Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea (Burning Bridges Sweeten the Air)

by DiNovia

Summary

Before Peggy Carter can make good on her promise to train Angie Martinelli to protect herself better, an old foe makes a reappearance and a new plot comes to light. Will Peggy be able to figure it out before it's over and done?

Notes

While suffering from writer's block while working on another *ahem* little project of mine, I came across this unfinished work while haunting my hard drive. It was already at 25k words when I found it and I thought the Cartinelli fans might want it up and posted, so I finished it.

It is the second part in what is supposed to be a five part series but I don't know if I'll ever get to the rest of the series (see above and blame that other *ahem* little project of mine). If I don't, at least I got this one up and posted.

Love you guys!

“You’re forgettin’ I worked at the L&L for two years, Peg. I know how to handle men. All kinds of
men,” said Angie Martinelli, frowning as they walked down Church Avenue. “Why do we keep having to go over it?”

SSR Agent Peggy Carter cut Angie a look, her candy-red lips set in a thin, determined line. “Because, my darling,” she hissed under her breath, “the whole point of this exercise is to keep you safe. If that means drilling certain things into your beautifully stubborn head, so be it.” She stalked down the sidewalk, her low heels sounding like gunshots as they connected with the concrete.

“You’ve stuffed so much into my head, it’s comin’ out my ears!” Angie pouted, hurrying after her. “When do I actually get to do something?”

Peggy froze in her tracks.

When, indeed? she thought, wondering if the day was coming—and soon—when her dangerous life would catch up to her, spilling over into Angie’s lap without so much as a “Hiya, pal!” The woman they had both known as Dottie Underwood was still alive, after all, and her orders had been to ‘kill Peggy Carter.’ When would she turn up again? And—more importantly—where? At the mansion? At the theatre? Around the next bloody corner?

Peggy closed her eyes against the dark and terrifying images in her mind, finding it an ineffective remedy for the horrors she saw there.

On the other hand… she thought, a promising image amongst the dreck catching her attention.

She opened her eyes and turned toward Angie, gazing thoughtfully at her, deliberately locking away the violent images to be dealt with at a later time.

Angela Maria Martinelli was a smart, resourceful young woman who was eager to learn and fast on her feet. Theory was one thing. A necessary thing, to be certain, but only just. Knowing when to pick up the stapler on the desk and how to use it to its best advantage was another thing entirely and Peggy knew it could save her life. By the look in Angie’s eyes—hopeful and rebellious in equal measure—she certainly believed she was ready for physical training. So why was Peggy so hesitant to begin it?

“Let’s go over it all again, one more time, darling,” she said, hurrying to mollify Angie when her features dove into another frown. “Just one more; I promise.” She quickly looked up and down the street then pulled Angie under the awning of the now closed pharmacy, hoping the long shadows of twilight would be enough to hide them from view. “Tomorrow we’ll begin your self-defense lessons, all right? We’ll move all the furniture from the parlor. Jarvis will go mad.” With a quick glance at the street to make certain no one was watching, Peggy leaned in and nuzzled Angie just beneath her ear. “All right, darling?”

Angie’s eyes fluttered closed and she gasped when Peggy’s lips grazed her throat. “Okay,” she said, a little breathily. She cleared her throat and put her hands on Peggy’s shoulders, gently pushing her back an inch or two. “Jeez, Peg, you make my knees go weak,” she said, opening her very blue eyes. “No fair kissin’ your way outta this one but okay,” she agreed. “Tomorrow.”

Peggy grinned and bit her bottom lip. “Thank you for being patient with me, darling,” she said, eyes glittering under the street lights.

Angie gazed at Peggy, head buzzing like a hive of bees. She wanted nothing more than to kiss that fire engine red lipstick right off the brunette’s lips and she swayed forward before catching herself with a start.
“Ugh! Go!” she said, exasperated, pushing the brunette out of the darkened doorway. “We’ve gotta pick up your dry cleaning before they close, English, or you’ll be sorry we came all the way to Flatbush for nothin’.”

The prospect of a wasted trip to Flatbush, no matter how wonderful the company, changed Peggy’s demeanor from flirtatious to frazzled. “You’re absolutely right, Angie,” she said, marching them both down the street again. “We’ll go over it again while we walk. Hurry, please.”

Angie fell into step with Peggy and began her recitation, her weariness with the topic evident in her tone. “Most men see women in one of six ways: mother, wife, lover, whore, daughter, and secretary. The trick is to discover which image the man in question is expectin’ and to provide it. That keeps you invisible.” She sighed heavily, concluding, “The moment you step outside their expectations and do something remarkable is your most dangerous moment.”

“Excellent!” said Peggy brightly. “You were word perfect! And the difference between a wife and a secretary?”

Angie rolled her eyes. “A man hides things from his wife, but a secretary knows where all the bodies are. He works harder keeping the secretary happy to keep her quiet.”

“If she’s smart and capable, he does. The pretty one with candy floss for brains, he keeps to stroke his ego. He won’t expect much from her beyond fawning praise and large bosoms.”

Angie looked down at her chest morosely. “That counts me out.”

“Hardly,” said Peggy without thinking. When she realized she’d commented out loud, she blushed. “What I mean to say,” she said carefully, “is you are perfectly well endowed, Angie, darling. And for those occasions where more might be needed, a pair of socks is often all the augmentation required.”

Angie snorted. “Yeah, right.” Then she frowned, the topic sending her down another path of inquiry. “Men are only half the problem, though,” she said. “I mean, I’m bound to run into a woman here and there, right? What do women expect?”

“That’s harder to quantify,” replied Peggy. “Women are more complex than men, Angie. It’s not so much about what a woman expects, because she’s been taught to expect so little. For a woman, it’s more about what she needs or what she wants. That’s the key.”


Peggy set her mouth into a grim line, needled by the knowledge that Dottie Underwood still roamed free, spinning her murderous webs.

“To win,” she said darkly.

They had only minutes to spare when they arrived at the laundry and Peggy suggested Angie wait for her outside while she collected her dry cleaning. Angie agreed affably, mostly because a dress in the shop window next door had caught her eye and she wanted to get a better look at it. She knew she couldn’t afford it—she didn’t even have a job, for Pete’s sake—but a gal could dream, right? Dreams cost nothing.

The jangle announcing Peggy’s entrance into the laundry faded in the evening air as Angie strolled to the dress shop next door, closed at this hour. A svelte blonde mannequin stood center stage in the store’s display, soft amber light playing around her perpetually graceful features. Her hair was styled
Angie looked at the dress with hungry eyes, leaning so close to the shop window she nearly left a nose print on the glass. She imagined herself in the dress, imagined Peggy seeing her in it for the first time, imagined Peggy’s russet eyes burning with desire as Angie wore the dress out somewhere special, just for her. Angie was so lost in her fantasy, she never heard the man until he was right next to her. His dim reflection in the window and the jab of something cold and hard in her side burst her daydream like a soap bubble.

“Hand over your bag, lady, and nobody gets hurt,” ordered the man, his eyes darting up and down the street, watching for curious onlookers and beat cops both. He wore a dark, shabby fedora and a worn overcoat. His voice was low and gravelly but not confident.

Angie wanted to roll her eyes but she wisely thought better of it. She knew what this man expected —easy money. The only thing was he’d picked the one girl in the entire street that didn’t have a nickel to her name. There was nothing in her bag except a cotton handkerchief, her lipstick, and a tiny dime-store mirror.

Boy, is he green, she thought. He was so worried about being seen, he hadn’t even reached for her handbag yet. She wondered if she was his first mugging and she felt a little bubble of pride well up from the pit of her stomach. His gun probably isn’t even loaded, she thought.

She resolved not to hurt him. Too much.

“Oh, mister,” she said, affecting a breathy, frightened tone. “Please don’t hurt me.” She gripped the top edge of her clutch and turned toward him as if intending to hand it over. At the last second, she sped up her turn and used her bag to deflect the gun, pushing his hand out and away from her. Then she brought the metal-framed bag down on the top of his wrist like a billy club, dislodging the pistol from his grip.

