as she turned back to the TV just in time to see the replay of Air Force One blowing up in the sky.

Merry Christmas, indeed.

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**December 25th, 2012**

**The Norco**

“Is your gun up?” Rhodey whisper-hissed at Tony as they slunk across the riggings of the oil tanker Norco on the hunt for Pepper and President Ellis. They had already seen Ellis strung up in the Iron Patriot suit. Pepper’s location was still unknown, but she was aboard the ship.

“Yep,” Tony responded easily as he quickly pulled his gun up behind Rhodey’s back. “What do I do?”

“Stay on my six,” Rhodey ordered, cool as a cucumber and not even breaking a sweat. “Cover high and don’t shoot me in the back.”

That was a joke. It had to be a joke right? Tony may not like guns, but he knew how to use them.

“Six, high, back. All right,” Tony parroted back quietly, the mantra running over and over in his head.

Had he mentioned that he was bad with guns? He did. Okay then.

An Array of gunfire fell upon the duo as they ducked and shot back. Thinking that he saw movement above Tony shot off the gun and ducked as the bullet ricocheted off the metal. The two ducked down as Rhodey fixed Tony with an immensely unimpressed glower.

“You see that? Nailed it,” Tony defended as Rhodey restrained from rolling his eyes. It was a true struggle.

“Yeah, you really killed the glass,” the airman muttered as Tony scoffed.

“You think I was aiming for the bulb? You can’t hit a bulb at this distance.”

Without even blinking Rhodey stood, shot his gun, and ducked down right as it shattered said lightbulb. Tony just sat there in silence as Rhodey nodded, pleased with himself.

“All personnel,” a voice announced through the sound system, “We have hostiles on east unit 12.”

“Over there!” a guard in the distance yelled as they two could hear thundering footsteps nearing
them.

“I repeat, we have hostiles on east unit 12.”

“I’m out,” Tony announced as he examined his pistol. “Give me – you got extra magazines?”

He made grabby hands at Rhodey who shrugged him off.

“They’re not universal, Tony,” Rhodey volleyed back looking like the last thing he wanted to do was give Tony some of his magazines.

“I know what I’m doing,” the billionaire countered, “I make this stuff. Give me another one. One of yours.”

“I don’t have one that fits that gun,” Rhodey tried to explain patiently, but Tony never brought out patience in him. The man was like a toddler who thought everything was his if he just cried loud enough.

“You’ve got, like, five of them!” Tony exclaimed exasperatedly before shaking his head. “Here’s what I’m going to do. Save my spot, ready?”

Without warning he stood to get his bearings and dropped back down to his knees immediately after, Rhodey looking at him keenly.

“What’d you see?”

“Nothing. Too fast.”

Rhodey stared heavenward and silently asked God, why this one? Why had he become friends with this white boy? Out of all the white boys at MIT (and believe him, there had been plenty) he got stuck with this one.

“Here we go.” And Tony was up for Round Two. This time he could actually see the fiery danger coming for them.

“Three guys, one girl, all armed,” he listed off to Rhodey who sighed and nodded. They weren’t totally fucked with those odds, just mostly fucked. Ah well, they had been through worse. With a shared glance of understanding and a quick knee pat, the two stood to take the four on.

The four guards, already glowing from the inside, had formed a parameter around the pair and Rhodey shrugged as he looked at them.

“God, I would kill for some armor right now,” he murmured to Tony, who nodded in agreement.

“You’re right, we need backup.”

“Yeah,” Rhodey believed that that was an understatement. “A bunch.”

The guards were closing in and Tony was just looking up to the sky, a smile forming on his face.

“You know what?” he asked to Rhodey before nodding up to the sky. Rhodey followed his gaze and saw something faint in the distance. And it was coming closer.

“Is that-”

“Yep.”
More lights were appearing in the sky, hurtling towards the *Norco.*

“Are those…?”

“Yeah.”

And suddenly, the Iron Legion was there.

Coming down from the sky like metallic archangels the suits closed in around the ship. More than could be counted, they were all different designs of the original Iron Man suit, all serving different purposes.

All together, they were a beautiful sight. One of Tony’s greatest inventions.

And they all had a job to do.

Tony wrapped an arm around Rhodey, slapping him on the back as he remarked, “Merry Christmas, buddy.”

Rhodey just stared up in awe at the sight of all the suits. The guards, who had looked so confident before, now were knocked down a peg or two as the suits clearly outnumbered the people aboard the tanker.


“Yes, sir,” Jarvis responded through all of the suits, his computerized voice echoing across the water.

The Legion immediately began locking onto the heat sources of those exposed to Extremis. Tony walked forward, “What are you waiting for? It’s Christmas.”

He smoothly executed the sign of the cross before holding his arms out with aplomb, “Take them to church.”

The Iron Legion wasted no time. They flew and dove through the sky, going after Killian’s cronies.

“Incoming!” Tony yelled as a destroyed suit nearly decapitated him and Rhodey before crashing to the deck below. It erupted in a fiery blaze that rattled the entire ship.

“Jarvis, get Igor to steady this thing,” Tony ordered and moments later Igor, a suit Tony had modeled after the Green Guy, came barreling through shipping containers. He crouched beneath a tumbling column and provided equilibrium to the rickety ship.

“This is how you been managing your downtime, huh?” Rhodey questioned with an incredulous chuckle as Tony shrugged innocently.

“Everybody needs a hobby,” he defended as missile fire continued all around the tanker.

“Heartbreaker, help Red Snapper out, will you?” Tony yelled over to the respective suits who tagged team three of the guards.

“You’ve named them?” Rhodey inquired in disbelief as Tony nodded in a ‘duh’ fashion.

“Of course I named them. They’re my children.” Tony winced. “Don’t tell Pepper I said that. Or Dummy.”
“Man, that’s messed up,” Rhodey murmured to himself, shaking his head just as a massive explosion sounded below them, shaking the ship violently. The tanker groaned from the onslaught as it righted itself in the water.

Just then one of the armors landed before Tony and opened up like a lovers’ embrace. He stepped forward and the suit enveloped him like a glove.

“Nice timing,” he commented to himself, pleased with Jarvis, as always.

“Oh yeah, that’s awesome,” Rhodey enthused as he stood. “Give me a suit, okay?”

He held out his arms wide open as Tony stared blankly at him. “Oh, I’m sorry, they’re only coded to me.”

Rhodey’s eyebrows furrowed as he continued holding his arms out. “What does that mean?”

“I got you covered,” Tony promised as the face mask shut and he was rising up into the sky. Another suit immediately landed in his place and began striding towards the colonel.

“Good evening, Colonel,” Jarvis greeted affably. “Can I give you a lift?”

The suit came to a stop in front of Rhodey, who huffed out an annoyed breath.

“Very funny,” he muttered sardonically but wrapped his arms around the armor all the same. The suit took off, Rhodey clinging for dear life as it barrel-rolled. They hadn’t gotten fair when they were ambushed by one of Killian’s goons. It landed atop the suit and began trying to tear it apart. Jarvis spun them and Rhodey tumbled to the catwalk below, groaning as he landed.

“Sir, I’ve located Miss Potts,” Jarvis disclosed to Tony as they dived through the sky.

“About time,” he rumbled to himself as Jarvis took them to Pepper. He needed to get her out of here, and quick. The ship was becoming more and more unstable and the worst it got, the more in danger Pepper could be with that Extremis running through her veins.

They crashed into the inside of the ship to see it a caved in mess of parts and machinery. Tony stomped through the wreckage as the sight of strawberry blonde hair caught his eye. She was pinned beneath the rubble, but she was alive.

Sucking in a sob of relief, he immediately went over to the mess and attempted to lift the fallen machinery off the love of his life. As he did, it pressed harder upon Pepper, her body wracked with pain.


He complied and lowered the debris as Pepper gulped in heavy breaths laying beneath it all. Tony kneeled down as the faceplate rose up.

“See what happens when you hang out with my ex-girlfriends?” he quipped because of course, he did.

Pepper just stared at him before looking away, clutching at her stomach.

“You’re such a jerk,” she whispered, but it was okay, Tony knew she did it out of love. He held out his armored hand towards her, reaching to pull her out.

“Yep, we’ll talk about it over dinner.”
Pepper weakly reached for her, her body shaking from pain and sobbing as she valiantly tried to grab his hand.

“Come on,” he whispered soothingly. “A little more, baby.”

Their fingers had just brushed when an orange hand came up from the floor below, its hand circling around Tony’s arc reactor. The heat upon the power source had Tony gasping and twisting to get away from Killian’s hand. He fell backward with a groan as Killian emerged from the floor, fluorescent with Extremis underneath his skin.

He looked at Pepper mockingly as he asked, “Is this guy bothering you?”

He bounded over to Tony and stood above him with a sneer.

“Don’t get up,” he advised Tony as he leaned down, running an orange finger over the arc reactor, the heat increasing against the metal of the suit, Tony feeling it through the layers.

“Ooh. Is it hot in there? Stuck? Do you feel a little stuck? Like a little turtle, cooking in his little turtle suit.”

“Tony,” Pepper murmured weakly from the wreckage. Killian looked at her with glee before glancing back at Tony.

“She’s watching. I think you should close your eyes.” When Tony didn’t comply he pressed down harder, “Close your eyes.”

Tony glanced from Pepper to Killian, his mind working a thousand miles per second to try and get them out of this shit show. Because if he didn’t they were toast. Literally.

“Close your eyes. You don’t want to see this.”

Killian raised his glowing arm, ready to bring it down upon Tony. Just as he swung, Tony extended the blade from his gauntlet and sliced through Killian’s arm. It fell to the ground with a sickening echo as it turned into molten lava. Killian groaned in pain above Tony and stumbled away.

“Yeah, you take a minute,” Tony muttered, only because he was incapable of not having the last word whenever possible. Killian fell to the floor just as his arm sizzled through the metal and collapsed part of the floor, taking Pepper with it.

She and the wreckage fell below, landing in a crane. Only seconds later alarms blared and the crane came to life, picking up Pepper and rotating away. Tony abandoned the unusable suit and took off after Pepper and the crane. He didn’t get far before seeing a guard charging towards him. Tony took off running and vaulted over some railing and landed on a gangplank several feet away. The crony made to follow him but was picked up by a suit mid-jump and disappeared into the night.

Tony caught sight of the crane and where it was going: a drop off point.

Not good. So not good.

“Jarvis,” he barked, “Give me a suit right now!”

He leaped onto a new catwalk and raced up some stairs where a suit was hovering in place, waiting for him. He lunged for it, ready to fall into it gracefully when it was knocked from the sky. He fell
to the gang walk below with a grunt as he stumbled to his feet.

“Oh, come on!” he yelled as he continued sprinting towards Pepper. He vaulted from the catwalk to some metal machinery and landed with a bang as he rolled across it.

“The President is secure, Tony,” Rhodey’s voice came through the comms, “I’m clearing the area.”

“Nice work.”

At least someone had succeeded in their job. Alright, one down, one to go. Okay, now that he thought about his current predicament that was pretty poor word choice.

He needed to get to Pepper.

Tony shimmied his way towards where the crane had become stationary, Pepper half hanging out. He braced himself on the railing and reached for his woman.

“Pep, I got you. Relax, I got you,” he reassured as she reached for him. She had the misfortune of looking down to the deck below and let out a little scream, turning her head and closing her eyes.

“Just look at me!” Tony coached. The crane groaned below them and shook as Pepper struggled within its grasp. They continued in vain trying to reach for one another as Pepper continued holding onto the crane, afraid to let go and plummet below.

“Honey,” Tony began desperately, his voice breaking as she looked at him, “I can’t reach any further and you can’t stay there. All right? You’ve got to let go.”

Pepper just stared at him, hand outstretched.

“You got to let go!” Tony got out through stuttered breaths as his heart hammered in his rib cage. “I’ll catch you, I promise!” he vowed through tears as Pepper weakly nodded. She was just letting go of the machinery when it gave out below her and tumbled downward.

“No!” Tony screamed, grabbing for her. Their hands brushed for a second and then she was plunging to the fiery deck below. She disappeared into the flames.

She was gone.

The little part of his heart that had been beaten and bruised into submission, the little part of him that was capable of loving someone unconditionally disappeared into the flames.

His baby, sweetheart, love of his life, Virginia Potts was gone.

His whole world came to a stop as he sat up there, staring down and hoping beyond hope that she would emerge unscathed from the fire. When he couldn’t look any longer he forced his head to turn as he felt like collapsing upon himself.

He wasn’t even granted a moment to himself before Killian, like some running gag, appeared on the catwalk. Tony hurled himself onto it, ready to face Killian one-on-one.

Killian had the gall to glance down at the deck where Pepper had fallen and remark mockingly, “A shame. I would’ve caught her.”

Tony’s grief turned into indomitable rage as he charged Killian like an enraged bull. Killian ran at him, expecting a collision of bodies. He jumped up just as Tony slid beneath his legs. He stumbled
to his feet and ran into the waiting armor of a suit as it enclosed him fully. He turned just as Killian jumped him.

They went up against each other, blow to blow, metal against fire. With a powerful shove, Killian pushed Tony off the catwalk to a landing below. Killian landed on top of him, ready to pummel with a glowing fist.

“Eject,” Tony ordered to the suit as he came hurtling out of it and went flying down. He was freefalling when a new suit latched onto him and he landed in the nick of time on the deck. The repulsors thrust him forward as he flew up and collided with Killian. They ascended through the sky and landed with a bang on a catwalk up above.

Killian had become so hot his shirt had sizzled off of him, exposing his tattooed covered torso. Tony blasted him, but the madman dodged them easily as he lunged for the billionaire. Killian was able to corner Tony as he blocked a blast.

“Well,” Killian announced gleefully as he held Tony over the siding. “Here we are on the roof.”

His other hand glowed menacingly as he raised it above Tony. He brought it down just as Tony ejected himself from the suit and fell to the landing below. He sneered down at Tony as a far off whirring sounded in the distance.

“Mark 42 inbound now.” Jarvis announced in Tony’s ear as he glanced up at the sky.

“Well I’ll be damned,” Tony whispered in a stunned manner. “The Prodigal Son returns.”

Tony rolled to his feet in a crouch, holding his arm out behind him, waiting for the inevitable moment the suit connected to his body.

He waited…and he waited…and the suit disassembled upon landing. It was now a scattered mess at Tony’s feet.

“What ever,” he muttered with an eye roll as Killian fixed him with an unimpressed look. It’s not like he was trying to impress that son of a bitch.

“You really didn’t deserve her, Tony,” Killian remarked, voice as smooth as a knife. “It’s a pity. I was so close to having her…perfect.”

Tony felt his blood boil at the mention of Pepper. Who did Killian think he was talking about her? He wasn’t worthy to lick the ground she had stood on. Killian jumped down to his level and Tony stumbled to his feet, arms raised defensively.

“Slow down, slow down!” Tony urged as he backed away, “You’re right! I don’t deserve her.”

He had never deserved Pepper, but he had been lucky to have her.

“Here’s where you’re wrong. She was already perfect.”

With a flourish of his hands, Mark 42 came to life behind him as the various parts hurled towards Killian. The suit enclosed him and pinned him to a beam above.

“Jarvis, do me a favor and blow Mark 42.”

Killian’s scream was cut off as the faceplate shut on him. Tony wasted no time in throwing himself off the landing. The explosion echoed behind him and he felt the heat as his back as he slid
downward. He jumped and landed within a suit as they went sailing to the deck.

He did not land gracefully. In fact, he might have broken his ankle. The whole ship felt like it was coming down around him as he laid gasping on the deck suit-less. He struggled into a sitting position and saw one of his helmets, resting in the flames and debris.

Just as he was allowing himself a single moment of rest (and maybe a good cry) a creaking noise sounded from across the deck as a figure emerged from the flames.

Killian.

Fan – fuckin’- tastic.

Tony tried crawling away and nearly buckled under the pain of his ankle. This was it.

He was done. He was all out of cheap tricks and cheesy one-liners

There was no Pepper. He had nothing.

Killian struggled towards him, half man, half molten fire.

“No more false faces,” he said in a raspy voice, “You said you wanted the Mandarin.”

A sinister grin crossed his grotesque face as his eyes blazed, “You’re looking right at him.”

“It was always me, Tony. Right from the start.” He held his arms out like a conquering warlord as he proclaimed, “I am the Mandarin!”

His moment of glory was cut short as a wooden beam smashed into him, knocking him off his feet.

Tony turned his head and his eyes widened as he took in the sight of…

Pepper.

She stood there like a fiery goddess of war as she clutched the beam to herself. She dropped it and breathed in heavily, eyes locked with Tony.

He just continued to stare.

“I got nothing,” he said, finally out of quips and jokes. All he felt was raw.

Just then, one of the suits came swooping down, Pepper in its sights. Pepper who still had Extremis in her, the same Extremis Jarvis was taking out with extreme prejudice.

Ah shit.

“Jarvis, subject at my 12 o’clock is not a target. Disengage!” He yelled out before realizing in horror that his earpiece had been knocked out when he had roughly landed.

The suit held up its gauntlet, ready to blast when something remarkable happened.

Pepper turned into a complete badass.

As the suit turned, ready to come at her she swerved to Tony, glowing eyes locked on his as she began running.

“What? Are you mad at me?” he exclaimed because he was a man who never let sleeping dogs lie.
She charged him and used his knee as a springboard to flip herself up into the air in a way he had only ever seen Rogers do. She sucker punched the suit, tearing it to pieces as she landed on the deck, glimmering fist stuck between the plates of the suit.

She pulled back her arm and attached the arm piece to it as she turned towards Killian. She rammed it into him as he attempted to stampede her. He went flying back into the wall. Pepper kicked over one of Tony’s dislodged rockets and blasted it just as it landed in front of Killian.

A massive explosion erupted, taking Killian with it. And just like that, he was gone.

No more Mandarin.

With Killian’s death, Pepper came back to herself as the glow of Extremis subsided and suddenly she was Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries and not Pepper Pots, Badass Extraordinaire who could give Black Widow a run for her money.

God, Tony loved her.

“Honey,” Tony began as he struggled to his feet.

“Oh my God,” Pepper uttered to herself in disbelief, “That was really violent.”

Tony suppressed a hysterical giggle as he shook his head. “You just scared the devil out of me. I thought-” he choked on the words but Pepper was kind enough to ignore that.

“I was dead. Why? Because I fell 200 feet?” she responded back smartly with a twinkle in her eyes.

Tony could only shrug because, yeah, that’s what he thought. To be fair though, he was friends with the Hulk and an actual god. Maybe he should have seen this coming. Pepper had always been too efficient to be on the sidelines.

Pepper ran a hand through her sweaty hair before looking at Tony, “Who’s the hot mess now?”

“Still debatable,” he countered as he reached for his earpiece, “Probably tipping your way a little bit. Why don’t you dress like this at home? Hmm? Sports bra, the whole deal.”

Pepper ignored him as she stared down at her hands. Those hands had just killed a man and done things she had never dreamed of doing.

What was she?

“You know,” she began haltingly, “I think I understand why you don’t want to give up the suits. What am I gonna complain about now?”

Tony bit back a smile as he came closer to her. “Well, it’s me. You’ll think of something.”

He reached out for her but she batted him away, backing away urgently.

“No, don’t touch me! I might burn you.”

Tony shook his head as he reached for her bare hand and gripped onto it tightly. His hand didn’t burn, it didn’t even tingle (well, tingle more than usual) as he held on.

“Not hot,” he told her truthfully. Pepper was blinking back tears as she looked at him.

“Am I going to be okay?”
“No,” he responded gravely, “You’re in a relationship with me. Everything will never be okay.”

His attempt at humor worked as a weak grin came across her achingly beautiful face.

“But I think I can figure this out, yeah,” he continued, “I almost had this 20 years ago when I was drunk. I think I can…get you better. That’s what I do, I fix stuff.”

Pepper stared at him with her doe eyes. “And all your distractions?”

“Um…I’m gonna shave ‘em down a little bit.”

To prove his point he said into his comm, “Jarvis. Hey.”

“All wrapped up here, sir. Will there be anything else?”

Tony didn’t take his eyes off Pepper as he responded, “You know what to do.”

“The Clean Slate Protocol, sir?”

“Screw it, it’s Christmas. Yes. Yes.”

And he wasn’t even a little bit heartbroken as he wrapped Pepper up in a firm embrace, burying his face in her silky hair and breathing in the scent of coconut and vanilla. It was pure Pepper. He held on tight as the Iron Legion began imploding.

Pepper gasped and smiled as she hugged him tighter, her fingers threading through the hair at the nape of his neck.

He leaned into her and kissed her cheek, his eyes watching the imploding suits like fireworks.

All in all, it wasn’t a terrible way to spend the holidays.

December 29th, 2012

Malibu

“You just ran a red light.”

“Semantics, Rogers,” Natasha countered good-naturedly as she zipped past another car before swerving into the right lane. She was at the wheel of an outrageously expensive, scarlet Audi TT Roadster. All thanks to Tony Stark, of course. They were racing down palm tree covered streets, the sun in their eyes and the wind whipping through their hair. While it was winter in LA, it was still in the high 60s and a far cry from the near frigid 20s of DC, so even Steve found it in himself to enjoy the brief time off from SHIELD.

Tony had immediately sent his private jet when Natasha had reached out to Pepper to inquire how Tony was doing in the aftermath of…well, everything.

The man had been through a lot: his mansion falling into the ocean, being presumed dead for several days, then nearly dying at the hands of the Mandarin, having his girlfriend injected with a tumultuous substance and having open heart surgery.
Let it be known that when Stark went big, he went larger than life.

Yes, Steve knew the Backstreet Boys. Their songs were infuriatingly catchy.

So here he was, about to die in a sports car at the hands of a Russian assassin. If only the Commandos could see him now.

Speaking of Natasha, she was more than enjoying herself as she zoomed through Los Angeles. Her vibrant hair was a wild mess from the wind and her excessive head bopping to the radio. Her eyes were hidden by large sunglasses and she was in a romper of all things. Steve wasn't quite sure what a romper was, it looked like a loose dress to him.

But according to both Natasha and Thirteen, his fashion sense was abysmal and he had no room to talk when it came to judging others.

He watched her for a moment, how carefree and relaxed she seemed in the sunlight. Then he wondered if she was being Natasha or...some version of Natasha. He could never tell with her. She was always changing and shifting like a kaleidoscope. The only one with a real grasp of who Natasha Romanoff is was Clint Barton.

Speaking of Clint Barton...

“Clint didn’t want to come?” he asked over the wind as Natasha suddenly turned. He slid into the car door and righted himself as Natasha glanced over at him, gaze inscrutable with her eyes hidden.

“He’s enjoying his well-deserved holiday.”

Steve quirked an eyebrow and asked innocently, “Without you?”

Natasha’s bright, red lips upturned into a smirk as she looked up into the rearview mirror.

“We’re not attached at the hip.” She swerved into the next lane as Steve gripped his seat so tightly he felt the leather straining under his strength. “And besides,” Natasha continued casually, “We had our own fun before he left.”

Steve shuddered at the implications. “That was, how do the youth say it? TMI.”

He was proud when Natasha let out a very unrefined snort. She quickly tried to cover it up into a cough, but it was too late. Steve had heard it.

He kept his self-satisfied grin the rest of the way to Tony and Pepper’s rental in Malibu. This mansion was purposefully not near the coast.

Soon enough Natasha was pulling up into the driveway of a home Steve would think could only exist in dreams, it was that lavish.

While grandiose, it was nowhere near the modern abode that Tony had once inhabited. It had a more warm feeling to it that was all Pepper. Steve imagined she was the one who had picked it out as she and Tony figured out their next steps.

The only thing out of place was the giant, charred stuffed rabbit sitting out on the front lawn. It was a bit worse for the wear with a burnt ear, sizzled fur and the fact that it reeked of sea salt.

“Wow,” Natasha murmured in awe as she stared up at it while Steve got their luggage. “That is hideous.”
“Thank God,” Steve replied as he came up to her side. “I thought it was modern art or something and it’d be rude of me to say anything.”

Natasha smiled and shook her head as she headed inside, Steve trailing in her wake. It was unusual to enter a space belonging to Stark and not have Jarvis greet you immediately. But the house remained silent as they made their way through the foyer to the spacious living room where Pepper lounged on a couch that could fit twenty in yoga pants and a slouchy, pullover sweater. She was typing away on her laptop. She glanced up at their pair and her beautiful face lit up into a megawatt smile.

“Nat, Steve!” she exclaimed as she jumped up from the couch and bounded over to the pair, “Thank you so much for coming, it means the world that Tony has friends outside me, Rhodey, Jarvis, and Happy.”

She hugged Natasha tightly and smiled up at Steve and she leaned up on her tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. Steve smiled bashfully at her as she pulled away. Pepper always made Steve feel… content when he was in her presence. She had such a grounding serenity to her hidden by no-nonsense sensibilities.

Tony was truly lucky to have her. Pepper was a rare breed of women. She was like lightning in a bottle.

Something told Steve that Tony knew just how lucky he was.

“Speaking of Tony,” Natasha interjected smoothly, “Where is our favorite man-child?”

Pepper let out a delighted laugh before slapping a hand over her mouth and blushing daintily as it stained her cheeks. When she had gained composure she pointed westward.

“He and Rhodey have barricaded themselves in the garage all day. Feel free to wade into that madness.”

Seeing as the whole point of coming out to LA was to ensure that Tony was still… Tony, the two SHIELD agents were quick to head to the garage.

What they found was apparently the aftermath of a bomb going off in a junkyard.

Scrap metal and wiring was scattered all throughout the space. At the nucleus of the chaos were Tony and Rhodey, backs to the SHIELD agents and hunched over a rather sorry sight.

It was one of Tony’s robots, battered and near broken by its sojourn into the Pacific during the Mandarin attack.

Tony was kneeling in front of the defective claw, one hand absentmindedly, yet gently running over the metal as the other attached wiring to the nonresponsive bot.

"Did you connect the red wire to the correct conductor?" Tony snipped impatiently as he turned his head expectedly towards Rhodey, who was at a baseboard of wires.

The airman sighed but responded patiently, “You know I did, Tones.”

“It needs to be absolutely precise if we’re going to wake him up.” His voice was stretched thin as if he were walking a tight rope. Beneath the near boiling anger, emotion laid thick in Tony’s words as he stared down at the bot.
“We got Butterfingers and U wide awake and more chipper than ever,” Rhodey replied softly as the two awake bots, charging in the corner, chirped and beeped their agreement as Tony rolled his eyes.

“We’ll get to Dummy too. We won’t leave him behind.”

With a few more rigging and tampering, Tony turned to Rhodey and gave a single nod. Rhodey sucked in a breath before flipping switches as the two lifelong friends watched Dummy resolutely, looking for any signs of life in the machinery.

For several long moments, nothing happened. Just when Tony looked ready to bow to his overwhelming emotions, something happened.

Dummy came back to life.

It took several moments for him to come completely back online and when he did, it wasn’t exactly pretty.

Dummy, who had been slowly waking up with twitches and chirps of his claw, was suddenly slammed into consciousness. And the last thing he had remembered had been falling into the ocean.

An unpleasant memory to say the least.

He began panicking, his claw flailing madly as it smashed into his nearest surroundings, nearly clobbering Tony in the head with one wild swing. The bot continued making distressed, mechanical noises that were as uncomfortable as nails on a chalkboard. Dummy’s agony was so potent that his brothers began crying in unison with him from their corner of the garage.

“Not helping, boys!” Tony hollered over at them as he tried to get Dummy’s attention.

“Dummy, look at me. C’mon, you big lug, look at me. Dummy!”

The sternness of his voice was enough to jog Dummy out of his immediate anguish even though the poor robot continued shaking in place, but its sensor was focused on his creator.

“You’re okay, Dummy,” Tony soothed as he reached out and placed his hand on Dummy’s claw. “I know you’re scared. But you’re not in the water anymore. You’re here with me and your brothers and your Uncle Rhodey. And I will never let anything like that happen to you again, you hear me? No more water. You are a land robot. I so much as even see you glancing at any body of water and you’re going to community college, you hear me?”

As harsh as his words could seem to an outsider, Steve and Natasha could clearly hear the affection in his voice as he held onto the robot.

“I mean it this time. You’ll be mopping up floors after Millennials. And let me tell you, they’re a mess. And they’ll put you to work in the bathrooms. You remember what I told you about public bathrooms? Disgusting.”

Dummy, whose cries had turned into a low, sad humming clicked his claw and peered back at Tony.

Tony, whose eyes had been growing increasingly wet as he talked to Dummy, finally allowed himself a sniffle as his grease-covered fingers stroked over the metal.
“So, like I said. You, land robot. Capiche?”

Dummy nodded his claw and Tony choked on his laughter as he leaned in and real quick, pressed a kiss to Dummy’s sensor. The bot preened under the attention as Tony leaned back, wiping his eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, don’t think anything of it, you baby.”

It was only then that Rhodey and Tony realized they weren’t alone in the garage. The pair whirled around to the SHIELD agents and Tony pointedly looked away, composing himself before being the Tony Stark they knew and tolerated.

“Well, well, if it isn’t my spandex wearing besties.” His smile was a little sharp, his eyes too bright and his humor too off to be genuine. But Steve and Natasha excused him for it and carried on as if they hadn’t witnessed the display between Tony and his bot.

“Tony,” Natasha greeted, cool as ever while Steve nodded his head.

“You’re up and about for a man who just had open heart surgery a few days ago,” Steve remarked lightly as Tony stood, wiping his hands on a rag as he shrugged.

“Open heart surgery? It was a walk in the park. In, out, with time to spare. I could run a marathon if I felt like it.”

Rhodey snorted from behind Tony as he crossed his arms over his chest, highlighting how snug his Air Force t-shirt was in comparison to Tony’s baggy and worn MIT t-shirt.

“As if you could run a marathon before the surgery,” Rhodey remarked playfully as Tony gasped. “You saying you doubt me, jellybean?”

Rhodey only rolled his eyes as he stepped forward to greet the two Avengers seeing as Tony wasn’t.

“Rushman,” he greeted Natasha cordially as the two shared smirks and then Rhodey turned to Steve and held out his hand.

“Captain,” he greeted informally as Steve shook back.

“Colonel Rhodes,” he replied going for casual this time. The first time he had met Rhodey in the aftermath of New York he had saluted the Colonel and well, let’s just say it had been an embarrassing moment for both of them, much to Tony’s sadistic amusement.

“I saw the designs of the Iron Patriot,” Steve remarked conversationally as Rhodey’s shoulders tensed and Tony bit back a smug, shit eating grin. “I liked the paint job. It reminded me of…well, me.”

“See,” Tony interjected gleefully, “I told you that you looked like the demented love child of me and Captain Good Looking.”

Rhodey threw a thoroughly unimpressed look over his shoulder to the billionaire who only shrugged. Rhodey sighed and turned back to Steve.

“Well, as amusing as that thought is to you, Tony, it’s a moot point. I’m ditching the red, white and blue look. I’m going back to War Machine. No offense, Cap.”

Steve shook his head. “None taken.”
“Oh, boo-boo, you’re coming back to where you belong. You’re gonna make me cry.”

“Tony.”

Tony was batting his eyes and wringing his hands around his rag. “No, really, I feel the tears coming. Bring it in.”

He lunged for Rhodey with his infamous grabby hands but the colonel dodged him and used Natasha as a buffer. Because not even Tony was crazy enough to try something like that around Black Widow.

The redhead only arched an eyebrow and muttered ‘children’ under her breath. She was very much regretting not having volunteered to stay with Pepper in the main house.

“Would you stop getting grease on my shirt,” Rhodey complained as Tony absentmindedly ran his dirty hand over his MIT shirt. Tony blinked in confusion before glancing down at the maroon shirt.

“Uh, no, booboo-bungalo, this is my MIT shirt.”

Rhodey chuckled before shaking his head. “No, Tones, it’s mine.”

Tony looked affronted as he countered back, “You’re mistaken, honey-muffin. I’d recognize my shirt anywhere.”

“Yeah?” Rhodey questioned with a glint in his dark eyes. “Then why is it a size too big?”

Tony was momentarily stumped as he glanced down and realized that the shirt was indeed a large instead of a medium. Never one to be outdone though he just shrugged and replied nonchalantly. “I like being comfy.”

“Okay. Yeah,” Rhodey murmured completely not believing as his friend as he began cleaning up their makeshift workshop. Tony threw his rag at him as he turned to his fellow Avengers with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Enjoy the flight? The flight attendants took care of you, right?”

“The flight was great,” Steve responded.

“The car was even better,” Natasha interjected with her trademark grin that was all teeth.

Tony lit up at the sight of it as he nudged the redhead with his shoulder. “I knew you would enjoy her.”

The three stood in almost uncomfortable silence for several long moments before Steve tried breaking the ice.

“So, how are you feeling?” Steve knew it was a bogus question the moment he asked it. He could tell from the gleam in Tony’s eye as he prepared to wind up the First Avenger. An elbow gut from Natasha dissuaded the billionaire from acting on his instincts as he rolled his eyes and placed his hands on his hips.

“I’m fine, really,” he emphasized when the two stared at him passively. “Everything happened and it’s done, so let it be done, as Dad always said. And now I’m moving on, looking to new horizons and all that mumbo jumbo. Seriously, I’m being a big buy about this. I’ve even settled everything at the Malibu estate.”
Tony turned away to pack up some of his tools and to pat Dummy on the head, who beeped slowly, already in sleeper mode in order to recharge.

“You planning on rebuilding?” Steve asked, knowing how attached Tony had been to the property. It had been more ‘Tony Stark’ than even Avengers Tower.

Tony chuckled as he shook his head, “No, no, I’m closing up shop and heading east. Pep and I are going to be New Yorkers.”

“Pepper will love the shopping as well as Broadway,” Natasha remarked as Tony rolled his eyes.

“Don’t get me started on Broadway. She’s already brought two months’ worth of tickets. My weekends are essentially gone once we move.”

“Oh, but you’ll love it,” Pepper’s musical voice infused from the doorway of the garage as she leaned against it.

“Of course I will, light of my life,” Tony retorted with an obnoxious bat of his eyelashes. Pepper giggled, shaking her head as her strawberry blonde hair fell down her shoulders.

“I took the liberty of ordering us pizza from Jon & Vinny’s,” she announced to the group of superheroes.

“Pep, love of my life, please tell me you ordered me the Ham & Yeezy with extra-”

“Vodka sauce? What do you take me for, an amateur?”

Pepper smirked as Tony blew her a kiss before continuing, “I ordered the El Chaparrito for Rhodey and the Salad Days for myself. I ordered pasta and pizza for Natasha and Steve as well. Hopefully enough to accommodate Steve’s, uh...appetite.”

Steve smiled sheepishly as he ducked his head. He liked to eat, what could he say?

The party migrated back into the living room as drinks were provided, everyone drinking except for Tony who couldn’t on his medication and Pepper who wasn’t drinking due to solidarity. Rhodey has assured Tony he’d drink enough for the three of them.

Soon enough the food came and everyone was sprawled out eating pizza and pasta while jazz music filtered through the speakers and Rhodey shared one of his War Machine Stories that always ‘kill it with everyone else’.

Tony felt light and loose in a way he hadn’t since New York. In fact, if he wasn’t paying attention he wouldn’t be too surprised if he floated away. Natasha and Steve were on the floor, using the coffee table as a resting place for their food as Pepper and Rhodey bracketed Tony in between them.

Both were pressed up against him from shoulders to hips to thighs and the warmth of their bodies seeping into his grounded him and his ever erratic heart.

And for the first time since New York, he really thought things were good. Not just good, great even.
SHIELD was nearly desolate as Sharon stood waiting in the atrium for a particular super soldier to arrive. It had been a couple of crazy days for the agency, even if Sharon hadn’t been involved in them. It’s not every day the Vice President of the United States joins up with a terrorist organization and aids in the potential execution of the President of the United States.

What a world they lived in.

Sharon fidgeted in place and resisted the urge to pick at her velvet, mulberry blazer as she fiddled with the buttons. She was doing everything not to overthink the wrapped package in her hand. If she overthought it, she’d just drive herself crazy.

There was nothing unusual about what she was doing. Hell, this was the polite thing to do.

Sharon sucked up her nerve as a familiar blonde head of hair was making his way towards her. She hid the package behind her as she greeted him with a smile.

“Captain,” she greeted as Rogers blinked in surprise at her appearance.

“Thirteen, back already from your vacation?”

Sharon nodded. “I got back last night.”

“Did you have fun?” Rogers asked politely.

“I did, but it was…chaotic at times.”

“Oh?”

“Hmm. Yes, my extended family is rather…large. Hell, sometimes it feels like there’s a hundred of us.”

Rogers furrowed his eyebrows but took her word for it. When that conversation lulled, Sharon jumped in with questions of her own.

“How’s Stark? Is he doing okay after the whole…mess?”

Rogers nodded. “Doing as well as can be expected. He’s recovering from surgery.” Sharon raised an eyebrow questioningly as the first Avenger elaborated, “He had his arc reactor removed from his chest.”

“Isn’t that what makes him Iron Man?” Sharon asked in confusion. She was pretty sure that thing powered all of his fancy suits.

Rogers chuckled aloud at the question as he ran a hand through his hair.

“According to Tony, he was Iron Man long before he started wearing the suits.”

“Ah well,” Sharon didn’t know what to say to that. “Good for him, I guess.”

Rogers nodded and finally noticed the package hidden behind Sharon’s back, the crinkling of the
paper had given it away, as well as her shifty behavior.

“What you got there?” he questioned as he tried to peek around, but Sharon was too quick for it. She brought it out in a flourish and held it out to him.

“Merry belated Christmas!”

Rogers stared at the package with wide eyes as he glanced rapidly between her and the gift.

“Oh, I didn’t get you anything,” he said lamely as Sharon bit her cheek. He really could be endearing when he wanted to be.

“Don’t worry about it,” she assured with a shrug, “You shouldn’t give a gift with the expectation of receiving one in return.”

She pushed the package into his large hands and waited eagerly. She was a giver by nature and gift receiving/giving was one of her Love Languages. So gift-giving was right in her wheelhouse.

Rogers almost didn’t seem sure of what to do with the package but eventually tugged at the tape and unwrapped the gift. Within the paper were several art supplies. Thick, crisp paper, drawing pencils, and a graphite drawing set.

Rogers stared down at the supplies in awe as Sharon watched him eagerly, trying to gauge the normally stoic Avenger’s expression. When he remained silent she decided to fill the void.

“I know you said you don’t have time for drawing,” Sharon began sheepishly as she ran a hand through her hair nervously. “But I have it on good authority that you loved it once and I don’t think you should just write it off. So, hopefully, now you can find time to love it again.”

Rogers looked at her, really looked at her before looking down and nodding.

“Thank you, Thirteen.” He said softly and Sharon felt her smile grow.

“Not a problem, Rogers. Not a problem at all.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew, this was such a beast to get through! Twenty-six pages on Word. But I'm happy, so that's all the counts.

Incorporating Iron Man 3 was much more fun than I thought it would be. As I was rewatching the DVD, I kept having to pause it because ideas were coming to me rapid fire. Hopefully my writing of Tony comes off as realistic for him as a character. He's been the one I've been most afraid to write for as he is so tricky to pin down.

I also love putting in that Tony/Rhodey love. Their bromance is one of the richest yet most underrated in the MCU. I love Science Bros as much as they next person, but come on, Rhodey is Tony’s oldest friend and very important and it should stop being swept under the rug by fandom. Also the Tony/Pepper/Rhodey dynamic is dynamite.
And also, who doesn't love Dummy? All he wants is Tony's affections :)

Pic time!

Ski Lodge in Breckenridge, CO:

Sharon's ugly Christmas sweater:

Sharon's velvet blazer:
“It’s not 1945 anymore, it’s 2013. You live here, in this century. But I…I’m worried that you wish it was the past.”

She raised a finger to his lips when he tried to speak. “Let me finish, silly boy. I know you feel as if your life slipped you by, that you missed everything. But this is where you live now, where you must make a life for yourself. You can’t keep hiding in the past, Steve. It will only destroy you.”

Steve shuddered in her grip as he looked down at the afghan, his free hand buried in its holes as he tried to stop himself from clenching his hand into a fist. He could feel the buildup of tears in the back of his throat, but he valiantly fought against the urge to sob. He blinked rapidly as tears stung his eyes.

“Peggy,” he choked out, “It’s so hard.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January 1st, 2013

Washington, D.C.

Sharon Carter’s 2013 Resolutions

1. Stop dyeing hair
2. Start growing out hair
3. Somehow develop the power of flight
4.
5.
6. Get Steve Rogers a LIFE

January 6th, 2013

Washington, D.C.

Steve Rogers’ eyes snapped open at the incessant beeping erupting through the darkness of his bedroom. He instinctually reached out, his palm gently but assuredly turning off his alarm clock as he laid sprawled across the marshmallow he called his bed. His solid body was entirely consumed by an overwhelming abundance of softness and it was damn annoying.

He felt like it would swallow him whole any minute now. What a way for Captain America to go.

His light blue eyes darted to his clock and in neon green color the time was big and bright: 4:30AM.

That wasn’t bad. He had averaged nearly five hours of sleep this time. Dr. Abbot would be pleased with that number.

Steve snorted at the image of his prim and proper British psychologist cooing at him and his achievement as if he was a toddler who had just used the toilet for the first time on his own.

“Who’s a good boy? You are, Captain America! Here, have a lollipop!”

He kicked off his sheets and rolled to his feet, his shoulders and back popping soundly in the emptiness of the room. He cracked his neck while shuffling towards the window and blindly reached for the shades, pulling on the string. They ascended and he peeked out to the street below.

It was pitch black and hardly a soul was out so early on a Saturday morning.

Well, you know what they say about the morning bird and the worm…

A thin layer of snow, no more than an inch, covered the sidewalks and had already turned to mush in the streets.

He turned on his heel, moving expertly through his dark apartment (perks of the serum) and relieved himself in the bathroom before trudging back into his room to change. He quickly stripped out of his sweatpants (yes ladies, he slept shirtless) and threw on SHIELD issued running gear. He zipped up a lightweight jacket to protect him from the wind (pointless, but it stopped people from staring at him like the last time he had gone running in a t-shirt in cold weather) and messily plopped a navy beanie over his blonde locks.

He shuffled into the living room, quickly laced up his tennis shoes and slipped his house keys into one of the numerous pockets that were on his person. How many pockets did people need these days? He had at least five on him.

He walked into the kitchen and searched the cupboards for one of Stark’s experimental protein bars. He had developed it for the armed services back when he was still into outfitting the military with weapons. It was packed with so many nutrients that one could keep a grown man in a war zone full for more than half a day. Now to achieve that with Steve and his metabolism he’d need at least three, but one was enough to sustain him for his daily run.

He finally found the diminishing box of them and nosily tore the wrapper before devouring half of it in one bite.

Its flavor was blueberry and it was a bit chewy, but it wasn’t bad. He couldn’t find it in himself to complain. Living through the Depression, Steve could say with complete honesty that he had had worse. When he finished the bar he neatly tossed the wrapper into the trashcan across the kitchen and headed out.

He locked the door behind him and turned in surprise when he heard a door opening down the
hallway. Emerging from her apartment with a load of laundry was a tired looking Kate in baggy pajamas and hair up in a messy bun, strands of it falling all around her. She blinked in surprise as she locked eyes with Steve, dark circles around her exhausted eyes, but she mustered up a genuine smile at the Avenger.

“Hey, neighbor,” she greeted in that faint, smooth Southern accent of hers that always reminded him of sweet tea.

“Kate,” he greeted with a small smile as he eyes glanced down at the basket in her hands. It was a mix of hospital scrubs and her civilian clothing. His baby blues immediately darted away when they spied a pair of purple, lacy underwear.

He coughed uncomfortably and from the smirk working its way across her face, she had seen it too. She softly giggled and shifted her basket so that her body hid the bulk of it, saving Steve’s dignity along the way.

“D-Doing…uh, doing laundry?” he asked as he felt heat blossom across his cheeks. Maybe the floor would open up and swallow him whole and save him from this conversation. Maybe Captain America was destined to be swallowed alive by something.

“Unfortunately,” Kate responded, ignoring his embarrassment. “This is my only free time to get it done.”

“Long night?” Steve asked. His mother had always worked odd hours as a nurse and from his limited observations of Kate, she worked even stranger hours, coming and going like a specter in the night. Must be a 21st Century thing…

Kate sighed as she shook her head. “More like a long day. I’m due at the hospital at 7am for a rotation in the neonatal unit. If I don’t do this now, this will be my fourth day in the same scrubs.”

She scrunched her nose in disgust before seeming to remember who she had just said that too. “And now you probably think I’m a walking disaster. I promise I’m only like this 50% of the time.”

Steve hastily shook his heard so fast that his beanie slumped down his forehead and briefly covered his eyes. He batted the hat back up and looked at Kate.

“No, I don’t think that. I think it’s incredible what you do. The hospital is lucky to have you.”

He didn’t know much about Kate, but what he did know without second-guessing was how dedicated she was to her job.

Kate smiled toothily as dimples popped out of her cheeks and she tucked an errant strand of hair behind her ears. “Thanks, neighbor; that means a lot. And where are you off today? No wait, don’t tell me, you’re one of those fitness freaks who jogs in the middle of a blizzard, right? Make the rest of us look like slobs in comparison,” she teased good-naturedly as she hitched up her laundry basket against her chest.

“I don’t know if I’d run in a blizzard,” Steve countered as he stuck his hands in his pockets. “But I do enjoy my morning jog, I must admit.”

“Masochist,” she jested with her smile still in place as Steve shrugged.

“I’ve been told that everyone needs a hobby,” he tried to explain but was cut off as Kate gave an undignified snort.
“Yeah, well, if someone’s suggestion to you was running, then I’m afraid they were playing a horrible prank on you, buddy.”

Steve chuckled and shook his head. “Self-inflicted, I’m afraid.”

“So my original point stands: you’re a masochist and enjoy torturing yourself.”

“Agree to disagree,” he countered and Kate laughed again, nodding her head.

“Well, seeing as we’re heading in the same direction, care for some company down the stairs?”

Steve felt his cheeks warmed again as he nodded and gestured for her to go first. This was the longest conversation he had with anyone outside of the crazy bubble that was SHIELD in a while. Just taking time and chatting with his neighbor was such a foreign concept to him, but he couldn’t help but admit he enjoyed it as he followed Kate down the creaky, wooden stairs as they groaned under his massive weight.

The two parted ways at the front door with a wave as Kate continued onto the basement and Steve stepped out onto the street, immediately getting slapped in the face by the crisp, winter wind. He pivoted on his heel, wind at his back, and took off in a warmup run as he traveled southwest along New Hampshire Ave.

It was a brisk, easy pace (at least for him). He picked up his speed as he rounded Washington Circle, the only sound in the early morning was his feet as they slapped against the slippery pavement. He never once faltered or slipped, another perk of being a super soldier. His breathing regulated and smoothed itself as he blew past the Watergate complex. It wasn’t until he was at the banks of the Potomac on the Rock Creek Park Trail that he truly began putting himself through his paces.

By now it was nearing 5am and it was only a tinge lighter. Instead of pitch black, the sky was lined with swirling greys at the horizon. The Potomac was particularly tumultuous this January morning. It was frozen solid at its peripheries and edges, the ice broken and jagged on its banks, as dark waves crashed angrily against it. Steve could hear the currents of the mighty river synching up with his heartbeat as he ran.

*Beat…beat…beat…beat…*

He sucked in breaths in the intervals as he finally broke into his full speed, the cityscape and the river flying by him as he charged forward. If anyone were out at the moment they’d be amazed at the way his body, taunt as an archer’s bow, moved quickly and gracefully along the trail.

When he had first begun his morning runs, he had attempted a ‘normal’ pace for running so as to not draw attention to himself by others. It had been excruciating. A normal man’s running was a brisk walk to a super-soldier. He might as well have skipped the workout for as little as he had gotten out of those first few running sessions.

Frustrated, he had broken out into a hard run while lapping the Mall and had given many people an eyeful as he left everyone in his dust.

It hadn’t taken long for people to realize they were jogging in the midst of Captain America.

The next day fans had been waiting with toy shields for him to sign, asking for selfies, autographs and a play-by-play of the Battle of New York.

So Steve now jogged at the crack ass of dawn, where he was more likely to encounter street
cleaners and newsboys than avid fans wanting a moment of Captain America’s time.

As he raced along the Potomac, his eyes couldn’t help but be drawn to the towering Triskelion as it sat upon its throne in the middle of the surging river. It was a fantastically modern and sleek building that radiated the same coldness and efficiency that Fury and SHIELD inspired in the larger world.

Steve’s stomach wore itself into knots the longer he stared at the agency Peggy built. He should love it more than he did because it was Peggy who had created SHIELD, who had done amazing things in the world to ensure its freedom. Peggy, who had always been better than Steve in every way. She had been the real hero, he was just the sucker carrying a shield.

He wanted to love SHIELD for Peggy, but something was stopping him from giving all of himself to the spy agency.

Call him old fashioned, but he couldn’t find it in himself to trust an agency that prided itself on how well it lied.

He wasn’t as naïve as Stark believed him to be; he understood the nature of their work, that the truth didn’t belong in the shades of grey that they operated in. He wasn’t a Boy Scout himself; during the War, he, the Commandos and the SSR, they had done things…things he wasn’t proud of. But they had done it for the freedom of others.

He still didn’t know why SHIELD did what they did. It wasn’t for freedom, even if they had fooled themselves into believing it.

It wasn’t all bad. Fury, for all his contradictory nature and hidden nuances, was a shockingly straightforward sonofabitch the majority of the time. Hill was one of the most scarily capable women he had ever met. Clint and Natasha had proven themselves as allies and tentative friendships were forming with the two former assassins. Thirteen…well, she was something else entirely.

Their working relationship was a mosaic, constantly shifting as new threads formed, completely transforming the image into something new and unexpected.

She was as varied as the names he threw out trying to guess hers.

Honestly, he didn’t think he’d ever understand his partner. He still wasn’t entirely comfortable with her. She got under his skin, one moment calculated the next friendly. She’d crack a joke and then five minutes later be distant and aloof. Yet, it wasn’t like Natasha, who thrived on being an ever-changing chameleon who fucked with everyone around her for a laugh. Thirteen wasn’t playing at being anybody else. It was like she was just as lost at knowing how to interact with him as he was with her. What a pair they made…

However, it seemed that she had a better grasp of who he was than he did of her. He didn’t like the imbalance. He wanted to be on equal footing. Maybe if he finally guessed her name that would be a step towards it.

Steve pushed the thoughts jumbling his brain away as he circled the Tidal Basin and rounded the corner of the illuminated Jefferson Memorial, its marble columns a brilliant white against the ashen morning clouds brewing above. His enhanced eyesight easily allowing him to see the silhouette of the larger than life statue of the third president of the United States, standing solemnly in his hallowed hall. Steve gave a little salute as he flew by.
It was only when the sky was a steely blue and the sun just rising that Steve encountered other dedicated runners as he lapped the Mall. He was dashing alongside the Reflection Pool, heading towards Lincoln, when he came upon one of his favorite joggers.

It was a dark-skinned man, bundled up in a heavy duty sweater, scarf, and red and blue Howard University beanie hat with a matching pompom. He was idly running, seemingly without a care in the world as he kept his head down to block out the persistent wind.

Steve added just an extra oomph to his speed (he was a bit of a showoff) as he rushed past the jogger. “On your left.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the runner muttered under his breath, though Steve heard him as clearly as if he yelled it at him. The Avenger bit back his smirk as he continued charging forward, leaving the runner in his dust.

He did three more circuits until the sun, pale and weak as it fought the clouds, was high in the sky and the Mall was congested with pedestrians and tourists. He easily jogged back to Dupont Circle and his empty apartment.

He took the stairs three at a time as they trembled underneath his weight. It was past 7am so Kate would already be at work, he reflected as he passed her door. He let himself into his apartment and immediately made a beeline for the kitchen, his stomach gurgling loudly. He gulped down a banana as he put together a protein smoothie.

He ate another banana as the smoothie pulsed in the blender. When it was completed he poured it into a glass and downed it in three massive gulps. He set the glass down and reached for another of Stark’s protein bars. Once he had chewed and swallowed it his stomach finally settled and stopped its pathetic whining.

Steve pressed himself against the granite counters, leaning back as his shoulders dropped and he allowed himself to breathe deeply, the harmony of them the only sound in his silent apartment. The sweat he had accumulated on his power jog was cooling and clinging to his body, he wiped his brows and tossed aside his beanie, his hair sweaty and sticking to his forehead.

He exhaled and straightened from the counter as his eyes spotted the mess from last night still splayed across his dining room table. He ambled over to the wooden furniture and began picking up his discarded cartons from a local Indian restaurant in Dupont. He had feasted on numerous servings of chicken tandoori, paneer tikka, lamb jalfrezi, baingan bharta, seafood biriyani, and garlic naan.

It had been delicious.

He was continuously astounded by how amazing the food was in this century (if at times artificial). Steve hadn’t known spices and flavors like he had eaten last night had ever existed. He had grown up on boiled potatoes, egg drop soup, bacon grease sandwiches, and worst of all: dandelion salad.

The only time he heard of India before going to the War was when Bucky had procured a worn copy of The Jungle Book and had read aloud to him at night in their apartment as Steve sketched.

Speaking of sketching…

As Steve cleaned up his eyes immediately fell to what the cartons had been hiding from view, Thirteen’s Christmas gift to him. They were laying innocuously on the table, untouched since he had brought them home a week ago.
He wasn’t avoiding the art supplies per se, he just felt a tickling in his throat and a tightening in his stomach every time he looked at them. They were an innocent enough gift, the way Thirteen had fidgeted and fawned when she gave them to him told him that her intentions were purely benign, but he felt if he touched them or, God forbid, opened them, then Pandora’s Box would be unleashed.

He had used to love to draw. What little money he was able to get from the occasional oddball job had gone to paper and pencils. His fingers, more often than not, had been stained black by charcoal that had worked its way under his nails, staying there for weeks.

When he had first woken up in this century and had spent those first few weeks in New York adjusting before everything had gone to shit, he had tried drawing again. He would go into the city, sit at a café near the then Stark Tower and would try and sketch the foreign and noisy world around him.

But there had been no joy in his creations. The images he had desperately wanted to draw the most: Peggy, Bucky, his ma; he couldn’t bring himself to trace because he knew it would have just torn his heart apart every time. So he had locked those images away and drew ugly buildings like Stark’s.

Then the aliens had come and, well…Steve hadn’t drawn since.

And now had had art supplies sitting on his table and he didn’t know how to feel about it. He stared at them a long time before turning away and throwing away the last of his takeout containers. Nearby was the miniature notebook Dr. Abbot had given him with the hope that he 'could write out his feelings and reflect upon them.' As if.

Once done he risked a smell of his armpits and made a face at how…ripe he smelled. He instantly changed direction and marched towards his bathroom, stripping off his running gear along the way. By the time he was naked as the day he was born underneath the water, a trail of clothes were scattered across his apartment.

He showered quickly and efficiently and didn’t stay a moment longer than necessary. Water dripped everywhere as he wrapped a towel around his waist and grabbed another to dry his hair and shoulders. He meandered into his bedroom and straightaway was in his closest picking something to wear.

Only a fraction of his closet space was actually taken up by the khakis, high-waisted trousers, checkered button-ups, and dress shoes that he wore on a daily basis. The rest was jammed pack with the modern clothing SHIELD had provided when he had first moved to the Capitol: jeans, sweaters, t-shirts and leather jackets.

He had given the clothing a one over when he had first moved in but hadn’t given them a second thought since. But there they sat, glaring reminders that Steve wasn’t in Kansas anymore. He didn’t want to be label ‘old fashioned’, he had been raving against the conventions and limitations of his time period even when he had been tiny, but sue him if he was trying to find a little piece of home in this bizarre world that he now belonged to. Unlike Dorothy, he couldn’t click his heels and return to the farm. He was stuck here. So, yeah, he liked his out of date clothing even if it made Thirteen and Natasha giggle. Though even now, the clothes he had worn for forever were beginning to make his skin crawl the longer he wore them.

With a sigh he reached for the nearest button up and a pair of trousers as he slipped into them. Trailing back into the bathroom, he hung the damp towels and combed over his hair into its familiar look before brushing his teeth and adding a spritz of cologne.
When he deemed himself acceptable, he grabbed his aviator leather jacket and grabbed the keys to his Harley. A few minutes later he was at a corner flower shop where he was on a first name basis with the owner, Mrs. Dellucci, an Italian grandmother who always had a granddaughter or two to set him up with.

“You need to eat more Steven, you're too skinny! I could snap your bones in half,” the elderly woman tsked as she brought out his usual order, strikingly red carnations, and rang him up.

“Oh, believe me, Mrs. Dellucci,” Steve countered with a genial grin. “I eat enough and then some.”

He watched as she delicately wrapped the bouquet and handed it to him with a flourish. He leaned across the glass counter and kissed her cheeks in thanks and blushed as she slipped him the phone number of her second oldest granddaughter, Valentina.