Startled, the mugger watched his pistol clatter to the ground. That was just the opening Angie needed and she stepped back to give herself room to swing, nailing him with a beautiful left hook to the jaw. He dropped to one knee just as Peggy, weighted down with multiple outfits on hangers, exited the laundry. The SSR agent looked up from putting her wallet back into her own handbag only to see Angie bring her joined hands down on a kneeling man’s trapezius muscle, knocking him onto his side.

“ANGIE!” she roared, discarding handbag and dry cleaning both, barreling toward her lover with all the relentlessness and iron will of a freight train.

Angie looked up and sighed, planting her right hand on her canted hip while blowing on the bruised knuckles of her left. “Relax, Peg,” she said. “I got this.”

Peggy, confused, slowed her approach abruptly, finding herself somewhat overwhelmed by frustrated adrenaline and rage. “You’ve got what exactly?” she asked incredulously, looking from the man groaning softly on the sidewalk to Angie and back. “What in the bloody Hell is going on here?” she demanded.

Angie grimaced. “This green lug thought he was gonna take my handbag,” she explained. “He thought wrong.”

Peggy saw the .38 on the ground and kicked it away from the man, scooping it up and aiming it at the would-be mugger in one fluid movement. “He had a gun?” she asked, her voice a little higher
and less controlled than she preferred. “Angie, you could have been shot!” A thin cord of black horror snaked up through her voice, strangling it in her throat. “You could have been killed,” she said hoarsely, letting her anger burn the tears right out of her eyes.

Angie was about wave Peggy’s worry away dismissively when she saw the absolute terror in her lover’s eyes. She realized this wasn’t just a run of the mill thing to Peggy and steadied the SSR Agent with a gentle hand on her shoulder. “No! Oh, honey, no.” She looked at the gun in Peggy’s hands sadly. “That’s not even loaded, I bet. This guy didn’t know what he was doin’. He was more afraid of me than I was of him. Honest.”

Peggy looked suspiciously at the gun, finally bringing it closer to her. She popped the latch and swung the cylinder out for closer inspection. Sure enough, not a single round. Every chamber was empty. Peggy wanted to throw it at the man. Instead, she ordered him up.

“Who? Me?” asked the man, hands raised awkwardly next to his head even though he was still on the ground.

“No. Harry bloody Truman.” Her tone did not brook discussion. “Yes, you. Get up. Now.” She looked behind her on the sidewalk. “Angie, would you be a dear and fetch my dresses and handbag. I seem to have left them in the street.”

“Sure, Peg,” said Angie. She hurried the few dozen feet up the sidewalk and retrieved Peggy’s belongings. The mugger had climbed to his feet—hands still raised—by the time she returned.

“Good,” said Peggy, nodding with military efficiency. “Now we’re all here, we’re going to take a little walk.” She pinned the mugger with a deadly glare. “I suggest you do exactly as I say,” she told him in a low voice. “Your welfare depends upon it. Do we understand each other?”

The man nodded slowly, his doughy face and bland features deceiving. Peggy couldn’t tell whether he was thirty or sixty. There was absolutely nothing remarkable about him other than his attempt to rob the woman she loved. And badly, at that.

Peggy, about five inches shorter than the man, came up behind him, jabbing the empty gun into his back. “That way, please. Stop at the corner.” She looked around for Angie, smiling when she found her trailing behind the two of them, a look of utter confusion on her face. “There you are, darling!” she said brightly. “It looks like your self-defense training is beginning a bit earlier than we planned. Is that all right with you?”

Elated, Angie nodded—until the purpose of the hapless mugger occurred to her. “Wait—with him?”

“Rule number one of self-defense: use what you have at hand. Mr.—“ she stopped, raising an eyebrow. “What is your name?” she asked the man.

He looked over his shoulder at the diminutive brunette with the gun. His gun. His empty gun. Despite that, he wasn’t willing to risk crossing her. He had a feeling she could still kill him with the .38, even if it was unloaded. “Tom?” he said, not sounding at all certain.

Peggy smirked. “Not Dick or Harry?” Turning back to Angie, she continued her original instruction. “Tom made the mistake of attempting to rob you. As a result, he has volunteered his services to us. There are consequences for bad actions, Angie.”

“But he didn’t actually rob me!” protested the young woman.

“Which is why the police won’t be involved. I’m hoping our little demonstration will convince Tom of the error of his ways and he will put his energy toward more productive pursuits in the future.
Does that sound reasonable to you, Tom? Or shall I summon the police?” she asked, jabbing the man with his own gun again.

The man shook his head. “No, ma’am,” he said, stopping at the corner as instructed. “Whatever you say, ma’am.”

Peggy grinned but it was without mirth. “That’s the spirit!” she said over-brightly. “Right onto Argyle, please, then right into the alleyway.”

The alleyway behind the storefronts they’d just left was dim, dirty, and damp. Peggy marched Tom to the widest point and stepped away from him, looking around the alley with interest.

“Stay there, please, Tom,” she ordered, still covering him with the unloaded gun. “I’ll just be a moment.”

A quick scan of the detritus cluttering the cheap asphalt gave her what she needed: a discarded chrome chair and a rolled up scrap of chicken wire. She righted the chair and made sure it would bear weight before dusting off the red vinyl seat. It wobbled a bit but was otherwise sound. She propped the chicken wire up vertically beside it, making certain it wouldn’t list to one side or the other. When she was satisfied, she looked at Angie.

“You can hang my dresses on the chicken wire, Angie, and put our bags on the chair.”

“Okay,” said Angie, not quite certain exactly how this was going to go and a little worried for the two-bit thief who couldn’t even manage to mug a penniless woman. She double-checked the soundness of the chicken wire set-up before taking her hands off it, finally satisfied it would stay. She didn’t want Peggy’s dry cleaning in a heap on the ground back here. It was filthy.

She wiped her hands on the skirt of her dress and turned back to Peggy and Tom. “Okay,” she said again, steeling herself for whatever was next.

“Good. We don’t have much light left, so this lesson will be brief,” said Peggy, waving Angie over to join them in the center of the clearing. “We’ll review this tomorrow in the parlor as we had originally planned, all right?”

Angie nodded. Peggy smiled reassuringly at her and turned to the hapless mugger. “Take this, if you will, Tom,” she said, handing his gun back to him.

Tom, his hands still up over his head, shook his head. “I don’t want it,” he said. “You keep it.”

Peggy rolled her eyes, annoyed. “Don’t be ridiculous. We are teaching Angie self-defense, Tom. How can she learn the intricacies of disarming an assailant if her assailant is not actually armed?”

Tom looked from Peggy to Angie and back to Peggy with comically wide eyes. “With all due respect, ma’am,” he said shakily, “I think she disarmed me just fine once already.”

Peggy beamed at Angie. “Yes, she did, didn’t she?” she asked, grinning at her lover proudly. To Tom, she said, “But as successful as she was, it was done on instinct alone. You and I will help her to expand her self-defense repertoire, as it were. After all, it won’t do her any good to be a one-note Nora, will it?”

Tom shook his head begrudgingly. “I guess not, ma’am,” he said. “Is this gonna hurt, ma’am?”

Peggy looked him up and down thoughtfully, her eyes cold and measuring. “We won’t break any bones or render you unconscious,” she promised. “Bruises, on the other hand…” She shrugged.
“Let’s say we’ll do our best not to leave too many marks.”

Tom sighed with relief. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“You’re welcome. Now, shall we begin? Angie, come closer, please.” Angie came to stand beside Peggy.

“I promise I won’t be too hard on ya,” she said, giving the would-be mugger a shy half-smile.

“I appreciate it, miss,” he said, returning the smile. However strange a night he was having, he figured it could be worse. Might as well as make the best of it.

Peggy held the empty gun out again. “Take the gun and point it at Angie.”

Tom lowered his hands and took the gun, turning it on Angie hesitantly. “This really don’t feel right, ma’am. Even if there ain’t any bullets.”

Peggy raised an eyebrow at the man. “You didn’t hesitate twenty minutes ago. The only difference now is that we’re asking you to point the gun at her. You’ll survive.” She positioned Angie directly in front of the gun and told her to raise her hands.

“Now, I assume you were looking in the shop window when Tom came up behind you earlier, catching you off guard. Is that correct?”

Angie twisted her mouth into a disgusted frown. “You don’t have to make it sound so dumb, but yeah,” she said unhappily.

“Dumb? Hardly! Angie, you disarmed a man half a foot taller than you and dropped him to the ground even after he’d startled you. You did everything exactly right.” She rested her hand on Angie’s shoulder. “I simply wish to show you some additional techniques, darling. For instance, in this scenario, your assailant is directly in front of you. What is your first instinct?”

Angie looked at the gun, then at Tom. Then she reached out with her right hand, clamping it over the barrel and cylinder as hard as she could.

“What are you doing?!” asked Peggy, her eyes bulging.

Angie smirked. “Disarming him. He can’t pull the trigger now, can he? I got him all locked up. Then all I gotta do is give him my left hook again,” she said, rounding on Tom with a powerful swing.

The mugger shrieked and let go of the gun. He raised his hands up over his head again, cowering where he stood, afraid to run but equally afraid to stay. These women felt like the most dangerous people he would ever face in his lifetime—and he’d spent eighteen months slogging through the muddy French countryside dodging Nazi patrols during the war.

Angie shook her head. “I wasn’t gonna hit ya again,” she said, chuckling. “I was gonna pull it. Promise.”

Tom laughed nervously. “I’m still smartin’ from the first time, miss,” he said deferentially.

“Fine,” said Peggy shortly, finding she couldn’t critique Angie’s instincts no matter how hard she tried. She took the gun from Angie and returned it to Tom. Then she grabbed the young woman by the back of her dress and pulled her twenty feet down the alleyway. “What will you do now? You can’t keep him from firing this time.”
Angie looked incredulously over her shoulder at Peggy. “I don’t have to!” she said. “All I gotta do is run, preferably around a corner or behind a car or somethin’. That peashooter ain’t no sniper rifle, Pegs. It’s much better up close an’ personal.” She put her hand on a canted hip. “No offense to Tom here, but even the best shot couldn’t hit the broad side of a barn with that thing from this distance.”

Peggy gaped at Angie for exactly two seconds. Then she coughed quietly, straightened the front of her dress, and walked to where Angie had stowed their handbags. She retrieved her own and turned toward Tom, coming to a stop directly in front of the man, disapproving entirely of his bemused grin, which she interpreted to be at her expense.

“It looks as though our impromptu lesson is over,” she said evenly. “We won’t detain you any longer, Tom, however…” Peggy opened her bag and retrieved two crisp bills. “I would like to purchase your gun. Is it for sale?”

Tom looked at the ten spots in the brunette’s hand and didn’t hesitate. “Yes, ma’am. It sure is.” He handed the gun over eagerly, secreting the cash in one of his many pockets before either woman could blink.

Peggy gave him a long, appraising look and then smiled softly, this one reaching her eyes. She reached into her bag again and retrieved a stiff white card.

“You seem to me to be an enterprising man in need of an enterprise, Tom. Or shall I say a legal enterprise?” She smirked at him good-naturedly as he blushed. “Call the man on this card tomorrow morning—no earlier than ten, mind you—you’ll annoy him, otherwise—and tell him I believe you could be a valuable asset to his organization.”

Tom took the card and read it, eyes widening to the size of dinner plates. “This card says ‘Howard Stark,’” he said shakily.

“It does,” she agreed. “He’s a friend of mine. Tell him Peggy sent you. He’ll understand.”

Tom, whose name wasn’t Tom at all, naturally, cleared his throat, embarrassed by the mist in his eyes. A job with Howard Stark would put food on the table for Marjorie and little Harry on the regular. A job with Howard Stark could change their lives.

“I don’t know how to thank you, ma’am,” he said quietly, looking Peggy directly in the eyes.

“Cease robbing defenseless women in the street and we’ll call it even,” said Peggy lightly.

“I promise,” he said as solemnly as a vow. “I swear.” He took a deep breath, his face dark with some sort of internal struggle. He eventually came to a decision and nodded with the finality of it. “Name’s Dick Hogan,” he said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Peggy Carter, Mr. Hogan,” said Peggy, reaching out to shake his hand. “And this is Angie Martinelli. The pleasure is ours.”

Dick cracked a half-smile. “I doubt that, ma’am.” He looked up at the fading light of dusk and nodded back toward the 4th Street Station. “Getting dark out, ma’am, miss. If you got a car, better get you to it. If you’re takin’ the train, better let me walk you to the station.” He looked from Angie’s grinning features to an amused Peggy and back again. “I know neither of you is what you might call ‘defenseless,’” he said, rubbing his aching jaw. “But I sure would feel better if I walked you there.”
“Far be it from me to stand in the way of chivalry, Mr. Hogan. I just need to retrieve—"

“Lemme get ‘em,” he said, hurrying to fetch Peggy’s dresses and Angie’s handbag from where they’d been stowed. He handed the clutch back to Angie with a grin. “I never knew that a woman’s bag could be so dangerous, miss,” he said. “I guess I oughta be more careful around my wife’s bags, eh?”

Angie shrugged. “If it were me, I’d be more worried about her frying pan,” she said, laughing as he paled.

On the crowded train back to Brooklyn Heights, Angie leaned in close to Peggy. “You really mean what you said, English? We start real trainin’ tomorrow?” she asked, her voice a husky whisper not quite entirely drowned out by the rumble and screech of the train.

Peggy stiffened, Angie’s nearness setting her heart pounding like a set of bongo drums. The sound of the train combined with the sound of her blood rushing in her ears nearly deafened her. “You’ll find, darling,” she said after clearing her throat, “I am exceedingly careful about the promises I make, especially to those I care about. I rarely make ones I don’t intend to keep.”

“Good to know,” said Angie, leaning closer, the words just a breath in Peggy’s ear.

Peggy swallowed thickly, wishing her hands were free so she could press one to the leaping pulse point in her throat or fan herself. How had it become so warm so suddenly? She wondered absently if they shouldn’t begin Angie’s training tonight, just so she could bleed off some of the electricity humming beneath her skin. She grinned wickedly, thinking of other ways to expend that energy—other much more enjoyable ways. Perhaps she and Angie would skip dinner tonight, instead.

The train shuddered and jumped as it accelerated through a turn and Angie used the sudden movement to its best advantage, looping a slender arm around Peggy’s waist and pulling her closer amidst the crowds of commuters. Peggy felt the heat of the young woman pressed all along her back.

Yes, she decided, they were definitely skipping dinner. The real question now was whether they would even make it up the stairs.

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Peggy Carter’s head pounded.

The late Spring sunshine had made quite an impression on the brunette, but not as much of one as Angie’s new dress had made. Knowing Angie would never purchase it for herself, she’d ordered it the day after the attempted mugging. It had arrived Thursday afternoon, perfect in every way. Angie’s delight at receiving the box with its blue satin ribbon and in the discovery of the dress inside couldn’t hold a candle to Peggy’s visceral reaction to seeing Angie in the dress the first time. Its color brought out the blue in Angie’s eyes and the cloth and cut conspired in such a delicious way, Peggy had been inspired—on the spot—to suggest a night on the town. An overindulgence in good food and better champagne later led to an overindulgence of another sort altogether and neither of them had gotten a single wink of sleep—not that either of them was complaining, of course.

Until—that is—the sun blasted through their windows at daybreak like an insufferably cheerful assassin, causing much protest. Angie grumpily pulled a pillow over her head and fell immediately into a blissful sleep. Peggy did not have the same luxury and she dragged herself instead to the bathroom to prepare herself for work, cursing the brightness of every room as she went. The unseasonably warm weather and accompanying humidity—evident despite the early hour—made
Everything worse.

Nothing had changed appreciably in the ensuing hours since she’d left the mansion except for the
day’s temperature, which had risen, and her spirits, which had not.

In short, Peggy Carter felt wretched.

Perspiration crawled down her back as the sun beat relentlessly through the enormous windows at
the back of the bullpen. After the agency’s successful intervention in Leviathan’s plot only a few
months before, Jack Thompson had moved her to Krzeminski’s old desk, the only official “atta boy”
she was likely to get from him now that he’d been made chief. She’d accepted the offer gladly and
was even gladder of it now. She could only imagine how much worse she would feel if she were
sitting in her old desk in the back of the room.