“She’s a beauty! An amazing cook,” Mrs. Dellucci said with a wink as Steve pocketed the number politely though both knew he wouldn’t end up calling her sweet granddaughter. He packed the flowers carefully into a compartment of his motorcycle and slid into the helmet. He normally didn’t wear it, any head injury he could acquire would be healed within the day, but on chilly days like this, the helmet was useful against the wind.

Soon enough he was pulling up to the familiar care center in Arlington as he parked his bike and pulled out the flowers. He signed in at the front desk, sharing polite chit chat with the nurses stationed there who he recognized after so many weekly visits.

His feet followed the familiar path to Peggy’s room where he found her sitting up in bed, a knitted afghan over her legs and her hands resting, entwined over her lap. Her greying hair felt in gentle waves down her shoulders and her dark eyes were bright with awareness and curiosity.

It was one of her good days.

Her face erupted into a broad smile as she noticed him lurking in her doorway. Steve felt his heart flip flop at the sight.

“If it isn’t my favorite soldier,” Peggy greeted with her raspy voice as Steve came to her side, bending down to press a kiss to her cheek.

“How’s my best girl?” he asked as he sat down at her bedside, hand seeking out hers as their fingers intertwined.

“Better now that you’re here,” she responded cheerfully as her eyes darted to the bouquet. “Are those for me?”

Steve smiled as he handed them over to Peggy, who immediately buried her nose in the flowers.

“Who else would I spend my hard earned money on?”

“Your vast admirers, I’m sure,” Peggy responded with a teasing smile as she set the flowers on her bedside table, her fingers stroking the petals.

Steve shuddered at the mention of his fan club. They were a rambunctious bunch who didn’t understand boundaries. He had found someone going through his trash a few weeks ago, clutching his used toothbrush like it was the Holy Grail. He still had nightmares about it.

“That’s a special brand of crazy I don’t want to get into.”
Peggy chuckled but nodded and the pair spent the next hour discussing banal things such as the comings and goings of the care center and Steve’s time at SHIELD. As Steve detailed the insanity that was Stark against the Mandarin, he couldn’t help but notice the soft gaze Peggy set upon him as she listened, a fond smile grace her face.

“What?” he asked self-consciously as he finished and resisted the urge to run his fingers nervously through his hair. It was one of his tells and Peggy would notice it immediately. She squeezed his hand as her smile dimmed and became a tinge sad.

“It’s nothing, it’s just,” she paused, collecting her thoughts before continuing gently, “It’s just when you sit here, looking like you do, wearing those clothes, I feel…”

She broke off and he saw wetness gathering in the corners of her eyes as she stubbornly kept them at bay.

“I feel like its 1945 and you’ve come home from the Valkyrie in one piece.”

Emotion was thick in her voice as she glanced down at their joined hands, his skin smooth and supple in comparison to the wrinkles and veins running across hers.

Steve swallowed audibly as he looked at her, running his thumb over her knuckles. With his free hand, he tenderly raised her chin so they could keep eye contact.

“I did come back from the Valkyrie in one piece, Peg. Just not the right time.” He chuckled bitterly as Peggy’s eyes watched him somberly.

“Oh Steve,” she whispered as she clutched tighter at his hand. “It is the right time. Any time with you alive and healthy, that is the right time. I’m just worried that you don’t believe that.”

Steve blinked and furrowed his brows in confusion as he looked at her. “What? Peggy, I don’t understand.”

She sighed and reached out, her palm cupping his cheek as she stroked his warm skin.

“It’s not 1945 anymore, it’s 2013. You live here, in this century. But I…I’m worried that you wish it was the past.”

She raised a finger to his lips when he tried to speak. “Let me finish, silly boy. I know you feel as if your life slipped you by, that you missed everything. But this is where you live now, where you must make a life for yourself. You can’t keep hiding in the past, Steve. It will only destroy you.”

Steve shuddered in her grip as he looked down at the afghan, his free hand buried in its holes as he tried to stop himself from clenching his hand into a fist. He could feel the buildup of tears in the back of his throat, but he valiantly fought against the urge to sob. He blinked rapidly as tears stung his eyes.

“Peggy,” he choked out, “It’s so hard.”

He felt her gentle fingers running through his hair as she comforted him. “I know Steve, but the very best things in life often are.”

He sat back, away from her loving hands, needing distance and space if he was going to keep himself together, to be a good soldier, to be Captain America.

Captain America didn’t cry, so Steve Rogers didn’t need to either.
Peggy allowed him his space as she folded her hands in her laps and merely gazed at him with a melancholy air. Steve wiped his face and at his running nose with the sleeve of his jacket.

“I’m sorry to do this to you, Peggy,” he said pitifully as he stared down at his hands. The same hands that had saved the world more than once.

“You act as if your pain is a burden, Steve,” she spoke softly, “But there’s nothing burdensome about it. We all feel, the real travesty is when we act like we don’t. That’s when terrible things happen.”

Steve tearfully chuckled as he finally braved a look at her sympathetic face. “When did you get so wise, Peg?”

The former SSR agent snorted as she rolled her eyes fondly. “Somewhere in between chasing after you and your Commandos and having to deal with Howard Stark as a Co-Director of SHIELD.”

Steve laughed loudly and Peggy joined in. They laughed long and hard until Peggy was grasping at her side as she drew in a deep breath. Something shifted though and as her laughter drifted away her posture change and the clarity of her eyes dimmed and clouded.

A moment later she was gaping at Steve with wonderment and awe. As if she hadn’t seen him in years…

Steve’s heart broke as he realized what was coming. It had only occurred once or twice before, but it gutted him every single time.

“Steve,” she murmured in amazement, hands shaking as she took him in. “Is it really you? You’re…you’re alive!”

Tears sprang to her eyes as Steve mustered up his best grin though he could feel how brittle it was at the corners of his mouth.

“Yes, Peggy, it’s me. I’ve come back to you.”

“But the Valkyrie…they said you were dead.”

He reached for hand and held on tight as she continued to stare at him, afraid if she blinked he would disappear from sight. “Peggy,” he began soothingly just as the nurses had once instructed. “What year is it?”

She blinked and glanced around, trying to get her bearings about her.

“It’s 1950,” she began haltingly, her eyes wide and alarmed. Steve shook his hand and gripped tighter.

“No, Peggy. It’s 2013 and you’re in Arlington, VA. Do you remember?”

“Where’s Daniel?” Peggy immediately questioned and Steve felt his heart clench at the mention of her deceased husband. He’d have to go another route to bring her back to him.

“Peggy, do you remember your life? You have a daughter who’s just as amazing as you. You created SHIELD alongside Howard. You’ve lived an amazing life.”

Slowly but surely the cloud in Peggy’s eyes faded until she was present with him once again. The moment she realized what had happened she dropped his hand and looked away, cheeks flushed in
humiliation and despair.

“I’m sorry, Steve,” she said without looking at him, her eyes glued to the wall. “I’m sorry…that you had to be a witness to my…sickness.”

Steve couldn’t stand for that. He immediately moved to the bed and wrapped up his favorite girl in his arms. Peggy melted into him, head burrowed in his broad shoulders as he swayed her and buried his nose in her hair.

She still wore the same perfume. If he closed his eyes he could pretend they were somewhere in Europe on another harebrained scheme of his.

“There’s nothing to apologize for, Peggy,” he told her fiercely as he held onto her. “You never have to apologize to me.”

He stayed with her until her breathing deepened and she nodded off into her afternoon nap. He set her back against her pillows and made sure she was covered by her blankets and quilts, so as to not catch a chill. He watched her for a while before standing and placing a tender kiss to her forehead.

He left the care center with a nod of his head to the front desk and drove a fair amount above the speed limit as he raced back to DC, his mind and heart racing a thousand miles per hour. Her words echoed throughout his soul, burrowing into the hollow planes of his body until they were a mantra in his mind.

But this is where you live now, where you must make a life for yourself. You can’t keep hiding in the past, Steve.

So consumed in his thoughts it was only a whim that he noticed the spinning red, white and blue lines of an old school barber’s pole on a corner street. Without knowing why he immediately braked, his Harley skidding across the pavement, groaning at the sudden stop. He maneuvered it into a parking spot and hurried into the shop before he lost his nerve.

It was empty save for a dark-skinned, middle-aged man sweeping the floor from a previous costumer. It had stripped brick walls, checkered tile floors and smelled sharply of aftershave. Photos of baseball legends such as Jackie Robinson, Willie Mays, and Hank Aaron hung on the walls as the dulcet tones of Duke Ellington played from a radio.

The barber nodded at Steve as he continued sweeping. “How can I help you, son?”

Steve sheepishly shoved his hands in his pockets as he glanced around. “A haircut, please.” He added the please as the barber chuckled and nodded. He set aside the broom and gestured to the nearest chair as Steve seated himself. The barber leisurely wrapped the cloth around him as he combed out Steve’s hair.

“Haven’t seen this style on a young man in years,” he remarked at Steve’s side-swept locks as Steve felt his cheeks heat up.

“I’m a bit out of touch of what’s hip these days.”

The barber chuckled as he continued combing. “To each their own. So, young sir, what can I do for you today? A different vintage style?”

Steve adamantly shook his head, “No, I want something more…modern.”

The barber hummed before reaching for his scissors. “I may have just the thing for ya.”
Steve leaned back, closed his eyes and let the past fall away to the snips of the scissors.

January 8th, 2013

The Triskelion

Sharon yawned as she staked out the elevators in the atrium waiting for a particular Avenger to arrive on the premises. Honestly, when had she become the man’s personal assistant? It seemed all she did anymore was chase after him to get him from Point A to B. She was standing by idly, fiddling with her cell phone, when she heard a murmur arise up across the din of noise in the atrium.

She raised her blonde hair and saw many SHIELD employees staring at something out of her eyesight. She pocketed her phone and stood on tip toes, trying to see what all of the hullabaloo was about.

Were they being attacked by aliens again?

Her jaw dropped when she saw the source of amazement. It was Steve Rogers…but a drastically different Steve Rogers.

He moved through the crowd easily as everyone parted before him like the Red Sea.

He had…gotten a makeover, a massive one.

Gone were the grey trousers and the old fashioned button-ups. This Steve Rogers was in hip-hugging denim jeans, a fashionable grey sweatshirt, and a dark utility jacket was thrown over it. His traditional side-parted hair was cut short, gelled and styled into a ‘faux messy’ masterpiece.

Hot damn.

What had happened to Rogers?

“Good morning, Veronica,” he greeted as he noticed her standing there, gaping at him like a fan from One Direction.

“C-Captain,” she responded her brown eyes slowly trailing from his feet to the top of his head (she may have paused a hair too long at his torso but she was only so strong).

Amusement flashed in Rogers’ eyes as he bit down a smirk curling in the corner of his face. Sharon blinked and tried to regain some self-control.

“This is all,” she gestured wildly at him, not knowing where to look as she gulped. “Different.”

She felt lame just speaking to him. Maybe aliens would still attack and save her from herself.

A girl could hope, right?

“Yes,” Rogers replied unhelpfully. Cleary enjoying her discomfort. She guessed it was only fair after her pink neon get-up months ago. Karma was a beast.
“Any…” she glanced away from how perfect his shoulders were highlighted in that jacket. “Any reason for the change?”

Rogers’ good humor faded for a moment as he rubbed at the nape of his neck abashedly. “A wise person told me to stop living in the past. I thought I’d give it a try.”

Sharon’s mouth frowned sympathetically as she gazed at him. She had a fair idea of who had bestowed such wisdom upon him. Sharon nodded and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Well then, welcome to the future.”

Rogers nodded before his eyes lit up as he pulled something out of his notebook.

“I have a question for you.”

Sharon arched an eyebrow as he opened a small, black notebook and pulled a pencil from his pocket.

“Yeah?” she was a little afraid of where this was going. He was acting very un-Rogers like. He was throwing her for a loop and she wasn’t completely sold on it.

“What’s the one thing that I missed in my time away that I should know about?”

Sharon blinked. She hadn’t been expecting that. Then again, she hadn’t been expecting Rogers’ hotness level to increase as exponentially as it had.

It was an odd world they lived in.

Strange as the question was, she understood it for what it was.

Rogers finally accepted the hard truth that he lived in this time now. He couldn’t keep pretending it was a bad dream and that he’d wake up in 1945.

The least she could do was humor his silly question.

She pretended to give the question a lot of thought as she brought her hand up to her chin and pondered the heavens. Rogers rolled his eyes but waited patiently.

“Ah!” she snapped and pointed her finger at the Avenger. “Bill Nye the Science Guy.”

Rogers stared, thinking it was some kind of joke. “Come again?”

“The man’s a genius,” Sharon insisted. “Everything I learned about science came from him.”

Rogers, seeing that it was in fact not a joke, looked down and slowly wrote it out.

“Well, thanks, I think.”

“No problem,” Sharon responded cheerfully as she hummed the theme song. Rogers pocketed his notebook and glanced at her.

“Any reason for the greeting party?”

“Fury has a potential mission for us,” Sharon explained as she handed over the file she had been clutching. Rogers took it and began scanning the pages intently.
“Think you can handle it?” she teased, wanting things to go back to normal where he didn’t surprise her with his very presence.

Rogers allowed a small grin to come across his handsome face as his eyes darted towards her.

“No time like the present to find out.”

Sharon grinned predatorily. That was exactly the kind of thing she liked to hear.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the previous reviews, it's always amazing to get positive feedback. Please keep it up!

I hope this chapter gives more insight to Steve and his internal struggles and hopefully fleshes out Steve and helps bring him to life.

I loved writing him and Peggy's interactions. It's lucky for Steve to have such support and love from Peggy, but also have her put him in his place when needed.

I know it may seem like I have everyone dressing casually at the Trisk, but there is a method to my madness. So, how I view it, is that handlers and other SHIELD agents that are based in the Trisk wear business/business casual while the field agents who are out on missions are much more casual, hence why Sharon, Nat and the gang are in jeans and leather.

And yes, we got a little hint of one Sam Wilson. I just love the idea that Steve has been trolling him for so long. Sam will remain just a tease for now and will make his grand debut in Story 2.

Pic time!

Sharon waiting for Steve:
Here I Am, Next to You

Chapter Summary

“So what’s got you so excited?” The Man with a Plan asked as Sharon bit down her grin. She couldn’t help it. She had been waiting for this ever since she became a SHIELD agent.

“Every year Level 7 agents and above are given an Academy mentee for the final stretch of their training. They take the recruit on missions, train them, supervise them, help mold them into the agents they one day will be.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

August 11th, 2007

The Treehouse

Sharon landed on the mats with a bang as she laid sprawled out, a sweaty, groaning mess of limbs. She wearily blinked opened her eyes and was grateful that the world was no longer spinning.

“Again,” the command came from across the room, the voice strong and authoritative as Sharon rolled to her side, blindly reached for her escrima sticks. With a sigh, the Academy student flipped herself to her feet and twirled her sticks as she planted her feet and faced off against SHIELD’s most fearsome agent.

Melinda May.

Sharon knew she had lucked out when SHIELD’s biggest asset (bar the Black Widow) had turned out to be her mentor for her last stretch in the Academy. Bobbi Morse had been more than a little jealous. Sharon had reveled in it.

If she wanted to be the best, she needed to be trained by the best. And there was no one better than May.

The seasoned spy had been putting Sharon through her paces these last few months. It had been grueling, but Sharon knew she was stronger for it.

The surprising thing hadn’t been May’s ferocity or her single-minded focus, but rather the warmth she had exhibited on more than one occasion. She looked after Sharon, both on missions and at the Trisk. She talked to her like a human and not a maggot. She had even taken her out for burgers and milkshakes a few times, knowing Sharon’s weakness for a juicy burger.

Sharon really had lucked out.

But not on occasions like these where May was kicking her ass round after round. Sharon heaved in a breath and centered herself as she faced off against her mentor.
May smirked. “Ready? Or should I give you another minute?”

Sharon scoffed and rolled her eyes. “Do your worst.”

May’s smile turned positively feral as she sized up her opponent. “Poor choice of words.”

The two lunged for another, the sound of their sticks clacking against one another as they moved quickly, looking like blurs to any outside source. Sharon leaped and came down upon May, striking out with her stick. Sharon struck twice against May’s right-handed stick, before bringing one down hard against the back of her wrist.

The S.H.I.E.L.D agent groaned as Sharon effectively trapped and twisted her hand, dislodging the stick as it went flying, leaving May with only one against Sharon’s two.

May went to her knees with a sweep of her baton, aiming for Sharon’s shins. Sharon raised her leg and pivoted on her heel, dodging the wooden weapon. She went up high to attack May and left her torso open for attack.

May was quick to act as Sharon brought her baton down. Moving quickly the S.H.I.E.L.D agent blocked Sharon’s advance with her stick, twisted Sharon’s arm and smacked the stick into Sharon’s chest. Sharon dropped one of her weapons in surprise as May’s stick collided with her.

The impact was worse than a punch to the gut as Sharon felt all the air escape her. Sharon fought back as their sticks splintered against one another. May had grabbed Sharon’s fighting arm and twisted in, locking Sharon into a bent over hold, smacking her once in the juncture between shoulder and arm. As she hit her she managed to grab Sharon’s remaining stick, leaving the blonde defenseless and her with two weapons.

May turned, and before Sharon had a chance to move, swiftly brought down the stick across Sharon’s shoulders and back. The smack resounded throughout the training space as Sharon dropped to her knees, sucking in deep breaths as pain exploded across her bones.

She remained in her kneels, stubbornly blinking back the tears swelling at her eyes. She could hear May’s breath above her as she remained on the ground.

“Is that all you got, Reynolds?” May taunted as she lazily revolved the batons. May paused and pointed one of the sticks at Sharon thoughtfully.

“Oh should I say…Carter?”

Sharon froze instantly on the spot, unable to breathe for an entirely different reason. Her wide, brown eyes stared up at May as the older woman smirked saucily.

“Oh, yeah, I know.”

Sharon couldn’t believe it. When she had enrolled in the Academy as Sharon Reynolds (her mother’s surname), Fury had promised that her files would be locked shut, so no one would ever figure out her little secret.

She wanted to achieve at S.H.I.E.L.D by merit alone, not by who her relatives were. Especially when said-relative was one of the founding members of the spy agency. Peggy’s shoes were monumental to fill.

“How?” Sharon got out through gritted teeth as May flippantly shrugged, not a single hair out of place on her head.
“Spy,” she remarked glibly. “So, you think you can be as good as Peggy Carter? Because, trust me, you’re no Peggy Carter.”

The jab, as expected, was enough to send Sharon into a flurry of movement as she jumped up from her crouch and charged the seasoned agent. However, passion didn’t make up for precision, as May easily got her in a hold and shoved her into the nearest wall.

Sharon groaned as she bounced off it and only ducked in time before May’s steel-clad boot made contact with her head. Somersaulting away, she landed on her feet and turned just as May came after her.

Both were weaponless, so now it was fist against fist, blow against blow. May came hard at Sharon, but she dodged her blow for blow, defending herself even as May lashed out at her. She internally smiled when she got a rough elbow strike to May’s head, momentarily holding the spy off. She groaned as May landed a punch to her side, feeling her ribs cry out from the abuse.

The two continued fighting, Sharon holding her own against May’s relentless assault. She had her arms up defensively and blocked a strong punch against them that sent her back a few feet. May lunged and Sharon was a second too late to avoid it. She hit the mats hard as the world spun around her.

When everything came into focus, May was standing above her, victorious. As if a switch flicked, May’s smile was warm and friendly as she offered a hand to her charge. Sharon took it and was pulled to her feet.

“That was good,” May complimented as Sharon scoffed. “I mean it,” May insisted as she reached up and ruffled Sharon’s sweat soaked hair.

“You’ve come a long way from when we first met. I would have wiped the floor with you months ago.”

“You did wipe the floor with me months ago,” Sharon corrected as the pair shuffled over to the benches, reaching for water bottles. Sharon chugged hers, the cool water refreshing against the stifling heat of the training room.

“And look at you now,” May gestured to her mentee. “With a little more refinement you’ll be able to go up against the best of the best, people like Barton or Romanoff.”

“Don’t let them hear you say that.” S.H.I.E.L.D.’s resident assassins were notorious for popping up at the worst possible times. Sharon had no wish to get caught up in the Black Widow’s web. The redhead would chew her up and spit her back out, budding friendship or not.

May opened her mouth to respond but was cut off as her cell phone chirped with an incoming text message. The spy reached for her phone and a beaming smile erupted from her face as she read over the text.

Sharon raised an eyebrow as she drained her water bottle. She knew what that besotted look meant…

“Ooh, is it the hubby?” Sharon teased with a waggle of her eyebrows as May good-naturedly shoved her away. “Did he say he loves and misses you? Hmm? Were there heart emoji’s?”

She ducked the escrima stick May threw at her as she quickly fired back a text to her husband.

Sharon had only met Andrew Garner once or twice, but one had to be blind not to see the immense
love between the two. They acted like newlyweds all of the time. It was nauseating in the very best way. Sharon thought it was cute…most of the time.

“Shut up,” May ordered, but she said it with a love-struck grin, Sharon wasn’t about to follow it. “Maybe when you finally grow up you can have a relationship as deep and fulfilling as mine and Andrew’s.”

Sharon chuckled as she idly cracked her neck, hearing the joints pop into place. “Nah, I don’t think anything like that is in the cards for me.”

She still had nightmares where she woke up and had accepted Max Davenport’s proposal. Yikes. The blonde dabbed her face with a towel. “I’m not the kind of person to choose love over duty.” Realizing what she had said she gulped audibly as her eyes darted over to May. “No offense.”

May rolled her eyes as she punched Sharon’s shoulder jokingly. “None taken. And you never know, it could happen to you.”

Sharon laughed as she tossed her towel to May. “I don’t see anyone lining up at the door anytime soon, but sure. True love and all that.”

“I can see it. He’ll be…blonde, blue-eyed, All American with an ‘Aw, shucks’ attitude.”

Sharon wrinkled her nose in distaste at the description of a…square, to be perfectly honest.

“So not my type,” she responded. “I like them bad with a hint of danger on the side. The kind that you know will break your heart from the start, but you can’t stop yourself anyway.”

“You say that now, but when the right guy shows up, you’ll be knocked off your feet wondering where he’s been all your life.”

Sharon couldn’t help but giggle at May’s declarations. “I’m sorry, I thought I was being mentored by a SHIELD agent, not a romance novel writer. When you find Melinda May, send her my way.”

Sharon reached for the escrima sticks, but May’s shake of her head stopped her mid-action.

“No, we’ve been sparring for hours. You deserve a break. A few more weeks or so and you’ll be ready for your exams.”

Sharon warmed at the compliment and the impending nature of the Academy Exams. Rumor had it they were gruesome with only a 47% passing rate. But if one wanted to be an agent of SHIELD, then she aced the exams.

“Well then, any other words of wisdom, boss?”

May pretended to think about it before a slow, rueful smile cropped up in the corner of her mouth.

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

Sharon stared uncomprehendingly at her mentor as she nodded. “Yes, they do.”

May chuckled and pat Sharon on the shoulder as she walked towards the entrance, throwing a remark over her shoulder as she went.

“Remember that. It may save your life one day.”
Sharon just watched her go with a raised brow.

Well, okay then…

January 15th, 2013

The Triskelion

“You look chipper today,” Rogers remarked as a greeting as Sharon came up to his side. He wasn’t wrong. She was giddy today. Because today was The Day.

“Today’s the Day,” was what she said to her partner who arched an eyebrow in response, baffled but not knowing if he wanted to continue this line of conversation.

“What day? Taco Tuesday?” His stomach grumbled at the thought, he was a fan of tacos…

Sharon stared at the Avenger for a moment before shaking her head and continued walking.

“Are you ever not hungry?” she asked as Rogers trailed behind her.

“Not especially, no,” he countered as the blonde spy rolled her eyes.

“No, it’s not Taco Tuesday. It’s way better than Taco Tuesday.”

Those were fighting words. Hardly anything was better than Taco Tuesday.

“So what’s got you so excited?” The Man with a Plan asked as Sharon bit down her grin. She couldn’t help it. She had been waiting for this ever since she became a SHIELD agent.

“Every year Level 7 agents and above are given an Academy mentee for the final stretch of their training. They take the recruit on missions, train them, supervise them, help mold them into the agents they one day will be.”

Sharon’s eyes had gone glassy as she described the process to Rogers, who was watching her thoughtfully.

“Good memories, huh?” he asked softly as Sharon nodded, feeling a blush creep up her neck towards her cheeks.

“Who trained you?”

“Melinda May,” Sharon stated proudly as Rogers raised an eyebrow, puzzled by the name. Sharon gaped at him as she came to a complete standstill and turned to the Avenger exasperated.

“You’ve never heard of Melinda May? The Calvary?”

“Should I have?” Rogers retorted sullenly as he crossed his arms over his chest.
“Uh, yeah,” Sharon was looking at him like he had grown a second head. “She’s only one of the best field agents SHIELD has ever had.”

“Better than Natasha?” Rogers asked disbelievingly.

“On par with Natasha,” Sharon conceded with a huff, but still Rogers was impressed. An equal to Natasha was not someone to be underestimated.

“She’s the reason I am as good as I am. I owe everything to her and her tutelage,” Sharon continued passionately as Rogers felt a smirk curl up in the corner of his mouth.

“So, if she’s the best, why haven’t I heard of her?”

Sharon sighed and looked lost for a moment before replying.

“She had a rough mission a few years back in Bahrain. Whatever happened it…shook her, changed her somehow.”

“What happened?”

Sharon shrugged in response. “She’s never talked about it. Whatever it was, it was bad. She got out of the field then, works behind a desk now.”

“Sounds like a shame,” Rogers said for the sake of saying something. It must have worked because Sharon perked up a bit.

“Yeah, well, now that I’m finally a Level 7 it’s my turn to have a protégé of my own.”

Sharon could see the camaraderie now. Having a mentor had been her favorite thing about the Academy.

“Is Romanoff getting one?” Rogers asked as Sharon shook her head.

“She’s refused every year. Says she’s not a teacher.”

“I’m not expected to have one, am I?” Rogers inquired, worried he’d have to have a sidekick of his own.

Sharon shrugged. “You’d have to take that up with Fury. As far as I know, no. Something about my mentee will be like a joint parenting exercise between us.”

Rogers sighed audibly. “Just what I wanted.”

Sharon was tempted to stick her tongue out in response but restrained herself. She was an adult like that.

“Well, when do you figure out who the unlucky victim is?”

“I’ll ignore the wording because you’re secretly jealous that all my wisdom will be bestowed upon a pupil. And right now, I’m off.”

Rogers waved her off as she walked away, heading to Hill’s office to receive her folder on her new student of sorts.

She wanted to be as influential to her ward as May had been to her. May was one of the reasons she was even half the agent that she was. May had seen all her flailing potential and had molded her
into something sublime.

Look at her, not even 26 years old and already a Level 7 agent and Captain America’s partner.

She wanted to be that person for someone else, help them find their way and become something great within the agency. And now she had her chance.

Maria Hill was quick to chuck her folder at Sharon and usher her out of her office quicker than the blonde could blink. She didn’t question the Deputy Director’s actions but greedily opened up her folder to consume the knowledge within. She looked up as the elevator dinged and stepped into the car, noticing Barton slouched against the wall as he threw a nod her way.

“Barton,” she acknowledged politely as she noticed the identical folder in his grip.

“You’re taking on an Academy mentee?” she asked curiously as the archer grunted.

“Yes.” He popped the ‘p’ and his voice was raspy like he hadn’t slept in days and was in dire need of coffee.

“Hill forced me into it. Especially since Nat’s refused, again. Apparently, they’ve got a talented archer this year. Hill thinks I can hone her skills or some bullshit like that.”

He shrugged sloppily and ran a hand through his already noticeably disheveled hair as Sharon nodded to his story.

“You got a name yet?” she inquired as his eyes rolled upward, racking his brain for an answer.

“Uh…something Bishop. I don’t really remember. I turned down my hearing aids halfway through the conversation.”

Sharon snorted and tried to hide the sound. Her friendship with Natasha must have been noticed by Barton for him to have voluntarily brought up his hearing aids. It was a touchy subject for the archer. The last time an agent had remarked about it, they had walked away with three missing teeth.

“What about you?” Barton needled. “Know anything about your candidate?”

Sharon held up her folder as she flipped it open to the correct page and read aloud from it. “Briar Rose Toussaint. She hails from Baton Rouge, Louisiana.”

Barton hummed to himself as he scratched at his stubble. “Hmm. Briar Rose? Isn’t that Sleeping Beauty’s name?”

“It is.” Sharon glanced over at the Avenger in surprise. “I didn’t take you for a Disney aficionado.”

Barton shrugged easily as the elevator came to a stop and the doors opened. “I love the classics. See you, Thirteen.”

He disappeared down the hall just as the doors closed again and the elevator continued its descent to the 19th floor. It deposited Sharon there as she trekked towards her office. She breezed through the doorway was pleasantly surprised to see someone waiting for her.

It was a young female, no more than 19 or 20 years old. Standing tall at around 5’11” with a long and lithe dancer’s body, that looked graceful even as it sat in one of Sharon’s desk chairs. Golden skin, brilliant and soulful aurous eyes, a head of thick and bouncy curls, and full lips greeted
Sharon as she took in the sight of her visitor.

It only took one guess to figure out who it was.

“Briar Rose Toussaint?” Sharon asked as she ventured further into her office, making a beeline for her desk. Excitement was already scattering out across her skin and she fought not to grin.

The young woman nodded once. “Yes, ma’am. Call me Bri.”

Her voice was slow and soothing like molasses and Sharon had half a mind to believe she had just walked out of a Disney movie.

“I’m Agent-”

“Agent 13,” Bri interrupted smoothly as Sharon quirked an eyebrow. “I know who you are. You’re kind of a big deal at the Academy.”

Sharon preened as she plopped herself down in her chair, leaning back with a Cheshire grin.

“Really? And why is that?”

“Because you’re Captain America’s partner,” Bri responded perfunctorily.

Sharon’s smile dropped and the wind collapsed from her sails.

“Oh.”

Bri nodded before continuing, “It’s an honor to be working under you, ma’am.”

The blonde balked at the term as she leaned back in her chair. “Call me Sharon. Just don’t ever call me that in front of Rogers.”

Bri blinked at Sharon’s adamant tone before slowly nodding. “Okay?”

“It’s a long story,” Sharon stated, sensing her student’s confusion. “Trust me when I say it’s for everyone’s best interest to keep my name between us.”

“Noted.”

The two sat in silence for a moment as Sharon struggled with what to say. The first time she met May had been on a mission while being shot at. It had been a great way to break the ice. She didn’t know where to go from here. Bri seemed equally as lost as she sat in the chair, looking everywhere except at Sharon.

Luckily they were saved from the silent torture as a knock sounded at Sharon’s door as Natasha popped her head in.

Bri’s eyes widened as she took in the sight of the only female Avenger. Sharon felt like glowering at her newfound protégé’s star-struck expression. Natasha saw it too and her expression became smug and coy as she stepped into the office.

“Hey,” she directed to Bri as Sharon rolled her eyes.

“What do you want, Nat?” she was quick to show that she and the Black Widow not only were on a first name basis at but nickname status.
That had to up her cool points a bit, right?

God, she sounded like the mom from *Mean Girls.*

Natasha wandered to the desk and pulled something from her jean pockets. “I got invited to the Presidential Inaugural Ball. I’m taking you as my plus one.”

She flung the gold engraved ticket onto the desk as Sharon reached for it and held it up to the light. It was legit.

Sharon was touched as she glanced up at Natasha who only stuck her tongue out in response.

“How’d you score these bad boys?”

“Something about saving the world and all,” Natasha responded offhandedly as she studied her manicure.

“And you’d invite me over Barton? Nat, how sweet,” Sharon cooed as Natasha shrugged disinterestedly.

“The whole team’s invited. Clint has tickets of his own. Wear something nice and don’t embarrass me.”

Natasha turned on her heel and left the office as quickly as she had appeared, Bri staring after her yearningly. Her head spun back around to Sharon as she gaped at the blonde.

“You’re friends with the Black Widow?”

“Nat and I?” Sharon asked with a sly grin. “We go way back.”

“Kate will be so jealous,” Bri whispered to herself. “She got paired with Clint Barton.”

“He’s an Avenger in his own right, I’m sure his charge will be more than impressed with him.”

Bri huffed out a laugh, “Yeah, he’s everyone’s 4th or 5th favorite Avenger.”

Sharon quirked an eyebrow, intrigued.

“If he’s your 4th or 5th favorite, who is your least favorite?”

“The Hulk,” Bri responded without hesitation as she shrugged. “You take away the green and mean, what is he?”

“A genius, I think,” Sharon replied dryly as Bri considered this tidbit before shrugging again.

“I stand by my point. You work with Captain America and are friends with Black Widow. That trumps Hawkeye any day.”

Well, Sharon liked her moxie, that’s for sure. She felt a grin growing on her face as she leaned back in her chair, the DC landscape shining outside her window in the bright, winter sun.

Suddenly, it seemed like they were so many possibilities.

“Well, now that we know where we stand. Let’s have some fun.”
Sharon couldn’t help but be besotted by the lights and spectacle of attending an inaugural ball. Politicians, celebrities, and activists were mingling in the massive ballroom as symphony music played softly throughout the space.

Bruce Springsteen and Bon Jovi would be taking the stage later and Sharon couldn’t wait.

It was times like these that she really loved her job.

She gasped as George Clooney walked past her, champagne in hand.

It definitely seemed like President Ellis was a popular and beloved man. His approval rating was at an all-time high at the moment, in part due to the sympathy from nearly being killed by the Mandarin less than a month earlier.

She stood among the glitz and glam in a floor-length, blue gown with pleated petals sewn into the fabric. She held her clutch to her side and surveyed the landscape. She couldn’t help but feel like a million bucks.

“Looking good,” Natasha stated as she materialized at Sharon’s side with a flute of champagne that she offered the blonde.

Natasha was a striking vision in a form-fitting, knee length dress bedazzled with blue and pink sequins. Her red hair was an array of wild curls and she stood tall in hot pink heels. It was a confident look only a woman like her could pull off.

“You as well,” Sharon remarked as she reached for the glass and daintily sipped it, her lipstick smudging the rim. She looked around as she saw familiar faces fanning out across the ballroom.

Maria Hill, in a slinky, satin gown was standing with Fury, speaking to diplomats in a variety of languages. Barton was near the Hors d’oeuvres table, fidgeting in a stiff tuxedo as he seemed near ready to claw out his white bowtie.

Pepper Potts was a vision in an off the shoulder designer dress (Marchesa or Armani, Sharon couldn’t tell) as Tony Stark babbled loudly at her side, looking like himself in his signature purple shades. Colonel Rhodes stood with the pair in his dress uniform, a smirk working its way up his face as Stark must have said something exceedingly amusing.

“Why isn’t Banner here?” Sharon questioned, glancing around and not seeing the scientist who was known for turning big and green. A shame, she had been looking forward to meeting him.

“Probably because of that.” Natasha nodded over to Secretary Thaddeus ‘Thunderbolt’ Ross.

Ah, yes. She could understand Banner’s hesitation to be anywhere near the man who had once hunted him so openly.

A flash of blonde hair caught Sharon’s attention. Stuck in a mob of adoring women was none other than one bashful Steve Rogers.
Natasha followed her gaze before smiling as she looked away. “If you will excuse me, I need to rescue Clint from himself.”

Natasha was gone without a sound as she disappeared into the throng of people. Sharon caught Steve’s panicked gaze and with a martyred sigh, drained the rest of her champagne, set it down on a passing tray, and made her way towards Rogers.

As she worked her through the crowd, snippets of conversation could be heard. As she passed General Ross she heard this, “It will be a fortress strong enough to hold that scoundrel Loki himself. It will be an island unto itself.”

And as she passed Secretary Pierce this piece of conversation was heard, “We’re still in the beginning stages of this…little project. All I really say is that it will be a game changer.”

Sharon elbowed herself into Rogers’ fan club and came up to the Avenger’s side with a bat of her eyelashes.

“Sorry ladies,” she apologized in a posh voice as she slipped her arm into Rogers’. “I need to borrow this fella.”

She tugged on him and he went willingly as his disappointed admirers melted away. She guided Rogers to a side table and stepped away from him, surveying him with a raised brow.

“Thanks for the save,” he murmured as he reached for a glass of bourbon.

“What would you do without me?” Sharon quipped in response as he sipped the alcohol. He shrugged and looked out over the crowd.

Sharon took the moment to notice his tuxedo. It fit him like a glove as he stood before her, showcasing his broad shoulders and slender waist.

“Nice tux,” she complimented as he looked at her. “I didn’t know you owned one.”

His bowtie was slightly eschewed and without giving it a second thought, she reached up to straighten it. Rogers watched her, eyes momentarily widening before he countered back.

“I don’t, actually. I was planning on wearing my army uniform but Pepper had this sent to me.”

He ducked his head as a slight flush came across his cheeks. Sharon grinned as she took in the sight of an embarrassed super soldier.

“Pepper is an exceptional woman,” Sharon remarked as she released the bowtie and lowered her hands to his lapel, patting off invisible lint.

“That she is,” Rogers murmured, just short of dreamy as Sharon bit down a grin.

“I think someone has a crush,” she remarked teasingly as Rogers blinked and shook his head.

“Oh, no, not really. It’s just…I appreciate when a woman is efficient.”

If efficiency was his type it was no wonder he had been head over heels for Peggy back in the day. Sharon thought it was pretty cute.

“And I’d never go after her, she’s Tony’s girl. I mean, not that he owns her. She’s her own woman. She chose Tony, odd as that is.”
Sharon snorted and got Rogers out of his misery.

“I understand what you’re saying, Rogers. We don’t have to belay the point.”

Rogers nodded. “Probably for the best.”

He looked her up and down before saying politely, “You look nice tonight.”

Sharon grinned as she resisted the urge to twirl. “I figured it was go big or go home.”

Sharon played with her clutch as she looked out into the crowd.

“Wait a second, is that Leonardo Dicaprio? Excuse me, Rogers. I have a husband to catch.”

Rogers watch his partner disappear into the crowd, her dress trailing behind her. He sighed as he saw the women beginning to close in around him.

It was going to be a long night…

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the previous reviews! I love receiving them!

Sorry if May's characterization may seem a bit off from AOS, but I had read that before the Bahrain mission she was a warm person, who often pulled pranks on her coworkers and had a loving marriage. So, I wanted to incorporate that into the story, since that passage takes place before Bahrain.

Hmm, I wonder when May's advise about displays of affection will come into play?? ;)

Kate Bishop is in the story! We'll meet her sometime in the future. She'll have a fun friendship/rivalry with Bri.

I hope everyone caught the hints at the ball about the Raft and Project Insight. Two major events occurring in the upcoming stories in the series.

Pic time!

Bri Toussaint:
Inaugural Ball Pics

Sharon:
Natasha:
Pepper:
Tony:

Clint:
Feels like We're on the Edge Right Now

Chapter Summary

Fury arched an eyebrow, “Yes, you do. A word of advice, Sharon. You’re towing the line towards dangerous territory. You keep on like this and you not only threaten to compromise your safety, but his as well. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Sharon could only stare down at her hands.

“So do I.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

January 24th, 2013
Gaithersburg, Maryland

Sharon shuddered as she stepped through the door and out of the biting chill outside. She was immediately hit with a wave of warmth as she rubbed her hands together, tinges of pink clawing at her skin due to the wintery cold. A bell above the door shepherded her arrival into the hole of a wall diner that looked like it hadn’t aged a day since it was erected in the 1960s. It was a quaint little place, out of the way and only known by dedicated locals who had been eating in it for decades.

No one even batted an eye at the blonde’s arrival, the few diners going about their business as they ate their breakfasts, drank their coffee and read their papers. Sharon glanced around before finding her target sitting in a cozy, back corner booth. His back was to the wall, allowing him to scope out the space with his one good eye.

Sharon raised a hand and waved only to lower it when Fury ignored her. She sighed to herself, hoisted her tote bag higher up on her shoulder and strolled over to her boss. She was dressed casually in form-fitting black jeans, russet leather boots pulled up to her knees and an olive anorak jacket shielding her from the cold. Her nearly shoulder-length hair was pulled up in a messy bun with wisps of hair escaping and framing her face.

“Nick,” she greeted as she slipped in across from the SHIELD director, the bench giving in under her as she melted into it.

Fury looked like…well, Fury. The man wouldn’t know relaxation if it bit him in the ass. He was dressed in his signature dark leather ensemble looking both intimidating and futuristic as he sat across from her, hands splayed out on the laminate table.

His dark eye roved over her face before he gave her a single nod. “Sharon.”

It was only in this space where they could exist like this. He was simply Nick and not the
headmaster of a bunch of superhero delinquents and she was Sharon, not a spy with a prestigious family legacy in the business.

This was the Nick who had been on the peripheries of Sharon’s life ever since she was a toddler, ambling after the older man during his infrequent visits to Peggy’s home during his early years as director. He’d never admit to ever being so green, but not even Nick Fury knew everything and he had relied on Peggy’s wisdom during his first few years in charge. Sharon had always loved resting on his knee, hearing his deep voice echo throughout him as he talked all manners of national security, all of it going over Sharon’s young head.

When they were like this, they weren’t boss and employee. That line was gone and there was no bullshit between them. They could talk shop about SHIELD in a surprisingly frank and honest way that they couldn’t elsewhere, but they could also talk about other topics…such as Peggy, frustrations, and life.

Nick Fury could be a surprisingly good soundboard when he needed to.

The two stayed quiet as their waitress, a robust woman named Dolores, swung by, filling them with coffee and taking their orders. Nick and Sharon had their usual’s: Nick a southwestern omelet slathered in hot sauce and Sharon a whole spread of pancakes, sunny side eggs, and fatty sausage with a side of whole wheat toast.

She was a spy, she’d work off the extra calories.

Besides, Sundays were for treating one’s self.

The two passed the time idly, small, safe chitchat about the continuous, dreary weather in DC, how the new espresso machine was working out on the third-floor lounge and how smoothly the new breed of quinjets were flying under Stark’s tinkering.

Their breakfast arrived in a flurry and neither wasted time in digging in, both comfortable with the silence except for the scrape of silverware over the plates.

Eventually, though breakfast head been devoured, the coffee cooling in their cups and the small talk depleted as Fury regarded Sharon from across the table.

Time for business.

Fury cleared his throat as he linked his fingers together on the table and sat perfectly poised. The ball was in her court. Sharon resisted the urge to fidget, she could be cool as ice around anyone else, but it was nearly impossible to remained stone face to the guy who had once read you bedtime stories.

Finally, she sighed and murmured, “It’s about Rogers.”

Fury bit back a smirk as he watched the blonde struggle. “Isn’t it always about Rogers with you?”

Sharon glowered at the man from across the table, her lips very close to forming a pout as she leaned back against the booth.

“I’m…concerned about him.” Her words were heavily loaded as she fought between remaining impartial and speaking her mind full stop.

Fury arched an eyebrow. “What’s there to be concerned about?”
Sharon sighed as she thought over her words. “I just feel as if…he’s misplaced.”

Now Fury seemed intrigued as he pondered Sharon’s misgivings.

“Are you saying he’s not adapting?”

Sharon was quick to shake her head. “No, he’s adapting just fine. He’s aces with technology and the internet, and he texts faster than even the most plugged-in teenager.”

“So?”

Sharon looked beyond Nick’s shoulder, her dark eyes gluing themselves to the peeling paint of the wall behind him as she considered her next move. “He’s adapting and fitting in on the outside, but the inside…I don’t necessarily think he wants to be here.”

Fury blinked slowly as he took this tidbit in. “Here as in this century? There’s nothing I can do about that. Contrary to popular belief, I have not mastered time travel. With a DeLorean or otherwise.”

Sharon rolled her eyes at Fury’s flippant tone as she threw her bunched up napkin at the man. Fury easily dodged the greasy projectile, which only added to Sharon’s inner frustrations. Finally, Nick decided to throw her a bone as he continued speaking.

“Rogers has been awake in this century for less than a year, he can’t be trusted to know what he wants.”

Sharon mulled over this reluctantly. “Still…I don’t think it’s SHIELD.”

Fury watched her intently for a long moment before speaking lowly, forcing Sharon to give him her entire attention.

“I didn’t force the good Captain to join SHIELD. It was his decision. He was free to do whatever he wanted: go back to the Army, write a book, live in the forest like a nomad. Hell, he could have joined Dancing with the Stars for all I care. He chose SHIELD, he knew what that meant when he signed on. It’s about time he got with the program.”

Sharon snorted ungracefully. “Easier said than done. Rogers is…exceedingly stubborn.”

Fury smirked. “You’ve handled worse. I trust you to curb Rogers’ temper.”

Sharon rolled her eyes as she felt hesitation gnawing at her stomach. While this was what she wanted to discuss with Fury, it wasn’t everything she wanted to say. From the way Fury was watching her, he was well aware of that as well.

It was time for Sharon to finally express the one misgiving she had had since Steve Rogers had bumped into her at the airport.

“I don’t want Dr. Abbot’s reports on Rogers anymore.”

The weight lifted off her shoulders the moment she said it. She squared her jaws and stared at Fury unflinchingly. “Besides it being a gross violation of doctor/patient confidentiality, it doesn’t feel right.”

Fury, like a gargoyle, remained perfectly still before clearing his throat as his voice took on the explaining tone of an overtaxed teacher.
“The reason you are given Dr. Abbot’s summaries of her sessions with Rogers, which I may remind you are only a summary of his general mental state and do not go into the particulars of their time together, is to better assess Rogers so as to work efficiently with him.”

The spy couldn’t help but scoff as she retorted, “I can assess enough from our time together. I’ll continue reading Agent 29’s reports, but I won’t look at another one from Abbot. I’m standing firm on this one, Nick.”

Fury, seeing she wouldn’t budge, decided on another tactic to get at the heart of Sharon’s true feelings.

“May I ask why?”

Butterflies were erupting in her stomach and she felt so weighed down by the dread she had been carrying around ever since she confronted Dr. Abbott about Rogers’ mental wellbeing. Sometimes she couldn’t even look at the super soldier without feeling that clawing feeling digging under her skin and burrowing under her ribs, trying to consume her from the inside out.

“Because he’s depressed!” she hissed, her usual composed resolve breaking as she slumped down on the table. Her hands were squeezed into fists and she could feel her nails digging into her palms.

“For God’s sake, Nick.” She felt herself pleading and she hated it. “The man hardly sleeps, he has no real friends outside of SHIELD, he goes through the motions of living life but he’s not all here. I’m trying my best to help him, but I can’t do it all.”

Fury’s expression smoothed over until it was completely unreadable.

“You’re getting soft, Carter.”

Sharon recoiled under the reproach as her breath caught in her throat. Nick knew her weak points; he knew what she hated most was being called soft, unable to hack the lifestyle that was SHIELD. That she simply wasn't good enough.

As hurt as she was she barreled on. “Compassion doesn’t mean I’m getting soft, it means I’m a decent human being.”

Fury was undeterred as he sipped his black coffee. “Maybe it was a mistake pairing you with Rogers.”

Sharon blinked owlishly as her heart plunged down to her stomach. She wanted to curl up into herself and forget she had ever opened her mouth to Fury.

Of course, Fury wouldn’t understand. He wouldn’t be the Director of SHIELD if he did.

But God damn him, she was a Level 7 agent. She was Captain America’s keeper. She had earned her seat at the table and she wouldn’t let him take that away from her because she refused to fall in line.

“Maybe,” she responded softly. “But it’s too late now to do anything about it. He’s my partner, that’s not changing anytime soon.”

Fury’s gaze was level as he observed her. In a quick flash, something like fondness was glimpsed in his good eye before he schooled his features back to impassivity.

“You have a lot of heart, just like your aunt. But she knew when to draw a line in the sand.
Margaret Carter knew when to get the job done.”

Sharon’s stomach whirled as she took that in. She nodded to herself before glancing up at the director.

“I’m not Peggy Carter. I have to do things my way.”

Fury arched an eyebrow. “Yes, you do. A word of advice, Sharon. You’re toeing the line towards dangerous territory. You keep on like this and you not only threaten to compromise your safety but his as well. I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Sharon could only stare down at her hands.

“So do I.”

January 29th, 2013

The Triskelion, Training Grounds

“And time!” Sharon called out as Bri sprinted over the line. Sharon looked down at the stopwatch and shrugged casually, knowing the Bri was staring intently at her mentor.

“Not bad,” she said as she marked down the results on her tablet, her fingers flying quickly.

Bri was doubled over, her hair a wild mess of curls and sweat and held up high with a scrunchie. She had her hands on her knees and was staring at Sharon keenly.

“So,” she rasped out as she drew in deep, ragged breaths. “What’s the verdict?”

“You ran a 7:30 mile.”

Bri broke out a brilliant smile and Sharon almost felt bad about having to burst her bubble. Almost.

“You need to be faster,” she said as Bri’s grin unceremoniously dropped.

“Blonde girl says what?”

Sharon rolled her eyes and bit down the smile threatening to break through. She was the one in charge around here. Melinda May had never cracked in front of her and she was not about to crack in front of her protégé.

“If you’re not fast you’re last.”

“I’m plenty fast,” the southern girl retorted as she stood straight, showing off how long her legs were. The girl was all limbs.

“Not fast enough,” Sharon responded.

Bri opened her mouth to argue but Sharon beat her to it. “You want to run again? I’m more than
happy to stand here all day until you either run a six-minute mile or you collapse from exhaustion. Whichever comes first.”

She gestured to the empty track to prove her point and watched as Bri deflated before her eyes. Sharon shook her head fondly. She remembered her Academy days, she had been just as headstrong as Bri. She had foolishly believed she could go toe to toe against someone like May, and just like every other recruit before her, she had been broken in like a stallion.

Bri had potential, she just needed breaking in.

Sharon had no qualms about being the one to do it.

Bri let out a low breath before nodding. “Alright, boss. Whatever you say. I am your humble servant.” She bowed to the blonde as Sharon’s laugh bubbled out of her. She lightly shoved Bri towards the bench.

“Get out of here. You stink, go take a shower.”

Bri reached for her water bottle and chugged its contents. The two walked through the training grounds together towards the locker room and were just passing the sparring mats when Rogers appeared in all his tight-fitting athletic gear. Sharon couldn’t hide her smirk as Bri’s eyes bulged taking in the sight of Rogers’...assets.

Sharon subtly elbowed her mentee who snapped back to attention and picked her jaw off the floor.

“I’m gonna…gona go,” she said to Sharon. Her expression was awestruck as she passed Rogers.

“Captain,” she greeted, eyes glossy and tone dazed. Rogers smiled politely in return.

“Hello, Bri. Please, call me Steve.”

Bri bobbed her head and only due to years of ballet managed not to trip over her feet as she bounded towards the locker room. Sharon couldn’t help but chuckle as she watched her go.

“Newbies,” she said to Rogers who only shrugged.

“You gotta start somewhere.”

Sharon glanced at the Avengers and then around the near-empty training grounds. It was late and most had headed home for the day or were away on missions. She shouldn’t be surprised to see Rogers, he preferred his workouts ridiculously early in the morning or late at night. Anything to avoid the gaggles of admirers that had a way of forming if he so much as sneezed.

“What brings you here?” she questioned curiously as he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

“I heard you were running Bri through her drills tonight. I thought I’d try my luck and see if you were up for some sparring.”

Sharon refused to show how pleased she was, but she couldn’t help the warm feeling the enveloped throughout her chest.

“Natasha not around?” she inquired teasingly as Rogers rolled his baby blue eyes.

“She’s off with Barton.”
“Doing what?”

“I didn’t ask. I don’t want to know.”

Fair enough.

Sharon felt a grin curl at the corner of her mouth as she glanced at the super-soldier. “Well, I guess I can pencil you in.”

Rogers huffed out a breath. “I’m delighted.”

Sharon threw aside her tablet as she wandered over to the mats, Rogers at her heels. The two stretched quickly and then stood opposite one another.

Sharon smirked as a thought came to her. “You got a name for me?”

Rogers thought about it for a moment. “Hmm. What about Natalie?”

Sharon wrinkled her nose. “Do you really want Nat hearing you calling me that?”

A beat of silence passed before a look of panic crossed Rogers’ chiseled face. “On second thought,” he began, “You don’t strike me as a Natalie.”

“Good boy.”

And with that, she charged the superhero. From then on out it was a flurry of fists, punches, and kicks. Rogers was without a doubt stronger than her and he was now more versed in modern forms of fighting, so beating him was a no-go. It didn’t mean that she made it easy for him to take her out. There was little else she enjoyed more than getting him all hot and bothered as he tried to pin her.

She evaded his grasp, took a running start and performed a perfect aerial cartwheel before landing in a crouch on the mats. She pulled out her trusty batons that had been attached to her calves. She twirled them and stood, squaring off against Rogers.

“I didn’t take you for a baton kind of girl,” he remarked lightly, wiping sweat from his brows. “I thought that was more Natasha’s speed.”

“Nat doesn’t have the magic touch,” Sharon fired back as her grin turned predatory. “But I do.”

Rogers' own smile grew. “Well then, let’s have some fun.”

And so they did.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys. So...it's been awhile. Sorry for the long, long delay. I just really needed a break though. The story was consuming me and it just stopped being fun to write for awhile, so I needed to step back. It doesn't help that I also really just want to move onto the second story that incorporates the Winter Soldier storyline. Alas, gotta lay the
ground work here so that Story 2 works out. But I'm back and excited to move forward
with this bad boy.

I hope going forward I can update more frequently, but life is life. Hopefully you guys
will stick with the story because your reviews mean everything to me and really help
me see the light at the end of the tunnel. So please bear with me.

Pic time!

Sharon at brunch:
I Will Shield You from the Waves

Chapter Summary

“Thirteen, are you okay?” Was it just her or did he sound on edge with worry?
“Thirteen? Answer me!”

“I’m good.” she responded slowly, “I hope no one heard that.”

The door burst open with gunmen.

“Guess not.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 2nd, 2013

The Triskelion, Shooting Range

“Some nights, I stay up cashing in my bad luck. Some nights, I call it a draw…”

The shooting range, a massive cement room, hidden in the bowels of the Trisk, was blissfully empty and Sharon felt no qualms in quietly singing to herself as she prepped her station. Her FNX-45 Tactical was loaded with the safety still on, her target was hanging 100 feet ahead of her and her muffs and glasses were waiting for her on the ledge in front of her.

“Some nights, I wish that my lips could build a castle. Some nights, I wish they'd just fall off.”

Her voice echoed loudly in the cavernous space, bouncing ominously off the walls for several seconds before finally fading away. The silence was cathartic to Sharon as she preemptively wiped her palms on her high-waisted, skinny jeans. She had been feeling out of sorts since her brunch with Fury and a good, long session at the shooting range would hopefully be enough to screw her head back on straight.

Soft. She wasn’t going soft.

She was anything but soft.

She scoffed just thinking about it and brandished the negative thoughts far, far away as she cracked her neck soundly and reached for the glasses. She pushed them on slid the muffs on over her ears as the world around her went silent. She could hear her heartbeat humming through her ears as she picked up the semi-automatic and clicked off the safety.

She centered herself, standing with wide legs and squared shoulders. She raised the pistol and lined up the target with narrowed eyes. As always, the perfect shot came easily. Her tongue poked out of her lips as she concentrated.
“This is it, boys, this is war, what are we waiting for?” she sang softly to herself before pulling the trigger.

_Bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang-bang._

The trigger clicked as the magazine emptied. Sharon breathed in as she lowered the gun and took a step back to admire her handy work.

Ten bullets. Ten near perfect shots, dead center of the target. She raised an eyebrow, impressed with even herself.

Yeah, she still had it. Carter women were made of steel.

Suck on that, Fury.

She had just loaded up her pistol with another magazine when she felt a presence at her back. She internally sighed, knowing who her shadow was. Funny how when she was attempting to avoid him he had a way of popping up near constantly.

“Melody.”

She ignored him as she double checked her gun.

“Carol.”

She ran a hand through her hair and refused to glance over her shoulders.

“Viola.”

“I’m afraid to inform you,” she said, her voice sounding strange with her headphones still firmly in place. “But I was not blessed with any musical abilities. Alas, your line of names is wasted on me.”

A sigh.

“Agent 13.”

She turned and glanced at the Avenger with an aloof air.

“Captain,” she greeted passively as she lowered the gun. She was clearly not going to be getting anything done with the man standing there and not planning on leaving anytime soon. He had an infuriating way of driving her to distraction. She refused to think about why. Such thoughts were… troubling.

Rogers nodded back as his eyes darted over her shoulder to the tarnished target, swaying gently in the air-conditioned breeze.

“You’re not half bad,” he assessed in that unflappable way of his that always made Sharon want to punch the look off his face.

“Are you questioning my skills as a marksman?” she couldn’t help but scoff as she leaned back, crossing her arms over her olive green, silk blouse. “I’ll have you know I’m in second place for Shield’s Female Marksman.”

Rogers raised an eyebrow, begrudgingly impressed. “Who’s first? Romanoff?”

Sharon couldn’t help but snort. “Barton, actually.”
A long pause followed as Rogers attempted to work that one out all on his own. When he came up empty Sharon took pity on the super-soldier and filled in the blanks.

“In his eternal quest to be the very best at everything he decided a minor thing such as gender wasn’t going to stop him from having top marks in all available categories.”

Rogers’ brows furrowed in confusion. “So…they just let him compete?”

Sharon felt her lips pulling up in an amused smile against her will. “Oh no, he went full reconnaissance and everything; he even wore a miniskirt. His thighs looked amazing.”

She chuckled just remembering the event. Barton had gone all out. He had been decked out in a corset, leather miniskirt, and six-inch stilettos. He had adorned a wavy blonde wig, fake eyelashes, lipstick, and killer eye makeup. His contouring had put Sharon to shame. Apparently, the man had been a makeup artist in a previous life because he had been very on fleek.

Many a female and male SHIELD agent had fallen in love that day.

And as usual, Barton had smoked the competition. He wasn’t the best marksman for nothing. He had obliterated every record in SHIELD history, even toppling the legend that was Bucky Barnes in his heyday.

Sharon turned back to her fellow agent and arched an eyebrow questioningly. “You’re not a gun fan, so what brings you to this level of the Trisk? It can’t be for my sparkling company.”

“It’s not.”

Ouch.

“We have a mission. It was given to us directly from Fury. Apparently, it’s a favor for an old friend.”

Hmmm. Now she was intrigued. Fury didn’t have many friends. He had piles of enemies and rivals, but friends were in short supply for the Director of SHIELD.

“Who’s the friend?”

“Senator Robert Ralstron, from Texas. You ever heard of him?”

Sharon shrugged. “Here or there. What’s the mission?”

“Don’t know yet. Fury’s orders are that we rendezvous in Texas with the senator for the specifics. STRIKE’s already loading up a quinjet in the hanger. I came to collect you.”

“Much obliged,” Sharon drawled out as she began cleaning up her station. A mission trumped shooting sessions any day. Hopefully, she’d be able to punch out her built up tension. She reached up for her comm and activated the correct channel.

“Bri, come in.”

“You are a go. Please tell me that you are saving me from the hell that is mission reports.” Bri’s voice echoed across the channel as Rogers inclined his head, clearly listening in with his advanced hearing.

The eavesdropper.
Sharon rolled her eyes as she replied back to her protégé, a smirk crossing her face.

“Better yet. It’s time to get your feet wet. We have a mission. Be at Hanger 4 in 15 minutes.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus, yes.”

Such enthusiasm.

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February 2nd, 2013

Dallas, Texas

Sharon couldn’t help but whistle lowly as the SUV pulled up in front of an opulent, French countryside inspired chateau.

The senator and his family were certainly living large in the lone star state. Sharon and Rogers exchanged glances as they ducked out of the armored SUV and walked towards the iron rod front doors.

They hadn’t even a chance to ring the door chime when the towering doors were thrown open and a middle-aged woman with big hair and mascara streaked eyes flung herself at the pair. Sharon expertly sidestepped her, leaving her to flail in Rogers’ embrace as he tossed a dirty look over the woman’s head as she held onto him.

“Thank the Lord you’re here!” she cried, clinging to Rogers’ form as he unsuccessfully attempted to soothe the sobbing woman.

“There, there,” he awkwardly cooed, his hands frozen on her back as he tried gently to push the inconsolable woman away.

“Evangeline,” a worn voice called from the doorway as both blond heads perked up. “Captain Rogers can’t help us if you continue holding him hostage in your arms.”

Standing before them was a middle-aged man with greying blonde hair and pale blue eyes. His shoulders were slumped and his eyes were rimmed with redness, suggesting he had been crying not too long ago.

Sharon would bet that this was their Senator Ralstron.

Evangeline Ralstron finally released Rogers and stood back, sniffling as she fiddled with her pearl necklace.

“Oh, please,” she begged with her southern accent. “Please say you’ll do anything you can to help us!”

Rogers fidgeted uncomfortably under her heartbroken gaze. He sighed and raised his head, squaring his chin as he nodded his head to the distraught woman.

“We’ll do everything we can to help you and your family, ma’am.”
His earnest voice and soft tone were enough to pass through Mrs. Ralstron’s grief as she weakly nodded and reached out, squeezing his hand for a single moment.

“That’s all I ask.” Her gaze shifted to Sharon who nodded in return. Senator Ralstron came to stand alongside his wife and placed his arm around her frail shoulders.

“Why don’t you go up and rest? I’ll speak to the Captain and his associate.”

He pressed a kiss to his wife’s temple as she sniffled again and walked inside, up the ornate marble staircase, and disappearing into the mansion. Senator Ralstron watched her go with a weary sigh before turning to the two SHIELD agents.

“If you would please accompany me to my study, I can elucidate on our…predicament.”

He choked on the end of his sentence as he gestured for the two blonds to come into his home. Sharon and Rogers trailed behind the senator as he led them into a sturdy, wooden furnished study. He slumped into his seat at his desk and nodded for the two to sit as well.

“Captain, Agent. I cannot say how appreciative that you would come to my aid at this dark time.”

“You should think nothing of it,” Sharon responded quietly. “SHIELD wants to help in any way possible.”

“Director Fury informed us that the two of you are friends,” Rogers threw in with a calculated expression.

Senator Ralstron nodded as he sat back in his leather chair. “Nick and I go way back. We were in the Armed Forces together. He’s a good man.”

“He is many things,” Rogers replied with an edged voice as Sharon glanced at the super-soldier.

“Unfortunately, my partner and I are flying blind here. Director Fury did not disclose the details of why you need our help-”

“Of course,” Senator Ralstron cut in with a nod of his head. “I asked Nick to allow me the discretion of informing you myself on why we so desperately need your help. I have a daughter, Lydia, she’s a freshman at Northwestern. This week is her Mid-Winter break. She and several friends went to Brazil for a weeklong vacation. I received this video late last night.”

Senator Ralstron clicked a remote and the flat screen in the corner of his office came to life. It was a grainy video, clearly filmed on a cell phone, and Sharon was getting whiplash just watching the jerky footage.

Finally, a bound teenage girl came into view. Her wrists and ankles were bound with thick rope and a crude piece of tape was stretched across her mouth. Her cheeks were streaked with tears and snot and her pale blue eyes – the same eyes Senator Ralstron had – were blown wide with fear as the camera circled her mockingly. She was in a large, space, floor to ceiling windows extended behind her with sunlight streaming in. The camera panned away to come and rest on a smirking man, clearly the ringleader of this operation.

“Bom dia, Senador,” he greeted toying. Sharon felt her skin crawling just looking at the perp. From the way Rogers’ frowned, he must have felt the same. The man took a few steps as Lydia Ralstron once again appeared in the frame.

“As you can see, we have your daughter. And my, what a bela menina she is.”
He cupped her cheek and chuckled as the young girl whimpered in fear. Senator Ralstron clenched his hands into fists as he bit down on his cheek, trembling with rage in his seat as the recording continued.

“You should not have let her come to my city without the proper protection. Such a little dove, so easy to entrap. Now she must pay for the sins of the father.”

He released the girl as she curled into a fetal position and cried. The camera moved away from her to focus solely on the man as he smirked at the camera.

“You’re playing by my rules now, minha amiga. We do this my way, or not at all. My request is simple. You’re a powerful, American man. I imagine this will be easy for you to do. I want $5 million dollars. You have 48 hours. Do not involve your American authorities. If you do not play by my rules then your daughter…”

The camera spun back to the cowering girl in the corner of the room.

“Well, then I hope you cherish your memories of her. Such a pretty thing to go to waste. Tchau.”

The screen went black and the silence in the room was near deafening as Senator Ralstron placed his heavy gaze on the two SHIELD agents.

“Now you can understand my need for discretion. That man cannot know you are helping me. Please, Captain, save my daughter.”

Rogers looked to Sharon and she nodded silently. Rogers turned his head to Senator Ralstron.

“We’ll bring her home safe and sound, that I can promise you.”

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*February 3rd, 2013*

*Fortaleza, Brazil*

“Heave we identified the man in the video yet?” Rogers asked from the helm of the quinjet as it came flying in through the clouds and circled above the beach city of Fortaleza, Brazil. Located right off the Atlantic coast. It was a bright and sunny day which belied the seriousness of the situation happening below.

“Arsenio Monterroso.” Rumlow intoned from his station as his fingers went flying over his tablet, holographic images flying up left and right. “He’s a big-time drug dealer who’s none to please with the tightening drug laws in good ol’ U S of A. Laws that have been spearheaded by Senator Ralstron.”

Rogers sighed from his perch. “At least now we know why he was targeting Lydia. Do we have anything on where she’s being held?”

“I got a lock from the video,” Sharon called out as she blew up a paused image of the recording, the one highlighting the windows that had been behind Lydia.
“It’s a skyscraper under construction right off Meireles Beach. It’s a new construction and currently vacated from any work crews. Makes it the perfect place to hide a girl without anyone noticing.”

Rogers nodded decisively, “I want scans on that building. I want to know exactly where Lydia is and how many adversaries we’re facing. We need to be delicate about how we go about this. One wrong move and Lydia’s death is on all of us.”

It was a silent but strong storm within the quinjet as everyone tapped away at their computers and on their tablets, seeking out the answers to their captain’s inquiries.

“I have eyes on Lydia!” Bri announced excitedly from her spot as all eyes turned to her.

“You sure?” Rogers questioned as he marched to her side.

Bri bobbed her head as he came to rest at her shoulder, peering down at her screen. “See that dot alone in the room? It’s being guarded by all these other dots.”

She gestured to the party of dots converging on the 20th floor. Rogers nodded in agreement.

“Good job, Bri,” he acknowledged with a shoulder pat as Sharon’s protégé looked ready to melt at the contact. Sharon rolled her eyes good-naturedly from her spot. What a goober.

“Floors 15-20 are packed with Monterroso’s men as well. They’ll be looking to stop any advancement of ours,” Rumlow called from across the quinjet as Rogers nodded thoughtfully.

“Alright, this is what we’re gonna do.” Everyone was silent as they watched the Avenger. “STRIKE and myself will go floor by floor, taking out Monterroso and his men along the way. Thirteen, you’re gonna circumvent the chaos by going through the air ducts until you reach the 20th floor. You’ll take out the men positioned there, grab Lydia and rendezvous with us. In and out. It should be a doable extraction.”

“Where will I go?” Bri asked from her corner. Rogers paused and looked to Sharon. He shrugged helplessly at her as she blew out a breath.

“Oh, so that’s how it was going to be.

“You’ll stay close to STRIKE,” Sharon ordered as Bri turned her wide eyes on her mentor.

“Or I could come with you,” she suggested cheekily, smile faltering at Sharon’s lack of response.

“Or I could stay with STRIKE,” she muttered as Sharon smirked.

“Good girl.”

Rogers looked pleased to have that decision decided for him as he turned towards his team.

“Let’s do this.”

The quinjet landed near the developing skyscraper as the SHIELD agents began suiting up. Sharon was ready to go in her white tactical suit as she strapped Bri into her bulletproof vest.

“You have everything you need?” she questioned intently as Bri bobbed her head. Bri was staring ahead, lightly swaying in place as Sharon double and triple checked that she was ready to go.
“It’s alright to feel nervous,” she advised as she looked into Bri’s utility belt, wanting to reassure herself that the girl had enough ammo. One didn’t walk into a gunfight with a knife and all that.

“I’m not nervous,” Bri insisted by her fingers drumming against her legs told a different story.

“I know,” Sharon pacified her charge. “I’m just saying, it’s okay if you are.”

Bri glanced at her teacher and bit down on her plump lip as contemplated something.

“Were you…nervous on your first mission?”

“God no,” Sharon snorted as she teased. “But that’s because I’m awesome.”

Bri rolled her eyes and Sharon told herself it was a job well down when the girl stopped dancing in place and finally looked the part of a SHIELD agent.

“Just,” Sharon advised softly. “Stay alive. I’d hate to have to call your family and explain how much of a failure you are dying on your very first mission.”

Bri laughed wetly as she lightly punched Sharon’s shoulder. “You got it, boss.”

Sharon looked away, locking eyes with Rogers. He gave her a single nod as Steve Rogers disappeared and Captain America, leader of the world’s mightiest heroes, took his place.

The mission was a go.

Thanks to the quick work of STRIKE, any lookouts on the ground level were quickly dismantled as the team of agents fanned out across the high rise, taking the stairs up and up, level by level. It was on the 14th floor when Sharon petered off from her fellow agents and took to the air ducts. She’d be crawling her way up six floors to get to Lydia.

Crawling through the vents may look like a hoot in movies and on TV, but the reality of it was rather grim. They were considerably small and dark and rather stuffy. It was not a place for anyone with claustrophobic tendencies.

Sharon also had to be entirely silent with her movements to ensure no one below would hear her rattling around. She was on her stomach, army crawling her way up and up. It had been about 20 minutes and she found herself on the 18th floor when Rogers’ voice came through the comm.

“How’s it going, Thirteen?”

She could hear the crackle of gunfire in the background and the cries of men crumbling. Cleary Rogers and the others were having a hell of a better time than her.

“Coast is clear,” she whispered back as she continued on. “How can Barton even stand these things? They’re dark, cramped, and creepy as hell. Also, I think I passed a rat carcass a few turns ago. Honestly, I-"

The vent fell out beneath her and Sharon went tumbling down, down, down. She resisted the urge to scream but nothing could stop her body from flailing about as she came crashing down into a laundry chute. She landed hard in a large, laundry basket, ending up tangled in a pile of sheets.

The world was spinning as she tried to right herself, Rogers yelling in her ear like a banshee.

“Thirteen, are you okay?” Was it just her or did he sound on edge with worry? “Thirteen? Answer
“I’m good,” she responded slowly, “I hope no one heard that.”

The door burst open with gunmen.

“Guess not.”

She jumped up, avoiding a hellfire of bullets as she fought back. Within a few minutes, she had the four goons disabled and lying about in unconscious piles. She held up her Glock 19 and poked her head out the door, finding the hallway empty.

“I’ll be taking the stairs from here,” she murmured into her comm and tried not to be worried when no one answered her. She crept along and found no resistance until she was up on the 20th floor, where Lydia was being held. She crouched at the end of a hallway and sneaked a peak, seeing an armed henchman heading her way.

Now or never then.

She took a deep breath, sheathed her Glock, and reached for two taser disks before taking a running start. She charged forward and just as the surprised goon attempted to lunge for her she went to her knees. Internally happy for the knee pads built into the Kevlar, she went sliding across the marble floor. She turned and threw the two taser disks. They landed on the floor and sent an electrical shock up the legs of the thug and he fell to the floor with a thud, body still convulsing with the electrical shocks.

She hurried to her feet and rounded a corner where a new henchman was waiting for her. He started in surprise at her appearance but wasted no time in charging her. She once again slid to the floor, skating through his legs and wasting no time in laying down a fierce crotch punch. The poor sap groaned and fell to his knees in agony for the family jewels. She landed in a crouch, jumped up and landed a kick to the kneeling man’s head as he collapsed. She pivoted on her heel and took off running down the hall.

By now, her presence was surely detected.

She halted by a bend in the hallway and saw two armed men with walkie-talkies heading her way with a purpose. She pulled out SHIELD issued smoke grenades and tossed them. They erupted the moment they hit the ground, enclosing the hallway with smoke. The two men were a coughing mess when Sharon came down upon them.

She slipped across the floor and swung her legs, effectively taking out one henchman as he fell on his back. She pushed herself up to her feet, and using the other man’s knee as leverage, jumped up and nailed him in the chin. He fell back and she twirled and she landed daintily just as another goon rounded the corner.

He raised a club against her and thinking fast she pulled out her trusty garrote wire and blocked the blow to her head. She kicked out his knee as he stumbled forward and then sent a hard elbow jab to his cheek. She aimed another blow for his throat and turned, capturing his neck with her wire as she used all her weight to flip him over her. He hit the ground with a smack as he struggled to draw breath.

She continued down the hallway punching, kicking and flipping her way through the small army of men. Finally, after what seemed like ages, she came to the doors where on the other side Lydia was being held hostage.
She kicked open the doors, not knowing what to expect, with guns drawn only to see the tanager cowering in the corner. She cried out, muffled by the tape, as Sharon hustled through the doors. Sharon kneeled down and quickly took stock of the hostage.

She had no outward signs of injury, she was more scared than anything else.

“Shhh,” she whispered as Lydia gaped at her, eyes wide and scared. “I’m here to help you. Trust me.”

Lydia haltingly nodded and Sharon sent her a smile as she made quick work of the rope binding the poor girl. Lydia hissed as Sharon untied her and saw how tight the ropes had been, digging into Lydia’s fair skin.

“I’m going to remove the tape, it might sting, okay?” she murmured as she slowly peeled it off. Lydia cried out as Sharon cooed softly, trying to soothe the frightened girl. Lydia laid there in a heap, holding onto herself as Sharon tossed the tape aside.

“It’s okay,” she spoke calmly as she cupped Lydia’s face and wiped away some of the tears. “Everything’s going to be okay. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

“My…D-Daddy.”

“He and your mother are waiting for you at home. I promise I will get you back to them. You believe me?”

Lydia slowly nodded and leaned into Sharon as the spy smiled at her.

“Okay, let’s get you standing. We need to get you out of here.”

Sharon stood, pulling the teenager up with her. Lydia only took a step before nearly collapsing in on herself as her body learned how to operate again. Sharon was quick to grab her, wrapping an arm around the girl’s thin waist and tossing the other one over her shoulder as she supported the shaking girl.

“Just lean on me, we’re gonna be fine.”

The blonde led them to the door and when she peeked out she knew they were in trouble. A group of ten or so armed men was coming right for them.

“Perfect,” she muttered to herself as she squeezed Lydia in a consoling manner and reached for her comm.

“Bri,” she called out as static answered her. Suddenly, she could hear gunfire and shouts through the line.

"I’m a bit busy at the moment, boss,” Bri panted into her ear.

“Well get un-busy. I need you,” Sharon ordered briskly as she backed herself and Lydia back into the room.

“What happened to staying with STRIKE?” Of course, her protégé would be a smartass.

“Change of plans. I need you up here.”

She heard Bri curse through the line before acquiescing. “I’m on my way.”
Sharon led Lydia to the corner of the room and lowered her to the floor. “I need you to stay here. I’ll be right back, I promise.”

She moved to pull away, but the teenager glomped onto her.

“Please don’t leave me,” she cried, tears pooling in her eyes as Sharon sighed and looked in the girl’s eyes.

“Hey, I promise, I will be right back. Stay here and stay quiet.”

The girl finally released her as the blonde moved towards the doors, pistols in hand. She jumped out and immediately started firing. A few went down and then she threw herself into fighting. She even borrowed a few shoulder flipping moves from Natasha. They were flashy but effective as Sharon used them to take a goon or two down at once.

She had worked her way halfway through the mob when Bri appeared at her side, guns a blazing.

“Finally,” Sharon yelled at her as she jumped up, delivering a savage knee kick to a goon’s gut as he fell to the ground.

“I was busy!” Bri grouched as she used her dancer’s body to evade a punch from one of the gunmen.

“Excuses, excuses.”

Though the two hadn’t been training together long, they were a good team as they took out the rest of the force. Sharon had just punched a man down when a gunshot echoed behind her. She spun around and saw Bri racing into the room where Lydia was.

“Shit,” Sharon cursed as she followed behind. She slid into the room and found Lydia trembling in the corner, one of the henchmen standing before her, gun raises, and Bri, shocked to the core, just staring at the scene with an opened mouth.

“Bri!” Sharon yelled and the girl jumped, gaping at Sharon, not knowing what to do in the heat of the moment.

The man was still advancing towards Lydia.

Like hell, he was laying one hand on the girl.

Sharon raised her Glock, aimed and fired. The man dropped to the ground as Lydia screamed. She cowered as Sharon pocketed her pistol and slowly stepped towards the teenager.

“Lydia,” she whispered as she knelt down in front of the shaking girl. She glanced over her shoulder and Bri was leaning against the wall, staring at the dead man with blank eyes. Sharon had no time to focus on her as she turned back to the college student.

“You’re okay now. The bad men are gone.”

Sharon was soft as she spoke, tense as she worried that the girl would no longer trust her after that violent display. She needed worry, Lydia launched herself at the spy and sobbed into her shoulder. Sharon wrapped her arms around the girl and rocked her, whispering nonsense into her ears all the while.

Finally, she had Lydia up on her feet and was leading her out of the room, Bri meekly following
behind.

"Thirteen," Rogers sounded in her ear. "We have Monterroso. What’s your position?"

“I have Lydia secured. We are good to go here.”

“Roger that. Meet at the quinjet.”

Sharon turned to Lydia with a grin. “Hear that? You’re going home.”

February 3rd, 2013

The Triskelion

Sharon yawned as she made her way through the Atrium, the glass-paneled ceiling showing how dark it was. After rounding up Monterroso and his felled men, the quinjet had made a pit stop in Dallas to return Lydia to her family. There had been much crying and hugging on part of the Ralstron family. She had had to rescue Rogers from Mrs. Ralstron’s overly enthusiastic embrace.

Upon returning she had showered and changed back into her civilian clothes. Now she was preparing to head home to her apartment where delivery, wine and her mission report for Stanford were awaiting her.

She picked up her pace as she saw Bri hurrying ahead of her.

“Hey, Bri!” she called out, her voice echoing throughout the minimalistic space. Bri tensed but came to a halt as Sharon came to her side.

“I was looking for you once we got back,” Sharon began lightly, watching how Bri looked like a deer in the headlights ready to bolt at any moment. “But you had disappeared.”

Bri sighed and stared determinedly ahead. “I just wanted to head out. To…clear my head.”

Sharon nodded in understanding and almost let the girl go. It was clear how guilt-ridden she was about the entire affair. Except…except she wouldn’t be a good mentor if she let Bri slink off and sweep this under the rug. They had to talk about it. It was the only way they’d move past it.

“You know we need to talk about it.”

Bri’s body was as tight as a coil as she refused to meet Sharon’s eye.

“I know.”

Sharon sighed and crossed her arms over her chest as she regarded her mentee.

“You hesitated.”

Bri flinched and Sharon felt sympathy sweep through her. She knew what Bri was feeling. She had been there just recently with Fury. It wasn’t fun to be called out for a mistake. But still, Bri had to
learn from her mistakes. What she needed was tough love and Sharon would give it to her.

“You hesitated and it almost cost Lydia, our mission, her life. That’s unacceptable.”

Bri kept staring forward as she worried her lip. Seeing as she was taller than Sharon, it was near impossible to make her look her in the eye.

“He who hesitates is toast. I don't care what kind of moral see-saw you’re riding ... the mission is all that counts. If you can’t do that, then you shouldn’t be here.”

Bri ducked her head and Sharon felt her heart go out to the rookie. First missions were hard on everyone.

“Hey,” she said quietly and nudged her mentee. “Look, it’s not the end of the world. It was your first mission, you’ll learn to be better. I will make you better. Do you think I was perfect on my first mission? Please. Melinda May nearly cleaned my clock.”

Bri glanced at the blonde with a glimmer of interest. “Yeah?”

“Oh yeah,” Sharon bobbed her head. “It was a hot mess. And embarrassing as hell. But I learned from it, and ultimately, it made me a better agent. So stop stressing and dig deeper. Okay?”

Bri nodded. “Okay.”


Bri blinked. “What’s your take on good, old fashioned southern food?”

“What, like grits and biscuits in gravy?”

Bri rolled her eyes, insulted. “There’s so much more to the South than that. I’ll show you. You’re about to eat the greatest food of your life. It’ll be so good, you’ll slap your momma.”

Sharon beamed. “I’m looking forward to it. Lead the way, rookie.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who reviewed the last chapter! You guys rock! Please keep it up! I hope this chapter did well in setting up a big/little sister dynamic between Sharon and Bri. That's what I'm hoping to get across.

Translations:
Bom dia, Senador - Good Day, Senator
Bela menina - Pretty girl
Minha amiga - My friend
Tchau - Goodbye

I just used Google translate, so if they are wrong or not conjugated correctly, my bad.
Pic time!

Sharon at the shooting range:
I Like the Sad Eyes, Bad Guys

Chapter Summary

“No,” Maria intoned darkly, “He wanted to…talk about feelings.”

She spat out the word like it was a curse. Sharon’s eyebrow rose to her hairline as she stared at Maria in shocked surprise.

“Feelings?” she wasn’t sure if she had heard the brunette correctly.

Maria nodded as she examined her manicure. “Feelings.”

“Like…emotions and stuff?”

Maria bobbed her head, “Yep. He wanted an open and communicative relationship moving forward.”

Sharon wrinkled her nose distastefully, “Gross.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

February 22nd, 1987

Arlington, VA

“I said a Georgia, Georgia, a song of you, comes as sweet and clear, as moonlight through the pines…”

Margaret Carter (Peggy to her friends and family) couldn’t help but hum along to the sweet-sounding crooning of Ray Charles as the music floated throughout the cozy house she had called home for more than thirty years. She was in the old-timey kitchen: a sea of mahogany cabinets, golden yellow drawers, and matching, striped wallpaper to boot.

The kitchen was a pinpoint in time, looking exactly as it had when the newlywed couple had moved in decades before. It could have come straight out of a Sears’ catalog.

Peggy was perched at the laminate counter, putting the final touches on her cake extravaganza. The truth of the matter was, while Peggy Carter was a great many things – wife, mother, Director of SHIELD – she was not a particularly apt cook…or baker.

Luckily for her, boxed cake mixes were a divine invention for the truly incompetent.

“I said, Georgia, oh Georgia, no peace I find, just an old sweet song, keeps Georgia on my mind…”

A piping bag was held firmly in her grip; the wispy, sprawling veins of her hands noticeable as she
clutched the plastic bag, finishing the birthday message atop the frosted, sugar monstrosity.

Her silvery hair was high up on her head, held in place with a hair clip, and a flour stained apron was tied snugly around her trim waist. Her long, delicate fingers were speckled with frosting, the only sliver of skin safe from the chocolate was her left ring finger; her thin, golden wedding band still immaculate and pristine.

The music was so soothing, Peggy couldn’t help but sway along as it continued to its crescendo. The record was just coming to its end when a strong pair of arms wound themselves around her waist and her back was covered in a familiar wave of warmth.

“Hello there,” she greeted softly, leaning back into the sturdy strength of her husband. She turned her cheek expectantly and wasn’t disappointed when a moment later a gentle kiss was placed there. Her husband’s head didn’t retreat but rather rested on her shoulder, a sizeable nose nuzzling her neck, inhaling deeply. Peggy couldn’t help but sigh at the pleasant prickle of whiskers over her fair skin.

“Looks good,” Daniel complimented after several, blissful moments of silence. The kind only two people truly in love year after year can experience; where the world fades away and the only thing left was the two of them. They were each other’s sanity; Daniel was her rock. He, more than anything else, was her shelter and safe place when she had handled problems varying from the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Kennedy assassination to Jillian’s first date and spats over which college the Carter-Sousa offspring would attend. (Peggy had advocated hard for an east coast school – Harvard, Sarah Lawrence, Georgetown – but in the end, mostly to spite her, Jill had chosen the farthest school away: Stanford.)

Peggy would never argue that she had been a perfect mother (nowhere even near perfect, in fact), but if one listened to Jill, they would think she had never even tried to be a mother at all. Yes, Peggy had devoted much of her life to SHIELD and before that the SSR. But that was the price one paid when being a woman in espionage in an age when men thought the only thing she was suited for was to be their Girl Friday. She not only had to punch her way through the glass ceiling, she had to demolish it to ensure a new one would be built in its place.

To know that one day women would enter the odd and strange world of international intrigue, and to know Peggy had played a small part in contributing to that, was a monumental thing to feel. It didn’t mean that Peggy had enjoyed missing school plays, swim meets, school dances, and everything else that was included in raising a living, breathing child.

So, yes, Peggy would never win a Mom of the Year award. She had made peace with that long ago.

But through it all Daniel had been there, supporting her, loving her, and most importantly, encouraging her. The man deserved a gold medal for everything she had put him through throughout their years together.

As many years as they had been married (36 to be precise), he still had a way of making her feel as giddy as a school girl whenever he set his loving gaze upon her.

“Me or the cake?” she teased as he placed his large hands on her hips, gently rocking them side to side. She could feel Daniel smiling into her skin as he responded,

“Both.”

“Good choice, Mr. Sousa.”
“I learned from the best, Mrs. Carter-Sousa.”

God, she loved this man.

She relaxed in his embrace as she finished decorating the cake, dousing the dessert in sprinkles.

“So,” Daniel asked after several moments of quiet. “Who all is coming to this birthday bash? Jill’s in Paris with that poet laureate of hers—”

Peggy couldn’t help but snort at the mention of Jill’s husband, Gerard O’Connor. He was an eccentric sort of man, more a lover than a fighter. Just the kind of man Jill knew would drive her mother up a wall.

“The man thinks himself the next Robert Frost,” she muttered derisively as Daniel chuckled.

“Be nice,” he nudged. “That’s our son-in-law you’re speaking about.”

“As if I could forget.”

She could feel rather than see the look Daniel was boring into her neck and she grumbled under her breath before acquiescing.

“Fine, fine. Go on then. Jill’s not coming, for obvious reasons.”

“There was no way Judy was traveling down from Boston with two kids, particularly ones as rambunctious as Cara and Billy.”

“They are a handful,” Peggy interjected at the mention of her grandnephew and grandniece. She loved them, but both had a set on lungs on them that they never tired of showcasing whenever they didn’t get their way. Their poor mother, Judy was a frazzled mess anytime Peggy could catch her on the phone.

“What about on your end? Should I be expecting Mr. Tall, Dark, and Imposing?” Daniel inquired as he swiped at the leftover frosting. Peggy wrinkled her nose at the sight of her 67-year-old husband licking frosting off a spoon like a child.

“Do you really think Nick Fury would ever attend a birthday party?”

Daniel chuckled, shaking his head no as Peggy continued. “Thought so. Well, Howard had talked of him and Maria making an appearance while they were in town this weekend. However, it seems Tony had been anticipating their sojourn and decided to throw a little party at the house in Westchester.”

“Let me guess,” Daniel cut in dryly as he licked his fingers. “It was anything but little and good ol’ Howard arrived right in the middle of it.”

Peggy chuckled in response remembering Howard’s booming voice as he had ranted over the telephone late last night to tell her why he wouldn’t be accompanying her to the intelligence briefing with the President tomorrow morning.

“He was livid,” she stressed, lips upturned in a grin as she recounted Howard’s numerous curses. The man could be quite creative when driven to apoplectic rage. It was something only Tony could bring out in the genius.

“The way Howard roars about him, the boy sure sounds like a menace,” Daniel mused, having
heard more than his fair share of what kind of trouble the prodigy was getting up to at MIT. Really, what could you expect from a scarily, brilliant 16-year-old with authority issues attending college? The book practically writes itself.

“It’s not that,” Peggy murmured thoughtfully. “I think it’s rather how much Tony is like Howard. He’s his doppelganger in so many ways, yet Howard knows in his heart that Tony’s more intelligent than him, that he will one day be better than him. I don’t think Howard quite knows how to cope. Especially without Jarvis to mediate and soften the blows.”

Peggy trailed off, a lump forming in her throat as she thought of the loss of her dear, dear friend. They had lost Mr. Jarvis only last year to a heart attack. He had left a massive void not only in Peggy’s life but also in the Starks. With him gone, it had become quite clear that Edwin Jarvis had been the glue holding the tumultuous Stark family together. Without him, Howard and Tony quarreled more and more, always wanting to one-up the other with barbed insults and cruel jabs.

Daniel squeezed her waist consolingly as he kissed her neck. “At least they still have Bernard.”

Peggy wetly chortled at the thought of Bernard Stark. The tenacious flamingo, after all these years, was still alive and strutting his stuff all across the Stark estate. Jarvis had detested him until the end.

“Indeed,” she responded as she subtly wiped her eyes. Tenderly, Daniel turned his wife to face him head-on as he graced her with a beaming grin. She smiled in return, taking in the sight of the man she had shared her life with. He was older but just as handsome as ever. The man had aged like fine wine. Crow’s feet and laugh lines mapped his face but did not dull his good-looking visage. If anything, they added to his appeal, showing that he had lived a life filled with laughter and love. He was gray-haired now, but still had a thick head of hair, Peggy ruminated as she placed her hands around his neck, her fingers tangling in the hair at his nape.

“Dance with me,” he whispered, his voice barely audible over Ella Fitzgerald’s singing.

Peggy shook her head. “I’m too old for such frivolous activities.”

Daniel was quick to shake his head as he tugged her towards him. “Oh, Peg, don’t you know? You’re 65 years young.”

Peggy couldn’t help but giggle as Daniel pulled her in and the two danced in the limited space of their kitchen. She tucked her head under his chin and listened to the beat of his heart as he hummed along to the song.

She didn’t know how long they stood there, swinging back and forth when the doorbell sounded at the front door. Peggy pulled away with an excited grin.

“They’re here!”

She swatted at Daniel’s hands as she swiftly undid her apron and tossed it aside. She wiped her hands, smoothed her blouse and hurried to the door. She flung it open to reveal Harrison and Amanda Carter. The couple was bundled up in winter coats, hats and mittens to protect them from the chilly, February air.

“Hi, Aunt Peggy,” Harrison greeted with a smile as he and his wife stepped into the cozy home he had grown up in.

“Hello, darlings,” Peggy responded, kissing both of their cheeks as Daniel ambled in with his cane,
taking Amanda’s coat as she shimmied out of it.

“Well,” Peggy asked with hands on her hips. “Where is the birthday girl?”

Harrison and Amanda exchanged smiles as, seemingly out of nowhere, Harrison produced a baby carrier from behind him. He set it down and Peggy was quick to kneel to see the little bundle of energy inside.

Sharon Elizabeth Marie Carter was wispy blonde curls and big, brown eyes as she giggled at the sight of her great aunt. She kicked her pudgy little legs and clapped her gloved hands. Cushioned in the carrier was Sharon’s constant little companion, a damned Bucky Bear with his button eyes and blue jacket.

“Aun’ Pegi!” the one-year-old greeted as Peggy cooed at her with her bright, red lips.

“If it isn’t my favorite girl,” Peggy said as she unstrapped the carrier and bundled the little girl up in her arms, bouncing her up and down as the little one snuggled in, babbling on in the way young children do.

Peggy felt her heart grow three sizes as she and her family ventured into the living room, Sharon secured in her arms the whole time.

Peggy had given up much to build SHIELD, but times like these she could just be a woman with her husband, nephew (truly a surrogate son), his wife, and the most precious child in the world.

She was fortunate to have such a life.

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**February 22nd, 2013**

**Washington, D.C.**

“Happy Birthday, Share-Bear!” Catherine shrieked the moment her face popped up on Sharon’s screen. Catherine was in the tiny kitchen of her Chelsea apartment; over her shoulder Jessie could be seen at the stove, cooking scrambled eggs.

“What’s up, birthday girl?” he threw over his shoulder with a quick grin before going back to his eggs. He needed to watch them intently to ensure they were a perfect consistency. Eggs were a delicacy.

Sharon couldn’t help but grin as she stood in her own galley kitchen, sipping the magic elixir that was coffee on the morning of her 27th birthday.

Now, for most, 27 wouldn’t be considered an important year as one had already hit 25 and was not yet 30. But really, Sharon was thrilled. As a SHIELD agent, one could never guarantee that she would live to 27. So, it was quite an accomplishment she was even here to celebrate her birthday.

February birthdays could typically be a hit or a miss, depending on the weather. She had spent several in blizzard-like conditions wishing for some sunshine. Luckily for her, it was looking to be a mild, winter day in the Capitol. Cold but not arctic levels of misery.
She was standing in her kitchen, drinking coffee and nibbling on some Greek yogurt. She was feeling cozy in a cobalt sweater, three buttoned skinny jeans, and knee-high boots. She spent the next twenty minutes chatting with her friends in New York before S H I E L D beckoned.

“I’ll call you guys later,” she promised as she threw on her taupe, winter jacket.

“Alright, love you!” Catherine blew a kiss as Jessie threw her a thumbs up. Sharon waved goodbye before pocketing the phone and heading out. It hadn’t snowed in DC since last week, so the roads were clear and free of slush as Sharon drove her beloved stingray through the early morning traffic. The Potomac was dark and churning as Sharon drove across the Theodore Roosevelt Bridge, the Trisk looming ahead of her in its concrete, glass and metal glory. She got through security and parked her car in the underground garage before heading into the main building.

She ventured through the Atrium, her heels clicking against the tiled floor as she hurried to the elevators. She was happy to find a car to herself and was leaning back against the railing as the door closed when a voice called out from the other side.

“Hold the door!”

Sharon halted the elevator as a disheveled Maria Hill forced her way inside, panting and out of breath. The usually poised Deputy Director was looking…well, like a bit of a mess. Her hair was all over the place, her wool jacket buttoned completely but not with the corresponding buttons, and it appeared that she was missing a shoe.

Huh. That was odd.

Maria refused to meet Sharon’s eyes as the blonde took her in. She contemplated just letting Hill go with some dignity, but it was her birthday, she needed a treat.

“Maria,” she greeted as the brunette grunted.

“Sharon.”

The two stood in silence as the elevator ascended before Hill finally broke and turned to the spy with a huff.

“Please tell me that your birthday festivities tonight include going to a strip club.”

Sharon quirked an eyebrow before shrugging. “Last time I checked, no. But one never knows with Natasha.”

“Lame,” Maria grumbled as she ran a hand through her hair. “Well, just so you know, I plan on getting rip-roaring drunk tonight. So, FYI and fair disclosure and all.”

Sharon looked at Maria before everything finally clicked into place. Everything made sense now.

“Who did you break up with this time?”

Maria fidgeted uncomfortably as Sharon smirked. “Really, who was it? Ricardo? Rocco? Lars?”

A fierce glare was thrown her way as Maria glowered.

“His name was Fabian, thank you very much,” the deputy director muttered as she scowled, crossing her arms over her chest.

“What was wrong with the boy-toy? He stopped buying all your excuses about working late and
going out of town?”

“No,” Maria intoned darkly. “He wanted to…talk about feelings.”

She spat out the word like it was a curse. Sharon’s eyebrow rose to her hairline as she stared at Maria in shocked surprise.

“Feelings?” she wasn’t sure if she had heard the brunette correctly.

Maria nodded as she examined her manicure. “Feelings.”

“Like…emotions and stuff?”

Maria bobbed her head. “Yep. He wanted an open and communicative relationship moving forward.”

Sharon wrinkled her nose distastefully. “Gross.”

“My thoughts exactly. So you can understand why, respectfully, I had to kick him to the curb.”

God, some people in the world were just bizarre. Feelings. Please.

“See,” Sharon turned and pointed. “This is why I don’t date.”

“No, you just have wild, crazy, animal sex with Neal Tapper instead,” Maria retorted with a sarcastic eye roll. Sharon couldn’t help but smirk at the mention of Neal. She hadn’t seen him in weeks, he was undercover somewhere in the world.

“Well, you’ve seen Neal. The man was made for orgasms.”

Maria looked like she wanted to gag. Luckily for her, the elevator came to a stop on the 19th floor and Sharon ambled out.

“Hey, Thirteen,” Hill called before the doors closed. “Happy birthday.”

Sharon continued on down the hallway leading to her office, nodding and smiling at coworkers as they ambled by. She could see Rogers loitering about, a cup of coffee in hand as he made polite conversation with someone from Accounting.

“Happy birthday, Thirteen,” a voice called from an open office as Sharon waved in acknowledgment.

“Thanks, Thirty-Three.”

Sharon’s eyes immediately darted to Rogers’ form. He had to have heard that, right? The man had super-hearing. He had to have heard something that was said less than five feet away from him.

Right?

However, whether Rogers heard it or not, he gave no knowledge of it as he nodded to Sharon in passing.

“Morning, Thirteen.”

He continued on down the hall towards his own office as Sharon watched him go. He hadn’t wished her happy birthday. Come on, who doesn’t wish a person happy birthday? It was only the
polite thing to do.

They were partners for crying out loud.

She had saved his ass more times than she could count. And the super-soldier couldn’t take 30 seconds out of his day to say ‘Happy birthday’?

Sharon scowled before turning on her heel and marching towards her office. She hurled her door open and angrily tossed her coat aside before dumping herself into her desk chair. She was in such an indescribably foul mood that she almost didn’t notice the beautiful bouquet awaiting her on her steel desk. It was a tasteful display of white Asiatic Lilies, white roses, and mini carnations, accented with blue statice, cream spray roses, and lush greens.

A delicate card was hidden among the flowers. Sharon plucked it out of the floral arrangement and flipped it open.

To our darling daughter,

We hope you have the most amazing birthday as you reach a new milestone, 27 years. Every day with you has been a blessing and a gift.

Most lovingly,

Mom & Dad

P.S. Please don’t die on a mission.

Sharon couldn’t help but snort as she placed the card down on her desk and leaned back into her chair, admiring the flowers. She really had the best parents. It wasn’t five minutes later when a knock sounded on her door and a familiar face ducked her head into the office.

“Hey, Nat-

“Close your eyes.”

Sharon blinked. “What?”

“I said close your eyes.”

Sharon didn’t know if she should be more confused or concerned for her safety. It was a tossup. But with the way the former assassin was glaring at her, Sharon decided to cooperate. So with trepidation, she closed her eyes and waited with bated breath for what was to occur.

She didn’t have to wait long.


Sharon did, looked down and well…

“Ta-da!” Natasha grinned as Sharon glanced from her to the…thing on her desk.


“It’s great, isn’t it?”

“It’s…something.”
What it was, was a hotdog bun, covered in sprinkles with a lit birthday candle sticking out of it. Well, it was certainly the most unique thing Sharon had ever been gifted. Nat rolled her eyes as she saw Sharon’s lukewarm expression.

“Well, I don’t know what you expected. I like you well enough, but not so much that I was willing to stand in line for hours at Georgetown Cupcake.”

Sharon pouted as she flicked a stray sprinkle off her desk. “Their red velvet is to die for.”

“Whatever, Carter. No one’s perfect. And besides, my second gift is even better than this.”

“God, I hope so,” Sharon whispered to herself with crossed fingers and toes. Not an easy feat in the boots she was currently wearing.

“I got us a reservation at Oyamel for 7pm.”

Sharon perked up at the news. “José Andrés? Fancy.”

Natasha nodded her head. “Exactly. So it’s you, me, Maria, Greer, Greer’s Latina lover, Bri, and Kate.”

“Kate?” Sharon asked with an arched eyebrow as she ripped off a part of the bun and stuck it in her mouth. What? She liked carbs. "Like as in Agent 29?" Kate was her undercover alias as Rogers' neighbor.

“No, Clint’s Kate.”

Sharon blinked. “Oh, you mean Bishop?”

“Yes, that’s what I said. She and Bri are friendly, so the kiddies can hang together while us adults have fun. I reached out to Bobbi, but’s she a no-go. She’ll be in Central America for the foreseeable future. Where’s your dress?”

Natasha’s green eyes darted calculatedly around the office as Sharon continued eating the sprinkled bun.

“Hanging off my door,” the blonde supplied helpfully as Nat’s eyes closed in and nodded.

“Excellent. We’ll be meeting in the lobby at 6:30, don’t be late,” Natasha threw over her shoulder as she headed to the door.

“It’s my party,” Sharon yelled after her. “I’ll be late if I want too!”

The day continued on as normal, well as normal as a day at SHIELD could ever possibly be. Sharon continued about her business. She got a birthday chewing out from Stanford (his version of a birthday hug), she was glitter bombed by Bri, and bear hugged by Trip. And…maybe she sought out Rogers more than was typical if only to pressure the Avenger into wishing her happy birthday. But the man kept denying her at every turn. Hell, someone had said happy birthday to her right in front of him, and what had Rogers done? He had commented on the weather.

The fucking weather.

So, really, it wasn’t Sharon’s fault that by the end of the day she had worked herself up into a proper tizzy. Her face was set in a grimace as she tramped into the bathroom and performed the awkward bathroom stall dance of changing clothes into a sequined black dress that hugged her
curves. She slipped into heels and went to the mirrors to transform her makeup from a daytime look to a nighttime one as she gave herself smoky eyes.

She was journeying back to her office to grab her jacket and clutch when she ran into Natasha. The spy had also changed and was looking mighty fierce in stilettos, leather pants, and a cheetah print top.

“You look hot,” the redhead appraised as Sharon rolled her eyes. She knew she looked hot.

“At least someone appreciates me today,” she snarled under her breath as Natasha raised a single eyebrow in that infuriatingly calm way of hers.

“What’s got your panties in a twist?”

“Rogers,” the blonde grumbled. Natasha just blinked, waiting for Sharon to extrapolate. She wasn’t disappointed as Sharon continued speaking. “You know he hasn’t wished me happy birthday at all today. That’s messed up.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know,” Natasha supplied diplomatically. Sharon glowered. They were far past being diplomatic about this.

“Oh, please. Bri put a birthday tiara on my head. I was wearing it the last time I saw him. All he said was, ‘Nice hat.’”

Natasha hummed. “Odd. Well, I wouldn’t worry about it.”

Sharon couldn’t help but sputter, “Worry? Who, me? I’m not worried about it. I just think he’s an ass.”

Natasha was unimpressed. “Right, well it’s 6:25. I need you in the lobby.”

Sharon waved her off. “I have to grab my jacket. I’ll be down in a minute.”

Natasha rolled her eyes but let the blonde go. Sharon continued on and darted into her office. The room was dimly lit with only her desk lamp on, casting an inviting glow throughout the sleek space. In the distance, the DC skyline was twinkling in the murky, winter darkness. Sharon threw on her coat and was heading to the desk to turn off the light when she noticed something sitting upon the surface. Something that hadn’t been there before.

It was a sketch. Of her.

She recognized the scene of it immediately. Several weeks ago she and Natasha had eaten lunch in one of the staff lounges, gossiping about their fellow co-workers. The artist had captured the moment Sharon had burst out laughing at one of Natasha’s sordid tales about Jasper Sitwell. Sharon’s head was thrown back, mouth opened wide in a beaming grin. She was clutching a mug of coffee and was sitting loose and relaxed in her chair.

The drawing was beautifully done in charcoal with exquisite shading. It looked as if it had taken a painstakingly amount of time to perfect. She had never received a gift like this before. She didn’t know how to feel as she noticed a blue sticky note resting next to the picture.

Happy birthday.

She felt inexplicably warm all over as she reverently reached out and traced her fingers over the drawing softly.
“Well, I’ll be damned,” she whispered to herself. She knew she was wearing an idiotic grin but she didn’t care as she turned off her light and ventured towards the elevators.

All in all, it had been a pretty good day.

Hours later found the spy relaxing on her couch as she watched trashy, late night TV. She had had a sublime birthday night. After dining at Oyamel (complete with Paloma postre for dessert) they group of agents had danced away the night at Untrabar, a popular DC nightclub. She was lax as she sprawled on her couch, the buzz of alcohol alighting her skin with heat and creating a pleasant fuzzy feeling in her head. She was easing into sleep when her doorbell rang. She blinked her eyes drowsily before rolling off her couch. She stumbled a bit to the door and couldn’t help but giggle as she undid the lock and opened it.

Immediately her face was assaulted by the sight of a single (slightly wilted) red rose. Holding the rose was none other than Neal Tapper. She rubbed her eyes to double check that it was indeed Neal. When he didn’t dissolve like a mirage she decided to trust that it was actually him standing there.

“Hey,” she greeted in surprise as the corner of his mouth upturned into a small grin.

“Hey, birthday girl. For you.” He handed her the rose with a flourish as she took it, examining it slowly.

“Thanks,” she responded as she let him into her apartment. “Aren’t you supposed to be in… Belarus? Or was it Burundi?”

The man was hard to pin down at any single time.

“Brunei,” Neal supplied as he trailed behind her to the couch. “Got in just a few hours ago. Figured I come and help you celebrate.”

His eyebrows waggled exaggeratedly at the innuendo and Sharon couldn’t help but laugh as she fell back on her couch, getting into a comfy position. Neal seated himself at the other end and didn’t put up a fuss when her feet immediately landed in his lap.

The two idly chatted about his mission and what had been going on with her since the last time they had seen one another. The whole time they spoke, he ran a hand over her socked feet, lightly kneading her ankle as Sharon enjoyed the sensations. With all the good wishes sent to her that day, the alcohol flowing through her blood and the unexpected surprise of Roger’s gift, Sharon was feeling very, very good.

So, really it was no surprise when not even an hour had passed, she was crawling into Neal’s outstretched arms. She melted into him, tucking her head into his neck, placing open mouth kisses there.

“You taste like sunshine,” she whispered nonsensically. His body rumbled with laughter as his large, warm hands wandered up and down her back before finally settling on her ass. He lazily squeezed and enjoyed the sigh that escaped Sharon.

Time moved slowly as kissing devolved into the removing of clothing. At some point, they took their activities towards her bedroom. Usually, relations between the two spies was quick and rough. They had needs that the other met, there was no need for intimacy or tenderness. But
tonight…Neal was soft with her as he drove her to the edge over and over again.

She was drowsy and completely sated when they were finally done. She rolled onto her side, burying her head into a pillow, absentmindedly waiting for her lover to dress and leave as he usually did. Except, this time he surprised her.

Instead of vanishing into the night, he curled up behind her, weaving an arm around her waist, tugging her closer to him. Sharon froze momentarily before wiggling to get comfortable, enjoying his heat at her back.

Sharon was a closet cuddler. She loved it, but she would die than rather admit it.

“I’ll make you breakfast in the morning,” he murmured sleepily, nuzzling her neck. His stubble rubbing deliciously against her skin as she squirmed.

“I’m holding you to it.”

Not even five minutes later she was asleep.

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February 23rd, 2013

Washington, D.C.

Sharon was aching in the best of ways as she wearily blinked awake. Scattered sunlight was streaming in through her curtained windows. Sharon groaned quietly as she rolled to her side.

She was alone in bed.

Not knowing if she had dreamed the whole encounter, she reached out, patting the sheets and feeling the fading warmth of a body that had slept beside her.

Huh. So it had happened.

A distant curse sounded from her kitchen and suddenly she knew where her bedmate was lurking. She sat up, stretching and yawning as she grabbed underwear and a worn t-shirt and ambled towards the kitchen.

She was met with quite the sight.

Neal, naked except for the tight Calvin Klein boxer briefs that showed off everything, was at her stove making her eggs and sausage.

“Morning,” he called over his shoulder as he whistled a tune to himself. Sharon leaned against the doorway watching the man she was supposed to have no string attached sex with make her breakfast.

She lived in a weird world.

“Morning,” she responded, her voice raspy with sleep. She couldn’t help but observe the man as he finished making them breakfast, plating it and ushering them to her living room. She dropped down in a turquoise chair and watched as Neal plopped down across from her, wasting no time in digging
in. Sharon just watched him for several moments before finally conceding and eating her own breakfast.

It was when Neal finished that she finally spoke about all the odd thoughts bubbling throughout her head.

“So,” she began slowly as he watched her. “We don’t usually do this.”

“Do what?” the SHIELD agent asked with furrowed brows.

“You know,” she gestured to the plates of breakfast. “This. Making breakfast for each other. Sleeping over.”

“Well,” Neal drawled as he absentmindedly scratched his chin. “You seem to know a lot about the things we don’t do.”

Sharon raised a perplexed eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Now Neal appeared agitated as he stared down at his empty plate. “It means…that I like you.”

Sharon stared at him for a long moment before it all clicked.

“Oh,” was all she could say as she was suddenly transfixed by her silverware. Anything to not have to look him in the eye. Her brain was whirling with thoughts and emotions as she tried to take it all in.

She really had never expected this. They had been clear when they had started this. It was only supposed to be sex, no emotions involved other than the ones that induced orgasms.

“Look,” Neal interjected with a hint of panic. “I’m not saying we need to move to the suburbs with our 2.5 kids, a dog, and a picket fence. But I’m tired of acting like the only thing I want from you is your body or that I enjoy dragging myself from your bed.”

Sharon couldn’t help but blush as his gaze raked over her. She suddenly felt more naked than him and she was wearing a shirt. She fiddled with her fingers as she looked at him from the corner of her eye.

“So, what are you saying?”

Neal shrugged, completely at ease with the conversation. “Let’s be more than we are right now. That okay with you?”

Surprisingly enough, she wasn’t opposed to the idea. She hadn’t dated much since her days at Georgetown which had ended in disaster. It was easier to just have casual sex in their line of work. But she liked Neal. He was a good guy, a competent agent, and they had a fair amount of things in common.

She didn’t hear wedding bells anytime soon in their future, but she guessed he didn’t either. She imagined them dating would be just like how they are now except with some added benefits. Like
breakfast. He made a mean omelet.

Really, what could it hurt?

“I think,” she began with a smirk. “That I can work with those mission parameters.”

Neal, the poser, blew out a relieved breath as he sent her a brilliant smile. She reciprocated it until a thought suddenly came to her.

“One thing,” she said with her fork pointed at him. “No talking about feelings under any circumstances.”

Neal wrinkled his nose. “God no, what do you take me for? William Shakespeare?”

Sharon smiled and went back to her breakfast. And just like that, she had a boyfriend.

Chapter End Notes

I'm a really big fan of this chapter, it was delightful to write. I loved having some Peggy/Daniel loving and incorporating some Agent Carter easter eggs. I killed Jarvis! My bad, but we all knew he had to die some day. It is a bummer that Tony loses Jarvis and his parents within five years, but I'm cruel like that.

And Sharon's dating...someone who isn't Steve. Wonder what he'll think about that? Hmm...

Thank you for all the reviews, they are a joy to receive! Please, keep them coming! It makes my day every time a new one is awaiting me in the inbox.

Pic time!

Sharon in the daytime:
Natasha daytime:
Maria daytime:

Sharon nighttime:
Natasha nighttime:
“Leave me alone, Thirteen.” Rogers cautioned as he stepped away and made a move to sidestep her. She was stubborn and stood in his way. He scowled and once again tried to lurk past her, but she grabbed onto his arm and refused to let go, forcing the man to face her. She knew he was only doing it as a curtesy, if he really wanted to, he could fling her into the wall like she weighed nothing.

“No,” he lashed out, shaking her off. For the first time Sharon noticed a glimpse of desperation in his gaze as he stepped away from her, “Stay away from me, Thirteen. Today of all days, just leave me be.”
sent its tail smashing to the side. The appendage moved at a speed greater than a hundred miles per hour and crashed into the library located right behind the robot.

Brick and glass went flying everywhere as nearly half of the library was razed to the ground in a single sweep of the artificial beast’s tail. The creature continued crying as more bullets rained down upon it. They bounced off the robot like raindrops. Sharon shook her head before glancing at Rogers. He was crouched next to her, barking orders impatiently into the comms.

He seemed rather on edge. Though not because of the fire breathing, rage machine in front of them that looked ready to demolish the entire university.

The truth of the matter was, Rogers had been on edge for days. He had been withdrawn and uncharacteristically snippy when forced to interact with others (like Sharon).

Something was bothering him, but for the life of her, Sharon couldn’t figure out what.

Also, this was the worst time to be contemplating such thoughts.

The blonde shook her head and immediately got her head back into the game.

“What kind of jackass creates a robotic dragon?” she yelled to Rogers as he sent her a withering glare before going back to giving orders. The jackass in question was one Professor Gregson Gilbert. Another one of those well-meaning types who let their passion for science, creation and the unknown blind them to the incredible stupidity of actually going through with such ill-conceived inventions.

Honestly, whoever thought a robotic dragon could actually contribute to society? It was a fucking dragon with the mindset of a puppy and the strength of the Hulk. It was like *Jurassic Park*, but with fucking robots.

It seemed Rogers was finally done berating STRIKE as he turned to her, body tense, lips pinched and eyes narrowed in frustration.

“Where’s our goddamn air support?” he growled as Sharon blinked, unused to such anger from him being directed at her.

“It’s still a few minutes out,” she responded and didn’t miss the scowl he threw her way.

“We needed that air support five minutes ago,” he hissed as Sharon shifted away, looking for the calm in the storm.

“It’s not like anyone could anticipate *this,*” she snapped back, gesturing to the absolute craziness occurring around them as a military tank went hurtling through the air, landing on one of the science buildings. “They’re doing their best.”

Rogers rolled his eyes. “Well, their best isn’t goddamn good enough.”

Peggy had always said Rogers had had a foul temper when things didn’t go his way. He was a bit of a control freak like that. Sharon could understand his frustrations, the situation they were in was nothing less that bat-shit crazy. But his blistering tirade (besides being odd and completely out of left field) was doing no one any favors. The Avenger had nearly reduced Bri to tears only yesterday during a tense sparring session. Sharon had knocked him flat on his back with a strategic dick punch for that. No one made Bri cry other than Sharon.

Rogers turned back to the dragon, which was once again trying to set everything in a fifty-foot
radius on fire. He reached for his shield and squared his shoulders, a grim look of determination marring his face. Oh no, Sharon recognized that face. She had gotten remarkably good at recognizing it in the time they had spent together. Rogers had made up his mind about something.

He was going to be a self-sacrificing idiot.

They were all so, so screwed.

“I’m going in,” he announced to her, never taking his eyes off the creature. Sharon internally groaned.