The metallic scrape and whir of the industrial fans above her head only exacerbated her headache
and the muggy staleness of the air in the room made her feel as if she were sitting in warm tomato
aspic, adding to her queasiness. She tried to focus on the reports on her desk but the tiny type
wavered in her vision before marching right off the page like a parade of black ants.

She closed her eyes and cradled her aching head in her hands, ignoring how limp her hair had
become. There was no help for it in this weather and it wasn’t as if the men looked any better.
Disheveled and morose, with their jackets draped over the backs of their chairs, their unbuttoned
collars, and their loosened ties, they all looked like Peggy felt: hideous.

She would have merrily executed every last one of them for an ice pack and two aspirin tablets.

Wham.

"You awake there, Carter?" asked Butch Wallace, his left hand resting casually on the stack of report
books he had just slammed onto the corner of her desk.

Peggy looked up at him slowly, murder in her bark-brown eyes.

"We’re all awake now, thank you very much, Wallace," she said acidly, narrowing her eyes at him.
“Can I help you with something or is it your turn to be the office jackass today?"

Peggy’s ire didn’t faze Wallace. “What’sa matter, Carter? Late night with your boyfriend, Stark?”
He saw his comment had garnered the attention of some of the other agents and he snorted. “No
offense,” he added, “but you look like somethin’ the cat dragged in.”

Peggy nearly rolled her eyes but thought better of it. Wallace wasn’t worth the effort.

“None taken,” she said, baring her teeth in something that bore a passing resemblance to a smile.
“I’d rather be ‘dragged in’ than kicked out. Tell me, is your De Soto comfortable to sleep in?” she
asked sweetly. Everyone in the office knew Wallace spent at least two nights a week in his car, sent
there by his beleaguered wife for any one of a thousand petty infractions. Peggy usually took his
side in the matter. As disrespectful as he was, at least he wasn’t a cheat.

Several of the men chuckled at Wallace’s expense and he whipped around, trying to see who it was.
The laughter stopped instantly, of course, and everyone suddenly seemed to have something
important to read. No one wanted one of Butch Wallace’s famous “knuckle sandwiches.”

“Boss wants you to file these reports when you’re done with those,” he said to Peggy. “Make sure it
happens today, yeah?”
“Of course,” she said, glancing at the clock over Jack’s office door. “It won’t be a problem,” she lied. Oh, she’d have them done, all right, even if it killed her. The way her head felt, death was certainly amongst the possible outcomes.

Wallace snorted again and wandered back to his own remarkably unburdened desk. Peggy scowled at his retreating back and returned to the report she’d been reading, the tiny type back in its proper place, though she still had no idea why anyone would have directed the Military Railway Service to send the SSR their security reports from June to December 1945 or why, for that matter, she’d been put in charge of reviewing them before they were filed.

Realizing the why of the order never mattered as much as the following of it, she dove back in, instantly bored to sobs by notations regarding missing supply shipments, privates caught drinking whilst on duty, and the like. She found the reports’ dryness a somewhat encouraging turn of events as it meant she would likely fall asleep long before her headache killed her.

She’d only been back at it for ten minutes when Jack Thompson’s telephone rang, the loudness of it causing everyone a start. He spoke to the caller genially for a moment before his entire demeanor changed and he rose from his desk to close the door to his office. Peggy kept an eye on him through the slats of his blinds, though, and watched as he paced back and forth for a few moments, his face a mixture of concern and—to the knowing eye—insecurity. He took his seat again and began writing notes furiously on a note pad beside the phone. After a moment, he nodded grimly, said a quick “Yes, sir,” and dropped the receiver back in its cradle.

For thirty seconds Jack Thompson sat at his desk, looking shell-shocked. Peggy scanned the bullpen surreptitiously to see if anyone else was paying the same level of attention as she to their new chief. Only Daniel seemed interested, a gentle frown appearing between his eyes as he glanced at Jack, seeing him sitting there, unmoving.

Finally, their questionably qualified leader came to some internal decision. He shot out of his chair and threw his office door open dramatically. “Li, Wallace, Sousa…and…” His eyes scanned the bullpen, finally lighting on Peggy’s face. “And Carter,” he said, not quite looking at her. In fact, he wasn’t looking at anyone. He scowled at the linoleum flooring, his lips twisted as though he’d tasted something bitter. “Conference room. Ramirez, Washington is sending a telex. Get it from Rose and bring it to me.”

The young man nodded and hurried toward the large, reinforced door at the front of the room, shimmying through to the other side before it had quite swung open fully.

Peggy grabbed a pad and pencil from her desk and headed toward the conference room, inordinately glad to be free of the MRS reports, even if only for a few moments.

Wallace, lumbering behind her, barked out, “Hey, Carter. Bring us some coffee, will ya?”

Peggy rolled her eyes briefly but dutifully adjusted her trajectory, detouring toward the small kitchen. Sousa rounded on the oafish brute intending to say something, but Jack beat him to it. “If I’d wanted her to bring coffee, Butch, I’d’ve told her,” he said, stopping everyone in their tracks, Peggy included. “We don’t have time. You can get your own coffee after the meeting.” He barreled past Wallace, bumping into him with a sharp shoulder. “Conference room. Now.”

Peggy—just as shocked as everyone else in the room—was the first to recover, the smile touching her lips authentic and a little smug. She followed Jack into the conference room with head held high, leaving the other three scrambling to be second in line. Once the door was closed and everyone was seated, Jack jumped right in.
“Early this morning, a team at IRIS was going through a batch of recorded telephone calls. These calls had been made last week, but the spools were delayed in getting to IRIS because of some labeling error or something. Anyway, one of the guys playing catch up got a little nervous when one of the calls mentioned Dr. Fenhoff.”

Peggy’s eyes bulged. “Fenhoff as in Dr. Ivchenko?” she asked. “What else did the call say?”

“IRIS is sending a transcript of the recording right now. Ramirez will bring it in. In the meantime, IRIS tracked down the circuit used by the woman who made the call—a woman who identified herself as Lillian Weatherby. They traced the call to a house in Alexandria, Virginia—except no Lillian Weatherby has ever stayed or lived there. It’s a boarding house for women run by a widow by the name of Iola Smoot. She doesn’t recognize the name and she says no one could have used the house’s only telephone when the recording says it was used—a little after 9pm on the 23rd—because it’s located in her own bedroom and she only lets her boarders use it for local calls between the hours of 5 and 6 in the evening or for emergencies. She apparently keeps a very strict schedule.”

Peggy tried to keep from smiling but failed.


The name ‘Miriam Fry’ hung unsaid in the room.

Jack cleared his throat and continued. “Since this was a trans-continental call, IRIS is still tracking down where the call connected, but the man identified himself as…” He looked down at his notes and read, “…as a ‘friend of Dr. Fenhoff’ in charge of the doctor’s estate and he told Miss Weatherby she should be on the lookout for a package being sent to her and to her ‘dear mother’—something Dr. Fenhoff wanted them to have.”

Ramirez opened the door then, waving a length of teletype paper. “Chief, the telex.”

Jack reached for it and laid it flat on the table in front of him, dismissing Ramirez with a wave. “Let’s take a look,” he said and everyone gathered around to look at the strip of brittle paper.

::Traffic Operator connects inter-continental call to Local Operator (Alexandria, VA) initializing automatic recording protocol::

::recording begins::

Alexandria, VA Operator: Miss Weatherby? Your call has been connected. Please go ahead.

A: Hello, yes? This is Lillian Weatherby. I was told to contact you.

B: Yes, Miss Weatherby. I have been expecting your call. Thank you for taking time out of your hectic schedule to call an old man. I am Gerhard Jurgen, a friend of Dr. Fenhoff.

A: I'm always available for a friend of Dr. Fenhoff, Mr. Jurgen. What can I do for you?

B: Before Dr. Fenhoff left on his travels, he asked me to oversee his estate. He wanted someone familiar with his work to be in charge, you see. He left detailed instructions on what to do in every situation, including this unfortunate one.