“Don’t you dare,” she lunged for his arm but the bastard shook her off easily and jumped over the SUV, landing daintily on the other side.

“Rogers, get your ass back here!” she screeched at his backside, but it was no use. He was gone. He took off sprinting, dodging the flames that the dragon was trying to inflict upon him.

“What the fuck is he doing?!?!” Rumlow yelled through the comms as Sharon watched with bated breath, heart lodged in her throat as Rogers leaped. With the grace of a gymnast, Rogers scaled his way up the dragon’s body towards its head. The robot flailed its neck about, trying to dislodge the super soldier that was sticking to its body like glue. He was searching for the robot’s weak spot, anything to disable it from its current rampage. His shield, attached to his right arm, was coming down as hard as Thor’s magical hammer against the metal, trying to splinter it apart.

Sharon gasped as the dragon madly flapped its wing and began climbing ten, twenty, thirty feet into the air.

“Air support,” she whispered frantically to herself. “Where the hell are you?”

Rogers was clinging to the neck of the robot, his knees digging into it, as he continued raising his shield only to smash it down. The clang of the vibranium hitting the steel was echoing all around as Rogers continued his one-man crusade.

Sharon’s breath caught as the dragon got in one successful neck swing that upended the captain. Rogers went flying back, tumbling down the dragon’s backside to land hard on the unforgiving ground. If Rogers’ had been a normal man, he would have several broken bones and would be running the risk of paralysis. Because he was Rogers, he was on his feet only moments later, ready for round two with the beast.

God, is this how Bucky Barnes had felt all the time throughout his friendship with the man?

Sharon was close to having a heart attack watching her partner once again attempt to tame the monster.

This time Rogers was practically a spider monkey as he grasped the dragon’s neck and continued his assault of shield and fists. He had punched out both eye sockets of the robot, so its sensors were shocked and the automation was flying blind.

Finally, Rogers managed a lucky punch to the underside of the robot’s throat, which revealed numerous wiring underneath. He tore it apart and moments the dragon faltered before finally giving out.

It short-circuited spectacularly and collapsed. Sharon felt the vibration from where she was standing as the ground thrummed. Rogers smoothly dismantled and holstered his shield. He was wiping dirt off his shoulders just as three quinjets appeared over the treetops.
The air support had finally arrived.

“What the hell was that?” Sharon demanded as she marched up to Captain America. He only regarded her dismissively as he glanced back at the downed robotic monster.

“I’m sorry,” he snidely began with a darkened expression. “Was I wrong in believing that the objection in this mission was to eradicate the giant robot? Was that not what I did, Thirteen?”

Even when he was annoyed with her, he had never said her name with so much scorn. Sharon bristled in return as she held her ground against the Avenger.

“Not without backup!” she seethed. “You could have been killed.”

Rogers chuckled, though there was nothing joyful in his laugh as he shook his head disbelievingly.

“Not much kills me.”

Without further glance he stalked off as Damage Control convened upon the site, ready for cleanup. Sharon just watched Rogers go with a heavy gaze.

Something was seriously amiss.

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March 10th, 2013

Washington, D.C.

“What’s gone and died up Rogers’ ass?”

Sharon sighed as she turned her head. “Good morning to you too, Natasha.”

“Buongiorno,” the redhead greeted as she plopped down into the plastic chair across from Sharon. The scarlet assassin was fresh off of a mission in Italy with a healthy glow to her skin to show for it. Sharon envied her, all she had was an increasing amount of stress lines as she dealt with Rogers and his increasingly poor attitude.

The man had been on the warpath all week. Sharon had always taken him for the suffer-in-silence type, but no, he was letting everyone else suffer right along with him. Fury had thrown him out of his office after their debriefing about the robotic dragon, Hill had nearly slugged him when she attempted polite conversation at lunch, and everyone else was left to cower in fear if Rogers so much as breathed in their direction.

“Seriously,” Natasha inquired as Sharon sipped her coffee. “Did someone kill his dog while I was away?”

“He doesn’t own a dog,” Sharon dryly remarked and was kicked in the shins for her comment. She yelped pitifully as Natasha rolled her green eyes.

“You know what I meant,” the redhead said with narrowed eyes. “What happened?”

“Hell if I know,” Sharon said as she leaned back in her chair. “He’s been an absolute boar since the beginning of the month and it just keeps getting worse day by day. We were sparring with Bravo
STRIKE yesterday and he gave poor Ramsey a grade two concussion. Rumlow was about ready to start a street brawl if I hadn’t jumped in and defused the situation.”

“Hmm,” Natasha hummed ponderingly. “As much a fan as I am of violent expressions of one’s emotional turmoil, this doesn’t seem like Rogers’ style.”

Sharon snorted mirthlessly. “You’re telling me. I don’t know what to do, Nat. The man chews my head off anytime we so much as make eye contact.”

Natasha deliberated over the problem, her eyes calculated as she stared ahead. She had recently changed up her hairstyle. Gone were the bobbed curls and the deep shades of crimson and in its place was an extreme blunt cut with a lighter shade of red. She had implemented a middle part that only a few lucky people in the world could pull off. All in all, it was a severe look, but Natasha had both the striking features and the cool attitude to pull it off.

“Well,” she said after several long moments. “One thing I can tell you is that Rogers never does anything without a reason. He’s ruled by a sense of duty. Whatever’s bothering him, he’s just manifesting his frustrations through his actions. Figure out the problem, everything else should fall into place.”

Sharon huffed. “Easier said than done.”

Natasha only shrugged nonchalantly in return. “I never give away my good advice for free. If you want to pay the price, I’d be happy to ruminate some more, come up with something more concrete.”

Sharon rolled her eyes as she stood. “I’ll take my chances. I’ll see you.”

“Ciao.”

“Che cavolo,” Sharon muttered underneath as her breath as she walked away.

“I heard that!” Natasha called out and Sharon waved her off as she wandered the halls of the Trisk, thinking over Natasha’s words. Natasha, as much as Sharon hated to admit it, was right (just like always). Sharon needed to dig deep to figure out what was going on in Rogers’ head. The safety of everyone at SHIELD depended on it.

So Sharon took a deep breath and headed to the one place Rogers had been haunting for the last week: the training grounds. She found him easily when she arrived, mainly because everyone else in the vicinity was giving the captain a wide berth. He was pummeling a punching bag. He was swinging so quickly that his punches were nearly indiscernible to the naked eye. Sharon watched with a sense of trepidation as she shifted from foot to foot and played with the sleeve of her cream, cable knit sweater.

Rogers was boxing with a purpose though his form was sloppy and his punches were landing hard but without any sense of precision. Sharon wasn’t surprised when one particularly ferocious uppercut sent the bag flying across the room where it joined three tattered others.

Rogers was really on a roll today. The worst he had been since his bad mood had set in.

He stood there, back to her, covered in a fine layer of sweat as he batted away his sweaty hair that had fallen over his eyes. When she realized he wasn’t going to look at her, she cleared her throat delicately and watched as his back became as rigid as an ironing board.

“What do you want, Thirteen?”
He hadn’t played the Name Game with her in days and she hadn’t realized how much she missed the inane activity until she had gone cold turkey without it. It was just Rogers’ effect on her. When he retreated he became stone cold, like the sun had disappeared. It left her shivering in its wake.

“I was just checking in,” the explanation sounded weak and by the way Rogers continued to ignore her presence, he must have seen through it as well.

“I’m right as rain,” he responded bitingly as Sharon bit her lip. Man, could he be a prick when he wanted to be.

“That last thing you are is alright,” she threw back at him as he turned his head sharply, his blue eyes dark and stormy as he glared at her.

“Something’s wrong with you,” she continued steadfastly. “I want to know what it is.”

“Why should I tell you?”

“So I can fix it!” she snapped, her voice raised several octaves. She sighed and fought to regain her composure. Rogers always had a way of sending her off the rails.

“I want to help you,” she persevered gently. “Something’s clearly bothering you.”

“Yeah,” the Avenger snipped. “You’re bothering me.”

“Stop being an asshole.”

“Leave me alone, Thirteen,” Rogers cautioned as he stepped away and made a move to sidestep her. She was stubborn and stood in his way. He scowled and once again tried to lurk past her, but she grabbed onto his arm and refused to let go, forcing the man to face her. She knew he was only doing it as a courtesy; if he really wanted to, he could fling her into the wall like she weighed nothing.

“Rogers-”

“No,” he lashed out, shaking her off. For the first time, Sharon noticed a glimpse of desperation in his gaze as he stepped away from her. “Stay away from me, Thirteen. Today of all days, just leave me be.”

He charged ahead, leaving her to stare after him with an appraising gaze. Even if Rogers didn’t realize it, that was a call for help. One Sharon wasn’t planning on ignoring, even if part of her just wanted to wring the man’s neck for all the grief he had put her through the last few weeks.

*Today of all days.* What had that meant? What was so special about today that had Rogers so on edge?

With a fire ignited in her mind, Sharon hurried to her office. She all but threw herself into her chair and booted up her computer. Once ready to go she went to the one place that held all the answers to the universe: Google.

It was easy to search for the significance of the current day.

March 10th …

1629: *Charles I of England dissolves Parliament*
Interesting, but probably not the thing haunting Rogers and causing him to act out like a rebellious teenager with far too much angst.

1906: Courriéres mine disaster

1917: Bucky Barnes’ birthday…

Sharon’s blood went cold as she reread the sentence. Oh no. Suddenly, in the worst possible way, everything made a sickening amount of sense. Sharon collapsed back into her seat as horror swept throughout her.

“Shit!”

She knew exactly where Rogers had gone.

When Bucky had died (fallen from the train – all Steve’s fault) Steve had been a wreck. He had been a sobbing mess when he and the Howlies had turned over Zola to the SSR. General Philips had taken one long, assessing glance at Rogers before announcing in that deep drawl of his. “Strong men don’t cry. You’re the strongest man out of all of us, Rogers, so suck it up and dry your damn eyes. Barnes would be embarrassed by such a display.”

Sixty-eight years later and Steve still thought that was the biggest load of bullshit he had ever been fed.

So here he was, standing out in the cold (though he barely felt it) with snow falling around him, tears pooling in his eyes as he stood in the somber silence of Arlington National Cemetery. His eyes were focused on the grave before him.

James Buchanan Barnes

1917-1945

Son, Brother, Friend, Soldier, Commando

“Hiya, Buck,” he choked out as the wind whipped past, ruffling his hair in the chilly breeze.

“I’m sorry I haven’t come to visit you,” he spoke haltingly, the words a weight on his chest. “I… I’ve been real busy. Not that that’s an excuse. Makes me a pretty lousy friend, huh?”

His eyes rolled up heavenward but all he saw were grey, ugly clouds. He puffed out a breath and it came out as mist as he stuffed his hands into his denim pockets.

“I shoulda been here for you…I shoulda caught you. I shoulda done…so much more.”

A single tear ran down his cheek. He wiped it away and startled when his ears perked up, hearing someone approaching from behind. He heard the slight crunch of snow as the footsteps neared him, though the person had been trained to be deceptively quiet. Not much got past his ears.
He sighed when Thirteen appeared at his shoulder. He relentlessly stared ahead, not wanting to see the pity in her well-meaning gaze. He had been receiving pity since he was a kid due to being the smallest and sickest kid in all of Brooklyn. Those pitying gazes had never gone away, not until the serum and Captain America had happened. He’d be damned if he received one now from the person who was supposed to have his back.

“How’d you figure it out?” his voice was thick with defeat. It made Sharon’s heart break just hearing it.

“Well,” she began gingerly. “I was a history major in college. This definitely came up in US History once or twice.”

Rogers stared down at his shoes. “History, huh? It still feels just like yesterday.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t know,” Sharon said softly, feeling Rogers’ surprise from beside her. She shifted and tugged her navy, wool jacket closer to her. It was a stunning day with the gentle snowfall enveloping the pair as they stood before Bucky Barnes’ grave.

“Why?”

“Because no one should have to mourn a friend alone,” Sharon answered while looking down at the grave, watching as snowflakes melted against the marble. Rogers turned towards her and his eyes widened at the bouquet of magnolia’s cradled in Sharon’s arms. He looked from the floral arrangement to Sharon and then back to the flowers.

“Are those…” he cut off, a lump in his throat as the blonde simple nodded. She kneeled down and tenderly placed the flowers against the gravestone, the startling white of the flowers standing out strongly against the onyx backdrop of the grave marker. She stood and wiped her hands on her jeans, standing with Rogers in silence for God knows how long. She had become so used to the stillness that she nearly jumped a foot in the air when Rogers began speaking out of the blue.

“I went into the ice on March 4th, 1945,” he didn’t look at her as he spoke, but stared off into the distance, seeing something only he could see. “Just six days before Bucky’s birthday. From the age of seven, I had spent every birthday, his and mine, with Bucky.”

He cut off abruptly to snuffle before valiantly carrying on. “And I couldn’t get it out of my head, even when I was fighting Schmidt on the Valkyrie, that in less than a week, Bucky was gonna turn 28 and he wasn’t there to see it. He’d never celebrate his birthday again. He’d never get older. But I would. I was expected to keep living my life, day after day, year after year, without him.”

He turned towards her suddenly, something wild in his eyes. “How the hell are you supposed to live your life when the person who knows you best, practically half of your soul, is gone? Hell if I had any clue. So when…when it came to staying aboard the Valkyrie to ensure its destruction, well…it was easy.”

Sharon stared at Rogers with wide eyes, fear clamping around her heart as she tried to decipher his grim words and the sadness in the way he spoke them.

“Are you saying…?” she couldn’t even say it aloud.

“No,” Rogers shook his head vehemently. Snowflakes were attaching themselves to his ridiculously long eyelashes and Sharon couldn’t believe they were talking about this, here in this place.
“I didn’t…go into the ice intentionally. But I was so tired, so worn down; that in the end, I didn’t fight my fate when the ship went down.”

He chuckled bitterly before continuing, “If I had known I’d end up here…maybe I would have tried harder.”

He gestured to the cemetery but Sharon knew what he really meant. ‘Here’ was the 21st Century, SHIELD, the Avengers, and even her. They were all a foreign world to the man out of time.

“Rogers-”

“Sixty-seven years I was in the ice,” he said decisively as he stared down at Barnes’ gravestone. “I missed 67 birthdays. Buck would be 96 today. Ninety-six years old, and there’s nothing to show for it.”

His eyes were red and his shoulders so beaten down as he stood there. He wasn’t even wearing a jacket, just a cozy blue and grey pullover sweater. Sharon knew she was his partner, not his friend, but someone had to be incapable of feeling to just let him stand there with a broken heart in hand and not even try to reach out.

Without thinking through the consequences, she stepped closer to the grieving man and placed her hand on his shoulder. He flinched but didn’t even look at her as she tried to rub some warmth into his body.

“Tell me about him.”

Rogers glanced at her out of the corner of his eyes. “What?”

“Barnes. Tell me something about him, something not in the history books or in a documentary. Something only you know. What was he like?”

Rogers stared at her for a long moment and she just about thought she blew it with him before he finally cleared his throat and looked around.

“He was…charming.”

Sharon snorted. “Charming?”

Rogers nodded. “He could sell ice to an Eskimo. He had a way with words, could wax poetic about nearly anything.”

“Sounds like he had the girls tripping over their feet for him,” Sharon couldn’t help but say with a grin.

Rogers chuckled and nodded his head jerkily. “He was a real catch. But he was always sincere. He never led a girl on or mistreated ‘em. He just wanted to make people happy. He loved makin’ someone smile.”

As Rogers continued speaking, his Brooklyn accept (normally hidden) crept through his words and it warmed Sharon to hear it.

“What else?”

“He had the foulest mouth you ever heard. His ma threatened to wash it out with soap nearly every day. The only who swore more than him was…well, me.”
He rubbed his neck sheepishly as Sharon laughed. “I can believe that.”

“And...he was so smart. He was the top of all our classes. Bucky was the reader between the two of us. He was voracious, it only took him a week to demolish *Moby Dick*. He loved science fiction novels the most: *A Princess of Mars, Journey to the Center of the Earth, Marooned off Vesta*, and the like. He hoarded books like they were treasure, I was always trippin’ over them in the apartment we shared. In the winter, it got so cold, I suggested we burn the pages for warmth and the way Bucky reacted you had thought I suggested we eat his sisters, he was that horrified.”

Rogers chuckled, shaking his head at the memory. Bucky had been so offended, hugging his hardcovers to his chest as he protected them from Steve’s grubby, charcoal-stained hands. He couldn’t help but stare at the horizon as he reminisced.

“His sisters…”

He trailed when suddenly a memory crashed into him and nearly knocked him off his feet, “Becca.”

Sharon stared at his profile. Becca? Who...did he mean Rebecca Barnes-Proctor? She was Barnes’ only living, immediate family. Sharon blinked as she watched Rogers’ eyes dilate.

“Rogers-”

“I have to go,” he announced and turned to stalk off. He halted suddenly and looked back at Sharon, standing confusedly in front of Barnes’ grave.

“Thank you, Thirteen,” his tone was sincere and the way he was looking at her, well, he had never looked at her like that before. Sharon just bobbed her head and watched him go.

Steve hurried to his motorcycle and took the quickest route back to his apartment. He was soaked to the bone by the time he was barreling into his home. He ignored the cold, wetness and dashed into his bedroom. He immediately dropped to his knees by his beds and went rooting underneath, finding the box he had ignored for so long. He pulled it out and tossed the top aside carelessly.

Inside were files. He flipped through them quickly and ignored the way his heart lurched as he breezed through them. These were the files of all his loved ones from the War and what had happened to them after he went in the ice.

Howard, the Howling Commandos...all DECEASED.

Only Peggy was still alive, but in so many ways she was already lost to him. His heart flipped when he found Bucky’s file. His eyes were immediately drawn to the black and white photo of his friend, standing proudly in that damned blue jacket he had coveted so much. He had strutted around like a peacock in that thing. Steve chuckled wetly just thinking of the time Dum Dum and Jim had ‘accidently’ flung some dung on the peacoat. Bucky had been livid. He had gotten his revenge though because the next day the two had woken up to mounds of dung in their boots. Their feet had reeked for weeks.

He tore his gaze away from the photo and forced his eyes downward to Bucky’s next of kin. His family had lived on after the War, all dying at different ages, all except Becca. She was the sole living member of the Barnes clan. She had made a home for herself in Connecticut where she had raised a son and daughter.

Steve had thought of reaching out when he had come out of the ice, but it had hurt too much. The
pain of losing Bucky had still been too raw. Truthfully, it still was. It was like an unending scab that always tore open when you thought it had finally healed. It just kept on bleeding, not strong enough to cause any harm, but enough to know you’d never forget it was there. An eternal injury to carry around.

Steve’s eyes darted as he quickly read Becca’s phone number. She was still here. She had loved Bucky as fiercely as he had. She was the only one who could understand this black hole of pain ripping him apart.

He had his cell phone out in a flash and had dialed the number without truly thinking it through. As it rang he momentarily felt the need to hang up. He almost did when the call was picked up and an elderly voice, though yet so distinctively Becca, answered.

“Hello?”

Steve choked out a sob as he curled up into a fetal position, pulling his knees towards his chest as he dropped his head.

“Becca,” he gasped. “It’s me…Steve.”

“Steve?” she answered with the same tremble in her own frail voice. “Is it really you?”

He nodded even though she couldn’t see him, “Yeah, it’s me. I’ve missed you so much…”

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March 21st, 2013

The Triskelion

“So, does this count as our first date?”

“What?” Sharon glanced at Neal before shaking her head. “No. Don’t be silly.”

Neal shrugged as he trailed beside her down the hallway. It was late at night and they were rarely used part of the fortress that was the Trisk.

“I don’t know,” Neal remarked good-naturedly. “We’re doing something together that’s not work-related or sex. I’m counting it as a date.”

Sharon rolled her eyes, but a smile was threatening to appear on her face. “Just so you know, I don’t put out on the first date.”

“Oh, sweetie,” he crooned as he exaggeratedly batted his eyes. “I’ve already sampled the goods. Many times, in fact.”

He slapped her rear end to really hit that point home. Sharon squealed in surprise before punching him in the shoulder, watching with satisfaction as he groaned. When they were nearly at their destination she turned to her boyfriend and asked, “Did you bring the chips?”

Neal held up two reusable bags filled to the brim with chips. Sharon nodded approvingly right as they came to the correct door.
“Here we are,” Sharon announced as Neal stared.

“Uh…I think this is a storage closet.”

Sharon grinned. “Not just any storage closet.”

She rapped on the door and only a moment later Barton’s voice came booming through the other side.

“What’s the password?”

Sharon sighed before asking aloud, “Do I have to?”

“Password!”

Sharon rolled her eyes before muttering, “Shoo-bop sha wadda wadda yippity boom de boom.”

Neal snorted and ignored Sharon’s glare. Even Barton could be heard snickering through the door.

“You may enter.”

The door swung open to reveal a relaxed Barton dressed casually in ripped jeans and a worn plaid shirt. He nodded for the two and they slipped into the above average size storage closet. It really was just a storage closet, nothing special about it, except for the activity that was to occur inside.

Seated at the poker table was Natasha as she lounged in her seat. She arched an immaculate eyebrow the second her calculated gaze landed on Neal. Sharon ignored the face the redhead pulled as she took the chips and dumped them on the snack table in the corner.


“It’s a two for one special,” Sharon said before Neal could open his mouth. She directed him to the table and dropped down into the seat next to him as she leveled a pointed look at Natasha.

“You want me, you get him. That’s a thing couples do, right?”

“Only when they’re looking for a threesome,” Clint quipped from the door as Natasha snorted.

“Well,” Neal offered gamely. “I’m always up for a threesome.”

He was met with the very unamused eyes of both women in the room. He had the grace to stay silent as another knock sounded on the door. Barton rubbed his hands together gleefully before clearing his throat.

“What’s the password?”

“Rama lama lama ka dinga da dinga dong,” Maria intoned dryly from the other side of the door. Barton’s eyes lit up like Christmas had come early.

“I’m sorry,” he didn’t sound sorry at all. “That was one too many lamas, you shall not pass.”

“If you don’t let me in, Barton, I’ll have you on milk runs for the next three months.”

Barton nearly tripped over himself to flinging the door open as he welcomed Maria in enthusiastically.

“Come on in, Deputy Director Hill! Make yourself at home.”
Maria breezed past him, carrying booze in her arms. She dumped it at the table and sat down at the table, raising an eyebrow the moment she noticed Neal sitting there innocently.

“What’s Tapper doing here?” she asked the room at large as Sharon gritted her teeth.

“I invited him. We’re together now, that’s what you do when you’re a couple. You go places together,” she hissed shrilly as Neal fidgeted in his seat, a tad uncomfortable by the somewhat lukewarm reception to his presence. Maria just shrugged in return and went to town on the chips. Soon enough Bobbi and Trip were ambling through the door.

“*Hola*, bitches,” Bobbi catcalled. “I’m back!”

Everyone assembled snacks and got drinks and were soon ready to get this road on the show. They were here for their quarterly poker session. Only the best of the best at SHIELD were invited to the secret game in the secret location of the Triskelion. It really was an honor. Peggy and Howard Stark had started the tradition all the way back in ’65 in the midst of dealing with the Russians.

“I still don’t see why strip poker is out,” Bobbi complained as Natasha dealt out cards.

“We’d never object you lovely ladies like that,” Trip replied as he raised the stakes. Clint and Neal nodding in tangent to Trip’s earnest assessment.

“Oh, please,” Maria interjected smartly. “You boys just don’t want to play strip poker because you’re always naked before even one of us ladies have taken our tops off.”

“That too,” Barton offered up as the game got underway. Poker was a good tension breaker. The beer helped too. Two hours in and everyone was loose-limbed and relaxed as they traded wacky mission stories and war wounds proudly.

“The weirdest thing that’s ever happened to me,” Sharon included as she swigged the last of her third bottle of beer. “Was without a doubt my ‘Heads’ guy.”

“‘Heads’ guy?” Tripp inquired confusedly. He had been hitting the alcohol pretty hard and was trying to figure which Sharon was the correct one of the two he was currently seeing in his vision. Sharon bobbed her head erratically as she leaned one elbow on the table and pointed.

“Yeah, such an oddball. So, here I am, in Istanbul needing to bring in your average mad scientist or whatever. He had some kind of…chemical bomb, I don’t remember. So he sees me and he runs, like they always do.”

“Here, here,” Maria clinked her bottle in agreement. Neal’s eyes stayed locked on Sharon as she retold the story.

“So I’m chasing him all over Istanbul…and I finally corner him. He speaks no English, just one word: *Heads.*”

“What does ‘Heads’ even mean?” Bobbi asked as she munched on BBQ chips. Sharon shrugged wildly in response.

“Hell if I know, he kept repeating it at me, over and over. I’m trying to calmly detain him, got out cuffs and everything. He takes one look at them and bolts out into the street. And he immediately goes SPLAT!”

Sharon clapped and more than one SHIELD agent jumped in their seat at the abrupt sound. Sharon giggles lightly as she leans back in her chair.
“He got hit by a car. He was dead instantly.” Her voice trailed off contemplatively. “I never got to bring him in. Never got to know what the hell he was trying to tell me.”

What she didn’t say was that she still dreamed about the man from time to time. That his scared gaze haunted her once in a blue moon. That the dream still gave her chills every time she had it. Some things you just didn’t share with others.

“Doubt it was important,” Neal said after a beat of silence as Sharon shrugged. He was probably right, but still, it was something to wonder about everyone once and awhile.

“What’s the turn?” Tip asked loudly as he glanced around and set his pearly whites on an unassuming Natasha.

“Romanoff! Tell us your weird and wild story.”

Natasha huffed out a breath as Barton smirked next to her. He nudged her with his elbow.

“C’mon, Nat, tell ‘em about the big, bad Bogeyman.”

“Bogeyman?” Bobbi asked. “I ain’t afraid of no Bogeyman.”

“That’s ghosts,” Maria dryly responded as Bobbi flipped her the bird in response.

“Oh, I have a story,” Nat said before things could get out of hand. She held audience over the court of slightly inebriated SHIELD agents.

“Once, someone got one over me.”

Silence swept through the group as they processed Natasha’s coded words. The Black Widow was one of the best spies not just in SHIELD, but in the world, and getting one over her was near impossible.

“Tell us!” Trip drunkenly enthused as the others banged their hands on the table to echo his sentiments. Natasha exchanged a glance with Barton before rolling her eyes and reaching for the hem of her shirt. She pulled it up to revealed her toned abdomen. Sharon was about to call out her friend for showing off her sinfully good physique for no reason when the blonde noticed the thick, pink scar on the redhead’s left hipbone.

Everyone else had noticed it and were staring transfixed at the disfigurement. Everyone had always assumed Natasha was pristine, too deadly to ever take a hit.


“What was the mission?” Hill asked as she shuffled the deck of cards, though no one was paying attention to the game anymore.

“Four years ago, I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran, somebody shot out my tires near Odessa. We lost control, went straight over a cliff, I pulled us out, but the marksman was there. I was covering my engineer, so he shot him…straight through me.”

Natasha pulled down her top and finished what was left of her beer. “Bye-bye bikinis.”

Sharon shuddered at the thought of such a dirty shot. She had been shot before, it came with the job description, but her wound was a minor graze to her right arm. She had never had a bullet churn
through her body, splintering the bone, tissue, and organs in its path. To take one where Nat had, the assassin was lucky she hadn’t bled out. Who could have such a perfect shot he’d take someone out by shooting through someone else? That was unheard of. Not even Barton would risk it.

“And this motherfucker is still alive?” Bobbi questioned, eyes riveted to Natasha. The redhead gave a single nod as a hush fell over the room.

“Who the hell gets a hit on you and lives to tell the tale?” Maria demanded to know. Sharon leaned on the table as she waited for Natasha’s answers. Natasha didn’t disappoint.

“The Winter Soldier.”

The room became a vacuum instantly. It was so still and silent one could hear a pin drop. Sharon felt a chill sweep up her arms as she stared increduously at her friend. Everyone in the intelligence community knew of the Winter Soldier. He was the world’s deadliest assassin. There had never been anything to prove his existence, no photos or video stills, but one defining feature was repeated in every retelling of the mythical killer's exploits.

His metal arm. A red star.

“The Winter Soldier?!?” Trip yelped belligerently. “He’s an urban legend, the ghost story you warn new recruits about at the Academy.”

Natasha only looked down at her hands. “He was a man…once.”

“I call bull,” Bobbi declared loudly, “Trip’s right, he’s just a ghost story. There’s no way he really exists. It’s impossible.”

“It’d mean he’s been killing for the last fifty years. Pretty strange, if you ask me,” Neal interjected skeptically from his spot, his eyes raking across the room.

“No one did,” Natasha snapped before flipping her hair over her shoulder. “And I’ve seen stranger things.”

“I’d believe aliens over the Winter Soldier any day,” Maria said as she finally finished shuffling.

“Now that we’ve heard that riveting tall tale,” Maria started dealing the cards. “Who’s ready to lose some more money?”

Cheers erupted throughout the storage room as the game was once again afoot. Sharon tried to get back into the party atmosphere but found herself subdued for the rest of the night.

There had been a moment when Natasha had been speaking of her experience.

And in her eyes, there had been a flash of something Sharon never thought she’d see in Natasha.

Fear.
Thank you so much for the reviews for the last chapter! I think it's the most I've received for a single chapter. You are all amazing and give me so much motivation. Please, keep it up!

So, Professor Gilbert, Dragon Man, and State University are all from the comics. I thought it would be a fun mini story to put in as an aside to the main meatiness of the story. We've received our first hint of the Winter Soldier! Definitely will come in handy when our beloved characters face off against him in the next installment of the series.

Translations:
Buongiorno - Good morning
Ciao - Goodbye
Che Cavolo - What cabbage!

Pic time:

Sharon on JB's BD:

Sharon's jacket:
Steve:
Natasha:
“What has you looking so traumatized?” the assassin asked in an assessing tone.

“I think Captain America just told me to practice safe sex.”

Natasha stood there for a long moment before realizing that Sharon was indeed speaking the truth. She wrinkled her nose.

“Hmm…that is alarming.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

April 4th, 2013

Tidal Basin

“I don’t see why you’re making me go look at the cherry blossoms.”

Sharon glanced at Rogers out of the corner of her eye as they strolled along the Tidal Basin. It was a surprisingly warm and sunny day in the nation’s capital. Gone were the snow and chill of winter and in their place was sunshine and heat. It was in the high 50s and Sharon was taking advantage by wearing skinny jeans and a striped sweater in various soft hues of blue and yellow. She had thrown on a Georgetown Bulldog baseball hat on before departing from her apartment and her honey blonde hair was falling atop her shoulders in gentle waves.

Rogers was casual as he walked next to her. She hadn’t given him much warning before dragging him to the Tidal Basin, so he was rocking jeans, a simple white tee, and a cream colored hoodie. He was also wearing the Mets cap Sharon had gotten him last year on their very first playdate. From the way people watched them pass with shushed whispers and bated breath, it wasn’t doing much to conceal Captain America’s identity. That or everyone couldn’t get over how impressive his pecs looked in his size too small t-shirt.

Sharon rolled her eyes at Rogers’ mulish tone. One would think she had suggested something awful like shoe shopping with Natasha instead of partaking in one of DC’s greatest traditions. Sharon loved watching the cherry blossoms spring to life every year. She had vivid memories of chasing after the airborne blossoms as a young girl, her small hands grasping onto the pink petals as her parents chased after her.

“No self-respecting Washingtonian has never not gawked in beauty of the cherry blossoms. It’s practically a rite of passage,” she told him matter-of-factly.

Rogers frowned before informing her, “I’m not a Washingtonian. I’m from Brooklyn.”

“Everyone in the Western Hemisphere knows you’re from Brooklyn,” Sharon retorted dryly. It
might as well be his own personal slogan: *I'm just a kid from Brooklyn.*

“You’re a broken record about Brooklyn,” the blonde continued. “You live in DC and you work in DC. That makes you a Washingtonian. A transplant Washingtonian, but all Washingtonians are transplants. So really, that just means you fit in. Which means we’re going to see and admire the cherry blossoms.”

Rogers huffed petulantly as he nodded respectfully to an elderly couple in passing. “I see them every day when I’m running.”

“No,” Sharon corrected with a finger point at the super-soldier. “You sprint past them at 40mph when you’re running, all you’re seeing is pink in your periphery.”

She halted and ignore the strong flow of people surging pass her. The Tidal Basin was packed with people (mainly tourists) wanting their fill of the natural phenomena before the cherry blossoms died in the next few weeks. All Sharon saw was sheer beauty. They were standing beneath a canopy of breathtaking blossoms that extended as far as the eye could see. How could anyone not be in awe of them?

“Slow down, take a step back and smell the roses… *err*, cherry blossoms, I mean. Besides, I don’t know why you’re complaining, I bought you coffee and everything.”

She gestured to the Starbucks in Rogers’ right hand.

“I spent nearly $10 on that venti cinnamon dolce latte with extra whip cream and extra syrup. With all the added hoopla, I’m surprised there’s any coffee in there.”

Rogers wrinkled his nose, offended as he cradled his coffee protectively. “Well, I think it’s delicious.”

Honestly, knowing the kind of man Rogers was and the world he had used to live in, Sharon had just blindly assumed he’d be a black coffee kind of guy, maybe with a dash of milk if he was feeling generous. But ever since Rogers had come out of the ice, he had been experimenting with every coffee concoction he could get his hands on. He loved the variety of milk, syrups, toppings and what not. His typical coffee order gave Sharon a cavity just looking at it. She was much more refined with her grande Americano with two pumps of toffee nut syrup to cut through the bitterness of the espresso. She sipped her own coffee as she glanced at the Avenger.

“You have the taste buds of a high school freshman girl who wears Uggs, I hope you know that.”

“Everyone’s a critic,” Rogers muttered to himself, pulling his hat down lower as a group of college-aged girls fawned over him near the Jefferson Memorial. Their giggles were audible even to Sharon.

“Again with the complaining.” Sharon shook her head in despair, a joking grin appearing in the corner of her mouth as they continued walking. “You really have no leg to stand on, not only do I buy your sugar monstrosities that you’re trying to pass off as coffee, but I have also paid for every single one of our playdates.”

Roger groaned loudly.

“I’ve told you, please stop calling them playdates.”

“What’s wrong with playdates?” Sharon inquired playfully, already knowing full well he hated when she referred to their excursions as such. She just got a kick out of it, hence why she continued
calling them playdates. Honestly, Rogers made it so easy. No wonder Stark enjoyed winding him up so much. It was such a satisfying feeling to watch the man out of time unravel beneath his own internal annoyance.

“We’re two adults. We’re just getting together and you’re…showing me around.”

The spy couldn’t hide her snort even if she wanted to. “Well, in that case, I’ve *shown you around* to practically every art museum in this town; from the National Gallery to the American Art Museum to the Hirshhorn.”

“Don’t forget Renwick,” Rogers interjected. He had been a fan of the Renwick. Sharon nodded in acquiescence as the sun shone down upon them.

“How could I forget the Renwick? We’ve been to nearly every Smithsonian except for the National Postal Museum and the National Zoo. Which we are definitely getting over there one of these mornings to introduce you to Mei Xiang.”

Rogers raised an eyebrow as he scratched his neck absentmindedly. “That’s the panda, right?”

“Correct,” Sharon beamed. “She is adorable. Your life will be changed when you see her eat some bamboo and take a nap in a tree.”

“Riveting,” Rogers deadpanned.

“You better be enthralled,” Sharon warned with narrowed eyes. “Don’t think I forgot about your lukewarm reaction to the Newseum.”

Rogers sighed wearily at his partner’s unspoken complaint. “I said it was fine. I had a nice time.”

“A *nice time*?” Sharon scoffed. “It’s my favorite museum in this city. When you hate on the Newseum, you’re hating on me.”

The blonde had been eager to take the super soldier to her favorite place in all of the DMV. She could spend hours walking the hallowed halls of that near holy space. She wasn’t a religious person by upbringing, but days spent in the Newseum were as close to a religious experience as she was going to get. Rogers…on the other hand had not appeared any closer to God during their jaunt their back in February.

“It’s nothing personal,” Rogers insisted in that endearingly earnest way of his. Sharon, however, was not budging. “It’s just…it’s hard to enjoy the news when you’re the one making headlines more often than not. I’ve seen my ugly mug on enough front pages to last me a lifetime.”

Sharon hummed as she pondered that. She did have to admit, there had been a lot of Captain America, the Avengers, and the Battle of New York articles in the museum the day they had been there. There had been no hope for Rogers’ anonymity. He had been made less than five minutes into walking through the doors. He had spent the majority of their tour signing autographs and reluctantly taking selfies with gaping fans.

Sharon had been amused. Rogers…not so much.

“That’s fair, I guess,” she conceded to the nonagenarian. “Though you have to admit, you were quite the hit with our tour group.”

She nudged the soldier and couldn’t help but laugh when Rogers threw her a dirty look as he threw his empty coffee cup away.
“Hysterical, Kimberly.,” His voice was dripping with sarcasm. “Really, our poor tour guide passed out and nearly died. Who knew what would have happened if I hadn’t been there to perform CPR until an ambulance arrived.”

Sharon choked on her coffee, laughter bubbling freely out of her chest. Shaking her head she turned to Rogers with tears pooling in her eyes at his serious expression. He really had no clue, did he?

“Oh, Rogers, you’re so gullible.” She patted his back with mock concern and kept walking, even as he stared at her retreat form questioningly.

“What?” he demanded to know as he strode forward to keep up with the SHIELD agent. Sharon took pity as she turned to the Avenger and explained in layman terms.

“Our tour guide, Tiffany, didn’t pass out. She was faking it.”

Rogers blinked rapidly in consternation as he tried to work through Sharon’s puzzling words.

“Why the hell would she fake that?”

No wonder Peggy had said that the man had no idea on how to talk to women. He clearly didn’t understand the female species and why they do the things they do. “Why do you think?”

“What?” Rogers paused as it finally came to him. “Me? She faked collapsing so I would do CPR? Why the hell would she do that?”

Sharon looked at the super-soldier him pointedly, her eyes raking up and down his form. She enjoyed the horror that crept across his face as he realized the source of their tour guide’s treachery.

“Oh.” The man couldn’t help but shudder. “Oh, God! What is wrong with people in this century?”

All the while, Sharon was cackling into her coffee, tears watering in her eyes as she tried valiantly to hold them in. Her cheeks were hurting from smiling so much and if she kept on going like this, she knew she’d have to contend with sore ribs from so much laughter.

“Desperation has no bounds, I’m afraid.”

Now that Rogers understood everything, his face was contemplative as his mind replayed the events that had occurred months ago. “Is that why instead of helping me you kept fiddling with your cell phone?”

“Oh yeah.” Sharon bobbed her head, no hint of guilt or embarrassment in her body language. “That was the most entertaining thing I’ve ever seen. You best believe I was filming that.”

The footage was sheer perfection. It had gone viral in less than five minutes when she had uploaded it to the internet. It had been her civic duty to share it with the wider world.

“Wait,” Rogers came to a halt. He looked at her with furrowed brows and a suspicious gaze. “Are you the reason that video went viral on the Avengers’ Twitter?”

#CaptainCPR and #dropdeadforcap had been trending worldwide for hours. Tony was still sending him memes of it even though it had been months since the video dropped. He had been the butt of late-night jokes for weeks. And was all because of Thirteen. Terrific.

“Guilty as charged,” Sharon admitted unapologetically. “But in my defense, I had to do it.”
Rogers couldn’t believe his ears. “Yeah, and why’s that?”

Sharon smirked. “The world, Rogers, the world. They needed that. Who was I to deprive them?”

She continued walking, feeling the glare Rogers was gifting her with all the way down her spine.

“I hate you,” he muttered underneath his breath. Sharon felt her smile grow. She wandered to the edge of the Tidal Basin, standing just before the waters of the Potomac, watching paddleboats in the distance. A gentle, spring breeze jostled her hair. They were near the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial and stood among a sea of cherry blossoms, extending as far as the eye could see, hugging the edges of the Tidal Basin as they swayed whimsically in the wind.

Rogers came to a stop beside her and followed her gaze. His breath caught in his throat as he took in the natural beauty for the first time.

“Wow,” he whispered to himself, mouth still open as his eyes moved rapidly over the scene, committing everything he saw to memory. His fingers were itching for his drawing pencils. Sharon smiled warmly as she watched him.

“See,” she said. “A rite of passage.”

Another successful playdate, indeed.

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**April 10th, 2013**

**Washington, D.C.**

“*Birds flying high, you know how I feel. Sun in the sky, you know how I feel...*”

Steve absentmindedly hummed along as he lounged on his sofa. It was functional more than anything else with a sleek, modern design. It wasn’t very suitable for afternoon catnaps, but it worked for sketching. His sketchbook was in his lap as he slowly and methodically recreated the vibrant cherry blossoms that Thirteen had dragged him to see last week.

The flowers had been making appearances in his dreams, a welcome respite from the flashing images of the *Valkyrie* and ice. He was on his third attempt (he just couldn’t get the shading down) when a sharp knock rattled on his door.

He involuntarily tensed, fingers wrapping around his pencil so firmly that the writing utensil threatened to snap beneath his unforgiving grip. He extended his enhanced hearing but was only met with a steady heartbeat and even breathing from out in the hallway.

The knock sounded again with a touch of impatience.

Not Kate then…

On the rare occasion when she knocked on his door it was always done with a quick, three knock rapt. Thirteen typically rang his doorbell when ambushing him into another... *outing.* She also had
a tendency to sway from side to side as she waited for him to open the door.

The truth of the matter was that he didn’t have too many visitors to his humble abode. He didn’t really have any friends, at least any outside of SHIELD and the Avengers. And Thirteen was the only one who felt comfortable encroaching on his privacy.

So, Steve really didn’t know what to expect as he ventured to his door and with a quick glance to his shield that was resting innocuously in the hallway, leaning against the wall, he opened his door.

Suffice to say, he was surprised to see Natasha standing there in a sundress.

“Rogers,” she greeted impassively with a slight, teasing curl of her mouth. She clearly saw the previous paranoia in his posture. Steve only rolled his eyes as he leaned against his doorframe and loosely crossed his arms over his chest.

“Natasha,” he acknowledged, “What brings you to Dupont Circle?”

“Can’t a girl visit her friend?” the redhead asked, slipping past Steve’s broad frame with ease before he could even blink. She sauntered down his hallway as if she owned the place. Steve watched her go with a dumbstruck expression before sighing, closing the door and trailing after her into his living room.

Natasha was glancing around casually, but he could see the slight edge to her eyes, the way they calculatedly roved across the living space, taking everything into account.

Honestly, spies.

“Nice place,” she said after a few moments before her jade green eyes dropped down to his sketchbook lying discarded on the sofa, still open to his half-finished cherry blossoms. Steve followed her gaze and immediately flushed.

No one but Thirteen knew he was drawing again. Hell, he didn’t even want her knowing.

Natasha looked from the drawing to Steve and then back to the sketchbook as she picked it up and examined it closely with an unreadable expression.

“It’s a good drawing,” she finally remarked as her eyes filtered to him. “Thirteen take you?”

“Kickin’ and screamin’,” Steve responded as Natasha snorted and looked back down at the sketch.

“She loves the cherry blossoms. She waxes poetic about them every year. She dragged Bri and Kate there just the other day and forced them into one of those paddle boats. They contemplated leaving her stranded in the middle of the Tidal Basin as recompense.”

Now, wouldn’t that be a sight? Steve could see the image clearly. He had to admit, it was a pretty funny image. He let the amusement fade away as he took in Natasha, standing in the middle of his living room like this was an ordinary occurrence.

“What are you doing here, Nat?”

Natasha looked away from the drawing and set the sketchbook down gently on Steve’s wooden coffee table from Ikea. Her eyes darted to Steve with a glint of mirth in her emerald eyes.

“I’ve heard about your playdates with Thirteen-”

“They’re not playdates!” Steve protested hotly as Natasha chuckled under her breath and leveled
the super soldier with a placating look.

“Sure they’re not, Steve. Anyway, you keep spending all your free time with Thirteen and you’re going to have me thinking you don’t like me.”

She batted her eyes exaggeratedly as Steve huffed in place.

“You wouldn’t want me to think that? Would you, Rogers?”

“I think you’re absolutely swell,” he muttered vehemently but the assassin just graced him with a serene smile as she plopped down on his couch, her hair bouncing as she landed gracefully. She invitingly patted the cushion next to her invitingly and with a sense of trepidation, Steve sat next to her, keeping a healthy amount of space between the two.

He knew better than to get caught up in the Widow’s web.

Natasha only smirked in response as she started digging through her designer tote bag, speaking to him all the while.

“I have it on good authority that you have both *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* on your I’ve-Lived-Under-A-Rock-For-The-Last-70-Years-And-Need-To-Catch-Up-On-Pop-Culture List.”

Steve blinked in surprise. Whatever he had been expecting…it hadn’t been his list. Also, he kept that on his person at all times, so how had Natasha sneaked a peek at it without his knowing? Actually, now that he thought about it, he preferred not knowing. Natasha was scary in her methods.

His list was also sitting on the coffee table. He had been steadily working his way through it and had crossed off the Michaels (Jackson, Tyson, Jordan), the 1969 Moon landing, *Band of Brothers*, and more. It was an exhaustive list. He wouldn’t be surprised if he spent the rest of his life playing catch up.

“What of it?” he asked cautiously as the redhead continued digging through her bag. She finally extracted whatever she was looking for with a sound of triumphant as she turned to her fellow Avenger with a victorious grin. Held firmly in her grasp was a DVD box set. In bold letters across the cover were the words: *Star Trek*.

“If you watch *Star Wars* first,” Natasha began. “I can guarantee you will never appreciate *Star Trek* in all of its rightful glory. So, I’m rectifying that before you turn to the dark side.”

Steve stared at her blankly, not getting it.

“That’s a *Star Wars* reference,” Natasha supplied helpfully at Steve’s confused glance.

Steve furrowed his brows. He had, of course, heard of both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek*. They were some kind of science fiction crazes (much more Bucky’s alley than his) that people were pretty passionate about. Steve, with his limited knowledge, really couldn’t see a difference between the two. But the last time he had mentioned that to Quentin, the tech genius had unleashed a rather long and loud rant about the virtues and differences of both. Thirteen had been in the background, cackling all the while at the bewildered expression on Steve’s face.

She was a supportive one, that partner of his.

“Aren’t we watching *Star Trek*?” Steve questioned with a side of petulance as he sank down into his couch. “Is there an actual difference between the two? The more you’re talking the less I
believe they are two different things and you’re just trying to get one over me.”

Natasha rolled her eyes and moved to her feet, gearing up the first DVD (how many were there?). She plopped back down as she reached for the remote and keyed up the TV to the correct setting. Steve sighed and seeing no chance of escape gave himself over to the experience he never imagined occurring with his fellow SHIELD agent. Natasha quickly scrolled through the menu and geared up the very first episode.

“We’re going to start with “The Cage.” It was the original pilot but it was rejected by the studio and the show was completely overhauled with a new cast and premise.” Natasha explained as the episode began. “All you need to remember is the USS Enterprise and Mr. Spock. Also, Captain Christopher Pike. He comes up again.”

Steve nodded to himself. That seemed easy enough. “Spock, huh? That’s the guy with funny ears, right? And the hand sign with the catchphrase: May the force be with you.”

He held up his left hand in the mimicry of something he had seen somewhere on TV. He tried to configure his fingers into what it had looked like, but instead, his hand looked like some wrangled warped pretzel.

Natasha was very unimpressed.

“о Боже.”

She shook her head before batting down his hand. “We have our work cut out for us. Also, if I so much as hear a titter when it comes to the Russian stereotypes of dear Chekov…well, just remember, I can kill a guy at least ten different ways with this remote.”

She brandished the tool threateningly as the blond gulped. He mimed zipping his lips closed and tossed away the key over his shoulder.

“Silent as the grave.”

Natasha smirked in response. “Good boy.”

She turned back to the TV just as the show began. Steve followed her gaze and settled in. The first episode passed quickly and then they were in the true series with Captain Kirk and Doctor McCoy. Steve had to admit as they got into episode three, the show was rather charming. He still didn’t know what to do with Natasha. The assassin was content with lounging on his couch and keeping silent. Much different than Thirteen who was always going a mile a minute on their excursions, trying to show him everything at once. It made museums a bit tedious, to be honest. It was like she never wanted him to miss a thing. He appreciated it, to a degree. But he had no idea what to do with Natasha’s silence.

So, he attempted making small talk. Natasha tolerated it for a while, answering with one-word responses. It was only when Riley began singing an Irish jig that Natasha turned to Steve with a slight frown for once again interrupting the flow of the show.

“Look,” she remarked unapologetically. “I’m not like Thirteen. I don’t feel the need to talk and talk to fill the silence.”

Steve shrank back, of course, Natasha would understand the oddness of his behavior and the reasoning behind it. She was the best of the best, after all.

“She means well, but she’s a fixer. She always blindly believes that she can fix other peoples’
problems. Which is laughable, because she can hardly fix her own until they’re right on top of her.”

Steve raised a single eyebrow. “Seems kind of harsh coming from you, her friend.”

Natasha sighed and turned to regard the super-soldier friendly as she leaned in to bestow some worldly wisdom on the man out of time. “Being a friend means you see the flaws your friend’s trying to hide. Being a friend means being too polite to say anything about it.”

Natasha turned back to the screen as Steve watched her for a long minute.

“So, you consider yourselves friends?” he inquired as Natasha glanced at him with a shrug.

“As good as friends as you can be in this kind of business.” She didn’t need to extrapolate on that. Steve understood where she was coming from.

“Do you know her name?”

“Of course I know her name.” Natasha scoffed as if she was insulted at the mere thought that she wouldn’t know it. “This is me we’re talking about. I know everything.”

Steve remained silent as he stared ahead contemplatively. The silence between the two was deafening before Natasha sighed and looked at the hero.

“Trust me, Steve,” she advised with uncharacteristic softness. “You knowing her name wouldn’t change anything. She’d still be Thirteen.”

“Is it a matter of trust? Does she not trust me?” Steve asked as Natasha maintained eye contact.

“It’s not about trust,” she said after a moment.

“Then what is it?” he asked, frustration clear in his voice. Natasha watched him for several moments before turning back to the TV.

“If she told you…when she tells you, she can’t ever take it back. She’d still be Thirteen, but she would be something else as well.”

“It’s just a name,” Steve argued as Natasha chuckled lowly. She glanced at him, a tinge sardonic in her gaze.

“It’s not just a name, it’s a life.”

She turned back to TV and he knew the conversation was closed. Natasha leaned back to make herself uncomfortable.

“Now,” she addressed the super soldier lightly, “Be a doll and go make us some popcorn.”

Steve huffed out a long-suffering breath but did as he was told. When the popcorn was done he plopped back down and geared up for a long weekend.

April 12th, 2013
“Happy Monday,” Sharon greeted Natasha cheerfully as the two stood in one of the staff lounges, drinking coffee. Natasha grunted in return.

“Do anything fun over the weekend?” the blonde questioned as Natasha smirked.

“Cap and I binge watched *Star Trek* over the weekend.”

Sharon’s head shot up as she stared at the assassin. Seeing that Natasha was being perfectly serious, Sharon pouted.

“What wasn’t I invited?”

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Please, you’re clearly not a Trekker.”

Sharon looked insulted as she turned to her friend with an aghast expression.

“I can Trek. I can Trek with the best of them!”

Natasha shook her head as she nonchalantly sipped her coffee. “You only watch the new movies because of Chris Pine.”

Sharon couldn’t argue that. “Hell yeah, I do. That man is beautiful! He is out of this world.” Sharon paused for effect, a grin crossing her face as she nudged Natasha. “See, that’s funny because the movies take place in space.”

Natasha groaned in return. Sharon broke out in giggles as she elbowed the redhead.

“Don’t act like you don’t love my sense of humor. I only do cheesy puns because you do cheesy puns! It’s like symbiosis.”

Natasha stared at Sharon with despair as she begrudgingly admitted, “I hate that I totally followed that line of logic.”

With that Natasha left Sharon’s presence as the blonde watched her go with a grin. The day continued on like any other and after a riveting sparring session with Bri near the end of the day, Sharon found herself in her office working on some field reports for Stanford. She was so involved in her typing she didn’t notice the knock on her door or the thick head of hair that poke itself through the door.

“Is this a bad time?”

Sharon glanced up at the interruption and raised an eyebrow questioningly at Neal’s sudden appearance in her office.

“Hey,” she greeted with a small grin as he waded in further. “I thought you were in Dominica on that stakeout? Aren’t you supposed to be out of the country until the end of the month?”

Neal chuckled as he neared her desk. “You know, I think most women are happy when their boyfriends surprise them unexpectedly.”

Sharon smirked in return as she leaned back in her chair. “Well, I’m not most women.”
“No,” Neal’s dark gaze raked over her body shamelessly. “You are not. You’re a breed of your own.”

He rounded the desk and Sharon tracked his movements closely, admiring how snug his shirt was as it wrapped tightly around his pectorals and showcased his rippling abs.

She did love abs in a man.

She didn’t move an inch as he leaned in and halted, his face only inches away from hers. He rested his hands on the arms of her chair, effectively trapping her, not that she had any plans of running away. A small, sincere smile overtook his face as Sharon absentmindedly counted the dusting of freckles across his nose.

“Hi,” he whispered, his breath warm across her skin. She felt her own smile grown as she stared back.

“Hello.”

Her eyes shuttered closed as his lips slanted over hers. She sighed softly against the pressure and sank back into her chair, tugging Neal along with her. She moaned as the gentle kiss took a heated turn when his tongue swiped out, tracing her bottom lip with purpose. She opened up to her, her hands working their way up his chest, feeling the hard muscles beneath. They wound themselves around his neck as she pulled him to her, wanting to feel his heat against her.

His lips had sunk down to her neck, kissing and biting against her smooth skin. His large, warm hands had just slipped beneath her shirt and were stroking her back. She really couldn’t understand while office romances were so often prohibited when this was the upside. She had just closed her eyes and had given into Neal’s skillful ministrations when of course everything was ruined.

A quick knock sounded on her door as a voice spoke. “Thirteen, do you have a minute? Oh.”

Sharon tore apart from Neal, eyes glossy and lips red and plump as her dark eyes filtered to the door.

Where Rogers was standing like a little boy who had walked in on his parents.

Fantastic.

Neal, for his part, was attempting to catch his breath as he remained locked over Sharon’s chair. His hair was a wild mess from Sharon’s wandering fingers and his cheeks had a flushed glow to them.

“Captain,” he greeted with a nod as Rogers locked his eyes on him. He nodded once in return before glancing away, refusing to even look in Sharon’s direction.

“Agent Tapper. It seems I have come at a bad time.”

Neal barked out a laugh as Sharon contemplated sinking into the floor and letting it swallow her up. Anything was better than this single moment in her life. She’d take robot dinosaurs and mutant bats any day of the week over this.

“Just a bit,” Neal said with his trademark, charming smile. Sharon was half tempted to punch it off his face. He was not helping at all.

Rogers glanced at her for only a second before sheepishly rubbing his neck.
“Well…I’ll just leave you to it.”

He turned on his heel and stalked out of the office. Leaving Sharon to despair in his wake. Did SHIELD own a mind-erasing machine? She would love to bleach this from her memory. Permanently.

Neal huffed out a little breath of amusement as he stood fully, “I’m guessing the Stars and Stripes didn’t know about us?”

“No,” Sharon said pitifully. “No, he did not.”

Neal whistled. “Awkward.”

Sharon couldn’t help but chuckled weakly. “Something like that.”

“Guess the show’s over, huh?”

Sharon glanced up at him and with a small quirk of her lips nodded. “Afraid so.”

Neal nodded in acquiescence and remarked affably, “That’s okay. You’ll make it up to me.”

He leaned in and kissed the corner of her mouth before leaving her office. Sharon sighed as she despondently watched him go.

That had been…unexpected.

She had never been opposed to telling Rogers about her and Neal. Really though, the thought had never crossed her mind. It had never registered to inform her partner upon her dating status. She never thought he’d care. But maybe that would have been better than walking in on it. Poor Rogers.

She knew he wasn’t the naïve, ‘Golly, mister!’ speaking, golden boy of the 1940s that the media enjoyed portraying him as.

But still, it was universally awkward to walk in on a hookup. It didn’t matter what century you were in.

And now they would have to talk about it. Which was the absolute worst. If it was up to Sharon, they would never speak about it again. But she believed in total transparency when it came to partners (besides the obvious of course, like her name). Something like this could affect their working relationship if left to fester. If they weren’t on the same page, they’d be useless to each other out in the field.

So…they were going to have to talk about it.

Fuck her life.

With a grumble, Sharon got up and began searching for the wayward Avenger in the labyrinth that was the Triskelion. She ventured far and wide, searching every nook and cranny in the modern intelligence agency.

She finally found him in the garage amidst the armored SUVs and sleek sports cars bearing the SHIELD logo. He was stretched out underneath his Softail Breakout. A toolbox was resting next to him as he tinkered with his prized Harley Davidson.

Sharon stood to the side of him, watching his feet, as she contemplated what to say to the super
soldier. Really, how does one begin a conversation such as that? ‘Sorry you had to see so much tongue.’