A: I am sorry to hear what happened.

B: Yes, as are we all. However, it is not all sadness. He wished for you and your dear
mother to have several mementos, so that you may remember him fondly. I will be sending the package to you on the first of June. I wanted to let you know when so you would know to look for it.

A: How lovely that the doctor would remember us! Do you have the correct address, Mr. Jurgen?

B: If it is the same as the one on your last postcard to him, then yes. The one with the —what do you call them? Connected houses?

A: The rowhouses, yes.

B: Rowhouses. Of course. The white steps are quite striking. Then I have the correct address?

A: You do, indeed, Mr. Jurgen! I will look for the package at the appointed time. And let me thank you on my mother’s behalf. I know she will be pleased to hear she’s been remembered by Dr. Fenhoff.

B: He was very clear on this matter, owing to his long association with you and with your dear mother. Please give her my regards.

A: I will, Mr. Jurgen. Good-bye.

::Alexandria, VA Operator disconnects call with Traffic Operator::

::recording ends::

Agent Mike Li looked up from the teletype, confusion plainly written in his features. “Other than the mention of Dr. Fenhoff, what does this have to do with anything?”

The men in the room looked at each other, hoping someone had some ideas. Peggy ignored them all, pulling the teletype toward her. She raised her pencil above it and was about to make some notations when she caught herself. She looked up at Jack, raising her eyebrows in question. “May I?” she asked. No matter how questionable his qualifications, Jack Thompson was still her superior.

He shrugged and Peggy returned her gaze to the paper on the table. “These,” she said, circling the callers’ names, “are pre-arranged code names. A field operative will have a book outlining what name to use and under what circumstances. That’s why Miss Smoot doesn’t recognize the name Lillian Weatherby. Whoever used her phone that night was known to her by another name entirely.”

She circled the words ‘hectic schedule’ and ‘always available’ next. “This is an availability test. Once they’d correctly identified themselves to each other, Mr. Jurgen, the mission director, wanted to know if Lillian, obviously an overseas operative, was available for the mission he was about to propose.” Peggy looked up and glanced at each of her colleagues. “Think of him as Chief Thompson, choosing from a pool of available agents to do his bidding. Jurgen thinks Lillian might be a good fit…but he needs to know her availability. She could be working on something else or otherwise impeded from being able to complete the mission. He mentions Dr. Fenhoff here as well, letting her know the general mission parameters. She either knew of or worked with Dr. Fenhoff sometime before his arrest.”

Sousa’s eyebrows climbed his forehead. “Like that woman from the hangar—the one you knew as —what was it? Dottie something?”

Peggy nodded. “Dottie Underwood, yes. She escaped our custody despite the injuries she received
during our fight. It’s possible she was directed to call Jurgen when she was fit to resume her duties.”

She tapped the end of her pencil against her chin, her brows knit in deep thought over her dark eyes. “When she says she’s ‘always available,’ that might simply mean she’s clear to return to duty or it could mean objectives having to do with Dr. Fenhoff supersede other objectives she might be pursuing.”

“Anything else jump out atcha, Carter?” asked Butch Wallace, snorting derisively.

“Yes, actually,” she said, seemingly unaware of his derision. “Thank you, Butch.” She pointed to the section where Jurgen spoke of the ‘unfortunate’ fate of Dr. Fenhoff. “Here, Jurgen lets Lillian know he’s aware of Fenhoff’s arrest and here,” she continued, pointing out the words ‘it is not all sadness’, “he lets her know some portion of his plan can go on.”

Sousa chuckled knowingly while Jack raised his eyebrows at Butch as if to ask ‘Happy now?’

Peggy paced a few steps away from the table, still bouncing the eraser of the pencil off her chin. “The package—whatever it is—is the mission. She’s being directed to take possession of it and she must know what it is, where it will be delivered, and approximately when it will arrive since Jurgen told her only when he was planning to send it.” She looked up suddenly, her eyes darting from man to man. “Does Alexandria have rowhouses? With white steps?”

The four men looked blankly at each other. Jack scowled.

“Li, start makin’ a list,” he ordered. As much as he hated to admit it—and he did hate it—at least Peggy was giving them a place to start. It was more than they’d had ten minutes ago.

Li grabbed Peggy’s pad and started writing things down.


Peggy shook her head. “I don’t think so. The woman I knew as Dottie Underwood worked alone. I don’t believe the words ‘your dear mother’ reference an actual person.” She shrugged. “Russia is often referred to as Mother Russia by her devotees. It’s possible when Mr. Jurgen asked Lillian to give her ‘dear mother’ his regards, he was showing deference to her superiors in Russian Intelligence.”

Butch looked at Jack, clearly hoping his friend and idol would do something—anything—to prove the ‘lady agent’ wrong. Jack ignored him.

“Alright, no one’s goin’ home tonight,” he said. He shot up off the corner of the table where he’d been sitting and started barking orders. “Li, start calling around. See if there are any rowhouses in Alexandria. With white steps.”

Mike nodded and ran to his desk, picking up his telephone before he’d even sat down.

“Wallace, you and Ramirez head out. Drive down to Iola Smoot’s place. Check up on anyone who lived at or visited the house this year. Get pictures if you can, descriptions if you can’t. Pay special attention to anyone who might have been sick or wounded or who might have left suddenly.” As Wallace headed out the door, he added, “And check out Smoot’s phone while you’re there. See if there’s any evidence of tampering.”

Wallace waved his understanding from Ramirez’s desk.
Jack looked at Daniel with something akin to resignation. “Sousa, see if IRIS has figured out who—or at least where—our little Russian femme fatale was calling. And tell the rest of the guys to call their wives or girlfriends and let them know they’ll be late. Start them figuring out what this package might be and how it might be delivered. This Jurgen guy is sending it tomorrow. Who knows how long it will take to get here.”

Peggy watched Sousa close the conference room door behind him on his way out.

“Carter—you stay for a minute, okay?”

The tiniest sliver of a smile dusted Peggy’s lips as she turned to Jack Thompson, expecting her second “atta boy” in as many months. But instead of a return smile, Jack turned away from her and paced to the window looking out over the bullpen, staring out of it without actually seeing anything beyond the window blinds and the glass.

Finally, he sighed, turning to Peggy with a look of annoyance. “Look, Carter, you can’t do that, okay?”

The smile on Peggy’s lips melted under the heat of Jack’s unexpected reaction. “Can’t do what?” she asked, confusion liberally coloring her tone.

“You may think you’re smarter than me but you’re not.” Jack’s green eyes turned dark jade with anger. “Showing me up in my own meeting, in front of my men? You’re not doing yourself any favors, you know. Who’ll take you on if I fire you for insubordination or worse? I have cause. Think about that.”

Genuinely shocked, Peggy let it show in her face. “Excuse me?”

Jack refused to look at her. Instead, he returned to the window, seeing the men beyond it finally, watching with satisfaction as they hurried to fulfill his orders, acting on his command. “Whoever your boyfriend was during the war,” he began, his voice low and scornful, “whoever you’re seeing now, you can’t use their names to give yourself more credit than you’re due, Carter. You aren’t Steve Rogers or Howard Stark. You’re a woman. Just a woman. No matter what your war record says.”

Forgetting herself completely, Peggy said, “And what does your war record say, Jack Thompson? How much of it is truth and how much of it is a story you told out of guilt and shame?”

Jack rounded on Peggy and lunged at her, fire flashing in his eyes. “No one would ever believe you,” he hissed, thrusting his index finger in her face. “Whoever you tried to tell. So you’ll keep your mouth shut about it, if you know what’s good for you.”

A lightning strike of white-hot rage shot through Peggy and for a moment she was speechless, disbelieving anyone could be so arrogant and so vile. When she finally found her voice, she paused before using it, knowing she held her career, her livelihood, and her honour in her hands. She took a deep breath, remembering the Jack Thompson she’d spoken to on that plane, the one who had confessed the truth behind the “war hero” stories. That Jack was lost and remorseful but honest. He deserved her continued respect. This Jack was narcissistic, insecure, and self-aggrandizing. He did not.

“That’s the difference between you and me, Chief Thompson,” she said, haughtily. “I will keep your confidence because it’s the honourable thing to do. You shared what you did during a particularly vulnerable moment and breaking that confidence would expose me as the worst kind of opportunist, the worst kind of officer.” She looked down her nose at him. “If the circumstances
were reversed—if I had shared a similar secret with you during a vulnerable moment—I have no doubt you’d break my confidence. The only question you’d ask is ‘When would it benefit me most?’"

She stalked out the conference room door, her perfect posture falling like a ruined soufflé when she was sure no one was paying her any attention.

She watched from her desk as Sousa spread the word about the intercepted telephone call, watched as the married men eagerly telephoned their wives to let them know they’d be late and not to expect them at dinner. She could practically see the glee in the faces of the ones who had children, knowing they were relieved to be escaping the noise and chaos of dinner squabbles and bedtime stories, even if they were trading those things for a night spent hunched over police reports or networking with other government agencies in the hopes of ferreting out the merest hint of a whisper about a mysterious "package" and how it might be arriving.

Her eyebrows knitted together in sad contemplation of all those interesting women with unexamined lives, unshared dreams, and unrealized talents sitting alone at dining room tables tonight. These men who disregarded her own skills so casually—how did they view their wives? As an ambulatory collection of martini recipes, timely suppers, and sparkling kitchen floors? The very thought enraged Peggy, even more so knowing she couldn’t risk calling Angie from the comfort of her own desk to let her know she would be very late, indeed.

She stared at the new pile of reports someone had just added to the pile she hadn’t yet begun to review and scowled at the unfairness of it all. She’d much rather go home to a light supper and a cool bath with Angela Maria Martinelli than be stuck here all night going through useless MRS reports. Barring that, she’d at least like to be able to call Angie to let her know their plans had changed and to reassure her she wasn’t in any danger—this time at least.

Peggy felt a presence to her left before she actually saw the source and was unsurprised to see Daniel Sousa propped up on his crutch halfway between his desk and hers. He had that perpetually wanting look on his face, the one Angie called "hang-dog hopeful", and a shadow of a smile dusted his mouth when Peggy turned his way.

"I thought we could work together," he said, nodding toward his own desk piled with reports. "Two heads are better than one,' and all that." Inexpertly hidden romantic interest made him lean too far forward on his braces in order to appear surer on his feet while his insecurity made his off-hand chuckle seem forced and insincere. Peggy had long been aware of Daniel's ulterior motives—had even briefly considered their merit once, the day they’d stopped Howard Stark from unknowingly destroying half of Manhattan with that ridiculously-named Midnight Oil gas. But Daniel, no matter how honourable or brave, could never hold a candle to Angie, something Peggy had known even then, long before a certain kiss in the library had made everything oh-so-crystal-clear.

"Absolutely," she said, forcing a smile of her own though she was certain it wouldn't reach her eyes. She caught sight of the clock on the wall over Jack's office and was struck by a sudden idea. "Though I do need to speak to Rose before she leaves for the day. I'll just be a moment." She turned and headed for the main entrance, cognizant of Daniel's confusion and disappointment as she hurried to catch the redhead "office manager" before she made it out the door and into freedom.

Her last bit of luck held and she caught the young woman alone in the switchboard office, rooting around in her oversized handbag for an unknown something.

"Miss Roberts, may I have a word?" she asked. "I know it is past time for you to leave, but—"
Rose's wilted features bloomed into an authentic smile. "Anything for you, Agent Carter. And how many times have I told you to call me 'Rose'?

Peggy smiled ruefully. "At least as many as I have asked you to call me 'Peggy', yet here we are."

Rose rolled her eyes. "Fine. Though I won't do it in front of those maroons," she said, nodding toward Peggy's office beyond the great steel door with a disapproving sneer. "They need to be reminded who and what you are. " She smiled again. "Now, what can I do for you, Peggy?"

Peggy paused for a moment, considering the best way to make her request while still maintaining plausible deniability, an essential component of her plan should Rose be less trustworthy than Peggy imagined her to be. "I was wondering if you could help me place a call," she said slowly. "You see, it is rather a more private conversation than I wish to have from my desk and I would never dream of utilizing your equipment without your permission, though I dare say I am fully capable, having been trained—"

Rose settled her headset back on her head before stopping Peggy abruptly. "It's okay. My boss asked me to stay since you all are. Someone has to get your calls to the right people.” She smiled softly, her eyes filled with understanding. "What's her name?" she asked, holding a switch plug at the ready.

Peggy froze, wary of the question. Had she given herself away so easily?

"Sorry?" she asked, her voice slightly higher in register than she would have preferred.

Rose laughed and reached for her handbag, retrieving an ornate gilded-silver compact from its unfathomable depths. She opened the compact and showed Peggy the puff pad and the dusty mirror within. "See that?"

Peggy nodded, clearly confused. "Your...compact?" she asked haltingly.

Rose held up a finger. "Observe," she ordered and she flipped an invisible catch nestled on the back of the compact between the hinges. The panel containing the mirror dropped forward, revealing a black and white photograph of a handsomely freckled woman with short hair covered in a kerchief. She had a broad, friendly smile and she seemed to be shading her eyes from sunlight streaming through a high-up window. She wore coveralls and stood at the end of a long assembly-line conveyor belt. Looking at the short section of conveyor belt that wasn't out of focus, Peggy thought it might be some sort of munitions manufacturing factory.

Rose gazed at the picture sweetly. "Her name is Freddie. Well, it's really Frederica but she hates that name, so everyone calls her Freddie. She works with her brothers at their mechanic's shop these days but she used to make anti-aircraft shells during the war. She was really good at it." Rose sighed happily, clicked the mirror back into place, and closed the compact with a snap, dropping it back into her handbag. "We have a little apartment in the Bronx, in Westchester Heights. I was gonna make dinner for her when I got home. Salisbury steak—her favorite. But that was before this little snafu cropped up." She turned and picked up the switchboard plug again. "So, what's her name?"

Relief flooded Peggy's eyes. "Angie," she said, unable to keep from smiling when she said it. "Her name is Angie Martinelli. The telephone number is 8-5595."

Rose winked at Peggy and connected the call. Angie picked up on the second ring, her voice only barely audible to Peggy through Rose's headset. "Hello?"
"Hello," said Rose. "Is this Angie Martinelli?"

"That's me! How can I help you?"

"Miss Martinelli, please hold for Miss Carter," said Rose, using her best telephone operator twang. Then she removed her headset and covered the microphone with her hand. "When you've finished, just unplug these two connections and hang the headset here," she instructed, pointing at the two switchboard plugs and the hook. "I'm gonna go powder my nose, okay?"

Peggy took the headset from Rose and nodded her understanding. "You are a dream, Rose," she whispered. "Thank you so very much."

The redhead reached out and patted Peggy's arm. "Sure, honey. Girls like us gotta stick together, right?" She winked again and exited through an unassuming door into a dim hallway beyond. Peggy put the headset on quickly.

"Angie?"

"Peg? What's goin' on? You okay?" Angie’s usual ebullience was evident in her voice, though shaded now by concern. Peggy felt momentarily envious. Of course Angie sounded happy; she’d had sleep.

"I'm fine, darling. I just wanted to let you know I'm going to be very late tonight. We've had...." She stopped, remembering the line she was on was entirely unsecured and most probably being recorded. She started again. "One of the swing shift girls called in sick tonight and my boss wants me to stay. I'm afraid I'll have to take a rain check on your—er—your..." She cast about for a dish that would convey security, warmth, and safety. It was a tall order, especially since she hadn't thought to prepare Angie for these types of communications. Necessities like this were completely new territory—for both of them.

"Your chicken cacciatore!" she said finally, remembering it was the dish Angie had made the night they'd first made love. She hoped Angie would make the connection though she had no reason to expect she would. "Will you leave a plate in the Frigidaire for me? I'll warm it for my supper when I get home."

The clicks on the line from the federal recording equipment were loud in the brief silence but finally Angie spoke. "You're lucky you're not gettin' day-old tuna fish, English. But seein' as your friend is sick and your boss asked you to cover, I guess I can't be too mad you're missing my Ma's cacciatore. There'll be plenty of leftovers for you in the Fridge."