Something told her that Rogers wouldn’t appreciate that.

Finally, because of course, he knew she was standing there dawdling, Rogers cleared his throat and shimmied out from underneath his motorcycle. He sat up, wiping his greasy hands with a rag, before glancing up at her politely.

“Elena,” he acknowledged civilly. Sharon sighed in relief. If he was playing the Name Game with her then things weren’t totally lost.

“Not my name,” she said for the sake of saying. Rogers quirked his lips as he hoisted himself to his feet and nodded to his motorcycle.

“I was just fixing it up. It’s been making a funny noise lately.”

Sharon nodded and the two stood in silence. Each gauging the other and waiting for someone to break the silence. Sharon glowered when she realized it would have to be her as Rogers stared down determinedly at his rag.

“So…” she began slowly as Rogers looked at her.

“So,” he parroted and waited for her to pick up the thread she had begun. Why did he always make things so difficult for her?

“I just wanted to say sorry, you know, about what you saw between Neal and me. I imagine it was…quite the sight.”

Rogers snorted. “Well, I can honestly say I hadn’t expected it.”

Sharon nodded so that she would have something to do. She was fiddling with her fingers when Rogers asked,

“So…you two are dating?”

“No,” Sharon answered without thinking. She bit her tongue when she realized what she had said. “Yes,” she corrected.

Rogers arched a single eyebrow. “I know I’m a bit fuzzy on how relationships work in this century but aren’t you supposed to be aware if you’re in one?”

Sharon sighed. “We are. It’s a recent development. It used to just be sex and now it’s not.”

Realizing what she said she panic before interjecting quickly, “I mean, there’s still sex, obviously. Really good sex!”

Now Rogers looked uncomfortable as Sharon continued babbling nonsensically.

“Great sex, actually. But now’s there…emotions involved, I guess. It’s what we’re going for anyway.”

Just kill her now.

The silence between them was booming as both stood there. Neither wanted to be there, but there was no escape now that Sharon had word vomited over everything. They were left in the disaster.
“Well,” Rogers began haltingly as he tried to find anything to grasp onto. “I’m no expert when it comes to relationships, but I hope it works out.”

Sharon wanted to die. She wanted to die right now.

“Thanks,” she choked out, refusing to look at him. Rogers nodded to himself and gestured back to the motorcycle.

“I need to get back to…”

Sharon took the easy out for what it is.

“Of course! I just wanted us to…clear the air. Be on the same page.”

Rogers nodded and raised his hand to weakly wave her off.

“Well, you know what they say. Always use protection,” he ended awkwardly before nearly throwing himself hastily underneath his motorcycle. Sharon stood stock still for a long moment. She opened her mouth to speak, but a strangled sound came out instead. Knowing defeat when she saw it, she turned and all but ran to the elevators.

She didn’t notice anything around her as she was transported back to the 19th floor. She was on her way to her office when Natasha materialized out of nowhere. She took one look at the blonde before narrowing her eyes.

“What has you looking so traumatized?” the assassin asked in an assessing tone. Sharon didn’t quite know what to say. Really, what could she say? What could anyone say after a conversation like that? Sharon just stood there, gaping for several long moments, before finally getting out.

“I think Captain America just told me to practice safe sex.”

Natasha stood there for a long moment before realizing that Sharon was indeed speaking the truth. She wrinkled her nose.

“Hmmm…that is alarming.”

Natasha sauntered off leaving Sharon to stand there like a fish out of water.

Honestly? How was this her life?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for the previous reviews! I love, love, love receiving them. Please keep them up! They give so much motivation.

I know in CATWS, Steve had Star Wars crossed off his list and not Star Trek. But I just picture Nat as a huge ST fan and she wanted to get Steve in on the action before Sharon and Sam scooped him up into Star Wars. Also, gotta love how awkward Sharon and Steve can make a situation. They notched it up to 100 real quick.
Translation:
о Боже - Oh goodness

Pic time!

Sharon at the cherry blossoms:

Sharon's hat:
Steve at the cherry blossoms:

Sharon at the Trisk:
First You Get Hurt, Then You Feel Sorry

Chapter Summary

“No one ever said it would be this hard.”

“That what would be so hard?” Natasha asked probingly.

“All of it,” Sharon confided, “The lying, the secrecy. I don’t know if I can take much more of it.”

“It’s just the guilt talking.”

“No,” Sharon barked before reigning herself in, “No, it’s not.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 6th, 2013

Detroit

Steve Rogers was having some kind of day.

When he had gotten up that morning, he had never foreseen spending his day stopping an escalating gang war in Detroit. Yet here he was, fighting his way through the crumbling husk of the Michigan Central Station. What had once been a stunning monument to transport was now (through years of disuse) nothing more than a deteriorating ruin that served as the perfect hiding place for some pesky crime lords.

The poignant stench of rot was strong in Steve’s nose as he hurtled down a decaying hallway. The ceiling above him, laden with water damage, looked poised to collapse any moment now. He could hear the trickle of running water far off in the distance and could still smell the strident odor of spray paint. Messes of graffiti art were splayed across the walls, creating a dizzying, kaleidoscopic effect as Steve sprinted.

Each window was blown out, stray glass and torn up wood littering the floor as Steve worked his way through it. Gunfire was flying at him though he gave it no heed with his shield protecting his front side from the bombardment. In any other situation, he had already flung his shield to take out the group of gunmen in front of him. But noting how paper thin the corroding walls were, Steve worried that if he let his shield fly loose, it would completely demolish a wall and leave him weaponless.

The group of thugs he was dealing with today were a new breed of sleaze. They were a gang with an eye for tearing the city of Detroit apart with a new kind of gang war, one utilizing some of the more mundane weapons of the Chitauri invasion a year ago. After the battle, Tony had been quick to create Damage Control and it alongside SHIELD had been quick in rounding up the stray
Some, however, had…slipped through the cracks.

Steve had nearly blown a gasket at Fury when the director had informed him and Thirteen that morning that some of those cracks were occurring in Detroit. This group of gangsters was looking for a hostile takeover and it was SHIELD that was going to stop them.

So, here he was. Fighting the good fight, just like always.

With a powerful jump, he landed a brutal double foot kick into the chest of the first gunman he came into contact with. The man folded easily, hitting the ground hard and staying down for the count. Steve also landed gracelessly but was quick to spring to his nimble feet and perform an effective roundhouse kick to another thug’s head. As the man went flying, Steve grabbed him by his jacket and hurled the body into three of his friends. They all went down like bowling pins after a flawless strike.

Hearing footsteps lumbering towards him from behind, he dropped down low and fast as a python, darted his legs out in a sweep kick that had the unfortunate recipient laid out flat and knocked out cold.

He was about to rise to his feet when he felt the butt of a rifle at the back of his head. He sighed to himself, shaking his head lightly.

“Hands up!” a gruff voice commanded as the rifle pressed harder into his helmet. Steve slowly did as he was told, all the while his eyes darting around as he formulated his next move. His shield was laying a few feet away, gleaming in the shattered sunlight that was drifting in through the broken window.

It’d be easy enough for him to lunge for his shield and use it as cover when the gunman inevitably fired upon him. He could use the shield as protection before ramming the guy with it.

Yep, that sounded like a good plan.

“Now turn around! I mean it!”

Steve clenched his teeth as the rifle was pressed even further into his helmet, forcing his head down. He did as he was told, turning to see the thug bearing down upon him.

“Now stand, hands in the air! And I swear to God, if you so much as breathe funny, I put the bullet right between your eyes.”

He demonstrated the validity of his statement by pushing the rifle into the ridge between Steve’s thick eyebrows.

Nodding along, Steve did as instructed, all the while waiting for the opportune moment to strike. Just as he stood to his full height he noticed a flash of movement over the thug’s shoulders.

A small smile involuntarily worked itself across his face.

The gunman noticed as well and forced the gun harder into his face.

“Why you smilin’, pretty boy?” he demanded to know, his fingers twitching uneasily on the trigger.
“Because,” Steve allowed his smile to grow. “I’m with her.”

The man turned his head only to be met with a fierce, right uppercut. Steve winced in sympathy as he heard the telltale crack of a broken jaw as the gunman dropped like a bag of potatoes. He wouldn’t be getting up anytime soon.

Steve glanced up from the downed man to take in the sight of Thirteen in all of her ivory clad glory.

She seemed rather unimpressed as she set her amber eyes on him. “Remind me, why do I always have to save your ass?”

Steve shrugged placidly as he remarked, “I’ve been told it’s a pretty nice one.”

His partner gave a small snort of amusement as she holstered her Glock onto her thigh.

“It’s rather flat,” she responded with a teasing glint. The super soldier wasn’t given a chance to volley back a quip when both heard a sound from down the hall. Thirteen was quick to dive for the shield and held it up just in time to deflect a new wave of bullets raining down upon them.

Steve crouched behind her as she held the shield strongly, taking every shot that was aimed at them. All the while she was digging through her utility belt and pulled out a miniaturized smoke grenade. She ignited it, and with a glance over the shield, lobbed it at the four hostiles at the end of the wall.

It landed in the midst of them and went off, smoke shrouding them. The pair of SHIELD agents listened to the coughing and the eventual thuds of bodies dropping unconscious to the floor. As the smoke dispersed and a ringing silence remained in its place, Thirteen lowered the shield.

She looked down at, admiring its sleek design and how effortless it was to hold. She turned to Steve and offered him back his most prized possession.

“Do they ever aim for the legs?” she asked with a nod to the assemblage of unconscious bodies around them. Steve shrugged nonchalantly as he attached his shield to his back.

“On occasion.”

“It’s very impressive,” Thirteen continued lightly. “How you manage to fit your entire body behind your shield. Truly, I am astounded.”

“Well,” Steve began in a glib tone. “It’s a gift.”

He shook his head as his eyes scanned their surroundings. Floors below he could hear the faint barrage that was STRIKE in the main lobby of the decrepit train station. He could hear the breathing of all the knocked out men surrounding them. He squared his jaw and put himself back into mission mode. Jokes with Thirteen would have to wait.

“Where’s STRIKE at in regards to subduing hostiles?” he inquired pointedly.

“I’ll check in.”

Thirteen reached up and turned on her comm, listening as the chaotic sound of gunfire echoed throughout her ears, followed by the whooping and yelling of STRIKE.

“Yippee ki-yay, motherfuckers!” Rumlow shouted with glee followed by the familiar sound of a
grenade exploding in the distance.

Thirteen turned off her comm and Steve turned to her with an arched brow. “So?”

She smiled serenely. “They’re doing just fine.”

Steve nodded, taking her at her word. He looked up, his eyes tracking across the ceiling. He couldn’t hear anything up there, but one could never be too vigilant when taking out a syndicate such as this.

He turned to Thirteen and decisively ordered, “I’m going to head up to the 18th floor and take a look around. I want you to rendezvous with STRIKE and take out the remaining hostiles. I want this wrapped up.”

Thirteen bobbed her head approvingly. “Sounds like a plan. I’ll see you at the bottom.”

Steve glanced at her before turning on his heel and heading to the rickety stairwell. “See you, Marsha.”

Sharon rolled her eyes as she watched him go.

“That’s not my name.”

When he was gone, Sharon turned and ventured down the hallway in the opposite direction of the super-soldier. She gingerly stepped over fallen bodies and kicked away their weapons on the off chance any of them woke up before being rounded up by STRIKE.

She came to a stop at the open elevator shaft. She gazed down at the seemingly unending tunnel cloaked in suffocating, thick darkness. With a slight huff, the blonde reached into her utility belt and pulled out a single light stick. She snapped it against her knee and held it up as an eerie, green glow emanated from it. With a glance at the shaft, she held out her hand and let the stick drop.

She watched the green light fall, growing dimmer and dimmer until it hit the ground 15 stories below.

“Huh,” she hummed to herself as she detached her grappling hook and embedded it securely into the floor. Turning so her back was to the shaft, she tugged on her line, making sure it was secure, before leaning back and pushing off.

She felt momentarily weightless as she flew back, but only moments later her boots were making contact with the stone walls of the elevator shaft. She continued her way down, bouncing methodically off the walls, the only sound was the slight whirring of her line. Every few bounces peeked down, seeing the green glow growing steadily closer.

It was as she was passing the third floor, that a wrench was thrown in her meticulous plan. She was just passing the open elevator doorframe when she noticed four gunmen standing there. She froze midair as they stared back at her, equally surprised at her appearance.

They were quick to reach for their guns.

Sharon hung her head. “Lovely.”

Thinking quickly, she was a whirlpool of movement. Pushing off from the opposite wall, she launched herself into the hallway, cutting her line. She landed in a crouch and took off charging to the men as they raised their semi-automatics.
She hit the first one with a robust knee strike to his torso. He ‘oomphed’ and flew back, landing on the ground. One goon blitzed her with his fist raised. She expertly sidestepped the punch as he went sailing past. She jerked back her elbow so it rammed into his nose, shattering the bone. He gave a wailing cry of pain as blood gushed out. Not wasting a moment, Sharon pivoted on her heel and executed a perfect spinning hook kick.

She turned her body, her leg wrapping around the thug’s neck as the force of her kick took both of them down. She landed expertly as the man thudded down, heading hitting the cement flooring hard. She turned her head to see another sniper coming her way.

She leaped up and landed a quick series of brutal blows down upon his person. He raised his arms to defend himself as she reigned blows down upon him. Seeing an opportunity, she implemented a severe cross to the man’s head. The blow lurched him forward and without stopping she used her left hand to land a hook to his exposed chest, her punch getting him in the ribs. She could feel several crack as she punched him. The goon groaned, falling to his knees and she finished him off with a high kick to the head. He collapsed in a miserable heap.

She didn’t even have a moment to herself before a beefy arm was wrapping around her from behind. She gagged in surprise as her air supply was abruptly cut off, the man’s arm tightening around her neck. Sharon reared back her arm for an elbow strike that successfully got him in the jaw, but the thug refused to loosen his grip on her. As her vision began dotting, she jumped up and used her weight against him as she flipped him over her shoulder. She landed daintily but he was completely laid out on the ground.

She gasped for breath, breathing heavily as she panted. Seeing no one else moving around her, she flipped herself up to her feet and rubbed idly at her agitated throat. She halfheartedly kicked the nearest goon to her in the gut and was satisfied by the groan he let out.

“Amateurs,” she muttered before strolling away. She headed to the stairwell and with a slight sense of trepidation, cautiously made her way down the stairs, noting every creak and whine of the rotting wood beneath her. Somehow she made it to the once grand lobby of the train station to find STRIKE barricaded as they exchanged gunfire with the contingent of criminals.

The lobby had once been a masterpiece of Beaux-Arts architecture, resembling an opulent Roman bathhouse with its marble walls and vaulted ceilings. Now it was nothing more than a shell of its former glory.

Sharon ducked as a stray bullet hit the wall just above her head. She crept along until she was situated with STRIKE, dropping down next to Rumlow, who was barking orders like a mad dog.

“Rogers’ wants this wrapped up,” she informed him primly as she reached for a stray M4A1 Carbine. Rumlow scowled from next to her, his face looking particularly rough at the request.

“What do you think we’re doing here?” he snarled as the blonde ignored him. She held out her hand purposefully.

“Magazine,” she ordered. After an intense stare down, Rumlow grumbled but looked around in his pack before throwing a magazine clip her way. She loaded it easily and turned, beginning to fire at will.

Somehow, even with those thugs in possession of Chitauri weapons, the tide turned in the favor of the SHIELD agents. Soon enough, the gangsters were subdued and being cuffed. STRIKE moved in to remove the alien ammunition. This time it would stay in Damage Control’s possession, hell or high water.
Sharon took some glee in hauling out a group of criminals. The group of weary gangsters were huddled together outside the train station, a few hundred yards away from the entrance of the once transport depot. It was a relatively cloudy day, but some sunlight was falling on the group of thugs and SHIELD agents.

“You boys are really going to enjoy prison,” Sharon announced to the weary band of not so merry men. What she didn’t expect was the chuckling to her right. She narrowed her eyes and stepped closer, locking gazes with one of the hostiles. It was a rather rough around the edges type of guy with a crooked nose and beady eyes. He was clumped across the grass, arms cuffed tightly together. He kept laughing even as Sharon towered over him.

Sharon felt the skin on the back of her neck rise as she stared down at him. Something about him was…unnerving. She crouched smoothly, twisted her hand in the man’s collar and yanked him towards her, their faces only inches apart.

“And what exactly,” she spoke grimly. “Is so amusing?”

The man only laughed harder, so hard, in fact, little droplets of spit came flying out of his mouth. Sharon subtly flinched as they hit her skin. The man just kept laughing as he leaned into her as if to tell her a secret.

“Boom.”

Something small appeared from under the sleeve of the man’s utility jacket and he grasped onto it, clicking a button before Sharon could lunge for it.

Then the world turned upside down.


Perfectly orchestrated, one after another like a domino effect, a series of explosions blasted through the floor level of the decrepit, abandoned train station. The same level, she and STRIKE had been in only moments before.

The explosions and the following shock waves were enough to knock all of them off of their feet. Sharon hit the ground hard, her head smacking the earth and the air forced out of her chest as she stared indistinctly up at the cloudy sky, the world tilting maddeningly around her. Her ears with ringing and her head felt as if it was splitting open from the inside. She wearily pushed herself onto her elbows, just in time to watch the station and all of its 18 stories come crashing down in sickeningly perfect unison as the building imploded. Smoke and dust billowed over them, consuming all of them in its unyielding grip. The air was so thick one couldn’t even breathe. Sharon buried her head in her arm, but her body still racked itself with powerful coughs as the dust snuck into her throat. It burned her eyes as she felt tears fall unwilling, steaking down her cheeks.

It could have been an eternity, but eventually, the clouds of grime and soot thinned. Sharon raised her head, her body still racked with powerful coughs as the dust snuck into her throat. It burned her eyes as she felt tears fall unwilling, steaking down her cheeks.

It could have been an eternity, but eventually, the clouds of grime and soot thinned. Sharon raised her head. She and everyone near her were covered in the ashes and powder of the explosion. Not an inch of her was saved from the filth coating her skin and suit. She weakly pushed herself up to her knees, eyes immediately darting towards the once standing Michigan Central Station.

It was completely razed to the ground. Like it had never even stood there in the first place.

Sharon stared at it as her heart abruptly dropped and chills ran up her arms.

“Rogers,” she hoarsely whispered. Her eyes flashed to STRIKE and then back to the building.
Rogers had been in that building.

He had been in it when it…no. No, no, no, no, no.

“STEVE!”

Sharon hurtled to her knees and took off sprinting, ignoring Rumlow when he tried to grab her and ran desperately into the ruins of the train station. She forced her way trippingly through wayward bricks, concrete, and metal scraps.

“No, no, no, no, no,” she whispered over and over to herself, like a mantra, as she came to a halt at what had once been the heart of the collapsed building. Without a care to herself or the potential dangers of a recently imploded building, she threw herself down to her knees and began digging through the rubble. She was like a madwoman, throwing aside dusty bricks and chunks of concrete.

She was cutting her hands something fierce, but she didn’t care. Adrenaline and desperation were pushing her forward as she kept searching for her partner.

She needed to find Steve Rogers.

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*May 8th, 2013*

*Detroit*

It was an absolute spectacle.

Only hours after the implosion, SHIELD, and Damage Control had descended upon the scene and hadn’t left. It was a chaotic mess. People were milling all over the place as machines came in, digging through the rubble.

Reporters and news vans were vying for information off in the peripheries, though SHIELD was doing its best to keep them away. They had blocked off the area and had risen tarps to keep out prying eyes.

But eyes wanted to see. The world wanted to know how Captain America could be missing in the endless ruins stretching out before them.

Sharon wanted to know too. She hadn’t left since the explosion, hadn’t slept and had barely eaten anything. She wasn’t leaving until Rogers did. She was exhausted, could barely stand up straight and her head was suffering a rather fierce headache, a byproduct of the concussion she had sustained. She was currently located in the epicenter of this rescue mission and was seconds away from seriously losing her cool as she spoke to the head of this operation.

“Okay,” she said with clenched teeth, looking for patience. “Explain it to me again.”

She crossed her arms over her chest, her eyes were immediately drawn to her bandaged wrapped hands. She had torn them to hell in her fruitless search for Rogers immediately following the
implosion of the train station. She was even missing a few fingernails from how vehemently she had been digging through the debris. She would have stayed out there for hours, not stopping, if Rumlow hadn’t forcefully thrown her over his shoulder and forced her to stop.

The man, her superior really, was a middle-aged, balding man who seemed to sense how close Sharon was to losing it. He attempted to be gentle with the blonde spy as he, once again, explained their current predicament.

“Presently, we are still unable to reach Captain Rogers-”

“What do you mean you can’t get him?” Sharon snapped agitatedly. “He’s right there! He’s been there for two days!”

She pointed to the flat screen that had a single blinking, green dot. It was Rogers. His stealth suit was outfitted with a tracking device in it. It was meant for situations such as these when an agent went off the grid while out in the field. Every tactical suit came equipped with one. One was also situated on Rogers’ shield, which was still buried beneath the wreckage as well.

Sharon had been staring at Rogers’ single, unmoving green dot for the last two days.

If they knew where it was, why the hell weren’t they getting him out? Who knew how seriously injured he was or what kind of state he was in currently.

What if he was…? No. Sharon refused to even think it.

The man was a super soldier. He had survived nearly 70 years in the artic. A building was no match for Captain America.

Her superior sighed and attempted to defuse Sharon’s raging emotions. “I understand your anger, Agent 13. However, we are doing our best.”

Sharon bit back a sharp rebuke to that statement. If they were doing their best, then was Rogers still buried beneath the ruins? Why couldn’t they find him?

“Before we can get to Captain Rogers, we must secure the area. We risk the shifting and unsettling of the debris otherwise. That could injure or trap Captain Rogers even further.”

Sharon turned away, shaking her head. She sucked in a deep breath. She knew, in the deepest part of her heart, that the man was speaking the truth. They were doing their best. She would have to trust in that.

She flinched as he continued speaking. “We’re doing all we can.”

Sharon stared down at her feet, her throat constricting as she hunched inward.

“Just get him out,” she ordered raggedly before turning on her heel and stalking away. She walked out of the manned tent and stood out in the sunshine, her eyes immediately glued to the ruins of the train station. It was covered with machines and people, all working to secure Rogers. Agents were pushing past her, all working towards a single goal.

Sharon stood off to the side, keeping out of the way as she absentmindedly watched them all work, sifting through the debris. She didn’t know how much time had passed when all of a sudden a commotion in front of her caught her attention. There was a lot of excited movement and shouting.

She pivoted on her heel as the balding man from before came barreling out of the command center,
his body buzzing with relief as he locked eyes with her.

“We’ve found him, Agent 13. We’ve found him.”

Sharon’s breath caught in her throat as she stared gapingly at the man. It took a moment for his words to truly sink in, and once they did she was all action. She took off sprinting, right into the heart of the chaos. Pushing and shoving her way through the mob of SHIELD and Damage Control personnel, she made it to the front of the pack just as Rogers was unearthed from the wreckage.

“Out of my way!” she gruffly commanded as she finally made it to her partner’s side.

He was, not unexpectedly, in pretty rough shape.

He was covered in the ashes of the implosion and was a canvas of black and purple bruises mottling his skin, all but rendering him a stranger. A large, deep gash was across his forehead, staining his blonde hair red with dried, caked blood. His left cheekbone was broken and grotesquely swollen making him near unrecognizable. His stealth suit was an absolute mess and nearly torn to shreds, and she knew it was hiding graver injuries.

Worst though was the steel pipe that had impaled itself through his left side. The uniform surrounding the injury was smeared with dried blood. It looked painful, the way the pipe was just sticking out of him as if he was some doll. She had no idea if it was piercing any internal organs.

Sharon stared down at the super soldier, her heart ramming in her ribcage as she brought herself down to her knees next to him. A hush had fallen over the crowd of intelligence agents. It seemed no one knew what to do when faced with the sight of such a battered Avenger. His eyes were closed and his chest was barely moving.

He didn’t look…

With a trembling hand, she reached out, placing two fingers against his neck. She held her breath as she searched for his pulse. It took a moment, but it was there, weak and uncertain.

Beat……beat……beat……

Sharon greedily sucked in a sigh of relief. He was alive. Her relief turned to righteous anger when she saw everyone still staring at the downed captain, waiting with bated breath on what to do. Her eyes narrowed as she hovered over him protectively.

“Well, what are you all standing around for?” she ordered furiously, “Get a medic over here!”

When no one moved she snapped, “Now!”

Suddenly it was a flurry of movement, but Sharon didn’t notice as she stared down at Rogers.

He was going to be fine. She would make sure of that.

May 10th, 2013

The Triskelion, Medical
“Sharon.”

Sharon ignored Bri’s condolatory tone as she stared ahead resolutely, her eyes not leaving Rogers’ bedside. She felt more than heard Bri’s sigh from next to her as the recruit glanced down to where Sharon was camped out in her chair. She hadn’t left it since Rogers had been placed in the room the day before.

“Maybe,” Bri suggested softly. “You should go rest – “

“No.” Sharon was adamant. She allowed her eyes to leave Rogers’ prone form as she looked up at her young protégé with a tired, world-weary gaze.

“He needs to see a familiar face when he wakes up,” she said with quiet conviction. “The last time he went under nearly 70 years passed.”

Her gaze drifted back to the unconscious super-soldier. “He needs to know he hasn’t lost more time.”

Rogers’ infamous awakening was nearly a legend within SHIELD. Partly because of the novelty of a man seemingly coming back from the dead and also partly due to how much of a shit-show it rapidly became once Rogers opened his eyes. His jaunt to Times Square was also whispered about. Sharon couldn’t even begin to comprehend the absolute fear and loneliness Rogers must have felt when he realized that he was nearly 70 years out of time, that practically everyone he had ever loved was long gone.

She would make sure he didn’t feel like that again. When he did open his eyes – and he would open them – she would be right there to show him that years hadn’t once again passed him by.

Bri watched Sharon and upon seeing that her mentor wouldn’t be standing down anytime soon, the curly-haired recruit nodded.

“At least eat something,” she quietly implored. Sharon flashed her a small, placating grin.

“Sure thing, B.”

With one last look, Bri left her alone, like she had been the last two days. She remained glued to her seat, staring at the sterile white walls, the only noise was the occasional beeps of all the monitors hooked up to Rogers’ body. Even after two days, he was already looking remarkably better than when he had been found in Detroit. The dust and soot had been wiped away, his hair had been cleaned and was once again blond. Both the gash and the broken cheekbone were healing rapidly and Sharon guessed that they would both be gone in the next day or two. He had had five broken or cracked ribs and they were healing as well. He had also had a severe fracture to his tibia shaft that was mending nicely. The injury taking the longest was his side where the pipe had pierced him.

All and all, he was looking good, but he wasn’t out of the woods yet.

He had remained unconscious ever since being found and now Sharon found the silence rattling as she sat there in the stillness. She looked down at her hands, still bandaged, and fiddled with the gauze unseeingly.

“You always have to do things the dramatic way, huh?” she said suddenly, her voice echoing dimly. “I mean, c’mon, Rogers, a falling building. Really?”
She shook her head droopingingly. “You know, the Howlies always said you were a bit of a
dumbass,” she said to the immobile Avenger.

“That you were always rushing into danger without a second thought. That your harebrained
schemes more often than not nearly gave Barnes conniptions.”

Sharon weakly chuckled as she leaned back into the unforgiving, plastic chair. She’d be feeling
that tomorrow. She rested her head against the wall as she glanced at Rogers.

“Though, to be fair,” she remarked thoughtfully. “I don’t believe you knew the building was going
to explode. So I guess I can’t really hold it against you.”

She slumped down in her chair feeling exhausted all at once. She wanted so badly to sleep that it
was beyond desire at this point. But she wasn’t leaving until he opened his eyes.

“I’ve been racking my brain for days,” she continued ramblingly. “About the last thing you said to
me. I couldn’t remember it for the life of me. Was it an order? Was it, god forbid, a joke?”

She looked down at her scraped up hands. “All the time we were in Detroit looking for you, and I
couldn’t even remember the last thing you ever said to me. Funnily enough, I remembered it
yesterday.”

Her amber eyes rested on Rogers. “The last thing you said to me, was about my name. It’s so
stupid.”

She chuckled but there was no joy to it. She drew in a breath and felt how constricted her throat had
grown throughout her incoherent musings.

“So, so very stupid.”

Her head thudded back against the wall as she fought the lump in her throat. Her gaze wandered
across Rogers’ unmoving face as she focused on the rise and fall of his chest.

Maybe it was easy, to say this when he was knocked out and unable to hear her. Maybe it was
because she was so very, very tired of it all.

“Sharon,” she whispered hollowly as she blinked away tears.

“My name is Sharon Carter. And I’ll tell you my name, you just have to wake up.”

She stared beseechingly at Rogers as if her name alone was the ticket to get him to open up those
blue eyes. But of course, he remained dormant.

Sharon sighed, but really, what had she been expecting? This wasn’t Sleeping Beauty.

She curled up in her chair as time continued to pass.

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May 11th, 2013

The Triskelion, Medical
“Hey.”

Sharon was broken out of her bone-tired reverie at the sound of the greeting. She turned her head to the door to see Natasha standing there, as polished and passive as ever. Though there was a slight tension in her eyes, the only visible sign that she was worried for her fellow teammate.

“Hey,” Sharon croaked back. Natasha rolled her eyes and produced a Shake Shack bag from behind her. She chucked it at Sharon and it was only due to her impeccable aim that it landed in Sharon’s lap, seeing as the blonde’s reflexes were completely shot. Sharon stared down at the bag before glancing at Natasha.

“Eat that,” the scarlet women ordered primly. “You look like shit.”

Sharon gave a faint laugh. “Thanks.”

She opened the bag and usually the sight of a scrumptious burger was enough to plaster a grin across her face. Now she was just stone-faced as she nibbled on some salty fries. Natasha seemed pleased at the process and stepped further into the room, coming up alongside Rogers’ bed. Sharon watched her and noticed the SHIELD issued duffle bag resting by Natasha’s feet.

“Going somewhere?”

Natasha gave a single nod. “Fury’s sending me on assignment in Madeira.”

Sharon continued slowly making her way through the fries. She could barely taste them but they did cause the faint hunger pains in her stomach to subside.

“When do you leave?”

“Now,” Natasha said collectedly. “I thought I’d check in before heading out. I wanted to see how he’s doing.”

The redhead turned to Sharon with a cool gaze. “What was it like? Finding him?”

Sharon shivered as the memories slammed into her. It had only happened days ago but it still felt like only seconds had passed from then to now.

“He was in pretty rough shape,” Sharon began solemnly. “His injuries were…extensive. Without the serum, I honestly don’t know if he would have survived it. He seemed stable enough though when we moved him to the medical quinjet. Things changed after takeoff.”

“What happened?” Natasha asked in an assessing manner, her eyes never leaving Rogers’ face.

“When they went to remove the pipe, the regenerative nature of the serum meant that his skin had been healing around the pipe. They couldn’t remove it without…tearing the new skin apart. It was the only time Rogers regained consciousness.”

Sharon stared ahead as the memories assaulted her, “He wouldn’t stop screaming. It took the entire med team to subdue him with the sedative they’ve been creating for him. The stress of it caused him to flatline momentarily. It took nearly a minute to get his heart beating again. It was all rather…gruesome.”

Sharon shuddered as she remembered those long moments in the quinjet when it felt like they had
lost him all over again, how his pained screams had pierced her skin and wouldn’t leave her memories alone, how they haunted her when she sat in this room alone. She pushed away her food, she suddenly wasn’t hungry anymore.

Natasha processed the information in her usual, aloof way. She looked down at the sleeping man and couldn’t help but remark,

“He looks so young.”

It was true. During his waking hours, Rogers’ face was so often lined with stress or indifference that it was easy to forget the man was only 27 years old. Now, as he slumbered, his face was completely cleared of any sense of urgency. The furrow between his eyebrows was smoothed over, his lips weren’t thinned out or pulled in a frown. He looked…peaceful.

“He is young.” Sharon insisted tiredly as she pulled on the sleeves of her grey hoodie. She had been living in the sweater and jeans for the last few days. She should probably change soon.

Natasha shook her head as her eyes darted towards the blonde. “No, he’s not. Not really.”

Sharon nodded her head in understanding, but it didn’t mean she had to like it. “He should be. He shouldn’t have to bear the weight of the world on his shoulders. It’s not right.”

Natasha smirked cynically. “It comes with the territory of being Captain America.”

“He’s more than just Captain America,” Sharon murmured.

“Yeah,” Natasha mused. “If only he knew that.”

The two stood in silence as Sharon watched Natasha watch Rogers. She was tinkering with her injured hands as she worked up the nerve to voice what she had been thinking for a while. The thing about Natasha was that one could always turn to her and both be set straight and called out on one’s bullshit.

“No one ever said it would be this hard.”

“That what would be so hard?” Natasha asked probingly.

“All of it,” Sharon confided. “The lying, the secrecy. I don’t know if I can take much more of it.”

“It’s just the guilt talking.”

“No,” Sharon barked before reigning herself in. “No, it’s not.”

Natasha stared at Sharon long and hard as she put the pieces of the puzzle together. “You’re thinking about telling him your name.”

Sharon looked down. “Maybe.”

Natasha sighed as she said reasonably, “Your reasons for keeping your name secret are completely valid.”

“Maybe in the beginning,” Sharon countered. “When we didn’t know how he’d react to the truth that Peggy had moved on, lived a life that didn’t revolve around him. But now…now it just seems like a way of protecting myself.”

“From what?”
“From him.” Sharon nodded to Rogers, who continued dreaming away, completely unaware of what was occurring around him.

“There’s nothing wrong with protecting yourself,” Natasha reflected sagely.

“You don’t think it’s cowardly?”

Natasha shrugged. “I think you need to do whatever it takes to survive.”

The redhead sighed before turning fully towards her friend, coming to her side and place her hand on Sharon’s shoulder.

“If you do decide to tell him,” she advised gently. “Make sure it’s because you want to and not because you feel like you owe him. You don’t owe him your name just because he almost died.”

Sharon bowed her head in acknowledgment. “Will do.”

Natasha looked like she wanted to say more but was cut off by the beeping of her SHIELD phone. She checked the message and looked resigned as her emerald eyes flashed towards Sharon.

“I have to go. I have a date with Delta STRIKE in Portugal. Keep me updated on Rogers’ condition.”

She squeezed Sharon’s shoulder once before scooping up her duffle bag and headed towards the door. She stopped right at the doorframe and turned to Sharon.

“Take care of yourself. You’re no good to Rogers this way, or to yourself.”

Sharon saluted and watched as Natasha disappeared as quickly as she had materialized. Once she was gone Sharon leaned back into her chair, taking up her vigil once again.

May 12th, 2013

The Triskelion, Medical

Sharon groaned at the crick in her neck, she had been bent over for hours and the strain of it was beginning to show. She sat up wearily, her back and neck complaining all the while. Stanford, seeing that Sharon wouldn’t be leaving Rogers’ side anytime soon, had decided that she would use all this downtime and be productive be working on mission reports and going over Academy recruits evaluations.

She was surrounded by paperwork as she sat crisscross in the ruthlessly uncomfortable, plastic chair. Honestly, she would have lifelong back pains after this, she just knew it. Mounds of papers and reports were spread out across the floor and she was currently on her fourth cup of coffee of the day. The caffeine was buzzing underneath her skin and was the only thing keeping her brain going.

She never got more than an hour or two of sleep at a time and any food she was eating was being
forced down her throat by Bri or Trip. Maria had threatened to have her removed from Rogers’
room on Fury’s orders, but Sharon had held her ground (and had clung onto Rogers’ bed that was
latched to the floor) and refused to go.

So, here she was, doing paperwork.

She glanced up as Rumlow lumbered through the door, backpack slung over his stocky shoulder
and Rogers’ shield held firmly in his grasp. Sharon’s dark eyes widened at the sight of the shield,
she had forgotten all about it when Rogers had been found. It was looking a bit worn for wear,
dinged up and dusty.

“The cleanup crew found it,” Rumlow announced gruffly as he set it down at the foot of Rogers’
bed, leaning it up against the medical gurney. He also placed the backpack down by her feet.

“Here are Rogers’ personal effects that he had with him on the mission.”

Sharon nodded. “Thanks.”

Rumlow nodded brusquely and stepped closer to the super soldier’s bedside. Rogers was looking
worlds better than he had when he had been found four days previous. His bruising was nearly
minimal and his wounds were healing quickly. Dr. Oukri believed that he could be discharged by
the end of the week. The only thing they were waiting for was for him to wake up.

“It’s messed up,” Rumlow remarked coarsely. “What happened to him.”

Sharon glanced from the STRIKE commander to her paperwork as she sighed. “Yeah, it is.”

“Rogers, he’s a good man,” Rumlow asserted as something flashed through his dark gaze. It
vanished as he cleared his throat and pivoted towards Sharon.

“We got those goons all locked up in Interrogation. We’re gonna make ‘em squeal like the pigs
they are.”

Sharon’s lip curled up faintly. “I don’t doubt that.”

Rumlow nodded and with one last look at the slumbering Avenger, he hightailed it out of the room.
Sharon wasn’t completely surprised, emotions seemed a foreign concept to the former mercenary.

Sharon continued working and it wasn’t until hours later and two more cups of coffee that things
went a little sideways. She was growing increasingly dizzy with lack of sleep and her coordination
was suffering because of it. She had thought she had set her newest cup of coffee down securely as
she worked, but it tipped and coffee went scattering across all her hard work.

“Jesus Christ!” she hissed under her breath as she tried to salvage her papers. She jumped up to
grab some paper towels from the small bathroom attached to Rogers’ room. As she came back to
the spillage, her foot knocked aside Rogers’ backpack as something small came rolling out across
the floor.

“Just great,” she muttered to herself as she knelt down and blotted away the coffee. Once it was
finally gone she found that about half of her paperwork would be stained with coffee. Stanford was
going to love that. Sharon agitatedly threw away the dripping paper towels and as she headed back
to her seat she noticed the small trinket laying on the floor.

She picked it up gingerly and held it in the palm of her hand. It looked like an antique compass.
She wouldn’t be surprised if it was one of the few possessions from his past that Rogers had
received after waking up from the ice. She popped the lid and yep, it was an old fashioned compass.

Her breath caught in her throat as her eyes took in the inside lid of the compass.

It was an image of Peggy.

Sharon sank into her chair with a heavy sigh as suddenly all of her limbs felt like they weighed a hundred pounds. The image was taken from a newspaper clipping and was faded and worn around the edge as if gentle fingers had caressed her face a thousand times. Peggy was young, assertive and beautiful, the picture clearly having been taken during the war.

Rogers must have carried this with him during his SSR days. He was still carrying it around today.

Sharon’s fingers gingerly ran over the image of her aunt as she gazed down at the compass. With a near silent click, she closed the compass and gripped onto it tightly, a fist forming around it as her gaze moved to Rogers.

He was so alone.

He didn’t have anyone, really. Just the memories of long ago friends and brother in arms. The only person he still had was Peggy and Peggy…she was fading away from the both of them, slowly but surely. One day she would be gone.

Sharon sniffled just thinking about it. When it happened, life would be hard for her, but she’d move on, just like Peggy had taught her. What would Rogers do? He’d lose the last remaining connection to his past life. Without Peggy, he’d be ripped asunder, left to flounder in this brave new world.

He needed someone, that much was clear. But she knew, deep down, that he’d never want her once he knew she was a Carter. She was too close to Peggy, too much of a reminder of everything he had once cherished that had been ripped away from him.

Sharon didn’t know what to do.

So she stood silently and gently placed the compass, face open, on Rogers’ bedside table and positioned it so that he could see Peggy there, waiting for him when he opened his eyes.

She returned to her seat and sat in silent contemplation as the day passed. Finally, at around 10pm, Rogers graced her with his presence for the first time in nearly a week.

It started with a slight, pained groan, jogging Sharon out of her musings. She jumped up as she saw a tight expression cross his face. His head was turned to the side and he let out another groan as he warily blinked his eyes opened.

Sharon nearly collapsed with relief as she stood at his bedside, hands gripping onto the railings for dear life.

“You’re awake,” she whispered in awe. Rogers’ blinked up at her uncomprehendingly.

“T-Thirteen?” he asked gravely, his throat harsh after so long of disuse. Sharon hurried to into the bathroom, grabbing a plastic cup along the way. She poured some water from the sink and grabbed a straw from the medicine cabinet. She returned to Rogers’ side and softly positioned his head so he could sip some water. He did so greedily.

“Slow down,” she cautioned. “Or you’ll throw up.”
Rogers reluctantly followed her advice and slowed down his gulps. He pulled away from the straw and Sharon set the cup down next to him.

“How do you feel?” she inquired quietly. Rogers flinched as he tried to sit up. Sharon placed her hand on his chest and gently – but firmly – pushed him back down into a laying position. Dr. Oukri would kill her if Rogers’ messed up all her hard work in keeping him alive.

“Like a building fell on me,” he quipped haltingly. Sharon rolled her eyes at the joke.

“Hysterical.”

Rogers chuckled weakly before holding onto his recovering ribs. “I thought so.”

Sharon pulled herself together enough to inform Rogers on everything he had missed in his near week vacation to la-la land. The super-soldier took everything in stride if a bit stoically.

“It sounds like it could have been worse,” he surmised at the end. Sharon bit back her tongue from retorting.

A silence lulled between the blond pair and Sharon realized this was the perfect time to make good on her promise.

_Tell him your name._

It would be best to do it now, while he was still somewhat fuzzy from the painkillers. Maybe he wouldn’t be able to totally comprehend it and therefore be much more agreeable to her long-running lie of omission.

_Tell him your name._

“I think…” she began but bit down on her tongue instead as the words fought to come out. Rogers watched her blearily, he looked near set to fading back into oblivion soon. If she was going to do this, she needed to do it now.

_Tell him your name._

“No that you’re awake,” she explained waveringly. “I think…that I’ll head home and get some rest.”

Rogers blinked. “Oh. Yeah. No offense, but you look like you need it.”

Sharon giggled hysterically before attempting to reign it in. She was feeling everything all at once: the adrenaline, the exhaustion, the despair, the anger. It was enough to nearly knock her off of her feet.

“You should look in a mirror,” she countered back as the giggling finally subsided. She turned and collected her possessions from where she had been camped out the last four days. When she finally had everything together, she looked at Rogers, his head was bobbing forward adorably as he tried to fight off sleep.

“I’ll see you,” she said as she made her way to the door.

_Tell him your name. Tell him your name. Tell him your name._

Sharon froze in the doorway and in a moment of decisiveness she pivoted on her heel to look at Rogers head on.
“Captain Rogers,” she began strongly as Rogers looked up at her sleepily.

“I…” she trailed off as her eyes moved involuntarily towards the compass on Rogers’ bedside table. She could see Peggy perfectly from here. Here was a man who still carried around the image of his sweetheart in a world populated by strangers.

Peggy had been the world to him. There was no place for Sharon, with her connection to Peggy and all her lies, in Rogers’ world outside of SHIELD. She could take him on a hundred playdates, badger him at every turn, try and get him to open up, but she’d still be Agent 13.

She had to be Agent 13 for him. He didn’t need or would want Sharon Carter.

That was just the way of the world.

Resolute in her decision even if she felt cracks forming in her heart, she raised her head and straightened her posture. She was Agent 13 of SHIELD, nothing phased her and nothing ever stopped her from completing the mission.

“I completed the mission report on the events in Detroit. All it needs is your signature. So whenever you’re able to, I would appreciate it.”

Rogers slowly nodded, a touch confused by the out of nowhere urgency to complete paperwork, but decided to let it go. It had been a rough couple of days, people were allowed their oddities.

“Yeah, send it my way. I’ll take a look at it.”

Sharon nodded brusquely, whipping around and leaving Rogers behind. She felt an immense weight press on her as she ventured towards the elevator. She entered the car and in a monotone voice called for the garage. The world outside was pitch-black as Sharon leaned against the glass, a whirlpool of emotions rippling through her.

In an uncharacteristic display of emotion, she clenched a single fist and banged it into the solid, bulletproof glass of the elevator. It didn’t bend to her will. She hissed slightly as she pulled her hand back, examining the damage.

She didn’t really feel the pain though.

She couldn't feel much of anything.

Chapter End Notes

The holidays are nearly here! So think of this as my holiday gift to you, all of my lovely readers. Thank you for all the support you have endlessly shown this story. It means the world to me and inspires me to keep going. Please, please, please, review! They are the best gifts you could give me.

The Michigan Central Station is a real location in Detroit. In fact, my mom used to use it to visit her sister in Kalamazoo. It is really abandoned, all though I think refurbishment efforts are in its future.
Also, due to the evolving nature of this story some tags have been updated.

Pic time!

Michigan Central Station:

Sharon in Medical:
Chapter Summary

“So…how’s the boyfriend.”

Sharon froze immediately on the spot. Catherine knew of Neal, back when all they had between them was sex. Sharon had yet to mention to her best friend that she and Neal had taken the next step in their relationship by becoming officially a couple. Sharon hadn’t told her parents so there was no way it had been passed onto the Reyes’ who would pass it onto Catherine.

Which only left…

“Please,” Sharon groaned, throwing her head back in despair, “For all that is good on this God forsaken earth, tell me that you are not in contact with Natasha Romanoff.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

May 23rd, 2013

New York City

A bright, sunny, spring day found Sharon at the heart of Columbia’s campus crammed with hundreds of others in a massive, covered tent awaiting the graduation of 2013’s class of law students. She was here to see the culmination of Catherine’s years of hard work and tenacity. Today, Catherine was achieving the childhood dream she had been holding onto since the fifth grade and getting out into the real world as the kickass woman Sharon had always known her to be. Sharon may save the world on a regular basis, but Catherine would actually change it.

Sharon was proud beyond words to see her best friend accomplish so much with so much grace and spunk to spare. Sitting next to her in a stylishly lightweight, cotton suit was Jessie, Catherine’s biggest fan other than Sharon and Catherine’s parents. Speaking of Mr. & Mrs. Reyes, they were on Jessie’s other side, speaking quietly to one another in Tagalog.

Swarming near the front of the tent, ahead of family and loved ones was a churning sea of powder blue and black robes: this year’s graduates. Catherine was part of a large graduating class, so Sharon and the rest were forced to sit through several hours of pomp and ceremony.

With summer on the cusp of occurring, the air had a hint of oppressive heat hanging to it, and Sharon couldn’t help but fold the paper program into a makeshift fan to try and preserve her makeup. One would think that with her years in the swampy, humid hellhole that was DC she would be more familiar with such heat. But it was a bitch no matter how long Sharon had been enduring it.

“How much longer until Catherine’s name?” she whispered softly to Jessie, who was doing his best
to stay alert in the spring haze.

“We just started the P’s, so we have awhile,” he answered back wearily, Nikon camera at the ready in his lap so that when the time came he would be the perfect paparazzi for his girlfriend. Sharon smiled just looking at him.

“You must be feeling pretty pleased,” she remarked subtly as the handsome man quirked an eyebrow questioningly.

“That my girlfriend is going to be kicking all kind of ass at the UN? You bet I am.”

Catherine’s internship at the Office of Legal Affairs had paid off and she would be starting there as a full-time lawyer in their Office of Legal Counsel next month.

“Not just that,” Sharon responded. “You graduated with top marks from Cornell, you have a surgical residency awaiting you at Mount Sinai in the fall. Your children will be far too smart for their own good with you two as parents, as well as being unfairly good looking.”

Jessie nearly choked on air at Sharon’s proclamation. She had to bite down on her lip to stop from laughing as the man struggled to answer.

“Getting a little ahead of ourselves, aren’t we?” he asked feebly as the graduation ceremony continued on around them, cameras flashing every few seconds. “I haven’t even proposed yet.”

Bingo. Sharon had found what she was looking for.

She tried not to look too pleased with herself as she asked, “So you are planning on proposing then?”

Jessie opened his mouth to respond but paused, his cerulean eyes narrowing suspiciously as he took in Sharon’s far too innocent expression.

“Wait a minute,” he breathed out accusingly. “You’re trying to psychoanalyze me, aren’t you? I can’t believe this. You…spy!”

Sharon held up her hands, shrugging benignly. She shifted in her seat, a hard plastic atrocity, as she smoothed her dress. She was attired in a beautiful blue and burgundy lace, midi dress with an array of floral applique sewn throughout. Her honey blonde hair was swept up into an effortless up-do, saving her neck from the pre-summer heat weighing down upon the Big Apple.

“We all have our talents,” the blonde defended. “You use yours to save lives, I use mine to get to the truth, no matter the means of getting there.”

“What does that have to do with Catherine and me?”

Sharon rolled her eyes as she nudged her best friend’s boyfriend. “You and Catherine have been dating for years. Hell, you’re practically already married. You have to be planning to put a ring on it. You’ll never do better than Catherine.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jessie grumbled but the good-natured smile on his face told Sharon that she hadn’t pushed too far.

“C’mon, you love her, she loves you. Isn’t that what people do when they love each other? Marry and have boatloads of kids and go live out in the suburbs?”
Jessie wrinkled his nose distastefully. “First off, I don’t care if Catherine and I have ten kids. We will never move to the suburbs. I’m insulted you’d suggest such a thing.”

Sharon snorted quietly, ignoring the glares the family in front of them were shooting over their shoulders.

“Good luck finding livable real estate in New York for twelve people. You’d have to be a multimillionaire to achieve that.”

“I’m going to be a world-class surgeon and Catherine now works for the UN,” Jessie announced drily. “You’re looking at the next Tony Stark and Pepper Potts.”

Sharon’s body was shaking with laughter, as she gripped his arm for support to ensure she wouldn’t fall out of her chair with her chuckling.

“You don’t look like a genius, billionaire, playboy philanthropist to me. Also, is your plan to become Iron Man as well? I don’t think red and gold would be a good look on you.”

Jessie smirked as he leaned back in his chair. “You never know. The Avengers need some color, you know? Right now they’re the whitest group of people I’ve ever seen. I mean, have you seen that Thor guy? There’s nothing more white than declaring yourself God.”

“I’m pretty sure it’s a little g god,” Sharon acknowledged laughingly. Jessie only shrugged in return.

“Semantics.”

Sharon was ready to fire back, she and Jessie could go on forever with their friendly banter. Mrs. Reyes, on the other hand, had other plans as she leaned over and calmly and swiftly smacked the two into quiet submission. It was for the best really as the R’s had started and Catherine was on deck.

Sharon sat up straight in her chair as Catherine ascended the chair, her dark hair falling in thick, gentle waves down her back.

“Catherine Rosamie Reyes.”

Sharon, Jessie, Mr. & Mrs. Reyes were on their feet cheering and hooting, their voices echoing throughout the tent. Catherine beamed as she crossed the stage, her robes billowing behind her. She smiled towards the crowd as she received her diploma. Jessie was clicking madly at his camera, getting as many pictures as possible for the 30 seconds that Catherine was on stage. Sharon was clapping like a mad woman, nearly screaming at the top of her lungs.

The rest of the ceremony dragged on, but finally, it finished and the class pictures had been taken, leaving the four milling about, waiting for Catherine to grace them with her sparkling presence. Catherine was putty in his arms, wrapped tightly around him with a grin so big it looked ready to split her face in two as she held onto him. Soon enough Mr. & Mrs. Reyes were converging on her, fawning over their youngest child, Catherine being the youngest of three girls.

“Share-Bear!” Catherine exclaimed excitedly when she finally freed herself from her parents’ clutches.
“Kit-Kat!” Sharon echoed with open arms as Catherine launched herself into them. The force of her embrace nearly sent the two woman backward as they hugged firmly. Catherine burrowed her head into Sharon’s neck and placed a sloppy kiss there.

“Catherine Reyes,” Sharon proclaimed loudly. “You’ve just graduated summa cum laude from Columbia Law School. What do you plan on doing next?”

Catherine pulled back, playing along with Sharon’s skit. “I’m going to eat all the food!”

The two broke out into giggles as Jessie snapped away on his camera.

“Speaking of food,” Mrs. Reyes chimed in primly as the two women broke apart. “We have reservations at the Purple Yam. We need to get going if we want to make them.”

The group started meandering to Mr. & Mrs. Reyes Suburban SUV that would carry them to Brooklyn.

“I bet their tocino doesn’t hold a candle to yours, Mrs. R,” Sharon interjected, ignoring the tongue Catherine stuck out at her for her brownnosing. It was a game Sharon had been playing for years. Mrs. Reyes only smiled knowingly as she reached out and pinched the apple of Sharon’s cheek.

“Such a charmer you are, this is why you’re my favorite.”

“Mama!” Catherine shrieked as Sharon chuckled, sending a wink Mrs. Reyes’ way. And so the party moved on, their laughter spreading across the spring day.

Sharon couldn’t sleep.

She was in Catherine and Jessie’s cozy Chelsea apartment, scrunched up on the pair’s forest green loveseat. The apartment was too small to house a normal size couch, so here Sharon was curled up on the loveseat as she stared unseeingly up at the ceiling.

The apartment was silent (or as silent as an apartment in NYC could be). She could faintly hear the snuffling snores of Jessie through their closed, glass bedroom doors. Every 30 minutes or so the air conditioning would kick on and rattle throughout the apartment for ten minutes or so before turning off, only to repeat the cycle later. Outside sirens wailed in the distance in the city that never sleeps.

Dinner had been a lively affair as they feasted upon Filipino delicacies and had been topped off by a serving of halo-halo at the end. Sharon could never resist the purple yam ice cream. Sharon tried stretching out her legs as they knocked against the end of the loveseat as she pulled her blanket up over her shoulders.

The truth of the matter was…Sharon was feeling a bit off. Even more unsettling was the fact she had been feeling this way ever since Rogers’ recovery from the Detroit incident. Things had been a bit…tense between the blonde pair. It was mainly Sharon’s doing, she could admit that to herself. She just didn’t know how to act around the Avenger now that she had nearly told him her most precious secret.

She had almost told him her name.

She hadn’t.
But she had thought about it. She had nearly done it. She probably would have if it hadn’t been for that damn compass. Really though, she should be thankful for the compass’ appearance. Without it and she would have told Rogers who she was and who Peggy was to her.

It would have ruined everything.

Sure, she wouldn’t be living a lie anymore. But Rogers would have nothing to do with her if he knew how long she had been lying to him by omission. She was a spy, lies were her life. What was one more?

Still, she couldn’t help but feel uneasy every time she saw Rogers.

That was why she had been thrilled at coming to Catherine’s graduation. A few days away from DC, SHIELD and Rogers would do her good. It would help her get her head back on straight and focus on the things that were really important.

Like the never-ending mission.

*Beep.*

Speaking of missions…Sharon grabbed her pinging cellphone and found a text awaiting her.

**From Natasha Romanoff:**

*Teamwork makes the dream work.*

Following that text was a picture sent to her by Natasha. It was of Natasha and Rogers in the midst of their undercover mission in Turk and Caicos. They were at a luxury couples’ retreat rooting out some kind of mad scientist who apparently was having relationship problems with his gold digging wife. So Nat and Rogers were undercover as a newly married couple. It had initially been Sharon’s mission, but with her being in New York, Nat had stepped up to partner with Rogers.

The picture was of the two of them lounging alongside sandy shores, endless miles of stunning, azure water stretching out before them. Both were in bathing suits sprawled out on lounge chairs. Nat had on a large sun hat and rounded sunglasses and Rogers’ eyes were covered with stylish Ray-Bans. They were both sipping on bright, fruity cocktails and had their hands raised for a high five.

Clearly, they were just rubbing Sharon’s nose in it.

She couldn’t help but lowly chuckle as she stared down at the picture. At least they were having a good time. Sharon glanced up when a faint noise sounded from the bedroom and a moment later the glass door was opening as Catherine slowly ambled out in her mismatched pajamas.

“Hey,” Sharon whispered softly as Catherine padded towards her. “Did I wake you?”

“Nah,” Catherine waved her off as she dropped down at the other end of the loveseat, curling up as she tugged the end of Sharon’s blanket over her. Sharon shifted her legs to make room and didn’t put up a fuss when Catherine’s toes dug underneath her thighs, seeking out her warm body heat.

“What’s up?” Sharon asked quietly when the two friends were settled in snugly. It felt like being in middle school again when the two were having sleepovers practically every weekend. Growing up the two had been attached at the hip. It hadn’t been until Sharon had gone to Georgetown and Catherine NYU that the two had ever spent more than a few days apart. Now they were more apart than ever with Catherine’s life taking off in New York with Jessie and Sharon being taken to every
corner of the world due to SHIELD. It was nice…moments like these where the two could just simply exist in the same place. It was easy.

“See,” Catherine interjected with a knowing glint in her eyes. “That’s what I was going to ask you.”

Sharon’s eyes flitted away guiltily. Natasha may be able to read every tick and glance of a suspect and get them revealing their plans within moments, but Catherine had known Sharon too long not to know her tells and be able to deduce when something was bothering her.

“That obvious, huh?” the blonde asked with a self-deprecating grin as she ran a hand through her hair.

She looked up when Catherine nudged her with her toes. “Only to the people who really know you, who love you, warts and all.”