If there was one thing on the planet Peggy found the most impressive in her fellow man (or woman, as the case may be), it was quickness of mind. Angie had not only made the connection Peggy hoped she would—and with lightning speed—she had returned the favor with her own coded message, neatly conveying she understood danger wasn't involved by referencing day-old tuna fish, the eating of which she had once compared to the danger inherent in Peggy's true work. The SSR agent had never wanted to kiss anyone as much as she wanted to kiss Angie Martinelli at that very moment.

"You are an absolute dear, Angie. Truly." She hoped the warmth in her voice would carry along the telephone line. "I must get back to work now, though, darling. I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll probably be up memorizin' lines when you get home. Knock on my door if you see the light, okay? You can tell me about your day."
"That would be a nice change, wouldn't it?" Peggy replied, smiling lopsidedly. She was inordinately pleased to know that when push came to shove, Angie Martinelli rose to the occasion whether trained to do so or not. Peggy wanted to shower Angie with praise, wanted to tell her how much she loved her— all of her, but especially that big beautiful brain of hers. She couldn't just now and the restriction felt like a steel band around her chest. "If I see the light, I'll knock. Promise."

Peggy returned to the bullpen in a better mood than she’d left it, her pride in Angie’s newly discovered skills dissolving her peevishness almost entirely. Hours later, her mood soured all over again as she looked at the telephone receiver she held with disbelieving eyes. Homicidal rage boiled in the acid sloshing around her decidedly empty stomach.

"But that's what I'm attempting to explain, Agent Clark," she said calmly. "We are an American intelligence agency. Surely you've heard of it. We're based in Manhattan—" She took a deep breath as the man on the other end of the line interrupted her yet again.

"You are correct; I am speaking with a British accent," she confirmed.

"Because I'm British," she replied to the obvious question. "However, I—"

Another string of tinny outrage burst forth from the receiver.

"If you would just—" began Peggy, only to be interrupted again.

"But I've been attached to the—"

"If you'll just allow me to—"

"I could explain all this to you—"

"If I could finish, sir!"

The rest of the agents in the room turned toward her, eyes wide in the silence following her shout. They could barely hear the sounds of an epic tirade continuing down the line as Peggy once again held the receiver away from her head, her mahogany eyes simmering with loathing.

When the agent on the other end finally paused long enough for a proper reply, Peggy brought the receiver back to her mouth. "Thank you, Agent Clark, for proving you lot in the National Intelligence Authority lack both intelligence and authority in such staggering quantities as to make the entire agency nothing but one gigantic cockup! How you managed to survive the war with such a stunning lack of common sense beggars the imagination as it is quite clear to me you were born with your bloody head stuck up your BLEEDIN’ ARSE!"

She slammed her telephone into its cradle with such force the sound actually echoed slightly around the room before the rest of her fellow agents—all of them by now veterans of this particular battle in the war against stupidity—erupted into applause.

Even Jack Thompson standing in his office doorway couldn't help but shake his head at Peggy Carter, a slight smile curving his otherwise serpentine lips.

"All right, men," said Jack finally. "Show’s over. Back to work."

"Aw, so soon?" came a voice from the stairwell door. "You haven’t even had your dinner."

A grinning Howard Stark entered the bullpen followed by a dour-faced Edwin Jarvis, both of them holding cardboard boxes. Howard’s rattled with the sound of clinking glass.
Jack Thompson was not happy to see the billionaire inventor. But then again, neither was Peggy.

“Stark,” said Jack, his voice laced with annoyance. “How’d you get in here?”

Howard set his box on the corner of McKnight’s desk with a clattering thunk. “Same way I always do,” he said, chuckling. He directed Jarvis toward the back of the room where the empty desks were. “Fixing the security system isn’t gonna help, Jack. You need to replace it. I keep telling you —”

“And I keep ignoring you. Seems both of us are stubborn types.” Jack took a step into the bullpen and hooked his thumbs in the waistband of his mouse gray pants. “What brings you out of your ivory tower today, Stark? Hobnobbing with the common man?” He slid his eyes sideways at Peggy for half a second. “Or woman?”

Howard paused, following Thompson’s gaze and frowning slightly. Jack’s insinuation and cutting tone made him a little nervous. He’d walked into the SSR thinking he was doing a nice, lighthearted favor for a friend of a friend, but now he felt like he’d stepped on landmine. A touchy one that could go off at any moment, the brunt of it catching him and Peggy both if it did. But consequences had never been Howard Stark’s forte.

He grinned again, holding up his hands in a gesture of surrender. “Didn’t mean to interrupt, Jack. I heard through the grapevine that you’d locked the troops down for the night. I thought they might want dinner since the Automat is out of service for the time being. Least I can do, right?”

Everyone watched Jack Thompson’s face for a hint of what he was thinking. A tension-filled fifteen seconds passed. Whatever it was didn’t show.

“Generous,” he said to Howard noncommittally. To everyone else, he said, “Take twenty minutes, have dinner. Then get your heads back in the game. I want something concrete on my desk tonight.” He cut a last look at Stark and at Peggy, and then retreated to his office, shutting the door behind him.

Howard shrugged before turning back to the men looking longingly at the box on McKnight’s desk. “Belly up, agents!” he said. “I’ve got cold beer and pop in this box and Jarvis back there has sandwiches, apples, and Hershey bars. Help yourselves!” He grabbed a beer and a Coca Cola and hurried out of the way as a line of damp, disheveled agents made a beeline for the front of the room.

“What’s his problem?” he asked Peggy, nodding toward Jack’s office. He offered her the bottle of pop.

Peggy looked at Howard pointedly. She took the beer from him instead and opened it on the side of her desk with a quick knock, the bottle cap bouncing noisily on the linoleum. She took a long pull from the bottle, her throat moving as she swallowed, eyes closed in appreciation of the beer’s coldness if not its taste. She missed the hearty nut-brown stouts and the crisp, lemony shandies of her home country, but these weak American beers would do in a pinch.

When she finally came up for air, she gave a long sigh, stopping abruptly when she saw Howard’s dumbfounded look. She cleared her throat primly.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “What was the question?”

“Never mind,” said Howard, shaking his head. “I have a pretty good idea what’s got Jack’s skivvies in a knot.”

“Oh, what doesn’t? Honestly.” Peggy took another pull on her beer bottle, finally noticing Howard

“Do you…uh…drink like that in front of these guys often?” he asked quietly, waggling his eyebrows at her suggestively.

Peggy narrowed her eyes at Howard. “Are you implying it is acceptable for me to beat a man senseless with a stapler but drinking beer directly from the bottle is indecent?” She rolled her eyes. “Grow up, Howard.”

The playboy laughed. “Never,” he said, winking at Peggy. “Don’t even suggest it.”

“I’m afraid such exhortations fall on deaf ears, Miss Carter,” said Jarvis weringly, approaching Peggy’s desk with full hands. “You are not the first to make that particular suggestion.”

“I’m sure I’m not,” she said ruefully. Seeing Jarvis’ burden, she added, “What’s this, Mr. Jarvis?”

“Your ‘dinner,’ Miss Carter,” said Jarvis evenly, the slight roundness of his pronunciation of the word ‘dinner’ letting Peggy know just exactly how he felt about the misuse of it here in America. “The envelope is a message for you.” Jarvis’ carefully stoic features told her exactly who the message was from and she snatched the envelope from its perch.

She turned away from Howard and Jarvis both and slid the card out of the envelope, heart fluttering with unexpected girlish anticipation. The note read:

_English,_

_Something tells me those fatheads you work with wouldn’t remember to eat dinner if their lives depended on it, so I’m sending dinner to you. Not tuna, though. You get chicken salad. Just this once. And chocolate, too. I hear chocolates are always lovely._

_Angie_

Peggy slipped the stiff linen card back into its envelope and held it against her heart for a moment before turning back to her desk just in time to see Jarvis flipping open a cloth napkin.

“Your chicken salad sandwich, Miss Carter,” he said, holding her chair for her.