“Oh,” Sharon said with a gaping mouth as she kicked at Catherine’s shins. “So that’s how it is?”

“Oh, that’s how it is,” Catherine quipped back gleefully as they got into an impromptu shoving match of legs and feet.

“Some of us,” a grumbled voice groused from the bedroom. “Are trying to sleep here.”

“Sorry, babe!” Catherine called out, smiling unapologetically the whole time as the two bit back giggles.

Jessie grumbled some more from the room but within minutes the steady sound of his breathing could be heard wafting out from the room. The two women settled back in, smiles still on their faces.

“So,” Catherine murmured after a pregnant pause. “What’s going on, Share-Bear? Is it SHIELD?”

“When is it not?” Sharon mused flippantly as she leaned back into her pillow. Catherine only watched her with her dark, analytical eyes.

“Is it Captain Rogers?”

Sharon froze minutely before reaching out to tinker with a stray end of the blanket. Catherine, noting she had hit Sharon’s sore spot, settled in and waited the blonde out. It was always better for Sharon to come to things on her own, she didn’t like being pushed and prodded.

“Rogers is Rogers,” Sharon finally said after several long moments. “Not even a building falling on him can stop him.”

“I’ve never asked,” Catherine mulled inquisitively from her end. “But is it weird? Working with Captain America when he, you know, has a history with Peggy?”

Sharon shrugged as she continued playing with the blanket, eyes kept studiously down. “He doesn’t talk about her much, at least not with me. Probably because he doesn’t know we’re related.”

“Do you ever think about telling him?”

_Only all the time._

Sharon didn’t say that though. The less said about that the better.
“I thought about it once, recently,” she haltingly admitted, her fingers clenching into fists at her sides. She huffed out a frustrated breath as she attempted to clear the jumble of thoughts surging through her brain.

Finally, she spoke. “The man rarely tolerates me as it is. If he knew about Peggy…he’d never speak to me again.”

“You don’t know that,” Catherine mused thoughtfully as Sharon snorted, her mouth turning down bitterly.

“Trust me, I do. You don’t know him. The wholesome, All American act that we were fed in history class? All a lie. The guy’s a stubborn, obstinate asshole when he wants to be and he doesn’t abide by liars.”

“Hmmm,” Catherine pondered. “He seems to be in the wrong business then.”

Sharon felt the corner of her mouth curl up into a small grin. “He’s been informed of that. But he thinks SHIELD is better than it actually is. He’s a black and white kind of guy, he doesn’t realize that SHIELD is at its best when we’re operating in the grey.”

Sharon turned her head, looking away, her eyes cloudy with hidden feelings. She sighed, locking down and Catherine knew she wouldn’t get anything more out of the blonde. So she went with a new tactic. She tickled Sharon’s side with her toes, enjoying the blonde’s surprise flinch as she turned her dark eyes on her friend.

“So…how’s the boyfriend?”

Sharon froze immediately on the spot. Catherine knew of Neal, back when all they had between them was sex. Sharon had yet to mention to her best friend that she and Neal had taken the next step in their relationship by becoming officially a couple. Sharon hadn’t told her parents so there was no way it had been passed onto the Reyes’ who would pass it onto Catherine.

Which only left…

“Please,” Sharon groaned, throwing her head back in despair. “For all that is good on this God forsaken earth, tell me that you are not in contact with Natasha Romanoff.”

A very long paused followed.

“Well…I’ve never spoken to her.”

“Oh, thank God,” Sharon remarked as she slumped over in relief. Catherine and Natasha would be a deadly force against Sharon if the two ever decided to team up. They’d bury her.

Sharon’s relief was short lived at Catherine’s next words. “But we do text.”

Sharon sat up straight, eyes comically wide. “What?”

Catherine just shrugged nonchalantly. “Occasionally.”

Sharon flung herself back down against her pillow, ignoring the pop of her back as it slammed into the loveseat.

“I can’t believe this,” she breathed out. “Everyone in my life is conspiring against me.”

“That’s rather dramatic, don’t you think?” Catherine questioned teasingly as she poked Sharon with
her toes. The blonde distractedly batted away the offending appendages as she stared up at the ceiling in disbelief. A betrayal such as this was par the course for Natasha, but from Catherine? Now Sharon was questioning everything.

“So,” Catherine cajoled from her spot, amusement clear in her gaze. “Why haven’t you told me about this Teal Napper?”

Sharon squirmed whiningly, a pout marring her face. “His name is Neal Tapper and I know you know that.”

“Maybe,” Catherine conceded with a shit-eating smile.

“And anyway,” Sharon murmured casually still refusing to meet Catherine’s eyes. “There’s nothing to tell about Neal and me.”

“Nothing to tell?” Catherine questioned with a perfectly arched eyebrow. “You’re dating. That makes it a thing.”

“Thing?” Sharon popped her head up as she rested on her elbows. “What kind of thing?”

Catherine waved abstractedly. “A relationship thing with relationship rules.”

Now Sharon was just lost. What kind of rules? Who knew relationships were so complex?

“Look,” she interjected. “Neal and I used to be friends with benefits-"

“Fuckbuddies.”

“**Friends with benefits,**” Sharon insisted strongly with a finger point. “But now we’re something else, something more. But that doesn’t make us, you know, like you and Jessie.”

Catherine snorted mockingly. “Well, duh, Share-Bear. No one can ever top Jessie and me. We’re perfection personified. We’re endgame.”

Sharon wrinkled her nose in confusion. “What does that even mean? Never mind, I don’t want to know.”

“It means,” Catherine elucidated. “That my and Jessie’s love is going to stand the test of time.”

“What? And Neal and I won’t?”

Catherine only shook her head as she reached out and patted Sharon’s shoulder comfortingly.

“Neal is not your forever love.”

“Forever love? God, Catherine, he’s not a pet I’m taking home from an animal shelter. What is this? A Hallmark movie?”

“You don’t love Neal,” Catherine insisted stubbornly as Sharon continued staring at her.

“We just started dating. I haven’t thought about it.”

“Yes, you haven’t thought about it. You also never even told me about it. I’m your best friend. If you loved him or had the capacity to love him, I would be the first to know.”

She had a point, but Sharon wasn’t going to let her know that. The blonde only slumped back into
her spot, crossing her arms over her chest as she looked anywhere but at Catherine.

“Whatever,” she muttered fussily, more embarrassed than anything else.

“Sharon-”

“I’m going to sleep,” Sharon declared, flopping down and turning on her side, making sure her back was to her friend. Catherine watched her for a long moment before sighing and rearranging herself on the cramped love seat.

Silence reigned between them for a long time.

May 27th, 2013  
Arlington, VA

“I believe I know what happened. Excuse me…”

And with that, Sharon and Peggy watched the thrilling conclusion as everyone’s favorite Brit, Jessica Fletcher, unmasked the true killer of the campaign manager, thus ensuring her old friend’s innocence.

“Angela Lansbury,” Peggy remarked admirably. “Is a true goodness among this world. We are lucky to have her.”

“Yeah,” Sharon mused from her spot snuggled up in Peggy’s bed with her. “She was pretty incredible in Beauty and the Beast. Who knew a teapot could make me cry?”

Peggy only scoffed from her spot, propped up against a mountain of pillows. “You are incredibly young, dearest. You should have seen her in her prime: The Picture of Dorian Gray, A Breath of Scandal, The Manchurian Candidate. The list goes on.”

“Hmm,” Sharon mused as she continued painting Peggy’s nails a vibrant shade of scarlet. “Well, you have to agree, her best work is Murder, She Wrote.”

“Oh, absolutely,” Peggy said with playful conviction as the episode finished and immediately launched into the next one. The pair had been watching it all afternoon. It was a joy catching up with Peggy, Sharon hadn’t been able to see her the last few weeks. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed her aunt until she got here and was allowing herself to bathe in her Peggy’s presence.

Today was one of her good days and Sharon wasn’t wasting it.

She had done this often enough when she had been a young girl, curling up in bed with Peggy as the woman read her fairytales, often interjecting how the princess would do better to just rescue herself instead of waiting for the silly prince to appear. Besides, the prince always just made a mess of things, as men typically do. Better to just save yourself.
Sharon was enjoying the sunny, spring day by wearing a loose, bohemian top that was tucked into an Aztec styled miniskirt. Her feet were adorned in metallic Greek sandals and her hair was up in messy milkmaid braids to keep the heat of an impending DC summer off her neck. They were quickly approaching the time of year when DC became completely unbearable. Walking outside would be like wading into Dante’s sixth circle of hell. Better to just stay inside with the AC. It was less sticky.

“There,” Sharon said with a flourish as she put the final touches on Peggy’s nails. “What do you think?”

Peggy held up her hands, the pop of red evident against the wrinkles and veins running rampant across Peggy’s aged skin.

“I think,” Peggy ruminated, mirth dancing in her eyes. “That these fingers would look absolutely delightful wrapped around a Walther PPK/S."

Sharon dropped her head back with humorous joy. “I like the way you think, Aunt Peggy.”

Sharon spent a few more hours with Peggy before finally departing. Instead of heading home to an empty apartment, Sharon found herself driving aimlessly throughout the city. Without really thinking about it, she found herself at Meridian Hill Park. She was walking amongst the trees and standing the base of the stunning thirteen basins cascading fountain. She was enjoying the sunshine and the soothing trickle of running water when her cell phone began ringing.

She pulled it out of her tote bag and raised an eyebrow when she glanced down at the caller ID. Aunt Peggy

Odd. It wasn’t like Peggy to call her so soon after she had visited her. With a hint of trepidation, Sharon brought the cell phone up to her ear.

“Hi, Aunt Peggy,” she greeted lowly, giving nothing away with her voice.

“They tried to feed me prunes,” was the surprisingly blunt response she received in return. She leaned against the railing, her back to the fountain as Peggy continued on sharply. “I swear, with each passing day they make me suffer the company of completely barmy gits.”

Sharon couldn’t help the relieved chuckle that passed through her lips. “Tell me how you really feel.”

“Dearest,” Peggy began gravely. “I’m afraid you’re going to have to spring me from this hell.”

Sharon’s lips quirked up into a genuine grin as she stretched her neck back, “Sorry, Aunt Peggy, you know I only perform jailbreaks on weekends and every other Tuesday. I’m afraid you’ll have to suffer their company a while longer, prunes withstanding.”

“Bollocks,” Peggy admonished with a hint of laughter floating through the phone. “You could at least come and visit at the least, it feels like months since I last saw you.”

Sharon’s blood ran cold. She gripped the cellphone tightly before sighing softly, her eyes falling shut as she leaned back further.

Peggy was having one of those…days. She could be sharp as a tack one moment and the next…her mind would go fuzzy. She couldn’t remember a few hours ago. She didn’t remember her afternoon with Sharon. The highlight of Sharon’s day didn’t even exist in Peggy’s memory.
“You saw me this afternoon, Aunt Peggy,” Sharon said gently. “Don’t you remember? I painted your nails.”

The silence on the other end was torturous. She could hear Peggy’s sharp intake of breath as her aunt struggled to remember.

“O-Of course I do, dearest,” she stuttered heartbreakingly as Sharon kept her eyes clamped shut, biting down so hard on her lip she threatened to break the skin open. Pain would be preferable to the helplessness she was currently feeling.

“Yes, yes I remember. It must have slipped my mind for a moment. Silly thing. But I remember, I swear I do.”

“I know, Aunt Peggy,” Sharon whispered forlornly. “I know.”

The conversation didn’t last much longer after that as Peggy feigned an early evening book club meeting. Sharon let her go. She hung up the phone listlessly and slunk over to a nearby bench, all but throwing herself down upon it.

She tried to be optimistic…but the truth was Peggy was facing an uphill battle.

She wasn’t lost yet, but how much longer did she truly have? A year? Two? Soon she wouldn’t remember anything, not Sharon or Jill or even Rogers.

They would all be strangers to her. Ghosts reminding her of what she had lost.

Even in the near brutal heat, Sharon felt cold as she buried her head in her hands.

The sun continued shining down upon her as her body shook.

May 30th, 2013

The Kennedy Center

Sharon was always amazed whenever she stepped foot in the famed Kennedy Center. She was standing in its grand foyer, her feet sinking into the plush cardinal carpet beneath her feet. Sixteen crystal chandeliers were dangling above her head, twinkling majestically in the grandiose light of the room.

She was beautifully attired in a perfectly tailored black jumpsuit that showed off the long lines of her body. The real beauty of her outfit was the sheer illusion, beaded top that took the outfit to the next level. Strappy sandal heels and a sleek updo with a dramatic smoky eye completed the sophisticated ensemble.

One always had to dress her best when attending the ballet.

Even more so when seeing the new work of someone as acclaimed as Annabelle Lopez Ochoa. Sharon tapped on her metallic clutch when she a familiar head of scarlet hair heading her way.
“Natasha,” she greeted the spy amiably as Natasha wove her way masterfully through the throng of dressed up attendees.

Natasha, as always, was a sight to behold in a formfitting, velvet green dress with a daring neckline and an eye-catching slit. The spy wore the dress confidently, drawing many an admiring look from the men standing near the pair. Her hair was falling down in gentle, red waves and the only jewelry adorning her tan skin was her delicate arrow necklace.

Speaking of Barton, he came ambling up behind Natasha, tugging at his tie and running a hand through his artistically disheveled, sandy hair. He was unsuspectingly stunning in a custom, three-piece suit that complemented Natasha’s look perfectly. Barton, who seemed a hot mess more often than not, looked quite put together as he stood next to Natasha, not a wrinkle visible at all in his dark suit. His attitude was typical Barton though…he was slouched forward, hands stuffed in his pockets carelessly, face set in a practiced, bored expression. It helped hide the fact he was casing every entry and exit point, his eyes darting around warily.

Sharon couldn’t help but whistle as she took him in fully.

“Looking good, Barton!” she complimented, “How did Nat wrangle you into the monkey suit?”

Clint only chuckled as he adjusted his tie. “Oh, you know what they say,” he drawled easily with a wink towards Natasha. “Happy wife, happy life.”

Natasha rolled her eyes, but her gaze was fond as she slipped her arm through Barton’s. Sharon only raised an eyebrow as she watched the two assassins interact. Was this foreplay for them? She honestly couldn’t tell. The moment between the two passed before Natasha set her emerald gaze directly on Sharon.

“Where’s your hot date?” The question would be innocent coming from anyone other than Natasha.

Sharon stood on her tiptoes and found what she was looking for as she waved her guest over. Bri came excitedly to her side. The Academy student was a vision in a patterned, chiffon maxi dress, with cascading tiers of material throughout the skirt. The bodice of the blue dress was silk with a lace neckline that created a classy effect. Bri’s wild curls were held up in a bun as she clutched Sharon’s arm. It was a far cry from the loose, casual clothing Bri preferred on a daily basis.

Natasha’s eyes flashed as she turned towards Sharon. “On babysitting duty, are we?”

Sharon only shrugged good-naturedly with a matching twinkle in her amber eyes. “I sprung her from the Barracks for a night of culture.”

The Barracks being the assigned housing for Academy students. They weren’t much better than actual barracks.

“Well,” Natasha noted with contained amusement. “Culture is definitely lacking at the Academy.”

“Standing right here,” Bri chimed in cheekily. Barton bit his lip to stop from smirking as Sharon grinned at her protégé’s moxie. Her girl was going places. Natasha only arched an eyebrow as she sized Bri up. Bri was even more of an Amazon than usual with her 5’11” frame accentuated in three-inch heels. She was towering over the diminutive Natasha. Still Natasha was unperturbed as she stepped up to Bri.

“Classical or Contemporary?” the redhead fired off, eyes narrowed with focus.

“Classical,” Bri answered easily.
“Vaganova or Cecchetti?”

“Cecchetti.”

Natasha pursed her lips. “Swan Lake or the Nutcracker?”

“Swan Lake.”

Sharon’s and Clint’s eyes were like tennis balls during a match, going back and forth at great speeds as Natasha and Bri did their own dance.

“Nureyev or Baryshnikov?”

“Baryshnikov.”

Natasha stood there with her hands on her hips and her face completely unreadable as the other three waited with bated breath for her verdict.

Her red lips quirked up/ “Alright, Toussaint. You’re officially allowed to hang out with the cool kids.”

Clint cleared his throat and stepped forward, arm circling Natasha’s trim waist. “Well then, ladies, shall we?”

He bowed his head and swept out his arm as Sharon and Bri passed him with batting eyes.

And so the night passed with music and dance.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone enjoyed their holidays and here's to hoping that everyone has an awesome 2018! Thank you so much for the previous reviews, I adored them! They were a great Christmas gift. Please, please, please keep it up! They absolutely make my day.

Also, my goal for this story is to be wrapping it up in the next ten chapters. So, fingers crossed, that we can be finished by Ch 40 at the latest! Honestly, when I started this in 2016 I never saw it having 30 chapters and still not complete. It has been a meandering journey for sure, but an enjoyable one.

Hopefully everyone enjoys the chapter. I wanted it to be more character driven with character interactions and less action. I also really wanted to highlight Sharon's friendship with Catherine and how easy it is for them to be together due to their many years of friendship. Sharon needs normality in her life and Catherine provides that for her. We'll get Steve in the next chapter.

Also, I know very little about ballet. Hopefully that segment at least makes sense.

Pic time!
Sharon at Catherine's graduation:

Sharon with Peggy:

Sharon at the ballet:
Natasha at the ballet:
Natasha's hair and makeup:

Clint at the ballet:
Bri at the ballet:
Chapter Summary

“Natasha, Thirteen,” he hissed out, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Sharon, wiping tears from her cheeks, couldn’t help herself when she responded,

“Hey, we’re just ordering fondue.”

Rogers turned as red as a tomato as he stood there, stuttering. Sharon’s grin only grew as she watched him struggle.

Oh, yes. She knew the fondue story. Every Howling Commando legacy knew about fondue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

June 18th, 2013

C&O Canal

The air was thick with summer heat as Sharon’s legs pounded down the gravel path, her feet kicking up dirt with every running step she took. Her hair, up in a swinging ponytail, was already soaked through with sweat and her athletic top was sticking unpleasantly to her skin.

“P-Please,” she panted out to her companions. “Explain why we’re torturing ourselves like this?”

“Oh, Carter,” Natasha mocked from beside her. “Feeling a little hot?”

“You know what they say about those that can’t stand the heat,” Maria chimed in from Sharon’s right side. “Get out of the kitchen.”

The two women had the audacity to look completely unbothered by the sweltering humidity they were currently enduring. The three had been running for the last hour along the meandering trail of the C&O Canal and Sharon still couldn’t see the end in sight. She had a competitive streak a mile wide, so she wouldn’t be dropping dead until the other two appeared to be doing so as well.

Though it was only midmorning, the sun already seemed impossibly high in the sky as it shined down on the trio, basking them in harsh summer light. Sharon could already tell she’d have some new additions on her freckle front after this run.

The humidity was at an all-time high, it pressed and forced itself down with every movement. Trying to run was like wading through quicksand, which Sharon knew from experience was no bueno. Sharon sucked it up though, ignoring the twinge at her side of a telltale cramp and kept on going, keeping pace with Natasha and Maria.
The three were quiet, the only sounds their sharp breathing, as they curved around a gentle bend. The soothing trickle of water to their left was a blaming sound as they continued a steady pace back towards Georgetown.

“So,” Maria began after several moments of silence. “Romanoff told me that you nearly told Rogers your dirty little secret.”

Sharon was quick to shoot a dirty glare at Natasha, who only shrugged flippantly in return, gaze set forward.

“I told you that in confidence, Nat!”

“You were on the verge of making a terrible decision,” Natasha replied blithely. “I told Maria as assurance that you wouldn’t. And she agrees with me, you don’t owe him your name.”

Sharon bristled as she kept pace. “It was a momentarily lapse of insanity. Point of the matter is that I didn’t tell him and I don’t plan on telling him.”

“Good,” Maria said with a bob of her head. “He’d go ballistic. Probably refuse to ever work with you again, let alone ever look at you with anything other than disgust and betrayal.”

“Thank you, Maria,” Sharon remarked dryly. “Just what I wanted to hear.”

Natasha rolled her eyes as she expertly hip-checked Sharon, with her eyes on Maria. “Don’t mind blondie, it’s just the guilt talking.”

Sharon shook her head. “It’s not just that,” she admitted uneasily. “I feel like all I do now is keep things from Rogers: my name, my relationship with Peggy, the fact that I was the one that stole his lunch last week out of the staff fridge.”

“That was you?” Maria inquired with a pointed eyebrow. Rogers’ stolen lunch had caused quite the scandal on the 19th floor. His disappointed, puppy dog eyes had nearly upended the entire workday. Sharon had nearly given in and confessed to her crime, but she had remained strong in the face of the storm that was his kicked puppy expression.

“I was hungry!” Sharon defended herself. “And besides he had leftover pizza from 2 Amys, I couldn’t resist.”


“Speaking of Rogers,” Maria cut in conversationally, always ready for work gossip. “I’ve heard through the grapevine that the Man with a Plan has a new addition to his fan club,” Maria informed her fellow spies.

“Who is it this time?” Natasha asked with an interested gleam flashing through her green eyes. The look made Sharon gulp uneasily. Sharon had learned from experience to be very, very afraid when faced with that look. Poor Rogers, he’d never stand a chance.

Speaking of Rogers’ avid fan club…they were growing quickly in numbers. Nowadays it seemed Rogers couldn’t go anywhere in the Trisk without attracting unwanted attention from the female population. The other day he had been forced to enter an elevator filled entirely with women. The poor guy had been sardined in there for more than 20 floors.
He was now currently taking the stairs whenever he had to venture somewhere within the spy agency.

“Bianca from Human Resources.”

“She’s cute,” Natasha gritted out as she increased her stride. Sharon nodded her head in agreement. Bianca from Human Resources was cute. A petite little thing with doe eyes and a beguiling smile. Definitely the type of woman a man would be proud to bring home to his mother…if Rogers’ mother was still alive.

“She also has a poster of him up in her office and one of those weird bobble-heads,” Maria intoned matter-of-factly as she swatted agitatedly at a stray piece of hair that had fallen out of her meticulous bun.

“I think she talks to it when no one’s around.”

Sharon couldn’t help but snort and her momentary distraction was nearly perilous when she tripped over a stray branch and almost face planted. She righted herself, but not without bumping into both Natasha and Maria, sending all three careening.

“Smooth, Carter,” Natasha drawled as all three corrected their courses. Sharon only flipped off the redhead and continued running forward, wiping at the sweat pooling up in her hairline.

“Who wants to bet that even if Rogers talked to Bianca all he’d talk about was how different things were back in ‘his days’?”

All three groaned in unison. God love Rogers, he was a good guy, but man, when faced with the opposite sex he was just hopeless. His idea of an icebreaker was going into great detail the differences between the 1930s and the 21st Century. As if truly highlighting the fact that he was essentially a grandpa was sexy. Whenever he got started it was like watching the Titanic die its slow, heartbreaking death.

“Back in my day,” Natasha began in a perfect imitation of the Avenger. “We didn’t even have TV. We played with sticks.”

“Back in my day,” Maria cut in, fighting back laughter. “We only had one kind of coffee and it was black.”

“Back in my day,” Sharon joined in. “Heck was the worst thing you could say to a fella. Golly!”

The three ladies exchanged glances before all yelling out at the same time,

“Inflation!”

The giggles came fast and then running was no longer an option as all three came to a halt, hunched over half in laughter and half exhaustion as the heat continued pressing down on them. Sharon stood straight, hands pressed to her sides as she rotated her neck, moaning in ecstasy as it cracked.

“How much farther do we have?” the blonde asked as Natasha held out her water bottle. Sharon took it greedily and chugged back several swigs of cool water.

“We’re three miles out from the Francis Scott Key Bridge,” Maria informed them as she glanced down at her Fitbit. She was already was way past 10,000 steps and it wasn’t even noon yet.
“Excellent,” Natasha responded with a conspiratorial grin curling at the corner of her mouth. “Loser buys mimosas at Café Bonaparte!”

She took off in a flash as Maria and Sharon stared gapingly after the diminutive assassin. The two spies exchanged wary glances before immediately sprinting after Natasha.

Even with the heat and humidity, it was a race of a lifetime.

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**June 20th, 2013**

*The Triskelion*

It was a peaceful day. That alone should have been a warning to Sharon of things to come. Yet the peacefulness of the day had created a false illusion of security that Sharon was currently enjoying as she did paperwork and sipped on coffee.

Of course, it was at that moment that Natasha ruined it.

“I’ve been thinking,” the redhead said, foregoiing a greeting like a normal, considerate person, as she invaded Sharon’s office and plopped down into a free chair, her feet immediately going up and resting on Sharon’s desk.

“Feet off the desk,” Sharon muttered without looking up before realizing what she had said and grimacing. “I sound like Stanford. I’m a 45-year-old man with a smoking problem whose life is slowly wheedling away due to the dumbass antics of his field agents.”

Sharon stared in horror, her eyes glazing over as visions of how she was slowly but surely transforming into her SO danced mockingly in her head.

“Don’t forget the thinning hair,” Natasha chimed in unhelpfully, smiling with only teeth as she made herself comfortable in the chair, feet still on Sharon’s chrome desk. Sharon’s hand flew to her growing hair, feeling the thick, silky strands. When she was convinced that she still had a head of hair to die for she turned her attention to Natasha.

“I’m sorry, what were you trying to say?”

“I thought you’d never ask. I have a brilliant idea.”

“Oh boy,” Sharon murmured quietly to herself. The last time Natasha had had a brilliant idea the Trisk had been transformed into a battlefield for an epic, all-out paintball competition that had involved everyone from Accounting all the way up to STRIKE.

It had been a bloodbath. Natasha and Barton had won because, c’mon, they’re Natasha and Barton. It had taken weeks to clean up all the paint. Fury had nearly lost his other eye. Sometimes, in her weaker moments, Sharon could still hear the screaming in her dreams.
So, yeah, Sharon was always a bit cautious when Natasha’s mind began plotting.

But still, Sharon was curious. “What kind of idea?”

“You know, with you and Tapper dating, much as I am against it purely on principle, it has got me thinking.”

Sharon’s eyebrows furrowed with bewilderment. “About what? Taking your relationship with Barton to the next level?”

Natasha narrowed her eyes as she gave Sharon a positively unimpressive look. “Cute.”

Sharon secretly preened as she grinned teasingly at the redhead. “I thought so.”

Natasha shook her head. “Anyway, I was thinking… it’s about time we find Rogers a girl.”

Sharon stared in surprise. All of the things she had been expecting – and she had been expecting practically everything – she hadn’t anticipated that. However, now that she thought about it, she could see the merit in Natasha’s suggestion. Rogers was, for all intents and purposes, alone in this brave new world. He had the Avengers and SHIELD, but Sharon knew that both were rather lacking in deep, interpersonal relationships. A girl could be good for Rogers if he’d just let it.

Also, it would be hysterical watching him try to talk to a girl.

“I have to admit… I am intrigued. Tell me more.”

Natasha grinned. “What about Hill?”

Sharon was quick to shake her head in the negative. “Maria’s a superb woman. She’s scarilily efficient, which apparently is a turn on for Captain America, but she’ll devour Rogers, chew him up and spit him right back out without any form of mercy. The poor guy would never recover.”

Natasha pondered this silently for several moments before nodding solemnly in agreement. “I see your point.”

“Who else?”


Sharon scrunched up her nose. “The one with the lip piercing? I don’t think he’s ready for that.”

Natasha leaned back as she gauged the situation calculatedly. “Hmm. Fair enough. Well, what about Kristen from Statistics? She has a crush on Rogers.”

Sharon blinked disbelievingly. “Nat, she’s practically his stalker. He won’t even go to the 30th floor anymore because of her.”


Sharon was saved from answering when the man in question poked his blond head into Sharon’s office. He looked from Sharon to Natasha before tentatively stepping in, blue eyes alert.

“Ladies,” he greeted, body almost cagey as Natasha waved him over.

“Rogers,” she greeted with a sanguine smile that set Rogers on edge. “Just the man we were looking for. Tell us, what do you think of Kristen from Statistics?”
Rogers froze. He had many, many thoughts on Kristen from Statistics. Most of them scary. She had cornered him by the men’s bathroom only days ago and he still had shivers from the memory of the encounter.

“She’s…nice,” he finally said, unassumingly. Sharon only shook her head as she remained seated at her desk.

“What do you have for me?” she asked, mainly to save him from Natasha’s schemes. The man had no idea what kind of trap he could unwittingly enter into, Natasha weaved an expert web.

“Mission report from Shanghai.”

Sharon hummed as she took it from him, scanning it over before plopping it down on her desk.

“I’ll add my assessment and then send it on over to Stanford.”

Rogers nodded once, eyes once more darting back and forth between Sharon and Natasha. When the silence became nearly unbearable he made his way to the door. But of course, Natasha wasn’t just going to let him go with his dignity intact.

“You know,” she began in a falsely friendly tone. “If you ask out Kristen from Statistics, she’d probably say yes.”

“That’s why I don’t ask,” Rogers volleyed back without missing a beat. Natasha’s smirk grew as she watched his retreating back.

“Too shy or too scared?”

“Too busy!” And with that Rogers exited the office, leaving the two spies to their plans. Natasha’s grin only grew as she tilted her head towards Sharon.

“This will be fun.”

Sharon only groaned. She could already feel a headache forming.

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June 23rd, 2013

The Triskelion

Natasha was on the warpath.

Once she had committed to Operation GRDA (Get Rogers Dat Ass) she was all in and she wasn’t giving up until Rogers gave in. Unfortunately for Sharon, both were equally stubborn and digging their heels in. Natasha wouldn’t stop trying to set him up and Rogers was definitely not accepting any date offers anytime soon.

Every time Natasha and Rogers were together, the redhead would find a way to cajole him into
going on a blind date. She had an entire directory of female SHIELD agents and was steadily working through them, seeing if any piqued Rogers’ interest.

None had so far.

If Sharon was honest, the whole thing had spiraled out of control. Rogers was now avoiding Natasha like the plague and had taken to spending all of his free time in the Trisk down at the training grounds.

Which was where Sharon was heading.

It was clear that she’d be the one breaking the stalemate. Rogers couldn’t be persuaded by Natasha, so now Sharon was up at bat. She honestly didn’t think she’d fare any better since Rogers’ thought less of her opinions than he did Natasha’s, but she was going to give it the good ol’ freshman try.

Finding Rogers was easy enough, he was running laps on the indoor track. His fan club was also there to support him, thirsty as ever as they watched him sprint, body as taut as an arrow.

Sharon couldn’t help but roll her eyes as she ambled past the cluster of desperate women who were immensely enjoying the way Rogers’ pectorals bounced perkily as he raced by. Sharon couldn’t entirely begrudge them that, his pectorals were extremely distracting. She, however, at least had the self-respect not to swoon with every lap he was running.

“His butt is just so round,” one woman murmured dreamily to her friend. “I just want to grab it.”

“It’s a bubble butt, for sure,” the friend responded, licking her lips shamelessly.

Sharon wanted to puke as she pushed past them, announcing loudly for all to hear, “Have some dignity, ladies!”

With some prodding and threatening bodily harm, Sharon got the group to disperse just as Rogers cooled down, coming up near her to stretch.

“Thanks,” he said as he knocked back some water. Even though he had been running at speeds unheard of for mere humans, he hardly looked out of breath. Not a hair was out of place, no embarrassing sweat marks. He looked perfect as always. It was only a tad infuriating.

“No problem,” she replied as he tugged his silver iPod classic out of his pant pockets and popping out his earphones. She was quick to grab the musical device and began searching through his music selections. This could be useful if they ever got him on that blind date Natasha was gunning for. Music was a great conversation starter.

She was disappointed by how little was actually on the mp3 player.

“You only have, like, 20 songs on your iPod. You know you can fit, like, 40,000 on here, right?”

Rogers only glared as he grabbed the iPod, taking it back.

“Yeah, well, in the ’40s most records only had one or two songs on ‘em. It’s hard to adjust sometimes with how much… more today’s society has.”

Well, that was a loaded bomb Sharon didn’t know what to do with. Luckily she was saved from the tricky minefield as Rogers kept digging through his pockets, pulling out his notebook, a pen, his phone, and wallet.
“Are your pockets a bottomless pit?” Sharon inquired incredulously. “Honestly, what else do you keep in there?”

“A gateway to Narnia,” he countered back sarcastically. Sharon blinked, still unmoored by how much of a sassy motherfucker he could be. The history books had it all wrong. Rogers was far from the pantheon of American ideals and morals that he often got lauded for.

If only Fox News could see how he really is. They would riot.

Sharon enjoyed it though, seeing the real him. Seeing the parts that aligned with Peggy’s and the Commando’s stories but also the parts that were Rogers in this modern century, learning to adapt as best as he was able.

He was so much more than just Captain America.

Sharon loitered as Rogers completed his post-run stretches and he turned to her with suspicious eyes.

“Natasha sent you here, didn’t she?” he accused as Sharon shrugged innocently.

“Maybe,” she admitted because he could always see through her blatant lies. Rogers huffed out an annoyed breath, running a hand through his blond hair.

“Then I’ll tell you what I’ve been telling her: no.”

“She means well,” Sharon began but was cut off as Rogers snorted, mistrusting.

“What she’s doing,” Rogers responded as he sat on the bench. “Is trying to get one over me.”

“No,” Sharon argued because Natasha was a lot of things, but she wasn’t intentionally cruel. Yes, this endeavor was an amusing one, but Natasha wasn’t doing it to cause harm to Rogers. This was her roundabout way of showing she cared. It was a bit messed up, but it was Natasha’s way.

“She just wants you to get out there, meet people.”

Rogers only rolled his eyes sulkily. “I meet plenty of people every day, thank you very much. I don’t need to meet any more.”

“C’mon, Rogers. When was the last time you went on a date?”

She knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment she said it. Rogers flinched, no doubt remembering that ill-fated date he had promised Peggy before plunging into the ice. The date he had never made.

Way to go, Carter.

She needed to salvage this before he shut down completely. Taking a new stance she stood back, looking relaxed and calm as she spoke again.

“Don’t you remember the feelings you get on a first date? The butterflies in the stomach threatening to escape? The sweaty palms as you wait for your date to appear. The blush you feel whenever you lock eyes across the table before quickly looking away, only to do it again seconds later.”

Sharon sighed whimsically. She hadn’t been on a date in years. She hadn’t dated at the Academy after the debacle that was her relationship with Max Davenport at Georgetown. And she and Neal,
while they might be more than friends with benefits, they didn’t go on dates. They didn’t have the

time with their conflicting schedules taking them to various places across the planet at any given
time.

The last time Sharon had been on an honest to God date was sophomore year of at Georgetown.
The boy, Leo Schumacher, had been a sweet, nervous thing. He had taken her to dinner and a
movie and left her at her dorm with a trembling kiss at the corner of her mouth. They had never
gone pat that, but it had been a good date.

The pointed clearing of Rogers’ throat was enough to break Sharon out of her long ago reverie as
she looked down at the Avenger.

“No dates I ever went on ever had those feelings,” he kicked out his feet dejectedly. “At least not
on my date’s part.”

Ah, Sharon remembered that Peggy had once told her that pre-serum, Rogers hadn’t had much luck
in regards to romance. Rogers looked ahead, eyes clouding over with memories.

“Bucky, he was always arrangin’ double dates. The girls would go along with it, because why
wouldn’t they think his friend looked just like him? Tall, handsome, strong, and charming to boot.
Then they’d get me.”

He gestured to himself as if he was still the sickly, frail pipsqueak he had once been. He may still
be that in his own head if the way his shoulders were curling inward was anything to go be.
Sharon’s heart went out to her partner and she resisted the urge to reach out and rub his shoulder.
Rogers wasn’t much for physical comfort unless completely compromised, like that day at Barnes’
grave. Normally he kept everyone at a distance.

“They’d take one look at me and just,” Rogers mimed a face completely going blank with unease
before he smiled a weak, self-deprecating grin that looked more like a frown.

“Well,” Sharon mused softly. “They didn’t know what they were missing out on. And it’s not 1943
anymore. Yes, you look different but don’t sell yourself short, Rogers. You have a lot to offer other
than just your looks. You had a lot to offer back then too, I bet, if they had just given you a
chance.”

Sharon sat down next to the super soldier as she fiddled with her thumbs. “Look, no one’s saying
you have to get into a relationship. That’s your choice, and only your choice, even if Natasha
would try and have you believe otherwise. But what’s wrong with getting out there and trying?”

She nudged him, forcing him to look her in the eyes before continuing. “What’s the worst that
could happen? You go out, have good food, meet someone nice, and enjoy stimulating
conversation? If it goes nowhere then it goes nowhere. At least you know you’d tried.”

Rogers thought this over, brows furrowed in concentration. Sharon only sighed before standing,
popping her back on her way up.

“Just think about it, okay?” she asked and was rewarded with a nod. She left him them, going about
her business. She had nearly forgotten about the conversation hours later when Natasha cornered
her, looking remarkably like a cat that got the canary.

“Rogers just informed me he was up for a blind date. I take it that his willingness was your
doing?”

Sharon glanced up before shrugging. “I may have given him some advice. It was up to him to
follow it."

Natasha only hummed in response, looking smug. “Well, I guess I have to be bowing down to your expertise. Thanks to you, Rogers has a hot date for Friday night at Masseria.”

Something was wrong. Natasha looked far too innocent for Sharon’s liking as she sat there with her beguiling, emerald eyes. Finally, it all clicked as Sharon whined and contemplated throwing herself out the nearest window.

“We’re crashing his date, aren’t we?”

Natasha’s grin turned as sharp and as deadly as a shark. She tapped her perfectly manicured nails on the table.

“I’m insulted you’d even ask, of course we are. Wear something sexy. Reconnaissance is in full effect.”

Honestly, what was her life?

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June 27th, 2013

Washington, D.C.

Operation GRDA was a go.

Sharon and Natasha were situated in a dimly lit, Italian restaurant, twinkling lights hanging down from wooden beams. It was a rustic, cozy place, perfect for a blind date. The pair had arrived before the couple, perfectly outfitted for a night of espionage. Sharon was in a sensuously form-fitting, maroon dress with delicate embroidery that cut off right at the knee, showing off her long, shapely legs. She was nearly unrecognizable in a brunette wig, long hair tumbling down her back. To top it off she had on blue contacts.

When she went in, she went all in.

Natasha sat across from her, stunning attired in a one-shouldered cocktail dress with a dramatic, ruffle detail. Her vibrant red hair was hidden under a large, abstractly designed black hat, more appropriate for a day at the races, than date night. Her eyes were hidden behind round, dark sunglasses.

The pair of spies were seated at a table in the far corner of the restaurant, far away from Rogers and his impending date. Their table, reserved and currently empty, was on the far wall, along a line of windows. A tiny candle was on it, already burning away, as it waited for its occupants. Natasha had set up the super soldier with someone from Communications, Ramona or Rhonda, or something like that.

“You really think this is a great idea?” she asked, sure Natasha was rolling her eyes at her even if
she couldn’t tell with the sunglasses.

“Please,” the redhead said in reply. “This is a phenomenal idea. We’re here to support our boy.”

“Does it really count when he doesn’t know we’re here?” Sharon countered, just to be difficult in return.

“It counts more,” Natasha said as she stood up smoothly. “Watch my back.”

With a deliberate sash-shay of her hips, Natasha sauntered through the restaurant, passing by the unattended table. As she passed by, she adeptly placed a bug on the underside table without anyone noticing. She took another circuit around the restaurant before coming back to the table, slipping seamlessly into her chair.

She did it just in the nick of time because Rogers and his date had just walked through the door.

Rogers had cleaned up surprisingly well, decked out in dress pants and a cobalt suit jacket. His date (Renee? Ruth?) was a pretty little thing with blonde hair (clearly dyed if the roots were anything to go by), tan skin and a megawatt grin that she was aiming right at the super-soldier. Her arm was wound through his, more by her doing than his.

Rogers remained polite though as a hostess escorted the pair to the table in question that was bugged and ready to go. Both Sharon and Natasha watched closely as the hostess left them there with menus on the table.

Rogers, old fashioned to a fault, had reached out, pulling out the chair for his date. Unfortunately for both, Rogers, having turned his head too much, in his nervousness had pulled the chair out way too far. His date, unnoticing, leaned back to sit and well…there was nothing but air to catch her.

She landed hard on her derriere. Sharon choked on her laughter as giggles bubbled out of Natasha from their vantage point. Everyone in the restaurant was watching, wide-eyed and amazed at the spectacle.

Rogers' face was burning as he stumbled over his feet in his haste to pull up the poor woman who was sprawled helplessly across the tiled floor. Rogers got her back on her feet, murmuring apology after apology as he tried to brush off any stray dirt. His hands flew back as if burned when one large palm accidentally wandered to her butt in an attempt to be helpful. Now he was refusing to touch or look at her as both sat down.

“Wow,” Sharon whispered, watching the whole affair. “We’re not even five minutes in and it’s already a complete train wreck.”

“I know,” Natasha responded, crimson red lips upturned in a smirk. “Isn’t it wonderful?”

The two turned back to the pair just as they began talking, their voices ringing in their ears through the comms.

“I am so sorry for that,” Rogers’ belayed urgently to his date.

“No, really, don’t worry about it, Captain Rogers.”

Rogers held up a hand. “Please, Robin, call me Steve. We’re on a date after all.”

His date stared for a moment before uncomfortably clearing her throat. “Well, in that case, Steve. It’s Rachel.”
Rogers glanced up with raised eyebrows, his face adorably confused. “Beg your pardon?”

“My name, it’s Rachel.”

Rogers' eyes widened in mortification. “Right. Rachel. Of course.”

Rachel waved him off with a saccharine giggle that grated on Sharon’s nerves. She couldn’t imagine how it felt for the Avenger who was sitting there, forced to endure it. The two sat there in awkward silence as a waiter came up, pouring water and taking their drink orders. Once the waiter was gone the two blonds sat there looking at one another, not knowing where to begin. Both opened their mouths at the same time.

“This is-”

“You look-”

Both cut off immediately as they glanced at each other with wide eyes. Both chuckled awkwardly.

“I’m sorry,” Rogers apologized sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his neck. “I’m not very good at this. It’s been…a long time since I’ve done this.”

Rachel grinned. “Well, I think you’re doing okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

More silence passed as the waiter came back with their drinks, a microbrew for Rogers and merlot for his date. The waiter left them again with the promise to return shortly for their meal orders.

“So,” Rachel began as Rogers fidgeted with his utensils. “Tell me something about yourself.”

Rogers just stared at her before shrugging. “There’s not much to tell. At least that hasn’t already been written in the history books.”

“Well…” Rachel mused, trying to grasp onto straws. “What’s your sign?”

Rogers’ eyebrows went up to his hairline. “Sign? What sign?”

“You know,” Rachel gestured helplessly. “Like, Zodiac?”

Rogers’ face blanched in understanding. “Oh, right. That’s a popular thing these days. We didn’t really care about such things, back in my day.”

“Oh boy,” Sharon muttered as Natasha shook her head.

“Here we go,” the redhead remarked quietly.

“Uh, well…I think I’m a Cancer. That’s one of them, right?”

Rogers’ date’s eyes lit up excitedly as she clapped her hands, leaning towards the Avenger from across the table.

“Shut up! Shut up!”

Rogers just stared blankly. “I didn’t say anything.”
“I’m a Capricorn!”

“Is that a good thing?” Rogers ventured a hesitant guess.

“Yes, it’s a good thing! We’re totally compatible.”

“How so? Personality wise?”

Rachel only batted her eyes enticingly as she reached out, fingers caressing Rogers’ unassuming hand.

“No, silly. Sexually.”

Rogers gagged unexpectedly on his drink, slamming the beer down. He reached for his water glass, but in the midst of his coughing, miscalculated and sent the drink spilling over and right into his date’s lap.

Rachel jumped back, trying to avoid the cascade of icy water covering her purple dress. She was mopping up water as Rogers finally recovered.

“I am so sorry!” he apologized miserably.

“Is it bad that I find this so amusing?” Sharon questioned from their table as Natasha shook her head cheerfully.

“Nope,” she popped the ‘p’.

Finally, with some aid of the waiter, all of the water was sponged up and had taken their meal order: gnocchi sorrentina for Rachel and three servings of linguine for Rogers, along with side orders of animelle and trippa. Rachel only watched with amazed eyes.

“Big appetite, huh?”

Rogers looked self-conscious as he leaned back in his seat. “My metabolism is pretty fast, so I have to eat a lot.”

Rachel only grinned in a way that Sharon supposed was meant to be seductive. “Well, you know what they say about men and big things.”

Rogers remained studiously silent.

The date continued with painstaking small talk as their food was delivered. At the same time, Sharon and Natasha’s pasta dishes came out as well (the agnello for Sharon and the branzino for Natasha).

Sharon was enjoying her lamb dish, digging in heartily, and was about ready to call the date a wash when something interesting occurred. Like a trueborn sleuth, she noticed as Rachel subtly slipped her right foot out of its stiletto. Sharon watched with intent eyes as Rachel’s foot crept towards Rogers’ unsuspecting legs.

“Oh no,” Sharon whispered to herself as the woman slowly inched her foot up Rogers’ leg, hooking behind his knee, intention clear in her footsie game.

And like a bomb, Rogers went off.

Caught completely off guard and apparently not used to such forward advances, Rogers jumped up
quick and completely upended the table. The table, and everything on it, flung over to the ground, glass, and plates smashing loudly across the floor, the noise echoing throughout the restaurant.

Everyone stopped and stared at the comedy that was Captain America failing on a first date.

It was all over for Sharon and Natasha. They were curled up in their seats, laughing until tears came to their eyes. It was just too funny not to laugh. Unfortunately for them, Rogers’ could hear them with his enhanced hearing.

His eyes darted around the restaurant and came to rest on the duo. His baby blues narrowed suspiciously as he stepped around the wreckage that was his dinner.

“Excuse me a moment, Rochelle,” he said through gritted teeth.

“It’s Rachel.”

Rogers just left her there, bee-lining determinedly for the pair.

“Uh oh,” Sharon gulped as he stomped towards them. “I think we’ve been made.”

Natasha remained nonchalant as Rogers came to a stop at their table, nostrils flaring and eyes pinched.

“Natasha, Thirteen,” he hissed out. “What the hell are you doing here?”

Sharon, wiping tears from her cheeks, couldn’t help herself when she responded, “Hey, we’re just ordering fondue.”

Rogers instantly turned as red as a tomato as he stood there, unraveling into a stuttering mess. Sharon’s amused grin only grew as she watched him struggle.

Oh, yes. She knew the fondue story. Every Howling Commando legacy knew about fondue.

Natasha took mercy on the crumbling super-soldier. “We just thought we’d offer emotional support, from a distance.”

Rogers was unconvinced. “Emotional support, huh?”

Natasha only nodded once. “It looks like you need it.”

Rogers continued fuming as he looked from one spy to the other. He couldn’t seem to figure out where he wanted to direct his anger as his eyes flittered back and forth.

“Stay out of my business!” was all he finally got out before he spun on his heel, stalking back towards his stupefied date. He hastily collected Rachel, paying for the damages and leaving the restaurant in a whirlwind of movement, Sharon and Natasha watching him go.

A few moments passed in silence and then:

“Please tell me you got that all on film.”

Natasha held up her phone shamelessly.

“Of course I did. Question is: who to send it to? Hill or Stark?”

The two shared twin looks before saying in unison,
“Both.”

Natasha leaned back in her chair, self-satisfied. “Well, now that that’s settled. Let’s get dessert.”

“I hear their tiramisu is to die for,” Sharon offered as she reached for her wine. Natasha’s eyes twinkled in the dim lighting as she grinned.

“I like the way you think, Carter.”

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_June 30th, 2013_

_The Triskelion_

Rogers wasn’t talking to them.

Which was fair, considering they had crashed his date, filmed the entire catastrophe, and then shared it among mutual friends and coworkers. If Natasha's words were to be believed, then Stark had spent the weekend making memes of the disaster and sending it to his fellow Avengers. Somehow even Thor was receiving them up in Asgard. Sharon didn't even know how that was possible, but who was she to question a god and his magical means of communication?

Still, Natasha was undeterred in her newfound matchmaking skills. One magnificently failed date was not enough for her to give up her quest to get Rogers some action. Really, she was just being a good bro, or so she claimed.

So, really it shouldn’t have been surprised when she once again cornered Sharon as the blonde was drinking her morning coffee.

“We’ve been going about this the wrong way.”

Sharon only raised an eyebrow. “Hi, Natasha. How are you?”

The redhead ignored her as she set out her new game plan. “We need to think beyond the Trisk if we really want to snag Rogers a girl.”

Sharon only shrugged. “So what are you saying? Someone within SHIELD but not a permanent feature in the Trisk? Who on earth could that be?”

Natasha’s growing grin had Sharon nervous as she replied, “Well, really, that only leaves Twenty-Nine.”

Sharon completely froze.

“What?!” she yelped loudly before composing herself. No, that was a terrible idea. Natasha couldn’t be serious. Rogers and Agent 29? The woman living down the hall from him pretending to be a nurse? Terrible, _terrible_ idea.
“Think about it,” Natasha remarked thoughtfully. “The cute nurse from down the hall who bakes pies for Rogers. She’s unimposing and sweet. It’s a match made in All-American heaven.”

Sharon was woefully unconvinced as she sarcastically volleyed back. “Except for the part where she’s an undercover SHIELD agent who’s been lying to him every single time they talk.”

Natasha shot her a flat look. “That’s rich coming from you, Thirteen.”

“Hey!” Sharon raised her hands defensively. “This isn’t about me and my relationship with Rogers!”

Natasha quirked an eyebrow, interest flashing in her eyes. “But you do want to have a relationship with Rogers, is what you’re saying?”

Feeling as if she had just been caught in a trap Sharon stared, gob-smacked at what her friend was implying.

“W-What?” she stammered out, trying to reclaim her legendary cool. “No! That’s not what I’m talking about! Stop twisting my words around, Natasha!”

Natasha only smirked in return. “Whatever you say. Now, where’s Rogers? I need to plant the thought in his ear.”

Natasha stood and pivoted smoothly on her heel, leaving Sharon flailing in her wake.

“Natasha!”

Sharon groaned pathetically, letting her head smack down on the table.

She needed better friends.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the previous reviews! I love receiving them, please keep them up!

Poor Rogers, the man just does not have luck when it comes to the opposite sex. What a way to crash and burn. Also, I wanted to highlight in the story how much Steve takes Sharon's advice into account. He may not fully trust and/or like her, but he does listen to her. She really is the only reason he agreed to Nat's blind date. Not that he'll ever do that again.

Hopefully this came off as a fun chapter. I definitely had fun writing it. Also, hopefully the location of DC is really coming to life. I want it to feel real and that all these characters are inhabiting the city, so I keep including locations other than just the Trisk and the National Mall. So far all the restaurants I have mentioned are actual places in the city.

Pic time!

Sharon jogging:
Natasha jogging:
Maria jogging:

Sharon on Operation GRDA:
Natasha on Operation GRDA:
Natasha's hat:
I'm a Mama's Boy, I'm a Fistfight

Chapter Summary

The teenager huffed out a breath judgmentally, “Oh, you’re an icer. Gotcha.”

Steve focused his gaze as confusion swept through him. “Icer?”

“Yeah,” the teen said with an air of youthful superiority, “Believes that stuff about SHIELD finding him frozen.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

August 13th, 1933

Brooklyn

“I am never goin’ back to bumfuck Indiana again!” Sixteen-year-old Bucky Barnes declared as he threw himself down next to Steve on the front stoop of the Barnes home.

“You say that every year,” Steve countered with a wet cough. He rubbed his frail chest just like how his ma had taught him to relieve mucus and pressure. He had been down and out with a severe case of pneumonia for the last few weeks. His strength was still waning and he really should be back home in bed, but nothing was gonna stop him from welcoming Bucky back after nearly a month in Indiana with his family.

“Young, well,” Bucky scowled, running a hand rakishly through his hair, his long and lanky limbs stretched out. “I mean it this time! I had to share a room with all three of my sisters. Three of ‘em, Stevie! They had me playing dress up and pretend tea parties.”

“Sounds like torture,” Steve dryly quipped as Bucky glared, revenge flashing through his pale eyes. Steve really should have seen it coming when Bucky hooked an arm around his shoulder and tugged him in, giving him a noogie of a lifetime.

“Buck! Stop that! Get off of me, ya animal!” he squirmed and elbowed fiercely for all he was worth as Bucky finally relented, releasing his best friend. The two stretched out, enjoying the early evening in Brooklyn as kids played out in the street, childishly yelling and screaming in glee.

Suddenly, Bucky’s eyes lit up as he began digging through his pockets.

“Hey, look at this. My Aunt Edith gave it to me,” he crowed triumphantly as he dug out a worn, crinkled postcard out of his pants’ pockets. Bucky all but shoved it under Steve’s nose as the blond blinked rapidly, trying to take in the picture.

He held it up and whispered the words to himself, “The Grand Canyon.”

Bucky nodded his head excitedly as he began jabbering about the famed landmark. “Yeah, it’s all
the way out in Arizona. I was readin’ about it in a copy of *National Geographic.*”

In great detail, Bucky relayed all the fantastical information he had learned. “We gotta go one day. You and me, Stevie.”

“What?” Steve asked. “To the Grand Canyon?”

Bucky bobbed his head. “Yeah, we’ll hike, go camping, and live off the land like real men.” He puffed out his chest imposingly, trying to look like a real caveman.

Steve snorted. “Like you’d ever survive out in the wild, city boy.”

Bucky only shook his head, eyes dreamy with faraway thoughts that only he could see.

“We’ll go west to the land of eternal sunshine and then we’ll just keep going until we hit the Pacific. We’ll stick out toes in the sand. We’ll go to Hollywood and get kisses from dames like Jean Arthur and Barbara Stanwyck.”

Steve only shook his head. He wished he had Bucky’s ability to dream things into reality. Bucky was sheer brilliance.

“Yeah, sure, Buck. Whatever you say.”

Bucky only leaned into his smaller best friend, knocking their shoulders together beseechingly.

“C’mon, Stevie,” he said. “Promise me. You and me, we’ll go to the Grand Canyon.”

Steve looked at Bucky for a long time and felt the weight of expectation press down on him. This, for whatever reason, was important to Bucky, and who was Steve to deny him his fantasies?

“Alright, Buck,” he promised softly as the sounds of the city surrounded them. “Let’s go to the Grand Canyon.”

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*July 4th, 2013*

*Outside Atlanta*

It was early morning, the sun cresting above the horizon, the sky a masterpiece of rosy pinks and pastel purples. Steve was seated at the counter of a hole-in-the-wall diner, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. He was the only guest, the other occupants being a waitress and cook. The air was thick with the smell of fatty grease from bacon and sausage as well as strong, bitter coffee.

Besides the noise from the kitchen and the cursing of the foul-mouth cook, the only other sound was the radio, faintly playing old school rock. Steve sat comfortably, shoulders relaxed as he idly tucked into his second helping of eggs, bacon and hash browns. His head was uncovered, but he figured he was far enough from crowds that he could go undetected easily on this little trip of his.
He was sipping on his coffee when an announcement from the TV behind him caught his attention.

“...DC is alive with the spirit of Independence Day! It is red, white and blue fever here in the nation’s capital. Festivities will occur all day from the White House to the National Mall. But one question remains, where in the world is Captain America?”

Steve’s spine stiffened as he pivoted on his squeaky stool, turning to watch the news report. The reporter was on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial as a sea of tourists surged around her, all sporting patriotic wear.

“The national icon found frozen alive in the Arctic only a year before is once again a no-show on America’s birthday. Coincidentally enough, the Fourth of July is also Captain Rogers’ birthday. Today, he turns 95. Well, wherever the good Captain is, here in DC we are wishing him a very happy birthday!”

Steve sighed as he watched the report move onto a segment at Mount Vernon. It was for that reason alone he had hightailed it out of DC the moment July started. He had more than enough vacation leave he hadn’t used up last year and was putting it to good use now. Fury hadn’t been thrilled, but that had only egged on Steve more. He was a bit of a shit like that.

“Another cup?” a raspy voice asked from behind the counter. He swirled back around to come face to face with his bespectacled waitress. She was holding a pot of hot coffee.

“Probably a good idea.” Steve nodded his head once as she poured it into his nearly empty cup. He reached for a sugar packet and emptied it into the steaming mug, the waitress watching idly. She seemed tired and bored with Steve as her only form of entertainment. So it wasn’t much of a surprise when she leaned her hip against the counter and assessed him with a friendly gleam in her eyes.

“That’s your bike out front, right?” her eyes immediately went to Steve’s Harley Davidson, the lone vehicle out in the parking lot. Steve nodded as he pierced a slice of bacon and chewed on it, savoring the crispiness.

“Long drive ahead of ya?” the waitress – her nametag read Suzy – inquired interested.

Steve swallowed down the bacon. “I expect so,” he remarked without going into further detail. Suzy only raised an eyebrow as she leaned in closer, pressing down on her elbows on the peeling, laminate counter.

“Well, where ya headed, handsome?”

Steve felt a flush crawl across his cheeks. Female attention, though much more frequent now than in his years in Brooklyn, was still always a shock to the system when placed solely on him.

“Out west, ma’am,” he sheepishly answered. Suzy nodded and headed into the kitchen as the cook began cursing up a storm. Steve polished off the rest of his meal and paid for it, leaving a generous tip behind. He stood, idly popping his back as he scooped out his backpack that had been resting on the stool next to him.

Unknown to everyone but him, his shield was hidden inside. He threw the pack over his shoulder as he headed out the door, a bell jingling his departure. He walked to his bike, the sun was higher up in the sky, as he tucked in his pack. He was about ready to get on his bike and head out when his phone began ringing.

He unsheathed it and raised an eyebrow at the name flashing across his screen.
That wasn’t his doing. When he had put in Thirteen’s contact information he had listed her as Agent 13 because...well, that was all he knew to call her – he still hadn’t made any headway on their little name game – and had left it at that. Somehow, his partner had commandeered his cell phone and had changed it to the current title. Steve hadn’t cared enough to change it back.

He leaned back against his bike, back to the diner as he brought the cell phone up to his ear.

“Rogers,” he greeted tentatively, half worried Thirteen was about to call him in for a mission. That would be his luck. Him trying to get away from SHIELD for a few days and them pulling him right back in mercilessly.

“Hey, birthday boy,” Thirteen acknowledged cheerfully and Steve felt himself relax. If it was a mission, Thirteen wouldn’t be sugarcoating niceties. As much as she got under his skin, he always appreciated her no-nonsense attitude when it came to missions. This seemed to be a friendly phone call. One he didn’t need, but he didn’t find it entirely unpleasant.

“How’s Atlanta?”

Steve sighed wearily. Of course, she knew where he was. He was really getting tired of SHIELD’s Big Brother charade of keeping track of him wherever he went.

“Do I even want to ask how you know where I am?”

He could hear the laughter in her voice as she responded. “It’s a trade secret. You know how spies are.”


He glanced around, seeing nothing but miles of road and land stretching out before him.

“How’s Atlanta?”

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“Do I even want to ask how you know where I am?”

He could hear the laughter in her voice as she responded. “It’s a trade secret. You know how spies are.”


He glanced around, seeing nothing but miles of road and land stretching out before him.

“How’s Atlanta?”

If she was surprised by his initiating polite conversation, she didn’t show it as she replied. “It’s good. I’m at my parents’ beach house in North Carolina. The whole family’s here.”

“Sounds like fun.” It did. The way Thirteen sporadically spoke of her family always gave the impression that she came from a loud and lively bunch. Steve couldn’t relate. All his life it had been just him and his ma until it had only been him.

“It is.” Muffled noises could be heard through the line. “Wait. Hold on – Greer! Stop being a dumbass!”

Static came across the line and he distantly heard his partner swearing under her breath. It sounded she was moving through a cramped space as she came back onto the line.

“I’m back. Wait. What is it, Daffles? I’m a little busy right now.”

Steve could faintly hear a child’s voice through the phone.

“But, Aunty-“

Static played up again as Steve’s reception went in and out momentarily. He, unfortunately, missed whatever the small girl had been about to call his partner. Hmm. He could have learned her name easily. Ah well.
“Okay, I’m in a good spot.” Thirteen’s light, easy voice echoed in his ear. "How’s the road trip?"

Steve had begun it days ago, heading out from Dupont Circle on his bike. He’d been through Virginia and North Carolina. He had spent a full day in Charlotte enjoying the sights and food. He had arrived in Atlanta last night and was now ready to take to the road again.

“It’s long,” he answered evasively, knowing that she was digging. She didn’t have as much finesse as Natasha, but that didn’t mean she still wasn’t good at wheedling information out of people. Steve, however, wasn’t in the mood to play along.

“Where are you even going?"

“Who wants to know?” Steve asked suspiciously. “You or Fury?”

“Fury means well.”

Steve snorted because that’s the last thing Fury would ever mean. He was a paranoid sonofabitch that micromanaged everyone and everything while keeping secrets close to his vest.

“He just doesn’t like it when you go off the reservation.”

“Yeah, well,” Steve scoffed into the phone. “Fury can kiss my ass.”

Thirteen laughed. “Now that’s a sight I would pay to see.”

Steve looked around, he really needed to get going. He stood up from his bike and he seated himself down on the beautiful machinery. He kicked out the stand and ignited the engine.

“Look, Thirteen, I gotta go. If SHIELD really needs me, I’m only a quinjet away.”

The bike purred beneath him as he sat back, the morning sun shining down upon him. The air was thick with humidity and it wasn’t even 9am yet. Atlanta could rival DC with its swamp-like atmosphere.

“Have some fun, Rogers. You only live once,” Thirteen paused poignantly. “Well, maybe not for you.”


He clicked his phone shut and tucked it into his jacket pocket. He gave a final wave to Suzy, who was watching him through the stained windows. And with that, he was off.

He drove all morning, the wind whipping through his hair as he made his way out of Georgia and meandered into Alabama. It was around noon when his stomach began rumbling noticeably just as he came upon a small, blink and you miss it kind of town named Sauga River. Its name was displayed on a large sign as he entered the town, a dam in the background. Steve came to a stop outside a bustling, homey restaurant. He checked his phone and found a next text awaiting him. He opened it to find that Tony had sent him a picture of him, Pepper and Rhodey enjoying the sun in the Maldives. He shook his head fondly as he came to a stop outside the door when he noticed a sign displayed on the glass.

CASH ONLY

Steve cursed as he reached for his wallet and found that he only had $5 dollars to his name. He glanced around and upon seeing no ATMs, sighed deeply. He was about to turn away when he
noticed another sign.

**HELP WANTED**

Steve pursed his lips thoughtfully. *Hmm*…that could work.

Steve entered the rustic restaurant and found it crowded with townspeople, enjoying their lunch as they ate and conversed with one another. The eatery had a friendly atmosphere. Steve looked around before spying a man at the cash register, back to the Avenger. Steve came up to the counter and cleared his throat.

“Excuse me.”

The man grunted in acknowledgment but didn’t turn around as he continued working.

“I saw your ‘help wanted’ sign. I’m not interested in the job, but I would be happy to wash some dishes in exchange for a late lunch.”

“Reckon we can do that,” the man responded in a genial southern accent. “What’s your name, son?”

The man turned. He was a portly, but kindly looking fellow with thinning hair and laughter lines. Steve immediately felt at ease in his company.

“Steve,” the blond answered as he reached out and shook the proffered hand. The man’s grip was warm and steady, callouses lining his palm.

The restaurant came to a standstill around him. Steve glanced up and found numerous pairs of eyes looking at him with wide-eyed amazement.

A smile flashed across the man’s face – Bob was on his nametag – as he stared at Steve.

“You’re him, aren’t ya?” he asked with flashing eyes as he yelled back to the kitchen. “Honey, it’s Steve Rogers!”

Steve could hear a plate breaking in the distance as he stood there, close to fidgeting under the scrutiny of the avid restaurateurs.

“You got a mighty famous face, son,” Bob said, finger pointed. “I’m honored. Please. Sit.”

He gestured to the nearest, open booth and Steve complied, slipping in across worn leather. Bob came around the counter to stand at the table, still chatting away with the superhero. Still, Steve felt obligated to say.

“The dishes-"

“Are you kidding?” Bob asked baffled. “Captain America eats here for free as long as he likes! No charge for you!”

Bob tilted his head to below back to the kitchen. “Honey, put a very thick steak on the grill!”

Steve could hear the sizzle of meat from here, and he had to admit, it did sound tasty. He couldn’t remember the last time he had had a good steak. But still, he didn’t have money to pay.

“No. Please,” he tried to bargain. “I want to earn my keep.”
All the while a crowd was building up around the table, cameras, and phones flashing as everyone tried to catch a glimpse of Captain America.

“Wow,” a young boy enthused. “What brings you to Sauga?”

“Wait. There’s no trouble here, is there?” a teenage girl asked in astonishment. “Should we be worried?”

In the corner, Steve could clearly hear a woman on her cell phone. “Channel 4? You have to get down here right now! You won’t believe who’s here!”

Steve sighed. There went the idea of making his way undetected. Thirteen and Natasha would get a laugh out of this once he was back in DC.

And then, of course, came the question Steve had been getting ad nauseam ever since he had come out of the ice.

“Can I get a picture?” “Can I get a picture?” “Can I get a picture?”

“No!” well-meaning Bob jumped in, shooing curious customers away from Steve’s table, brandishing a broom all the while. “Let the man relax!”

Steve bit back a smile as he leaned into the booth, allowing himself to minutely loosen in relief. Bob had finally got most of the crowd to disperse, though eyes still remained on the super soldier. Steve glanced up as Bob swooped in back by the booth.

“Okay. I accept your hospitality. As long as you let me wash some dishes,” Steve tried to barter, but Bob was having none of it.

“No, sir!”

“A few dishes,” Steve countered to no avail.

“Nope.”

“One dish.”

Bob quirked an eyebrow. “Can I take a picture of that?”

Steve chuckled. “Sure.”

“One dish.” Bob agreed before dashing into the kitchen to see how his steak was coming along.

Lunch turned out to be a bit of a spectacle. The steak and baked potato were phenomenal, but the crowd in the restaurant stayed strong and a horde was growing outside. And, yep, Channel 4 had turned up with cameras, broadcasting on the fact that a superhero was in this sleepy town, eating lunch.

Steve was steeling himself for making an appearance outside, but Bob – life-saving Bob – ushered him out a back door, up some stairs to his and his wife’s apartment above the restaurant, as a way to avoid the crowd. He chattered all the way, ushering Steve out onto the balcony that gave a perfect, bird’s eye view of the sleepy little town. The dam resided off in the distance, rising above the flat terrain like a stone fortress. Bob began pointing out the sights to Steve, few and far they may have been.

Steve enjoyed the easy conversation. He hadn’t had an honest to God conversation with someone
in so long that didn’t revolve around politics, espionage, or weaponry. Bob though, treated him like an average Joe, even if he seemed a bit infatuated with the Captain America persona.

“There’s the dam,” Bob pointed. “We have now begun and ended your tour of the city’s noteworthy sites.”

Steve was quick to shake his head earnestly. “You’re selling yourselves short. It’s a lovely town, Bob.”

It was. It was quiet and tranquil. A far cry from DC, New York, or even the Brooklyn of Steve’s past. Steve could never live in a place such as this, he was a city boy through and through. But it provided a peaceful reprieve, if only for a few hours.

Bob smiled in agreement before clearing his throat, nodding down to the alleyway below. “I told my wife to park your bike in the garage so nobody would mess with it.”

The blond bobbed his head in gratitude as Bob leaned against the railing, continuing on sensibly. “Now that folks know you’re on the road, you realize they’re gonna recognize you wherever you go.”

Steve shrugged, looking out over the quiet town. “It’s not something I’ve given a lot of thought to, to be perfectly honest.”

Bob shook his head. “For the love of God, at least find a cap and maybe some sunglasses.”

Steve snorted involuntarily as Bob watched him, confusion furrowing his brows. Steve only shook his head good-naturedly as he regarded his new friend. “Would you believe that’s what I typically do?”

Bob opened his mouth to reply but was cut off by the ringtone of his cell phone. He fished it out of his pocket, looking apologetic.

“That’s the wife. She’s probably wondering what’s keeping me so long.”

Steve waved him off as the man answered the call.

“Hi, sweetie. We’re-” Bob cut off suddenly, his face paling as his wife talked to him. “What?”

He hung up immediately and began looking something up on his phone, his eyes widening.

“Cap, you need to see this. She said it’s a live internet feed and that every single station picked it up.” Bob whistled lowly. “This is bad.”

Steve tensed as Bob raised the phone to show a video message addressed…to him.

“I repeat: this message is for Captain America.”

Steve’s jaw clenched as he leaned in. It was a man, cloaked entirely in resplendent purple – even a purple mask – with a Dali-like mustache. The man spoke in a cavalier tone as he addressed the camera directly.

“No, not a message. A challenge.”

The camera panned revealing a room of ruin and destruction, bodies strewn about carelessly, lying in pools of blood. Steve clasped his hands into fists, his nails breaking through the skin.
“Captain,” the camera was back on the masked vigilante. “You can find me atop the picturesque Sauga River Dam.”

The masked man chuckled coldly. “Strike that. You should find me, and soon. Because it’s been a very rainy summer. The river’s so high, the dam can barely hold it. And in about twenty minutes, I’m opening the main floodgates.”

The camera cut to black as Bob stood there, in bewildered silence. He held onto the phone as he began speaking to his companion, fear bubbling up through his chest.

“The town. Oh, God,” Bob whispered, heart beating a mile per minute. “He’ll wash away the whole town. There’s not enough time to evacuate! What are we gonna-”

Bob halted his rambling when he turned and found him standing alone on the balcony. He heard the road of a motorcycle and looked down just in time to see Steve speeding off on his Harley Davison and heading…straight towards the dam.

“Well I’ll be,” Bob mused, watching Captain America go off to save the town, shield strapped to his back.

Minutes later Steve arrived at the dam, pushing his way through news people and camera crews. He hurried into the large water facility, passing numerous bodies and puddles of blood before he founded the masked man standing, holding a long, gleaming sword at the neck of a kneeling worker.

“Whoah.” Steve came to a complete stop at the sight as he held up his hands, his shield attached to his left arm.

“This doesn’t have to get violent,” Steve tried to reason as the daredevil scoffed.

“Then you don’t know how I operate, Capitan.”

The masked man pressed the sword closer to the man’s neck, drawing blood. The kneeling worker trembled, sweat pouring down his face and tears pooling in the corners of his eyes. Steve felt his anger grow as his nostrils flared.

“Yeah, and who the hell are you?”

The man chuckled as he declared arrogantly, “I am the Swordsman.”

Steve stared. The…Swordsman watched him expectedly for any sign of recognition. When it didn’t come, he turned up his nose in an offended manner.

“Surely Hawkeye has mentioned me. I’m his greatest foe.”

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“Surely Hawkeye has mentioned me. I’m his greatest foe.”

Steve continued to stare blankly. Clint had never mentioned this crackpot. Probably for good reason. Swordsman? Really? Though what could one expect from such a poor Errol Flynn knockoff?

“Yeah, no,” Steve said with a shake of his head. “Can’t say that he has.”

Swordsman faltered momentarily, his eyes blinking from behind the ridiculous mask. “What are you doing in this backwater town then? You have to be here to shut me down.”

Steve only stood there before lightly shrugging. “You’re probably not going to believe this. But I
had no idea you were even here. What do you want?”

“What does any good American want?” Swordsman taunted mockingly. “A quiet home, love and millions of dollars coerced from towns that want to stay safe.”

Swordsman set his eyes on Steve, gauging the super soldier’s worth. “If I can be seen taking the head cleanly off an Avenger, I’d call that an endorsement.”

Steve narrowed his eyes and squared his shoulders, rising to the madman’s challenge.

“Come get it.”

The two jumped into action. Swordsman charged forward, sword waving threateningly. Steve raised his shield as the two weapons converged on one another. Steve expected to easily break the weapon with the strength of his shield but was in for a nasty shock when his shield went flying, embedding itself into a large pipe feet above him.

Steve stared from his shield to the sword, his gut clenching uncomfortably. Swordsman’s smile grew as he saw the Avenger’s unease.


Steve didn’t even want to think about how this megalomaniac ended up with the same mineral that had crafted his own shield. Hadn’t Howard expressly told him that Steve had the world’s only supply back during the War?

Swordsman smirked as he broke into a menacing stance, sword raised. “Tough for you.”

He lunged for Steve, but the super soldier had already pivoted on his heel, jumping up onto the railing and leaping for his shield. He reached his hand out, grabbing onto the metal as he dangled.

“I’ll work around,” he got out through gritted teeth as he tried to finagle the shield out of the pipe. He gave an oomph as a large weight attached itself to his legs, refusing to let go. He looked down to see Swordsman holding onto him, clinging to him like a glutinous leech.

“I’m surprised even you care enough about this little burg enough to die for it.”

Steve gave a fierce kick that sent Swordsman flipping. Steve swung, flipping him and his shield free.

“Are there people here?” he asked redundantly as he landed in a crouch on some scaffolding, Swordsman feet away from him.

“I should hope so,” Swordsman snarled.

Steve shrugged easily. “Well, there you go.” As if that explained everything. Which for Steve, it did. Every battle was important, no matter how big or small. The fighting continued until the two men were out on the dam itself, volleying hits back and forth. The Swordsman was a fast and spritely bastard, dodging Steve’s blows.

“As I said,” Swordsman jeered as he flipped over Steve, landing on his feet. “Twenty minutes.”

He slashed the sword across Steve’s chest, it was only his quick reflexes that stopped him from having a fatal gash across his torso. Swordsman only sneered triumphantly.

“Time’s up.”
The floodgates opened up, water gushing out massively. The roar of the water echoed all around as Steve stared in growing horror. Swordsman only laughed gleefully.

“Preprogrammed,” he explained with a twirl of his mustache. “What did you think I was doing before you showed up? I said you could find me here. I never said you could stop me.”

Feeling all kinds of done, Steve sprang forward and landed a punch with all his superhuman force behind it. Swordsman head snapped back as he went down, knocked out till Sunday. Steve didn’t even give the man another glance as he sprinted back into the dam facility.

He found one of the few survivors at the computer system, frantically trying to stop the rushing dam.

“Hurry!” Steve yelled as he came running down metal stairs. “Close the gate!”

“I’m trying!” the man replied hysterically. “He locked the system! It’s not responding!”


“It won’t do you any good!” the worker insisted. “There’s no way you can force it shut with the river swollen to burst!”

Steve leaped a story below to where the valve rested. He landed atop it and used all of his enhanced strength to try and turn the blasted spigot. It hardly budged. Sweat was trickling at his temples and his muscles were screaming out as he continued trying to turn the blasted valve.

“You okay?” the worker bellowed down, head appearing from up above. Steve’s veins were bulging as he continued working fruitlessly. He stopped suddenly when a quote Bucky loved to recite in his more philosophical moods came to mind.

“Archimedes,” he whispered to himself.

“Huh?” the man called down, clearly not following Steve’s stream of consciousness.

“Give me a…lever and…a fulcrum…and I can move the world.”

Steve’s looked up, determination gleaming in his brilliantly blue eyes. “Find something! Anything!”

The guy looked around before shaking his head wildly. “Nothing here! We need something thin and strong, and there’s just nothing – “

Steve’s eyes widened.

Vibranium. Completely indestructible.

“The sword!” he shrieked. “Get me the sword!”

The man disappeared only to reappear moments later, sword in hand. He flung it down and Steve caught it easily before jamming it into the faucet. Holding on tightly, he leaned back using the sword to force the valve to the left. He painfully groaned as his entire body strained against the massive weight.

Finally – finally – the valve gave. The wave of water outside came to a standstill as the dam gates closed, stopping the tidal wave. The worker, who had hurried to Steve’s side, stared at an outside monitor in amazement.
“Oh my God,” he breathed out in wonder. “You did it!”

He clapped Steve heartily across the back as Steve lurched forward uneasily, completely exhausted after depleting all his super strength.

“You saved the town!”

“Tell you what,” Steve got out through panted breaths as he struggled to stand. “Phone the police to pick up Swordsman…and we’ll call it even.”

The police came, carting away the masked madman. Steve stuck around long enough to watch him go and to give a few, stilted interviews to ravenous news crews. Finally, he was able to escape the spotlight, all but collapsing on his bike as he made his way back to Bob’s restaurant.

He was shocked to find the man himself waiting for him, takeout bag in hand.

“We lost a couple of basements and a playground,” he filled in the Avenger on the few damages the town acquired. “That’s it. If you’re to move on, do it before we throw you a parade.”

Steve weakly chuckled as he slumped across his bike, arms resting idly on the handlebars.

“You gonna be okay?” Bob inquired, concern flashing through his kind eyes.

“Feels like I just benched the Hulk,” Steve admitted, “But yes.”

“What’s this?” the Avenger asked as the bag was handed over, even though he could already smell the delectable scent of medium-rare steak and roasted vegetables as well as heart chili.

“For the road,” Bob explained as his wife kept up to his side, wrapping her arm around her husband. “Wife’s specialty. Hope you like chili.”

Steve smiled gratefully. No matter where he went, he’d always have a fond thought for this little town and its residents. Kindness like this was a rarity in this century. It reminded him of well…home. His lips turned down momentarily before he forced himself to smile cheerfully.

“What do I owe you?” he asked jokingly as Bob’s face turned to stone with irritation.

Steve chuckled as he placed the bag in his little side trunk.

“All right. Fairtrade. This one time.”

He ignited his motorcycle as he nodded to the couple. “Take care.”

They waved him off as he took to the road.

Sauga River fell behind him quickly as he continued on his way.

All in all, it hadn’t been the worst birthday he ever had.
“Huh.”

Steve couldn’t help but stop and stare. He had been driving idly through the state of Oklahoma when this sign welcoming him into a small, Midwestern town had gained his undivided attention.

**Welcome to Captain America, Oklahoma**

There was a town named after him. Wow. He really hoped Tony didn’t know that. It didn’t take much for the man to start making him the butt of every joke, better to not give him any ammunition.

Steve stared at the sign for a long time before curiosity finally won out and he turned his motorcycle towards the small town.

It’s not every day you find a town named after yourself…

It’d be criminal for him to not at least check it out.

He continued on, driving easily through the town before coming upon an open park where there was a massive amount of red, white and blue. Steve parked his bike as he took in the astonishing sight before him.

It was a celebration…of him.

Stars and stripes and red, white and blue shields were everywhere. Stalls were set up with Captain America memorabilia from shirts to decorative plates to vintage trading cards. Children were prancing around in Captain America costumes as Steve watched them go.

Steve hopped off his bike and looked through his trunk, pulling out the Mets cap Thirteen had gifted him with long ago. This time he’d be prepared. He was just locking up his bike when his cell phone rang. He pulled it out and raised an eyebrow at the name dancing across his screen.

**Natasha Romanoff :)**

The smiley face had not been his doing. How did the women in his life keep getting hold of his phone without him noticing? Oh, right, spies. He needed better coworkers.

He answered the video call and watched as Natasha’s smirking face filled up the screen.

“**Hey, Rogers,**” she greeted, an amused curl to her lips.

“Natasha,” he acknowledged with a nod of his head. It was sunny wherever she was and she looked relaxed as she lounged on a towel, sunhat on, protecting her porcelain skin.

“**We saw your handwork in Alabama. Good job.**”

Steve’s brows furrowed as he asked, “**We?**”

The camera turned to reveal Natasha’s partner in crime: Clint. He was clad in a worn flannel shirt,
sweat pooling at his armpits, with his hands covered in work gloves. Clint, tan and hair blonder than usual, raised a hand to salute his teammate.

“Cap,” the archer greeted in his usual gruff manner, but his eyes were friendly as he looked at the screen. “Thanks for taking on Swordsman. He’s such an asshole.”

“No problem, Barton. He alluded to being…familiar with you.”

Clint snorted as he raised an arm, wiping it across his sweaty forehead. “Yeah, the freak has some kind of complex. Keeps declaring himself as my archnemesis or something insane like that. Like I said, major asshole.”

The phone turned back to Natasha. As it moved Steve caught flashes of their location. It seemed they were in some kind of field.

“Where are you guys?”

Natasha smiled secretly. “Classified.”

Steve rolled his eyes and spent a few more minutes chatting before hanging up with a promise to bring back a souvenir from the Captain America fair. He pocketed his phone and with a deep breath, waded into the madness.

He didn’t get very far before drawing attention to himself.

“Wow,” a kid said, coming up to Steve’s side, wearing a t-shirt with Steve’s shield on it. “You’re him.”

Oh no. Steve had been made and by a nine-year-old nonetheless.

“Pardon?” he feigned innocence but the kid’s interest had already waned as he ran off, chasing after his friends. Steve sucked in a breath as he watched them go.

Maybe this had been a mistake…

“Awesome cosplay ‘Steve,’” a woman said in passing as she walked by the super soldier. “You should check out the contest at noon.”

Steve watched her go bemusedly. “There’s a contest?”

He shook his head, amazed as he entered further into the park. His eyes roved over every stall and knick-knack. His stomach rumbled quietly and he perked up upon seeing a hot dog stand.

“Two,” he ordered politely as he came up to the counter, sliding over $8. “Onions and mustard, please.”

As his order came up he couldn’t help but look around, remarking politely, “Some party. How long has this been going on?”

The vendor, a lanky teenage boy with a face full of zits rolled his eyes in a bored manner before answering. “This is the second year. The vote to rename Burlington in his honor was nearly unanimous.”

“Huh,” Steve mused as it clicked in his head. “Is this right after he came out of the ice?”

The teenager huffed out a breath judgmentally. “Oh, you’re an icer. Gotcha.”
Steve focused his gaze as confusion swept through him. “Icer?”

“Yeah,” the teen said with an air of youthful superiority. “Believes that stuff about SHIELD finding him frozen."

He held out the two hotdogs as Steve took them, still peering down at the teen in bewilderment.

“As opposed to…?”

“Well, c’mon,” the teenager exclaimed, like it was obvious. “That’s like Abraham Lincoln waking up. Except kids had heard of Lincoln.”

Now Steve was just lost. He bit into his first hot dog as the teenager continued on.

“Back then, you had to have known your World War II to recognize the name ‘Captain America,’ right?”

Steve swallowed thoughtfully as he worked on his second dog. “You could make a case.”

The teenager nodded his head as he snapped his fingers. “So, me, I think once the government saw those freaky aliens come out of that hole in the sky, they suited a modern guy up and put him in. For PR they played him up as a legend. You gotta admit, the whole ‘suspended animation’ angle is hard to swallow. But you know what?

“Doesn’t matter. You ever see him in action?” the boy asked, shaking his head before Steve could answer. “No? Lemme tell you, it’s like a ballet. With punching.”

Should Steve be offended? He felt a little offended. Yeah, his fighting style was a bit… acrobatic, but it was hardly ballet. Not that there was anything wrong with ballet.

“A one-man army,” the teenager continued. “You wouldn’t believe it. Ask anybody here.”

Steve opened his mouth to give his opinion, but was cut off as he heard a whooshing behind his head and a voice yell out, “Mister, look out!”

He whirled around, catching a small, plastic replica of his shield out of the air before it could collide with the back of his head.

“Wow!” a little girl murmured as she ran up to his side. “You caught my shield!”

Steve rubbed the back of his neck docilely as he handed it over. “I…guess I did. Force of habit?”

The girl only giggled before running off. The teenager sighed from behind Steve, shaking his head disappointedly.

“Like I said, man, it’s all a conspiracy. They’re playing us the same way they did with Area 51.”

Steve shifted as an awkward silence descended. “Right. Well. Keep up the detective work.”

He turned on his heel, walking away with a shake of his head.

“The truth is out there!” the kid called at his back as Steve continued weaving through the crowd.

God, the 21st Century was a weird place.
A coyote howled in the distance, its cry echoing mournfully throughout the canyon. Steve raised his head, glancing around curiously. His eyes cut through the dark, seeing nearly as well as he did during the day. The coyote cried again and Steve reckoned it was a mile or two away, scavenging for food.

He let himself relax as his eyes darted to the fire burning away merrily in front of him. He had started it himself, which was a relief because Dernier, God rest his soul, would never have let him live it down if he hadn’t. Steve chuckled fondly just thinking of that wily, old pyromaniac.

He sighed softly as he sat hunched over his bedroll, using the light of the fire to work on his little project. Above him the night sky was a masterpiece of stars and constellations, stretching on for infinity. He had never seen so many stars at once. Stars were practically unheard of in New York and DC and even during the War with as many nights as he and the Commandos had spent in the woods, he had never witnessed such a breathtaking sight.

He had arrived at the Grand Canyon and had spent the last two days hiking and traversing through the majestic landmark, amazement etched across his face the entire time. It was even more beautiful than he could have ever comprehended. Definitely more so than that dainty, worn little postcard Bucky had shown him once upon a time.

Steve’s eyes involuntarily went down to the sketchbook in his lap and the nearly finished portrait he had been meticulously working on all evening.

It was Bucky.

It was the first time he had drawn Bucky since waking up.

Ever since he allowed himself to tentatively draw again, he had studiously avoided ever drawing his best friend. He had begun with that simple birthday sketch of Thirteen, rusty though he may have been. Then he had moved onto landscapes, such as the cherry blossoms and the various monuments throughout the capitol. He had even gotten up the courage to etch a portrait of Peggy as she is today: aged, timeless and utterly captivating. That drawing had been framed and hung in a place of honor in Peggy’s room at her care facility.

But he had never allowed himself to draw Bucky.

It hurt too much, like picking at a fresh scab until the skin broke, only to bleed out and begin the vicious cycle of healing again. To draw Bucky meant that Steve finally had to start letting go, accepting the reality that he was here and Bucky…was not. In fact, letting go was the entire point of this impromptu road trip across America.

As usual, the one to get his head straight was Peggy.

He had visited his dearest girl, bemoaning this or that of the 21st Century. How it was so foreign,
so utterly different than anything he could truly comprehend, how it sickened and enticed him in equal measure, leaving him utterly untethered on a day-to-day basis. He also may have been recounting Peggy with the disaster that had been his foray into 21st Century dating.

Peggy, as always, had seen through him like the transparent piece of glass he was. She knew what was really bothering him, with it having been so close to his birthday and all. He would be another year older at 28 (95) and as much as he was adjusting to this century, he still wasn’t at home in it.

Peggy, entirely lucid and the wisest person Steve had ever encountered, had only met his eyes solemnly as she told him.

“It’s tempting to want to live in the past. It’s familiar. It’s comfortable. But it’s where fossils come from.”

Steve was at risk of becoming a fossil.

So without much planning or foresight, he had thrown himself on his bike and had taken off, coming to Bucky’s dream place. Bucky would never be able to see the magnificent views that the Grand Canyon offered, so Steve would soak it in for the both of them. He would savor this moment forever and hold on tight to it because that was the least he owed Bucky.

So here he was, drawing Bucky.

His eyes were trained to the paper as he shadowed in the slopes of Bucky’s cheekbones, placed the dimple in his friend’s chin that all the girls of Brooklyn had swooned over, and created the perfectly coiffed hair that Bucky had been so vain about, even in the middle of the War.

Steve’s hand trembled as he finished the drawing. A part of Steve never wanted to finish, wanted to just spend the rest of forever bringing Bucky back to life through art. It felt like closure – like saying goodbye – as he forced himself to place his pencil aside.

With shaking hands and tears pooling in his eyes, Steve raised the sketchbook up to the sky, so that Bucky could see the glorious ravine before him.

“See, Buck,” Steve whispered thickly. “We made it.”

He let his head drop as the tears fell freely, staining his cheeks; Steve’s body racking with long-suppressed grief and longing. Eventually, when he was completely exhausted, he fell back upon the bedroll, the ground lumpy and uneven beneath his massive weight.

He fell into a seemingly dreamless sleep, but dreams found him anyway.

“Please, don’t do this,” Peggy’s voice was pleading an unsure and so utterly not Peggy-like. “We have time. We can work it out.”

Boy, did Steve want to. He wanted nothing more in his life to work it out, to come out of this unscathed, and to dance with his best girl.

But life doesn’t always give you what you want. And Steve had already been given far more than he deserved. How could he cheat destiny for more?

“Right now, I’m in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer a lot of people are gonna die.”

He choked as he continued speaking through the radio, endless clouds stretched out before him.
“Peggy, this is my choice,” he forced the plane down as ice and water waited for him below. “Peggy?”

“I’m here,” she softly responded, he could hear the tears in her voice. He cursed himself, the last thing he had ever wanted to do was make Peggy cry.

“I’m gonna need a rain check on that dance,” he said, pathetically trying to lighten the mood in the last few minutes of his life.

“Alright,” Peggy gamely agreed with a quiver to her voice. “A week, next Saturday, at the Stork Club.”

The ice was growing closer. Everything would end in white.

“You got it,” Steve promised, hands gripping the wheel so tight he could feel it breaking underneath his clasp.

“Eight o’clock on the dot,” she ordered. “Don’t you dare be late. Understood?”

“You know,” Steve got out. “I still don’t know how to dance.”

“I’ll show you how,” Peggy’s strong voice broke hoarsely. “Just be there.”

He was about to crash.

“We’ll have the band play something slow,” he said as the plane rattled ominously, “I’d hate to step on your-”

All he felt was ice and cold seeping into his veins as it dragged him under, forcing darkness on him.

Steve jerked away with strangled breaths, gasping for air as a sickly, cold sweat clung to his skin. He sat up on the bedroll, his eyes immediately drawn to the warmth of the fire as he huddled near it, trying to get rid of the phantom coldness that still haunted him in his nightmares.

What Peggy hadn’t told him about the past that was no matter how hard you try to let it go, it had a way of holding on tight.

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July 17th, 2013

The Triskelion

“Happy Anniversary!”

Steve glanced up from his paperwork, appropriately weary as he saw Thirteen lurking in his doorway. She sauntered into his office, coming to a stop at his desk. With a flourish, she placed a single cupcake down on his desk. She looked inordinately proud of herself as she grinned at him.
Steve only raised an eyebrow as he looked from the cupcake to his partner. “What are we celebrating?”

Thirteen’s beaming grin grew as she exclaimed, “It’s a year from the day we began working together. It’s our Workiversary.”

Steve was rather nonplussed as he racked his brain to see if what she was saying was true. It was. “Ah yes,” he agreed dryly as he regarded the cupcake. “The day you lied to me, pretended to be a tourist, and planted a tracking device on me. How could I forget?”

Thirteen only shrugged lightly, unconcerned by his ire. “Spy.”

“Hmm,” Steve mused as he reached out for the cupcake, bringing it closer to him. “And do you do this with all your coworkers?”

She sure loved her celebrations and holidays. It always seemed like she was celebrating something. Steve had never had such a vest for life. It was endearing as it was alarming.

“Well,” Thirteen began as she placed her hands on her hips. “We are partners after all. And friends.”

Steve blinked as silence reigned between the two of them. He gulped and avoided her earnest gaze. She faltered for a minute before bravely putting on her game face.

“Or we’re just co-workers.”

Steve, not wanting to touch that can of worms, artfully changed the subject as he sniffed his cupcake and was rewarded with the decadent scent of chocolate.

“It looks good.”

He had a bit of a sweet tooth when it came to treats such as cupcakes.

“Well, I should hope so,” Thirteen responded. “I stood in line for nearly an hour at Baked & Wired for that bad boy.”

“It’s a nice surprise, thank you, Thirteen,” Steve said gratefully, looking up at his partner. Thirteen was constantly surprising him and for the most part, her overtures were genuine. He really should stop being so suspicious of her motives. Maybe this cupcake could be an olive branch of sorts…

“The Tessita is my favorite flavor.”

Thirteen smiled knowingly as she proudly said, “Like I said, spy.”

Steve rolled his eyes even though a small smile appeared on his face. “Of course. How could I forget?”

Thirteen smiled fondly, reaching up to tuck a strand of honey blonde hair behind her ears.

“Well, I just wanted to celebrate the fact that we’ve survived an entire year together with only minor scrapes and bruises. And, you know, I just wanted you to know…that I like having you here.”

A blush stained her cheeks as she looked away shiftily. Steve decided to be nice and not call her out on it even though a part of him wanted too. Like he said, he could be a bit of a shit when he wanted to.
“Well, I like being here,” he conceded before furrowing his brows thoughtfully. “Mostly.”

Thirteen chuckled, feeling more at ease as she rocked back on her heels. “Mostly.”

She looked down at her watch and then cursed under her breath, “I’m late for my meeting with Stanford. My ass is grass!” she pivoted on her heels, heading out, “Enjoy the cupcake!”

Steve watched her go before glancing at the cupcake.

As he said, Thirteen was full of surprises.

Chapter End Notes

Quick note: the previous chapter has been edited and updated so that instead of Natasha sharing the video of Steve’s date on social media, instead its just shared among the Avengers. Also, I added a picture of Natasha's hat for the stakeout. So, check that it to be fully updated on the story.

For this chapter the main inspiration and dialogue comes from both Captain America #695 & #696. I really wanted that road trip aspect and Steve exploring other parts of the country, particularly around his birthday. Also, Steve going to the Grand Canyon to honor Bucky comes from the comics as well.

As you can now see, we only have two chapters left! I'm really excited that the end is nigh and that we'll soon be moving onto the second story. Just a heads up, usually the time jump between chapters is only a few days to a few weeks, but the next one will be a few months in the future. I just don't want that to be jarring to you, the audience.

Thank you for all the previous reviews. They are always a delight to receive and at times are pretty insightful and eye-opening. Please keep them coming! They are such a great motivation to me.

Pic time!

Sharon at the Trisk:
I'm Here in Search of Your Glory

Chapter Summary

Thor regarded his fellow Avenger with a deep, solemn gaze. “Tell me, dear Steven,” he rumpled out pleadingly, “Does it every get easier? The overwhelming grief?”

Steve exhaled the breath he had been holding since Thor had uttered Bucky’s name. He looked at his friend, really looked at him, before murmuring,

“I haven’t been in this time for very long, so I’m not a complete authority of the matter, but…no, I’m afraid it doesn’t get easier. You just learn to live with it.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

November 5th, 2013

Chicago

It was dawn in Chicago.

Willis Tower was a near ghost town as a single security guarded manned the security desk in the luxurious lobby. He was sitting idly at his desk, watching the early morning pass him by through the floor to ceiling windows that made up the lobby.

He glanced up as movement flashed through the circular sliding doors. A group of men – and one woman – dressed in nondescript grey jumpsuits and hats covering their heads, entered the lobby. The guard raised an eyebrow at seeing such a large group so early in the morning.

The guard glanced down at his dossier and noted that a cleaning crew was due today. But oddly enough they weren’t due in until 7am, more than an hour away.

The security guard raised his arm to wave as the group began flanking his desk. “Wait. Are you a new cleaning crew?”

“S’right,” the supposed ringleader of the crew said nonchalantly, ginger hair hidden under his cap. “Don’t worry about us.”

The guard narrowed his eyes. “Well, the job says I kind of have to.”

He placed down the clipboard as the group came to a stop in front of the large, modern security desk. “ID’s please.”

“Sure,” the ginger man agreed amenably enough as he reached into his back pocket. In a flash, he was holding out a pistol armed with a silencer aimed right at the guard’s head.

The man smirked. “Got it right here.”
The security guard recoiled, arms raised defensively. “What?! No!”

The man pulled the trigger and the guard jerked back, falling to the ground, dead. Blood pooled out of his head. A moment passed before everyone sprang into action, perfectly precise. One of his men ventured behind the desk, kicking the dead body out of the way as he placed the security hat on his head, ready to take up his post as the lookout.


His men began fanning out through the lobby as the rest followed him towards the elevators. The group began throwing off their baggy jumpsuits, revealing bulletproof vests and an array of semi-automatics underneath.

Wilson sighed as he watched his boss. “I still don’t understand why we need twenty for this operation.”

Baker placed his steely gaze on his subordinate. “If you don’t think SHIELD isn’t going to try and get back what we stole, you’re kidding yourself.”

“That’s ridiculous,” another goon chimed in. “They couldn’t possibly know where it is.”

The woman, with long raven hair, stood near the disagreement, her blue eyes roving throughout the lobby calculatedly. Baker only carelessly threw aside his cap as he marched into an open elevator, the others joining him. A briefcase was clutched tightly in his grasp. He hadn’t let it out of his sight since the entire operation began.

“Fine. I’m ridiculous,” Baker conceded darkly as he jammed the correct button for the infamous Skydeck. “Next stop.”

Seemingly an instant later the elevator doors opened to the deserted tourist attraction. Chicago stretched out all around them in a brilliant 360˚ panoramic. The sun was cresting above the endless blue of Lake Michigan off in the distance.

It was truly a breathtaking sight. However, Baker was a man on a mission and he had no time for such poetry.

“Fan out,” he barked to his men. “Make sure there’s no one else here.”

“Baker,” a man inquired, “You still paranoid about SHIELD?”

Baker came to a stop in front of a bench as he gently placed the briefcase on it, opening it and peering inside to what lay there.

“It’s like the old joke,” he murmured. “Just cause you’re paranoid-”

“Doesn’t mean they’re not out to get you.”

The man sighed wearily. “Yeah, I know.”

Baker glanced up, taking stock of men he had been working with for years, men he had recruited to his lucrative cause. He’d be a fool to ever really trust any of them, but they were all exceptional at their jobs. His eyes darted to their newest recruit: Audrey. She had joined their operation weeks ago and already had proven herself a valuable asset to their cause. She was standing by the massive windows, gun at the ready and expression warlike.
Baker reached into the briefcase, carefully extracting the weapon. He held it up to the light, watching as the light caught the dark liquid. Who knew something so innocuous could be so deadly?

“Hard to believe this little thing can cause so much damage?” He whispered in awe, gleefully thinking of the chaos to come.

“Now what?” One of his men questioned as a smirk turned Baker’s face ugly.

“Now we wait.” He looked up. “We wait for the day to start. We wait for the skyscraper to be filled with thousands of people.”

His grin turned deadly as his grip tightened around the vial.

“Then we release the Zodiac.”

“I can’t believe it,” Sharon murmured, staring at Rogers with a shocked expression painted across her face. Rogers only shook his head as he adjusted his gloves while he stood in the center of the airborne quinjet as it crested over Lake Michigan, sweeping over the Chicago skyline.

“Well, believe it,” he retorted as he placed his shield at his back, it clicking into place in the magnetic harness.

Sharon continued to regard her partner, flabbergasted by his confession. “You’ve really never have had deep dish pizza?”

“Can’t say that I have,” the Avenger said, placing his comm into his ear. The quinjet was buzzing with activity as Rogers, Sharon, Bri, and Bravo STRIKE prepared for their impending landing. Weeks ago a SHIELD facility was broken into and stolen from it was a mysterious yet deadly liquid known as the Zodiac. Years ago, Peggy had dealt with the liquid weapon and once it had come into the custody of SHIELD, it had been declared destroyed. So, imagine Rogers’ shock when it was stolen.

The thief, a man by the name of Baker, and his terrorist cell had gone to ground, burrowing deep. They had remained completely silent until some noise got picked up last week. So here they were, ready to save the day, just like always.

“Man, you are missing out,” Sharon exclaimed as she buckled her utility belt securely, it hanging off her hips. “Deep dish pizza is the best kind of pizza.”

Rogers only raised a bemused eyebrow. “Now, you’re just pulling my leg, Thirteen. New York style is clearly the best.”

Sharon scrunched up her nose in disagreement. “Uh, no it’s not.”

Rogers nodded his head, nonplussed by her opposing stance. “Yes, it is.”

Sharon shook her head determinedly as she planted her hands on her hips, jutting her chin out as she locked eyes with the super-soldier.
“No. It’s not. It’s way too greasy and the dough’s too thin. And really, who wants a piece of pizza the size of your head? And having to fold it in order to eat it?” Sharon pretend-gagged her displeasure at the notion.

“Yeah, but that’s why Jumbo Slice is so good,” Ramsey, a STRIKE member, piped up from his spot. Sharon and Rogers’ squabble had gained a large audience as STRIKE watched the entertainment unfold.

Sharon rolled her eyes dismissively. “Jumbo Slice is only ever good when you’re completely trashed.”

“Yeah,” Ramsey – a simple boy who couldn’t have been much older than 21/22 – nodded, unperturbed by Sharon’s criticism of the notorious DC pizza. “That’s why it’s awesome.”

“Heathens,” Sharon muttered under her breath as she holstered her two pistols.

“I hate to disagree with you, boss,” Bri chimed in as she assemblage her own arsenal of weapons, her wild, curly hair falling in front of her eyes. “But deep dish even isn’t real pizza, it’s more like a…tomato pie.”

“Exactly!” Rogers agreed, pointing at Bri gratefully.

“Bri,” Sharon gasped comically, placing a hand upon her heart dramatically. “The betrayal.” The blonde looked around and finding no one in her corner made an executive decision. She’d show these infidels what true pizza tasted like. “That’s it, after the mission we’re getting deep dish.”

Grunts of compliance arose throughout the quinjet, because STRIKE never turned down a chance at food.

Rumlow chuckled as he stepped forward, strapping on his tactical gear. “Giordano’s it is.”

Sharon narrowed her eyes at the STRIKE commander. What an amateur. “As if, Rumlow. Everyone and their mother knows that the best deep dish pizza in Chicago is without a doubt Pequod’s. You can’t beat their caramelized crust.”

“Thirteen, I’m from Skokie,” Rumlow stated as if that made him an authority. “Giordano’s is the superior deep dish.”

Sharon stepped forward, jabbing a finger in his chest as she declared, “Giordano’s is shit.”

“I like Lou Malnati’s,” Rollins announced from where he was seated, he seemed oddly proud of adding his two cents to the conversation. Sharon was severely unimpressed as always by Rumlow’s #2.

“Nobody asked you, Rollins.”

“Alright, team,” Rogers’ voice cut through the impending blowout of the pizza battle. His tone was stern and everyone’s eyes immediately snapped towards Captain America. Rogers inclined his head towards the holoscreen which held up the mission parameters.

“Let’s go over the plan one more time before our landing.”

The motley group of SHIELD agents gathered around as Rogers laid out their plan of action.
“We’re after this man,” Rogers gestured to a floating image of Baker, a hardened, ginger-haired man with a bushy beard and mean eyes. “He’s in possession of the Zodiac. Due to our mole on the inside, we know that he and his men have holed up on the Skydeck of the Willis Tower and are planning to unleash the weapon upon the tower’s occupants.”

Rogers paused and opened his mouth to continue when someone pointedly cleared their throat. Rogers glanced around and came face to face with Sharon. Rogers looked at her for a long moment before tiredly sighing.

“Yes, Thirteen?”

Sharon fidgeted but said clearly, “Sears.”

“What?” Rogers asked, clearly baffled. He remembered the good ol’ days when Thirteen had accepted his word as law and never questioned things. Those days had been so peaceful.

“It’s Sears Tower.”

Rogers blinking glanced down at his tablet for a long moment before raising his head. “It says Willis Tower.”

Sharon shook her head. “Trust me, its Sears. You’ll piss off a lot of Chicagoans if you call it Willis Tower.”

Rumlow nodded along with the blonde, arms crossed over his broad chest. Rogers just stared at her for a long moment before conceding defeat. It was easier that way, to just let her have her way.

“Okay…Baker and his men are in Sears Tower.” Sharon nodded approvingly to herself as Rogers continued. “Rumlow and I will enter through the main lobby, dispatching any of Baker’s men there. Thirteen and the rest of you will be on the roof, waiting for my order to make your entrance. Understood?”

Rogers was greeted with nods and hoots of understanding throughout the quinjet. Moments later the quinjet was landing several blocks away from the skyscraper as Rogers and Rumlow – cloaked in a trench coat – hopped out, making their way by foot towards their destination. The quinjet raised up, stealthily flying up to the roof of the famous building.

Rogers remained hidden outside, finding his own way in, as Rumlow, faking a nasty cough as he pretended to be a hopelessly lost tourist, stumbled into the lobby.

“Hey there,” Rumlow greeted to the pretend security guard, “I’m-” he was cut off by a fierce bout of coughing as he hacked into his arm, the coughs genuinely rattling and dry. “Looking for Wrigley Field.”

Baker’s man only stared disinterestedly as he gestured to the empty, glass lobby. “Well, it’s obviously not in here.”

From behind the desk, he was gripping a gun tightly, in case the whack-job started making trouble.

Rumlow loitered in a carefree manner as he stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Oh, sure. I know that.”

The guard felt a chill sweep up his spine and he stood, hand going to his pocket. “I think you’d better head back out.”
Rumlow only chuckled lowly as he meandered his way closer to the desk. “You’d talk that way to a-” he couldn’t resist coughing some more, it really sold his act. “A Cubs fan?”

The guard scoffed, sweat beading at his temple. “Yeah, okay, that’s it. You’re heading out right now-”

He didn’t get to complete his thought as Captain America’s shield came whirling straight at his head. The man dropped like a bag of bricks as Rogers emerged out of the shadows.

“Nice acting, Rumlow,” Rogers complimented as he reached for his shield. “I used to do some of that for the USO.”

Rumlow chuckled as he threw off his coat. “Where do you think I learned it, Cap? They showed us your old newsreels during training.”

Rogers didn’t quite know how to respond to that. He only nodded his head towards the elevators as the two highly trained men took off towards them. Rogers though couldn’t hide his frustration at the entire situation that SHIELD had placed them in. Why hadn’t they just destroyed that weapon when they had the chance all those years ago? Why had they held onto it for decades? Why all the damned secrecy?

“We shouldn’t even be here,” he got out through gritted teeth. “These people – whoever they are – stole the Zodiac from SHIELD. After SHIELD swore they didn’t have it.”

Rumlow only shrugged noncommittally, untroubled by SHIELD’s duplicity. The man was going on twenty years with SHIELD and STRIKE. He had been hand selected by Secretary Pierce to come into the fold of SHIELD. He was more than used to the various hues of grey that SHIELD unforgivingly operated within.

“Well, now we’re gonna get it back,” the STRIKE commander said as he glanced at the rows of buttons. “Top floor. Right?”

Steve sighed but nodded.

Ping.

Baker and his men immediately advanced on the elevator.

“Incoming elevator!” Baker snarled, raising his gun. “Open fire!”

A hellfire on bullets rained down upon the elevator as it opened. The bullets tore through the metal, ripping the lift apart as bullets ricocheted all around. Suddenly it halted as Baker and his men peered through the smoke.

The elevator was empty.

“What the hell? It's empty,” one of Baker’s men said as he stepped into the empty space.

“Not quite,” a voice said from above as his head shot up, taking in the sight of Captain America
and Rumlow huddled up on the ceiling. The two SHIELD agents came flying down, kicking as they went as they landed on the ground. A man gasped as he took in sight of the red, white, and blue Avenger.

“There’s a huge reward for Captain America,” he raised his gun. “We’ll take him alive.”

Rogers only raised an eyebrow challengingly, “I’d like to see you try.”

The man chuckled, “Kill the friend!” he reached into his vest and began pulling out pig stickers. He began flinging the knives at the pair. Rogers raised his shield as the first one collided with the vibranium. Rumlow huddled behind the super soldier.

“Well, that’s just rude,” Rumlow gritted out as a knife went sailing over his head, taking several hairs along the way.

“The knife man,” Rogers ordered from behind the shield. Rumlow nodded as he raised his semi-automatic.

“I got him. You handle the rest.”

“Done.” Rogers hurled the shield as it took out the two nearest gunmen to him. He lunged forward as a group of four tried to charge him, using their combined weight against the superhero. Rogers dug his heels into the ground and reared back.

“Four to one,” he got out as he twisted. “Odds seem a little unfair…for you.”

With some fancy and skillful maneuvering, he was able to swiftly kick and punch his way through the wall of men as all went down hard. Rumlow expertly took out the knifeman, rifle firing all the while with gleeful abandon. Rumlow really enjoyed this part of the job.

The two fought their way through the crowd and came face to face with Baker, who seemed very unimpressed with their presence.

“So tell me, Captain,” he said, behind his wall of men,. “How the hell did you even know where we were?”

Rogers smirked as he nailed someone with a dirty uppercut. “A little bird told me. I think you may know her.”

Baker scowled. “Impossible. There’s no-”

A click of a pistol sounded from behind Baker, cutting him off, as he whirled on his heel to stare into Audrey’s unflinching eyes. She had a gun raised, aimed right between his eyes.

“Audrey!?” Baker roared, his face burning red. “But you were with us for weeks!”

The diminutive woman smiled, showing only teeth as she corrected him. “Natasha, actually. Audrey was my cover name.”

Suddenly he knew her. The famed and deadly Black Widow.

Her grin turned sinister. “Plus, your 401k plan sucked.”

It was at that moment that Thirteen, Bri, and STRIKE made their grand entrance. Windows along the Skydeck smashed open in spectacular fashion as the SHIELD agents came grappling in through the flying glass. Sharon landed in a perfect crouch as she unclipped and raised her gun in enough
time to take out the idiot firing on her. Sharon rolled across the glass stained floor, catching
Natasha’s eyes in the process.

The redhead only smirked. “What took you losers so long?”

Sharon chuckled as she punched a charging man. “Can’t let you have all the fun.”

The fighting hit its crescendo as everyone partook. STRIKE had guns blazing and Rogers was
expertly taking out combatants with his superior strength. Gunfire was echoing around as the
Skydeck became a battlefield. Sharon ran forward, head first towards an armed opponent. She
raised her pistol, nailing him in the shoulder. He rocked back but remained standing, arms
outstretched as he grunted in pain.

Sharon ran forward, bracing her arm on his uninjured shoulder as she flipped herself up. When she
had performed a perfect 180° she shot out a goon in front of her. As she continued flipping forward
she wrapped both legs around her unfortunate springboard’s neck, squeezing hard as she pushed her
back leg forward, turning herself. The man lurched hard to the side, swinging both around as
Sharon used the opportunity to shot several more adversaries.

She released the gunmen as he crashed to the floor and rolled neatly to her feet. Natasha shot her an
impervious look.

“That’s my move,” the redhead accused. “You can’t do my move.”

“Thirteen!” Bri called out from her spot as she landed an effective roundhouse kick. “Look out!”

Bang.

Sharon careened forward as searing pain erupted along her side. She fell to her knees and
immediately placed a hand at her side, noting the red bleeding through her white suit.

“Shit,” she lowly swore as Bri bounded to her side.

“I got you covered, boss.” Bri gathered Sharon’s arm over her shoulder and led her behind a large
column as the shootout continued.

“Thirteen,” Rogers' voice echoed insistently in her ear. “Status report.”

Sharon hissed as she prodded the wound. Her suit was torn open at the wound sight but she
couldn’t see a bullet hole. Thank God for small miracles.

“It’s a graze,” she got out through clenched teeth as bullets rained down on their little hideout.

Natasha was squaring off against Baker, shooting at the metallic, bullet-proof suitcase that was
housing the Zodiac. The bullets only deflected off the briefcase.

“Tut-tut, Natasha,” Baker mocked from behind the suitcase. “You know the Zodiac will kill us all
if you shatter its tube. So if you want it intact, you’re going to have to pry it from my cold, dead
hands.”

Natasha smirked. “Not a problem.”

She lunged forward but miscalculated as Baker got her around the neck, his grubby fingers
squeezing down on her windpipe as he raised her up, feet dangling off the ground.

“Actually,” Baker hauled her closer to him as she choked. “It may be more of a problem than you
are willing to admit.”

He raised her up as she continued to fight against his merciless hold, red staining across her cheeks as she struggled to draw breath. Baker smiled, madness flashing through his hard eyes.

“Give up, Natasha. You can’t win—”

He was suddenly cut off as Natasha, who was always able to get out his chokehold but just played along for kicks and giggles, kicked up her foot, nailing Baker right under the chin. His head reeled back as she kicked once more and was released. She flipped herself backward, wig flying off as her red hair broke free.

Upon landing on her feet she declared, “You and I have different definitions of ‘can’t.’”

Baker struggled to his feet and brandished the briefcase, swinging it wildly as it smacked against Natasha’s head, sending her down to the ground.

“This ends now!” he roared just as Rogers rammed into him with his shield.

“Hold it!” the Avenger ordered as he bucked Baker back towards the windows. “That’s as far as you go.”

Baker only shook his head as he stepped back. “Oh, I don’t think so, Captain.”

He turned to the window, shooting one out as wind whipped in through the Skydeck.

“You can’t stop the Zodiac!”

Baker took a running leap and jumped out of the window of the 110 story building. Without even a moment of hesitation, Rogers—who didn’t have a parachute or anything sane like that—followed him out, diving down after Baker and the Zodiac.

Sharon sighed resignedly as she stumbled towards the window, holding onto her side. “I hate it when he does that.”

“I got this,” Rumlow gruffly said as he came to a stop next to her, giant grappling gun in his possession (specifically for occasions such as these). Rogers really liked diving out of things: buildings, quinjets, etc. They watched as Rogers crashed into Baker, the pair fighting even as they tumbled through the air, falling fast and hard to the city streets below.

Rumlow raised the grappling gun and waited until Rogers had his hand wrapped around the briefcase. The moment Rogers had it in his grasp, Rumlow fired the gun as the hook attached itself to Rogers’ arm, halting his descent.

Baker continued falling until he pulled on his pack, a billowing parachute appearing as Baker floated down to the city.

“Got him!” Rumlow crowed jubilantly as he began reeling Rogers back up the twenty or so stories he had fallen. Natasha watched impassively as she ordered several STRIKE members to follow Baker’s landing and apprehend him.

Sharon hissed in pain as she pressed down on her graze, blood still flowing out steadily. Rogers pulled himself back into the skyscraper, briefcase in hand.

“Nice shot, Rumlow,” he said to the STRIKE commander who nodded proudly, clapping the
Avenger on the back as he stood.

“Told you I learned from you.”

Rogers caught his breath before setting his steely gaze on both Sharon and Natasha as he held up the suitcase. “SHIELD said this was destroyed. No one’s told me why they lied about it.”

The two females exchanged exasperated glances as Natasha took point, stepping forward. “SHIELD labeled it as destroyed so that no one would come looking for it,” she spoke as if she was explaining naptime to a belligerent schoolchild. “A lie, yes. But well-intentioned.”

Rogers scoffed as he marched away, suitcase in hand and body taut.

Sharon watched him go warily, knowing that somehow she’d be in the doghouse for this even if she had been equally unaware of the Zodiac’s existence as Rogers, before turning to the rest of the group and suggesting casually.

“So? Pizza?”

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**November 5th, 2013**

*The Triskelion, Medical*

They didn’t get pizza.

Instead Sharon had a hot date with Medical, at Rogers’ urging – which was just completely hypocritical seeing as Rogers had to be dragged kicking and screaming to Medical whenever he was injured – and found herself sitting on a gurney, stealth suit stripped down to her waist, leaving her only in her sweat and blood-soaked white cami as a nurse attended to the graze, disinfecting it. It really wasn’t so bad, though she had been warned it would leave a scar.

Sharon glanced up, meeting both Rogers’ and Bri’s gazes before hissing in pain as gauze was wrapped around her torso.

“You really don’t have to stay,” she told the two. “I’ve got this.”

Rogers, looking huge as he sat in a puny, plastic chair, still outfitted in his tactical suit, shield resting at his feet only shrugged lightly.

“I’ve got nowhere to be.”

Bri nodded her head in agreement, her curls flying everywhere. She was already in civvies but seemed content to stay at Sharon’s side.

“What the boss-boss said.”

If Sharon was the boss, Rogers was the boss-boss. Sharon only weakly chuckled, ignoring the
“You two are incorrigible,” she muttered fondly as the nurse finished the wrappings and was injecting a few mild painkillers. Rogers only raised an eyebrow as he took in the scene perceptively.

“You rarely left my side when a building fell on top of me,” he said ruefully as he leaned back. “I figure this is the least I can do.”

Sharon froze immediately on the spot, her gaze shifting cagily towards Bri who only shrugged in response. Clearly, she hadn’t been the one to fill Rogers in on that long ago week from hell. “How do you know that? You were unconscious.”

Rogers only blinked astutely as he stated in a matter-of-fact tone, “The nursing staff filled me in. They told me I was lucky to have such a caring and attentive partner.”

Sharon subtly breathed in a deep sigh of relief. She didn’t enjoy thinking of the time Rogers had been laid up in Medical for nearly a week, unconscious and wounded after a building fell on top of him in Detroit.

That week had been one of the lowest of her life. She had been…weak. She had nearly buckled beneath her own guilt and had seriously contemplated telling the Avenger her name, the name that linked her so intrinsically to Peggy and to Rogers’ past.

Luckily for her, she had snapped out of it at the last second before divulging her secret to her partner. However, ever since then a current of unease had entered their working relationship. Some of the hard-won camaraderie she had so desperately fought for in the beginning with prodding, poking and playdates had weakened, leaving things awkward and uncertain. The duo still worked well together – rivaled out in the field only by Natasha and Clint – but they didn’t always know how to exist around one another comfortably when not on missions.

Sharon hated it, but she didn’t know how to work past it. Which was hard for her to swallow as she never enjoyed ceding defeat. There was a divide between the two that could only ever be conquered if she was 100% honest with him. And that was just something she wasn’t ready to do. So, for now, they were stuck waffling back and forth between partnership, friendship, and something else entirely.

“Alright, Agent 13,” Nurse Yoon cheerfully declared to the group. “You are all set to go. Just make sure to take it easy the next few days.”

Sharon grunted in acknowledgment as she lowered her tank top and jumped off the gurney, sucking in a slight, pained breath.

“Awesome,” she got out through clenched teeth. “Let’s go.”

She made her way to the locker room, changing gingerly into her civilian clothing. She slipped into skinny jeans and a navy, silk blouse as she buckled up her ankle booties before throwing on a grey, wrap coat.

She made her way to the atrium where she found both Rogers and Bri waiting for her. Before she could even open her mouth, she was interrupted by Rogers’ stomach rumbling loudly. It must have been hours since he had last eaten. The super soldier shifted sheepishly as he rubbed the back of his neck, avoiding Sharon's well-meaning gaze.

Sharon only inclined her head towards the superhero. “C’mon, I’ll take you to dinner. My treat.”
Rogers balked at the invitation. It had been a while since their last playdate. “You don’t have to do that.”

The blonde rolled her amber eyes. “I’m doing it. Tell me, Rogers, what’s the best burger you’ve ever had?”

Rogers stood there dumbstruck as he pondered the question blinkingly. “Umm…I went to Burger King once.”

Sharon stared uncomprehendingly at the Avenger for several long moments.

“That’s the most tragic thing I’ve ever heard,” she said to herself before making an executive decision. “That’s it, we’re going out. B, you’re coming with us.”

Bri evasively glanced away, a faint blushing coming over her cheeks. “Actually, I already have plans.”

“What?” Sharon inquired confused, Bri never turned down a chance to spend time with her mentor. Sharon was just that awesome to be around. “With who? Kate’s with Barton in New Zealand.”

Bri regarded Sharon defensively. “I have friends other than Kate.”

“Yeah?” Sharon challenged, placing her hands on her hips. “Like who?”

“People,” Bri argued as the blonde scoffed. “And this isn’t an outing with friends, it’s a date.”

Now Sharon was intrigued. She stared wide-eyed at her protégé. “A date? When did this happen?”

“Earlier this week.”

“With who?”

Bri shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “A coworker.”

“Where are you going?”

“Co Co. Sala.”

Sharon hummed satisfactorily. “That’s a good choice.”

“Good,” Bri bobbed her head. “Now that I have your approval, I’m outsies.”

She waved to both blonds before turning on her heel and hurrying away, Sharon’s eyes boring into her back.

“I expect details!” Sharon called to the willowy, retreating form. When Bri was gone, Sharon turned back to the Avenger, who had been somewhat hoping she would forget about him during her interrogation of Bri. But alas, her eyes flashed with interest as they locked gazes.

“So…about that burger.”

He sighed. This was going to be a long night.
“You are going to love this,” Sharon promised as she slipped into her seat, the cheery ambiance of Bareburger all around as Rogers plopped down across from her. He was in all black and looked decidedly dashing and modern in a bomber jacket with suede sleeves. Whoever had bought his modern clothes had clearly known what they were doing. The man looked good.

“Do you only eat burgers?” The Avenger questioned, a tad concerned for his partner’s health. She really loved burgers and she didn’t have his enhanced metabolism, he really didn’t know how she stayed in such impressive shape.

“What can I say?” Sharon shrugged as she scanned the menu greedily, eyes pouring over the options. “I like what I like. I’d think you’d be more of a fan.”

Rogers arched an eyebrow from across the table “And why’s that?”

Sharon’s eyes gleamed teasingly in the dim light of the restaurant. “Burgers are All-American and you are also All-American, in fact, if the papers are to be believed you’re the Most American.”

“Heard har-har,” he replied, completely straight-faced. Sharon chuckled as their waitress stopped by the table, ready to take their drink orders. After she had she lingered for a moment, smiling down at the duo. Rogers tensed, thinking she’d recognized him, but he was shocked by what she said instead.

“What a cute couple you make,” she complimented gaily. “You’re both so…blond.”

Sharon blanched at the waitress’ words as she shook her head so hard, her hair slapped her cheeks. “Oh! No! We’re not…this is strictly—”

“We’re co-workers,” Rogers interjected flatly as Sharon jerkily nodded her head in agreement. Their waitress blushed before scurrying away, promising to come back with their drinks. Though Sharon wouldn’t be surprised if they never saw her again. An awkward silence descended on the pair as both avoided eye contact studiously.

After what seemed like forever, Rogers cleared his throat. “I won’t tell Natasha if you don’t.”

“Done,” Sharon promised, holding her hand out to seal the deal. Rogers snorted but reached out, shaking her hand. His grip was warm and steady for a beat before they released. He looked back down at his menu.

“So, burgers…”

Sharon smiled as she began a long-winded spiel over what made a perfect burger from the bread to the cheese to the juiciness of the meat.

All and all, it wasn’t a bad way to spend the evening.

November 18th, 2013
“Friends,” Thor boomed joyously, arms thrown wide as he regarded his fellow Avengers with a beaming grin. “It is so glorious to once again be among you!”

He wrapped his muscular arms around his two nearest companions – Barton and Stark – and crushed them to his body, lifting both clear off the ground.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Tony wailed as he kicked wildly, squirming all the while to break free of the god’s strong hold. “I love you too, you big hunk of Viking wet dreams. But feet? On the ground. Very much on the ground.”

Clint had remained deceptively still through all the manhandling, though his hands were curled into fists, clearly missing his arrows at the moment.

“Of course,” Thor murmured in chagrined understanding as he gently placed his teammates down. “My sincerest apologies.”

To make up for it, he slapped both heartily across the back, nearly sending both flying forward against his vigorous blows. He really needed to remember that they were only humans and not as physically dense as Asgardians.

“Thanks, buddy,” Clint got out through clamped teeth as he stepped away from the hulking figure, rubbing his shoulder all the while.

It had been quite a shock to Steve’s system when days earlier Thirteen had wandered into his office, telling him that ‘Thunderstruck’ was back and causing mayhem in London. Steve had been quick to turn on the news, watching as Thor battled some kind of…elves in Greenwich.

Once the dust had settled and Tony was able to reach out to the god, he was quick to throw a party for the group of superheroes. This was the first time since the Battle of New York that all of them were together. Tony had been splitting his time between NYC and the rest of the world as SI had a habit of taking him all over, Steve, Natasha and Clint were primarily in DC with SHIELD, Bruce had made himself sparse and stayed mostly under the radar in the Himalayas, popping into the Tower sporadically – typically when he grew tired of Tony’s incessant whining about never visiting him – and up until now Thor had been in Asgard, protecting the Nine Realms.

Steve had to admit…it was nice to have the whole team back together, if only momentarily. In some ways, they understood him best out of anyone in this century since they also had an insane amount of baggage to be carrying around. Who knew shared baggage could be such a unifier? Thor had spent much of the evening regaling his teammates with his travels throughout the Nine Realms, bringing peace and security to them. He then, of course, launched into the tale that had once again brought him back to Earth.

He spoke lovingly of his Jane Foster, harshly of the devious Malekith and his plans to restore the Dark Elves through the use of the Aether and corresponding convergences in London. His voice dipped mournfully as he also spoke of the passing of both his mother and brother, Loki.

“Well good,” Clint brashly threw out at Thor’s admission, his eyes pinched with a deep-seated hatred for the god of mischief and the way he had once warped the archer’s mind. “He had that and a thousand other unpleasant things coming for him.”
Thor flinched, his face dropping, as Natasha smacked Barton upside the head.

“Do you not remember our sensitivity training?” she hissed to her fellow SHIELD agent.


“Oh my God,” the redhead murmured under her breath, her eyes rolling hopelessly up to the ceiling as she seemed to be rethinking her long years at Barton’s side.

“No,” Thor somberly said, holding up his hand to command the attention of the room. “Our archer is right, Loki…did many a terrible thing in his lifetime. That should not be forgotten just because he proved himself to me with his sacrifice.”

Thor seemed to curl into himself, lips trembling as he abruptly stood. “Excuse me, friends, I feel a pressing need for some air.”

The remaining Avengers watched the warrior lumber away out onto the grand balcony that overlooked all of Manhattan. A thick silence remained among them.

“Nice one, Barton,” Natasha derisively scowled, glaring at her partner. The archer held up his hands defensively.

“What? I hated the guy. I’m not going to pretend like everything’s hunky-dory because he was a little bit less evil than we all originally thought.”

“Brucie-boo,” Tony batted his eyes at his fellow Science Bro. “You’re a doctor, you go talk to him.”

Bruce sighed wearily as he fiddled with his glasses. “How many times do I have to tell you, Tony? I’m not that kind of doctor.”

“I’ll go talk to him,” Steve declared, surprising even himself as he stood and stalked out of the room, joining Thor on the terrace. It was nippy with a twinge of chill, but nothing that Steve and his serum couldn’t stand. He came up to Thor’s side as both blonds looked out over the twinkling city.

It still amazed Steve how different the city appeared. He still couldn’t completely reconcile the New York of ’43 with the New York of today. It took his breath away with a punch to the gut with how foreign yet familiar the city landscape was to him every time he glimpsed it.

Thor accepted his company readily enough as the two larger than life men stood in silence. Steve was patient enough to wait Thor out. He didn’t have to wait long.

“I know Loki wasn’t exactly…popular among any of you,” Thor began as Steve turned towards the god. He didn’t quite know how to respond.

“Well,” Steve remarked neutrally. “He did try to take over the world and enslave the human race. So…”

Thor exhaled, nodding along to Steve’s reasoning.

“Tis true,” the Asgardian agreed as he looked Steve square in the eyes imploringly. “But you have to understand, the Loki that did all those terrible things was not the Loki I grew up with, the one who spent centuries at my side.”
Thor turned back to the city reflectively. “Or perhaps…maybe it was him all along and I was just too blinded by my love for him to see it.”

“Love does that to people,” Steve readily agreed. He’d never loved someone as complicated and complex and someone as hard to love as Loki, but those he had loved, that love rang true and pure and would be impossible to rip from him, no matter the circumstances.

Thor’s eyes moved over Steve’s face as he mused introspectively. “The Lady Darcy, a trusted companion of my beloved, she had laid out a tome of this great country’s history. I saw mention of you in it and perused the text, wanting to learn of your past, seeing as we hardly had the time to speak of such things the last time we were together. I read of your shield brother, James Barnes, and his tragic death.”

Steve sucked in a sharp breath as his eyes inadvertently moved to the Brooklyn Bridge, a beacon in the autumn darkness.

“You lost him,” Thor surmised as Steve felt a stinging at the corner of his eyes.

“I let him go,” Steve hoarsely admitted, the guilt still as strong and agonizing as the day it had happened decades before. He had been trying to let the guilt and the sorrow go since his road trip to the Grand Canyon. But it still ensnared him, more so now with the impending opening of that damned Captain America exhibit at the Smithsonian later this month.

What had once haunted his nightmares would now be fodder for the public. His trauma would be a learning experience for middle schoolers.

Thor regarded his fellow Avenger with a deep, solemn gaze. “Tell me, dear Steven,” he rumbled out pleadingly. “Does it ever get easier? The overwhelming grief?”

Steve exhaled the breath he had been holding since Thor had uttered Bucky’s name. He looked at his friend, really looked at him, before murmuring,

“I haven’t been in this time for very long, so I’m not a complete authority of the matter, but…no, I’m afraid it doesn’t get easier. You just learn to live with it.”

Thor sighed before turning to survey the city below them. “I had worried you would say that.”

Silence remained between the pair as they stood there, shoulder to shoulder, in shared grief and loss.

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**November 28th, 2013**

**The National Air and Space Museum**

Welcome back, Cap!
Sharon stood at the beginning of the much anticipated Captain America exhibit that the Smithsonian had been promising for months. Today was the grand opening with many politicians and public figures vying to be the first ones through the gate.

Sharon, alongside Natasha, had scored tickets as Rogers’ dates. Not that he had particularly wanted them to attend – truth be told, he didn’t even want to be here – but the pair had wormed their way in.

Sharon stood in a dark, textured moto jacket as she took in the sight of Rogers’ past being laid bare for public viewing.

“A symbol to the nation; a hero to the world. The story of Captain America is one of honor, bravery, and sacrifice.”

“Was that Lieutenant Dan?” Natasha asked curiously, coming up from behind Sharon. She stood casually in a scarlet bomber jacket, hands in her pockets jauntily.

Sharon nodded. “He’s apparently a big Captain America fan.”

Natasha looked swiveled impressed as her eyes roved around, taking everything in.

“Someone’s popular,” she teased as a swarm of teenage girls pressed into the exhibit, all wearing shirts with the shield on them. Sharon felt herself delaying at the entrance, not quite ready to walk in even as Natasha’s impatience began showing.

“Doesn’t this seem a bit… premature?”

Natasha hummed in response. “How so?”

“Exhibits like these,” Sharon was grasping. “Are for people who’ve been dead for decades.”

“Well,” Natasha countered smoothly, “Everyone thought he was dead for decades.”

“Yeah,” Sharon argued back a bit irrationally as she tried to work through her point. “But he’s only been back alive for less than two.”

“Yes,” Natasha agreed impassively. “And he’s living history. Captain America belongs to the world.”

“It doesn’t seem right,” Sharon murmured, troubled by the whole display and not quite knowing why. “Putting a man’s life on display when he still has to live it. Reminding him of what’s he lost. It’s like a slap in the face.”

Natasha sighed, pragmatic as always in the face of Sharon’s misplaced sentimentality.

“Rogers lives here now, he needs to stop clicking his heels and thinking he’s going back to Kansas. This is his home now.”


“He’s not wrong.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sharon whispered as they finally moved into the exhibit. They traversed down a long hallway that was filled up with a beautifully painted mural of Captain America saluting the America flag patriotically.
The first part of the exhibit covered Rogers’ childhood and early years in Brooklyn. It listed the various ailments that really should have killed him as a baby. There was a single picture of pre-serum Rogers, from his training day during Project Rebirth. It was the same photograph Peggy had held onto for years, always hidden away in her home office.

Peggy – through Sharon’s father – had contributed to the exhibit, donating photos, journals and even a few of the sketches Rogers had once drawn her. All of it reinforced the longtime perception that Peggy and Rogers truly had been star-crossed lovers, so viciously torn apart by destiny.

Sharon imagined that was just salt being rubbed into the wound that was Peggy on Rogers’ soul. Even if the man wanted to move on – not that Natasha was making any headway in her matchmaking – how could he when the world refused to let him forget about Peggy? Really though, Rogers was most likely having enough trouble of that on his own. Peggy was a remarkable woman. He’d be hard-pressed to find anyone equal to her splendor. Sharon really didn’t envy the girl Rogers might one day settle down with. She’d have tough shoes to fill.

They continued on, passing the part of the exhibit devoted to Rogers’ time with Project Rebirth and how it turned him into the world’s first and only super soldier. Finally, they entered the heart of the exhibit, Captain America’s time during WWII as the leader of the elite group, the Howling Commandos.

At the center of the display was the colossal mural of Captain America and his Howling Commandos, below them near-perfect replicas of their war uniforms. Many family members of the Commandos had donated to the exhibit, Sharon had been hearing about it for months from her mother, always happy to pass along Howlies gossip. Rogers was at the center, flanked by his closest companions, men Sharon had spent her childhood on the knees of, listening to their wartime stories.

At Rogers’ left-hand side was Bucky Barnes, as handsome and brilliant as ever, even in painted form.

“He’s cute,” Natasha remarked, following Sharon’s gaze to the portrait of Barnes. Sharon nudged the redhead teasingly.

“Have a crush?”

Natasha snorted. “Oh, yeah. Dead guys really do it for me.”

The two looked around and finally found Rogers. He was being swarmed by a mob of eager admirers and fans who all wanted a piece of the super soldier. He stood tall among the crowd as he glimpsed his two coworkers.

His eyes sent a clear message: *Save me.*

The two sighed and exchanged glances. “Rock, paper, scissors?” Natasha suggested.

Sharon bobbed her head in agreement as both held out clenched fists.

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!”

Both threw down as Natasha brandished a rock and Sharon paper. She crowed in delight as Natasha groaned in despair.

“Paper beats rock!” Sharon gloated as she covered Natasha’s fist. The redhead only batted her away.

And with that ominous threat, Natasha disappeared into the dense crowd, going to Rogers’ side to save him from his own fan club. Sharon stepped forward to the large, glass plaque devoted entirely to Barnes and his history.

*Best friends since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Steven Rogers were inseparable on both schoolyard and battlefield.*

“I guess I’m the new you,” Sharon mused, lips hardly moving as she spoke quietly to herself, no one paying her any mind amongst the fervor.

“Minus the best friend part,” Sharon corrected. “But I am watching his back, trying to keep him out of trouble. Even though he makes that extremely difficult sometimes. He really has no sense of self-preservation.”

Her eyes glanced up to the photograph of Barnes taken sometime during the War. He was looking far off in the distance, eyes clouded as his face remained stone-faced.

“But I guess you already knew that, huh?”

She looked around before sticking her hands in her pockets, rocking back onto her heels as she continued thoughtfully. “Hopefully his revival and resurgence of being a reckless dumbass hasn’t turned you into some kind of ghost, come back to haunt him.”

She chuckled faintly at the thought of a deeply irate phantom Barnes following Rogers around on their missions and cursing out his foolhardy actions.

Sharon exhaled, her eyes finding Rogers through the madness. Natasha had stepped in with a predatory glint in her eyes, making many scatter. She was like a staunchly loyal Pitbull, guarding Rogers with an icy glare as the two conversed.

He really needed someone in his corner. Sharon’s eyes moved back to Barnes’ portrait.

“I’ll watch out for him,” she promised softly, “Keep him safe to the best of my ability.”

She turned and lost herself in the exhibit.

*Chapter End Notes*

Whew! Only one chapter left! Somedays, I really thought this would never come, but I am happy we are nearing the end and moving onto the future. Hopefully how this story ends is aligning with everyone's head spaces for CATWS. Steve is mistrustful of SHIELD's intentions, his relationships with Sharon and Natasha are both complicated due to their spy nature and obviously, Sharon's secret. He trusts them but he doesn't.
Also had fun foreshadowing things to come into the future. Such as Bucky coming back as some kind of ghost and Sharon thinking of the woman Steve may one day be interested in and who would have to measure up to Peggy. It's like, Hello, Sharon, that will be you. :)

The prelude comic for The Winter Soldier was used as inspiration for the Zodiac mission. I went to school in Chicago, so I had fun with the debate over the best deep dish (IMO it's definitely Pequod's) and the fact that many Chicagoans still refer to Sears as Sears Tower. I had fun writing those segments.

With Sharon's cool flip, it was a bit tricky to write in a visual way, but it is the same one shown in Kingsman 2 that Eggsy did while fighting Poppy's minions. You can see it clearly in the trailers.

Thank you for the previous reviews! It is always a joy to receive them. Please keep them coming.

Pic time!

Sharon grabbing a burger:

Sharon's coat:
Steve grabbing a burger:

Sharon at the CA exhibit:
Natasha at the CA exhibit:
Can You Tell Me, Do I End up Happy?

Chapter Summary

“Thor, meet my partner, Agent 13.”

The god’s eyes lit up as he took in the sight of the SHIELD agent. “Ah, Lady 13! It is an honor to meet the Captain’s shield mate.”

Thor scooped her up, embracing her for all she was worth. He lifted her clear off the ground, his massive arms squeezing her to him as her breath was forcibly sucked out of her body. Sharon didn’t care. She could die right here and it would be worth it just to know what Thor smelled like. (Poptarts, he smelled like poptarts.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

December 15th, 2013

Washington, D.C.

“I just want you for my own, more than you could ever know. Make my wish come true, all I want for Christmas is you.”

Sharon was singing along lightheartedly to the festive, holiday music blaring throughout her narrow kitchen. Her hips were swaying and her blonde head was bopping along to the music, her messy bun shifting erratically atop her head. She was bundled up comfortably in her old Hoyas Lacrosse hoodie sweatshirt, a 13 emblazed into the right-hand sleeve. She was in dark, baggy sweatpants and her feet were covered up with polka dot, fuzzy socks. Anything to escape the winter chill outside.

She was situated in front of the stove, slaving away over a frying pan as eggs, onions, and peppers sizzled, giving off a pleasant aroma.

She may not be much of a cook, but she could whip up a mean omelet when the occasion called for it.

She was so into her dancing that she didn’t even take notice of the new presence in the kitchen. She jumped nearly a foot in the air when a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her slim waist. A strong jaw nuzzled into her neck, five o’clock shadow bristling over her pale skin. A plump pair of lips began trailing up and down the column of untouched skin as Sharon sighed softly, giving into the ministrations as she leaned back into the body behind her.

“Something smells good,” Neal rumbled into her ear, nipping down on her neck as she shuddered in his grasp.

“Yeah,” she got out breathily as she swayed into him. “And if you keep up like this you won’t be
“Any what?” he teased as she felt his smile in her skin. “Any food? Or any of this?” He squeezed her ass for demonstration.

“Both,” Sharon replied primly, eyes trained on the omelet and not his wandering hands. Neal chuckled and the vibrations of it raced up Sharon’s spine as the man released her with a final tug on her earlobe. When Sharon had the space to think clearly, she cocked her head over her shoulder, viewing him fully. He was dressed as casually as her, looking rakishly handsome with his tousled hair and the stubble lining his jaw. She had always loved a man with facial hair…

He had surprised her Friday evening by getting back early from his undercover mission in Ethiopia. She had tugged him into her apartment where they had spent the rest of the weekend huddled up in her bedroom enjoying certain…activities. They had only left the confines of her bed for necessities such as sustenance and hygiene. Not it was Sunday evening and he was still there, assuring her he had appropriate clothes for work tomorrow in his go-to bag.

It was oddly domestic, having him here this long in her living space. It felt like being a normal, everyday couple. Sharon didn’t mind it half as much as she thought she would. She was an independent soul, never had liked being tied down by demanding men, but what she and Neal had was easy, laidback and without stress or expectation.

Sharon glanced back down at the pan, humming softly to herself. “I’m almost done in here, why don’t you find something to watch on TV. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Neal nodded in the affirmative, grabbing a bottle of wine and two glasses on his way out. Sharon watched him go with a small smile as he disappeared into her living room. Minutes later she was finished and had plated the omelet. She picked up the two plates and strolled into her living room.

Christmas lights, twinkling merrily, were strung up across her ceiling, bathing the room in a soft and fantastical light. Garland was strewed artistically around her flat screen TV with stockings hanging below it. In the corner of her living room – veering towards her dining table – was a miniature Christmas tree, gold and silver ornaments hanging from artificial branches.

“Dinner is served!” Sharon announced with a flourish as she plopped down next to Neal on her sectional. She handed him his plate and was rewarded with a glass of pinot in return. The couple clinked their glasses in celebration as Sharon turned her attention to the TV.

“What are we watching? Please tell me it’s one of those cheesy, Hallmark movies.” She rubbed her hands in anticipation for the cheese fest but was disappointed by what she saw on the screen.

“Who will campaign door-to-door for America? Carry the flag shore to shore for America? From Hoboken to Spokane, the Star Spangled Man with a Plan!”

“Ugh,” Sharon groaned, flopping her head back and throwing an arm over her eyes in a futile attempt to block out that blasted song. She glared daggers at Neal through the cracks of her fingers as he smirked treacherously back at her, eyebrows wagging ridiculously.

“Why on earth would you pick a Captain America documentary?”

Neal – the bastard – only shrugged as he made himself comfortable, digging into his eggs.

“Why not?” he countered smoothly, ignoring the dirty kick Sharon aimed at his knees.

“Why not?” she hissed, smacking his shoulder with a pillow. “I have to put up with this every day
at work. I don’t need it invading my off hours. We’re changing it.”

She reached for the remote but was halted when Neal wound an arm around her, manhandling her into his lap with an oomph. She squirmed like a toddler demanding to be put down, but Neal held on.

“She just watch this part,” he bartered. “It’s about the rise of Hydra.”

Sharon stopped squirming long enough to raise a questioning eyebrow up at her boyfriend. “Who cares about that piece of shit Nazi organization? Hydra’s long dead and gone.”

She would know that better than anyone else. She worked with the man who had razed them to the ground nearly 70 years ago. Her whole childhood had been about hearing tales of the demise of the rogue Nazi group. She didn’t need to watch a documentary to know about it.

“It’s interesting, you know?” he mused, eyes on the screen. “And besides, what’s it that people say? If you don’t learn from your past you’re likely to make the same mistakes. You know, history repeating itself and all that other stuff.”

Sharon stared up at the man before saying decidedly, “You had a sad childhood, didn’t you?”

Neal burst out in laughter, loosening his hold enough so that Sharon could discreetly begin reaching for the remote, even as she continued egging the man on.

“No, seriously,” she got out as she laughed along with him. “You have some hidden, childhood trauma and now this kind of shit gets you going. You probably love the Cold War.”

“Well,” Neal replied, as he rubbed her leg. “Who doesn’t love the Cold War?”

Sharon laughed as she snagged up the remote, expertly keeping it out of Neal’s reach as she began flipping through the channels.

“Trauma or not, you are not subjecting me to an evening of this. I’ll never stop humming that song and that’s the last thing I need the next time I see Rogers.”

Neal didn’t fight her but began eating as she found an exciting prospect. “Ooh, *Home Alone*. I love that movie!”

She turned it on and settled back into the sectional, eating and drinking and enjoying the company of the man next to her.

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**December 21st, 2013**

**The Triskelion**

“I’ve gone over the property damage you and Rogers sustained during your last mission in Bangkok,” Stanford growled as he stomped into his office, not even greeting Sharon as she situated
herself in his desk chair.

“Out of the chair,” he said as he noticed her. She did as she was told without complaint as she threw herself into the chair across his desk, slouching down as Stanford glared at her from his spot.

“What’s the damage?” she asked conversationally. There had been so many explosions that she was intrigued by how many casualties Rogers had racked up. The man wouldn’t know subtle if it punched him in the face.

“Five million dollars,” Stanford barked, his face going splotchy and red the way it always did when it appeared he was going to have a heart attack. Sharon whistled lowly, impressed by the total. That was a new SHIELD record.

“Why are you glaring at me?” she asked defensively as he continued to go red. “It’s was Rogers’ half-cocked idea to storm the Grand Palace instead of waiting for backup against Mr. Sinister.”

Stanford gave her his best do I look like I give a flying fuck look and Sharon was worried he wasn’t breathing with the way the vein on his forehead was bulging.

“You two are menaces,” he hissed out as Sharon lightly shrugged. She and Rogers were getting quite the reputation, that was for sure.

“Hey,” Sharon balked. “When I’m out in the field, I’m only following Rogers’ orders. If you want to criticize our performance, you can take it up with him.”

“Oh yeah,” Stanford snorted derisively. “That’s right what I’ll do. Trying to talk sense into that red, white and blue hoo-ha is about as productive as bashing my head into a wall. No thank you.”

Sharon only nodded, not fighting her handler. He did have a bit of a point. Rogers was notoriously stubborn. It was often his way or the highway.

“Well,” Sharon wheedled. “We did complete the mission within full mission parameters. So… yay?”

Stanford only continued grumbling to himself as he sat at his desk, going through various reports. Sharon watched fondly; Stanford may be a crotchety grouch, but she loved him anyway. She’d be sure to get him the good coffee for Christmas, the kind he loved from Brazil. That’d cheer him up.

His desk was a mess, strewn with various reports and folders. Sharon’s eyes trailed across them absentmindedly but came to a stop as she saw something. She arched a brow curiously, her hand already reaching for the folder as she inquired,

“What’s Project Insight?”

Her hand was nearly on top of the folder when Stanford swooped in and smacked away her appendage as he hoarded the folder closer to him, clenching it tightly.

“None of your damn beeswax, that’s what it is!” he answered gruffly, avoiding her gaze, as Sharon blinked perceptively.

Interesting. Stanford never kept much from her. What could it be?

Sharon watched him for several moments before relaxing, letting the train of thought go. So what if Stanford was acting cagey? He’d fill her in when she needed to know. She could be patient, play the long game. Unlike Natasha, she was a firm believer in good things coming to those who wait.
“Well,” she murmured as she stood, clapping her hands together. “If that’s all, boss. I’m gonna go.”

“Try and stay out of trouble,” was the grunted threat that followed her. Sharon only winked as she sauntered through his office door.

“I make no promises.”

She checked her watch as she ended up in the hallway. 11:23am.

Perfect time for a cup of coffee.

She hadn’t even taken ten steps down the hallway towards the nearest staff lounge when Natasha materialized at her side instantly, taking Sharon by surprise. Sharon reigned in her shock, but from the way Natasha was smirking gleefully, clearly the redhead knew she caught the blonde off kilter.

“Hey,” Sharon greeted as the pair walked together, shoulders brushing amicably with their matching strides.

“Stark’s having a New Year’s Eve extravaganza at his tower,” Natasha announced all knowingly, in lieu of an actual greeting. “All the Avengers will be there.”

Sharon nodded along, running a hand through her ever-growing, natural blonde hair. “Sounds like fun.”

Natasha nodded along, eyes trained ahead as she remarked in a blasé manner, “Pepper put you on the guest list. Apparently, you made an impression when you met her for those PSA videos.”

Sharon paused momentarily as her amber eyes stared into the side of Natasha’s head. On the one hand, she was thrilled that Pepper Potts remembered her existence and liked her enough to invite her to an Avengers shindig, on the other hand…

“You really think Rogers will want me there?”

The Avengers were, after all, his friends. And up till now, they had been an Agent 13 free space. She’d hate to encroach on one of the rare times the man was surrounded by friends.

Natasha rolled her eyes. “Who cares about him? It’s a big ass tower, more than enough room for the two of you. Besides,” her lips curled up with hidden mirth. “Thor wants to meet you.”

Sharon slammed to a stop as Natasha continued walking, her hips swaying purposefully.

“How on earth does Thor even know about me?” the blonde yelped as she hurried to keep up with her friend. “Wasn’t he in Asgard until just recently?”

Out of all the Avengers Sharon was acquainted with, Thor was the one she really wanted to meet. Come on, the man was built. His arms, his chest, the hair. He was what dreams were made of. Rogers may be a 10, but Thor was an absolute 15. No wonder he was revered as a god, his body was definitely not human. His scientist girlfriend was a lucky, lucky woman.

Natasha only shrugged disinterestedly as she explained. “He and Stark created this…intergalactic pen pal writing system while he was in Asgard. Barton and I have mentioned you from time to time.” Natasha’s grin grew as she glanced at the blonde. “Apparently Rogers rants about you on the rare occasion.”

“Lovely,” Sharon deadpanned. Hopefully, Rogers wasn’t making her look bad to Thor. She’d never
“So, you’re coming then?” Natasha inquired, glancing down at her perfectly manicured nails with an air of nonchalance. Sharon watched her suspiciously.

“Why do I feel like I don’t have a choice?”

Natasha’s answering grin was all teeth. “Excellent. I’ll let Pepper know. To seal the deal I also invited Catherine and Jessie, so, you’re welcome. As per usual.”

“You’re a goddess, Nat,” Sharon breathed out. Catherine and Jessie would be over the moon about this. How many people could say they partied with superheroes? Sharon was officially winning Best Friend of the Year Award with this.

The two entered into the lounge and immediately spied an unsuspecting Rogers, sipping on coffee at an open table. Natasha’s grin became predatory as she spied the super soldier. Sharon felt a twinge of fear for him. Good things never came out of the grin.

“What about you, Rogers?” the assassin asked as Rogers glanced up, gaze locking onto the two spies. “Do you have a date for Stark’s New Year’s Eve party? If not, I can arrange something.”

Natasha’s smile was as deadly and as ruthless as a Great White.

Rogers glared as he answered, “Yeah, I’m never falling for that ever again, Romanoff.”

Natasha pouted childishly as she went to the coffee maker, pouring herself a mug. “You can’t ring in the New Year alone. There must be someone.”

Her eyes flashed as they darted from Sharon back to Rogers. “What about the cute neighbor of yours. The nurse?”

Now the redhead had two blondes glaring at her. Natasha had never let the Agent 29 thing go since first suggesting it months ago. Whenever she had a chance she was at Rogers’ ear, praising his seemingly normal and perfect next door neighbor. Both blondes were tired of it, for different reasons, obviously.

“Kate,” Rogers said with a pursed mouth and pinched eyes. “And I’m getting really tired of you trying to set me up with her. I’ve told you a hundred times, I don’t like her like that.”

Natasha only shrugged innocently, eyes gleaming with amusement. “Never say never, Rogers. You may just surprise yourself.”

With that the redhead swept out of the room, leaving the two partners in semi-awkward silence as they avoided eye contact.

Finally, Rogers cleared his throat and nodded his head at her. “Chelsea.”

Sharon chuckled to herself as she headed to the coffee maker for her own cup. “That’s not my name.”

It was quiet as she filled up the cup, adding creamer until the coffee was thick and light brown, just the way she liked it. When she turned, she was surprised to find Rogers watching her. His eyes flitted away once he was caught.

“Any big holiday plans?”
Sharon shook her head, tucking a strand of honey blonde hair behind her ear as she wrapped her hands around her mug, enjoying the warmth seeping into her skin.

“No, I’m staying in town. I’ll spend the day with my parents, but that will be about it. We went all out for Thanksgiving, had it up at my aunt’s house in Boston with the whole extended family.”

Rogers nodded politely. “Tapper accompany you?”

Sharon snorted into her coffee and nearly choked on it as Rogers watched with wide eyes and a bemused expression. When Sharon finally had control over herself, she shook her head, hair flying everywhere.

“Oh no, Neal doesn’t do ‘meet the family’ and besides my family can be quite…invasive.”

They were Carters for crying out loud, it didn’t matter that only Sharon and Greer were in the spy business, a natural skill for interrogation ran through all their bloodstreams. She’d never subject Neal to that.

“What about you?” Sharon questioned as she leaned back against the counter, hip cocked out. “Do you have any plans?”

Natasha would burrow underground somewhere with Barton. But maybe Stark had plans of forcing Christmas cheer on the super-soldier. Rogers only shrugged in return, hand gripping onto his mug.

“I might visit with an old friend.”

Sharon knew which old friend he was referring to. Her gaze immediately turned sympathetic as she nodded, not questioning him further. The silence continued between them before Sharon pushed herself forward, nodding to the door.

“I gotta run through some sims with Bri, I’ll see you.”

Rogers saluted her as she headed out. “Later, Sharleen.”

Sharon paused in the doorway. She heard Rogers’ slight intake of breath as she turned. He was watching her with interested eyes. She knew what he was thinking, had he finally done it? After months had he correctly guessed her name?

Close, but no cigars.

Sharon only shrugged as a smile flitted across her face. “That’s not a bad guess.”

She felt Rogers’ gaze on her back as she walked away.

December 26th, 2013

Arlington, VA
“…and without warning, he just jumped on the grenade!” Peggy regaled Sharon with one of her favorite stories involving Rogers, as tears of hilarity pooled in the corners of her wrinkled eyes. A paper crown was sitting precariously atop her head as she sat up in bed, covered in blankets and quilts as she leaned back against a small mountain of pillows. Opened crackers were spread across Peggy’s bed, their goodies pouring out onto the older woman’s lap.

Sharon was sitting next to Peggy’s bed, comfortable in a bulky sweater with a Santa’s hat lopsidedly slipping down her head. In her hand was a glass of Wassail as the blonde sipped it contentedly, chuckling along to Peggy’s story. It had been told many a time at bedtime during Sharon’s childhood.

“From what I hear through the SHIELD gossip chain,” Sharon chimed in good-naturedly, toeing the line of deception. “Is that he’s not acting much differently nowadays.”

“Ah, yes,” Peggy solemnly nodded, though a twinkle was still in her eyes. “I pity the poor soul he’s partnered with. I imagine he doesn’t make it easy for them.”

“You’re telling me,” Sharon muttered vehemently under her breath.

“I’m sorry, dearest,” Peggy murmured. “Did you say something?”

Sharon only plastered a smile across her face as she shook her head. “No, Aunt Peggy.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Peggy put forth as she adjusted her crown. “Do you ever encounter Steve in the Triskelion?”

Sharon poignantly paused, mind whirling quickly through various contingencies of how to get her out of this conversation without flat out lying to the one person who mattered to her most. She hated keeping her and Rogers’ working relationship a secret from Peggy, but she wouldn’t make her aunt complicit in her own lies. What Peggy and Rogers had was tragic enough already, Sharon wasn’t going to add to that.

“From time to time,” Sharon haltingly admitted. It was only a little bit of a lie. She saw him…just on a regular basis. Peggy nodded, satisfied and unknowing of her great-niece’s inner turmoil.

“Good,” the former SHIELD director asserted. “I hope he is adjusting well at SHIELD.”

Well, he was certainly doing something. Sharon didn’t know if it was adjusting though. More often than not he seemed troubled by the types of missions they were running. Fury kept things close to the vest, something that infuriated Rogers every single time. Sharon was growing really tired of playing mediator between the two powerhouses.

Sharon glanced down at her hands, her eyes catching sight of the friendship bracelet Bri had gifted her with through their Secret Santa exchange at SHIELD. Sharon’s bracelet was white with a single black bead, the opposite of Bri’s which was entirely black with a single white bead. The bracelets represented the yin and yang relationship the two had built up through their year together. Soon, Bri would graduate the Academy and take SHIELD by storm.

Sharon – who just somehow knew the universe was out to get her – had been tasked with getting a holiday gift for Rogers. She bet Natasha had something to do with it, the vixen. Sharon had hemmed and hawed over what to get the Avenger. She had taken a risk the year before giving him art supplies when he had been so insistent that he didn’t want to take up the hobby again. However, her risk had paid off, since he had gifted Natasha with a watercolor portrait of herself this year.

So, Sharon had played it safe and given him Ken Burns’ *Baseball.* The super soldier had seemed
interested enough when unwrapping it. He was a fan of PBS, after all. So, Sharon was counting it as a win. And she didn’t even rock the boat.

Peggy leaned back into her pillows. She seemed all there, speaking lucidly and without any gaps in her memory. Of course, because she was doing so well, fate had to step in and be an absolute bitch.

Sharon watched with trepidation as slowly but surely Peggy’s dark eyes clouded over, confusion marring her aged face as she stared at Sharon disorientedly.

“Beg pardon,” Peggy primly stated. “But are you a new nurse? I haven’t seen you before.”

Sharon’s heart dropped and she clenched her fists hard enough to draw blood as her nails broke through the skin.

“It’s me,” Sharon quietly pleaded as she bit her lip. “It’s Sharon.”

Peggy blinked rapidly and it was like the sun had come out from a wall of clouds as her eyes became bright again with recognition.

“Sharon,” she beamed, reaching out to clutch Sharon’s hand. “It’s so good of you to come and visit me. I’ve missed you.”

Sharon breathed out deeply, keeping her voice steady as she forced herself to smile genuinely, squeezing Peggy’s hand.

“I’ve missed you too.”

Peggy smiled as she made herself comfortable, not even caring that a crown was on her head or that her bed was covered in chocolates as she placed her full attention of her niece.

“Tell me, what have you been up to? I want to know everything.”

Sharon sucked in a breath before launching into her various missions and adventures. It was the same things she had told Peggy an hour ago when she had arrived.

It didn’t matter. Peggy had no recollection of it.

Outside, snow continued falling.

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December 31st, 2013

New York City

“Oh my God!” Catherine squealed as the group of four lumbered out of their Uber right at the curb of Avengers Tower. Catherine held onto Jessie’s arm in excitement as she stared up at the skyscraper with wide eyes.
“We’re really going in there?” she asked, tilting her head towards Sharon. The blonde shivered in the cold, winter night, but nodded her head, blonde hair falling in gentle waves down her shoulders.

“The perks of having superhero connections.”

“And I thought the UN had all the connections.”

Avengers Tower seemed the place to be tonight in New York, Times Square be damned. A line stretching at least two blocks was forming outside the tower as seemingly everyone in the Big Apple vied for an invite to the year’s biggest party.

Sharon turned to Catherine and Jessie with a warning gaze. “Remember, here I am Agent 13. No Sharon and definitely no Carter. We good?”

The couple bobbed their heads in understanding. They knew how important it was for Sharon’s identity to remain secret. Nodding her head in a satisfied manner, Sharon headed to the lobby doors where the group was immediately detained by a bulging security guard.

“Name,” he barked out.

“Agent 13,” Sharon replied as she passed over her SHIELD ID. “Natasha Romanoff invited me.”

The guard looked down at his StarkTab, his eyes glancing back and forth between the approved list and Sharon’s ID. After several long moments, he grunted in acknowledgment and handed the ID back to the blonde.

He opened the glass doors as the foursome passed into the imposingly modern lobby. They had to go through security as Sharon and Neal’s Glocks were approved. Their coats were taken and they were ushered to the elevators by a severely stressed out Happy Hogan, who was snarling orders into his walkie-talkie all the while.

They had a spacious elevator to themselves as Sharon took the momentarily reprieve to look over her companions. Catherine was in a hip-hugging, burgundy dress that was doing amazing things to her figure. Jessie was suave and handsome next to his girl in a stylishly sequined, patterned blazer that few men could pull off with such ease. Jessie was a clotheshorse, though. He could wear anything without it wearing him. And right now, he looked like a model as his bright eyes roved around nervously.

Neal stood next to Sharon looking fashionably rumbled in dark jeans and a military type sweater. Sharon felt like a million bucks in a form-fitting metallic silver, bandage dress. Bri’s friendship bracelet was hanging loosely off her slim wrist. To complete the look she had matching, metallic pumps.

Across the elevator, Jessie fidgeted and the usually smooth-talking man looked suspiciously apprehensive. Catherine shot Sharon a look as she rubbed her boyfriend’s back.

“Everything okay, babe?” Catherine asked with a note of concern in her voice. Jessie only shrugged her off as he tried to place some distance between the two.

“I’m fine,” he declared tersely, taking a step away from his girlfriend. Sharon raised an eyebrow as she assessed the scene, unable to turn off her inherent spy skills. Jessie was acting odd. If he did something stupid, like break up with Catherine at a party alongside the Avengers, Sharon was going to kick his pretty little ass. She liked Jessie. But Catherine was her best friend. If he hurt her, she’d mess him up.
Hoes before Bros.

Sharon didn’t have time to ruminate over Jessie’s perplexing behavior when a computerized voice cut through the elevator.

“Greetings, Agent 13. It is a pleasure to see you again.”

The other three jumped, but Sharon only grinned knowingly as she glanced up at the mirrored ceiling of the elevator.

“Hi, Jarvis. I’m happy to be back.”

The elevator came to a stop at the penthouse as the four ambled out into the most luxurious party Sharon had ever seen. It was three levels of people mingling all across the steel and marble structure as club music boomed throughout the penthouse. Food of every kind was everywhere and there was a fully stocked bar with every kind of alcohol imaginable. Celebrities, socialites, and TV personalities were everywhere the eye could see.

Man, Stark sure knew how to threw a party.

“I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,” Catherine whispered in awe as Dwayne Johnson waltzed past them with a charming smile, an entourage of people trailing behind the bulking actor. She slapped Jessie’s arm excitedly and in his dumbstruck awe, he forgot to act weird around her as he spied John Legend playing a little tune on a grand piano, charming a crowd of rapid females.

Natasha materialized out of the crowd as her eyes raked over Sharon’s group. The assassin was in a tight, purple lace dress that looked more like lingerie and a stunning pair of stilettos. Natasha’s eyes rested for a long moment on Neal before she set her indecipherable gaze on Sharon.

“Excuse us,” the redhead said with a false smile, linking her arm through Sharon’s and tugged. “I’m stealing her for a moment.”

Sharon let Natasha guide her through the surging crowd as they trailed up the stairs up to the main level of the party.

“When I invited you and said you could bring guests,” Natasha murmured as she led Sharon. “I didn’t mean your boy toy, Tapper.”

Sharon rolled her eyes. Natasha’s love/hate (mainly hate) relationship with Sharon’s boyfriend had become burdensome ages ago.

“Every girl needs a date on New Year’s Eve.” Was all the blonde said in rebuttal as the redhead rolled her eyes.

“I came solo.”

Sharon scoffed. “Please, Nat, I saw Barton when I came in.”

Natasha opened her mouth to retort but closed it with a grin as she spied something up ahead. “Oh look,” she pointed. “There’s Thor. Want to meet him?”

Sharon gasped as she saw the god tower above the crowd. “Hell yeah, I do!”

Natasha led her friend towards the group Thor had collected. Rogers was standing near him in a dark button up shirt and leather jacket, laughing along to one of Thor’s war stories. The warrior
was in a navy, velvet ensemble, with floral designs exquisitely stitched into his suit jacket. His hair was tied back and braided, making him look every bit like a Viking come to conquer.

He was a whole lotta man wrapped up in a divine package.

“Smell my breath,” Sharon hissed quietly to Natasha. “Is it okay?”

Natasha only rolled her eyes as she pushed Sharon forward, into the circle of people surrounding Thor. Rogers caught her eye and raised a beer in greeting. If he seemed surprised by her presence, he hid it well.

“Thirteen, fancy seeing you here.”

“I invited her,” Natasha jumped in from Sharon’s side. Rogers only sighed before turning to Thor.

“Thor, meet my partner, Agent 13.”

The god’s eyes lit up as he took in the sight of the SHIELD agent. “Ah, Lady 13! It is an honor to meet the Captain’s shield mate.”

Thor scooped her up, embracing her for all she was worth. He lifted her clear off the ground, his massive arms squeezing her to him as her breath was forcibly sucked out of her body. Sharon didn’t care. She could die right here and it would be worth it just to know what Thor smelled like. (Poptarts, he smelled like poptarts.)

Rogers looked alarmed as he tried to get the god to let her go. “Thor, that’s not what I said.”

He looked at Sharon, who was still jammed in Thor’s hearty embrace. “I didn’t say that.”

“We’re partners at work,” she supplied helpfully from where her face was smashed into Thor’s thick neck. “It’s purely professional.”

Confusion flashed across Thor’s handsome face as he gently set Sharon back down on her two feet. She was a bit weak though and was grateful she stayed standing as she looked up at the Asgardian. She was perilously close to swooning.

“Ah,” the god murmured sheepishly. “My apologies then. It’s just the way you’ve been described to me,” he gestured to Sharon’s general appearance. “That your beauty and ferocity on the battleground is equal to that of our good Captain. I just assumed that the two of you were romantically bonded.”

Rogers flushed red as Sharon blinked suspiciously. Rogers would never describe her that way. So, who had?

“Who described me that way, exactly?”

“Well, our own female warrior, the fearsome Widow.”

Sharon sighed. “Of course she did.” She really should have seen that coming.

Sharon shot a glare over Thor’s shoulder to the redhead, who only winked in return. Clearly amused by the mess she had gotten the two blondes into.

“Well,” Sharon got out with a forced grin. “It’s an honest mistake.”

“Indeed,” Thor agreed before beaming. “Let me introduce you to my own beloved, Jane Foster.”
He tugged a diminutive woman to his side, who was dressed in a lovely, modest navy dress. Sharon quickly learned that she was Jane Foster, Thor’s girlfriend or betrothed or whatever a mortal woman could be to an alien/god. The small talk continued as Sharon went this way and that, finding new groups of people to converse with as the night continued on in a dizzying display.

She ran into Maria, who was in a sensational gold and white cocktail dress. She passed Tony Stark and Colonel Rhodes in the middle of an epic foosball battle against Rogers and Barton. Catherine had finally seemed to pull Jessie out of his strange funk as the two were on the dance floor jamming out next to Taylor Swift, who was leading the party with karaoke. Jane’s intern, Darcy was heavily making out with her own intern, Ian, on one of the leather couches. There was a lot of tongue for so early in the evening.

Sharon was on the hunt for Neal as she stopped at the Hors d’Oeuvres table, overlooking the food selection. She had just grabbed some incredible looking croquettes when a cheerful voice sounded behind her.

“There’s cake if you want some. Dummy made it.”

Sharon spun around to come face-to-face with Pepper Potts. The CEO was in a show-stopping black number with sequined cap sleeves. Her strawberry blonde hair was up in a high ponytail.

“Agent 13,” she greeted with a charming smile/ “It’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“You as well, Ms. Potts. Thank you for the invite,” Sharon said gratefully as she gestured to the majestic scene occurring around her. “It’s…something else.”

Pepper gave a tinkering giggle. “Tony doesn’t ever do anything small, does he? Oh, and please, call me Pepper.”

Sharon couldn’t believe it. She was on a first name basis with Pepper Potts. Someone needed to pinch her ASAP.

“You said something about cake?” Sharon asked as she looked down at the immaculate spread. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the lumpy, misshapen, ashen grey shape that she guess could pass as cake…if one was blind.

“New Year’s is his favorite holiday,” Pepper said, speaking of one of Stark’s robots. “He, Butterfinger, and U are having their own celebration up in the labs.”

Well, good for them. But Sharon was concerned that Dummy’s little…creation could kill someone. She was definitely passing on the cake.

Shortly after that, Pepper dismissed herself as she saw Stark jumping up on the bar top, looking ready to break out in an impromptu striptease, Colonel Rhodes cheering him on, with a wad of dollar bills held in his hand. He looked absolutely ready to make it rain.

Sharon couldn’t believe she was here to witness this. Her life was awesome. And to think, her mom had always been against her becoming a SHIELD agent. Well, look where she was now.

She looked up as an arm wrapped around her waist. “Hey, beautiful,” Neal kissed her cheek as she leaned into him, enjoying the affection.

The rest of the night continued on in a haze towards its final crescendo. By the time midnight rolled around Sharon had taken a selfie with Brad Pitt, watched avidly as Heidi Klum flirted heavily with Rogers, played a game of pool against Thor and had a dancing duel with Bruno Mars.
Soon enough though the countdown began.

The partygoers, high on life, crowded around the floor to ceiling glass windows that overlooked Manhattan. Sharon was crowded together with Neal, Catherine, and Jessie as she awaited the New Year.

_Ten…nine…eight…seven…six…five…four…three…two…one…!_

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

Cheers erupted throughout the penthouse as confetti cannons went flying, showering the crowd in gold confetti, falling like rain down upon them. Fireworks exploded across the horizon, bathing everyone in vibrant colors as all of New York celebrated the coming of 2014.

Without warning, Sharon was hauled into Neal’s arms as he surprised her with a rough and dirty kiss that left her head spinning. She got friendly kisses from Catherine and Jessie as she passed through the crowd, passing along light hugs and kisses to anyone she came upon.

During the countdown, both Natasha and Clint had disappeared. Sharon could only guess what kind of mayhem the pair was currently getting up to. Maria was smacking lips with her flavor of the week down on the dance floor. Thor had Jane swept up in his muscular arms, roaring in the arrival of the New Year. Stark, on tiptoes, was kissing Pepper lovingly before the power couple reeled in Colonel Rhodes, who squirmed against the sloppy kisses Stark was pressing to every available space of skin across his friend’s face, Pepper laughing in delight as she pressed a quick peck to the colonel’s lips.

Sharon, filled with good cheer and merriment, was out of breath as she spun through the crowd, right into a sturdy and warm chest. She placed her hands up against the impressive pectorals as she glanced up, locking eyes with Rogers.

The two sprung apart. In heels, Sharon was only an inch or so shorter than the super-soldier. The stood there as everyone else continued celebrating enthusiastically around them.

“Hi,” Rogers finally got out as he rubbed the back of his neck, looking a twinge uncomfortable.

“Hi,” Sharon echoed back breathily, feeling a flush crawl across her cheeks. When had it gotten so hot in here? Someone needed to fix that. Wouldn’t want someone going down for the count due to overheating.

“Well, uh…Happy New Year,” Rogers murmured as Sharon bobbed her head, her curled hair slapping her cheeks.

“You too!” she said in a high pitched voice as the embarrassment grew.

“Hopefully,” she got out, “2014 is a good year for you.”

Rogers chuckled, looking young for the first time in a long time. “It can’t be any more memorable than my other two years in this century.”

“Kisses all around!” a clearly inebriated Darcy Lewis screeched as she raced past, placing hard kisses on both blonds’ cheeks. They watched her go as a disgruntled Jane trailed after her wayward intern.

“Well,” Rogers said as he looked at his partner. “I guess I can’t disappoint the lady.”
And with that, he leaned in, placing a soft kiss to the apple of Sharon’s cheek. He was gone in the blink of an eye, but Sharon’s skin burned where his lips had marked it. Sharon watched him disappear into the crowd as her hand involuntarily rose, touching the warm skin of her cheek.

“Wow,” she whispered to herself dazedly. How much had she been drinking? She needed to cut herself off.

She pivoted on her heel as she heard joyous screaming through the crowd.

“Yes! A thousand times yes! I would love to marry you!”

Sharon pushed herself through the throng of people and gasped at what she saw. Jessie was done on one knee, holding out a ring to a trembling Catherine. At her joyful proclamation, he slipped the diamond ring onto her shaking finger, before swooping her up in his arms, spinning her all around.

“I’m engaged!” she yelled to the gathered crowd as raucous claps and cheers broke out. A grin was threatening to split Sharon’s face as she watched the scene.

All around her people were celebrating, fireworks still booming across the skyline. It was an incredible moment, and one Sharon wouldn’t forget anytime soon.

And as she stood in Avengers Tower surrounded by superheroes, she couldn’t help but wonder about her future.

What would next year bring?

Chapter End Notes

This is it! We have come to the end. Wow, when I started this story nearly two years ago, I could have never believed it would unfold like this. Thank you to everyone who supported this story with your kudos, comments, bookmarks and subscriptions. It's been so great and so meaningful to me.

Keep a lookout because in the next couple of days I'll be posting the first chapter of the next installment: You and I Were Fireworks. Hopefully you'll all follow Sharon on that next journey.

Please, please, please review! I love hearing all of your guys' input.

Pic time!

Sharon's living room:
Sharon's kitchen:

Sharon and Bri's friendship bracelets:
New Year's Eve fashion

Sharon:
Neal:

Maria:

Pepper:
Thor:
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!