“Good lord,” she said, rolling her eyes heavenward. “Get out,” she ordered, shooing Jarvis away from her desk. “The both of you. And take that ridiculous napkin with you! We have work to do.”

And work they did. Without the clownish distraction of Howard Stark, the agents munched quietly on their sandwiches as they ran down leads or otherwise tried to make themselves useful. The hours ticked by with little in the way of progress until Wallace called in his report. Peggy, Daniel, and Mike Li all crowded into the Chief’s office to hear it firsthand.

Wallace said Lillian Weatherby might have been a woman going by the name Gloria Grayson who had been staying at Iola Smoot’s boarding house for just over three weeks. She’d arrived with a single suitcase, a British accent, and a cane she required after twisting her ankle while running for a taxi in Dupont Circle. The boarding house matron described Grayson as tall and pretty with auburn hair and a wide smile and added that the young woman had come to America as secretary to a British entrepreneur looking for investors to rebuild his manufacturing business in Manchester. She left every morning right after breakfast, was back in time for dinner every night, and paid her rent in full and on time every week.

On the night of the 23rd, Grayson had skipped dinner, complaining of a headache. On the morning
of the 24th, when she hadn’t come down for breakfast by 8:30am, Mrs. Smoot asked one of the other girls to check on her. Failing to get a response to her repeated knocking, the girl tried the door knob of Grayson’s room and found it unlocked. She opened it, surprised to find the room empty of not only Gloria Grayson, but of all her belongings, too. The only item she found in the room was a crisp ten-dollar bill, left under a small figurine on the bedside table.

Wallace’s cursory examination of the telephone inside the house showed no evidence of tampering but the outside line did, having been recently spliced, then repaired.

“Are we assuming this Grayson woman is Dottie Underwood?” asked Daniel. “I thought she was blonde.”

“Hair color is easily changed,” said Peggy. “As is a person’s accent. I won’t know for certain until I see a photograph of her, but I’m inclined to say Gloria Grayson and Dottie Underwood are one and the same. She worked with Fenhoff extensively prior to his arrest and it is likely she suffered a leg injury—among others—from her fall out the hangar office’s window. Bruises and stitches are easily concealed.” She looked at Daniel apologetically. “Limping and other mobility issues are not,” she said quietly.

Daniel flushed, embarrassed, but waved her concern away.

“Let’s say Grayson is Underwood,” said Jack. “She flees New York and holes up in some boarding house in Alexandria to lick her wounds for three weeks. Then she calls Jurgen. Why wait? And she said in the call that she’d been told to contact him. How did she know to call him? Who told her to do it? Iola Smoot said Gloria Grayson had never received so much as a telegram at the house.”

“But she left every morning after breakfast,” said Li. “Mrs. Smoot assumed it was because of her work as secretary to that British guy, but that’s all just made up, right? She must have been going somewhere else.”

“Lone intelligence operatives working in enemy territory will always return to one or more pre-arranged locations to meet with handlers or runners when they’ve been compromised and require new or additional orders,” said Peggy. “Fenhoff’s arrest forced Dottie to go underground but news of it would have reached her superiors quickly. Knowing that, Dottie would abandon her usual method of communications with them and would make her way to one of the safe locations. She would visit the meet site every day, hoping to make contact.”

Of the three men present in the room, Jack knew only one had any intelligence experience at all. Li had been posted on an aircraft carrier in the Pacific during the war and had worked at intercepting and translating Japanese communications there. He had no experience in the kind of cloak and dagger stuff Peggy was describing, though, and neither did anyone else in the SSR—something Jack knew could be a huge liability to their agency’s success now that everyone was running around pretending to be Mata goddamned Hari.

Jack loathed having to rely on Peggy Carter’s expertise for anything at all, let alone something as sensitive as a possible German-Russian plot against America, but he had no choice. He could either use her knowledge and skills to get the job done or he could ignore her and go down in history as the worst fuck up in US intelligence history. As much as he hated the idea of relying on a woman, he hated the idea of failure more.

“Where would this meet site have been?” he asked, sighing heavily. He was between a rock and a hard place and whatever move he made felt like he was selling out.

Peggy shrugged tiredly. “Anywhere. Though mine were often in city centers or high-traffic areas
near….” Her voice trailed off and she looked out the window of Jack’s office to the leaning tower of MRS reports on her desk, an idea striking her. “Train stations!” she said, whipping her head back around. “American railway terminals are like little cities within cities. They have shops and cafes and thousands of people walk through them every day. It would be a simple matter to make contact there and, if done correctly, no one would think anything of it.”

“Hiding in plain sight,” said Daniel morosely. He was thinking the same thing everyone else was: how many foreign agents were making contact in railway stations all across America?

Jack felt a headache coming on. “There’s no point in tracking down the meet site now. She obviously made contact and was given instructions to call Jurgen.” He looked at Daniel. “Has IRIS been able to figure out where that inter-continental call connected?”

“Algeria as far as they can tell,” said Daniel, shifting in his chair uncomfortably. “They said it might be a while before they can find out where exactly, though we’re lucky. There are only five switchboard offices in the entire country that handle inter-continental traffic.”

“What’s the problem, then? Why can’t they track it down any faster?”

Daniel looked nervously from Jack to Peggy and back. “Well, since that massacre in Setif last year, there’ve been a lot of territorial skirmishes between nationalist and French forces. Two of the switchboard offices are under French control, two are under Muslim nationalist control, and one is apparently under the control of whoever has the most guns or money. The French offices say they’ll get back to IRIS with information when they can. The other offices seem to be ignoring our requests across the board.”

Jack nodded. “Plus, the French Provisional Government changes leaders as often as I change my —“ He looked at Peggy. “—uh—socks. Who knows what’s going on in Algeria when we can’t even keep up with what’s going on in France?” He looked at Sousa hopefully. “Any ideas on what this package might be?”

Daniel shook his head. “I figure it must be something Fenhoff and Underwood were working on in addition to that Midnight Oil plot. I have feelers out to every intelligence agency but so far, no leads.”

Jack looked as defeated as they all felt. “Well, let’s hope whatever it is doesn’t fall out of the sky on us tomorrow.” He looked at his watch, surprised to see it was just after 2:00am. “Send everyone home. Get some sleep and be back here ready to go in the morning. Wallace and Ramirez will be back by then. We’ll meet in the conference room first thing to go over everything again.”

They all nodded, filing out of his office and then out of the building dead on their feet. The sight of Jarvis parked outside the building, standing ramrod straight next to the car, outraged Peggy Carter.

“Please tell me Howard hasn’t bugged the SSR offices,” she hissed under her breath as she collapsed into the back seat, exhausted. That was all she needed.

“As far as I know, he has not,” said Edwin Jarvis, intrigued by the possibility. He took his place in the driver’s seat and looked at Peggy in the rear-view mirror. “I’m here at Miss Martinelli’s request, not Mr. Stark’s.”

Peggy’s eyes widened and she looked positively horrified. “You haven’t been waiting outside all this time, have you? What could she have been thinking? Jack Thompson only dismissed us fifteen minutes ago. I could have been here all night!”
“On the contrary,” said Jarvis, pulling away from the curb. “I arrived outside your building only twenty minutes ago. Miss Martinelli estimated you would be dismissed between two-fifteen and two-thirty, saying—and I quote—‘that pretty-boy chief won’t give up his beauty sleep without a fight.’”

Peggy looked out the window, covering her smile with her hand. “I see,” she said neutrally. Angie’s estimation had been right on the money, as they say. It was 2:23am.

A brief silence ensued, interrupted by Jarvis clearing his throat. “I have been instructed to notify you you’re expected in the yellow bathroom upon your arrival home.”

Peggy, drowsing slightly as she watched the sleeping streets of Manhattan flow past her window, bolted awake, eyes snapping to the rear-view mirror. Jarvis carefully did not meet her gaze.

Knowing they’d been soundly and surely caught, Peggy didn’t quite know what to say.

“I… Mr. Jarvis, I—“

“Miss Carter, I once gave you unsolicited advice about closing yourself off from the very people who would support you.” He glanced at her briefly. “If that advice played any part in your subsequent… connection to Miss Martinelli, I can assure you I am very proud to have been of service.”

“Thank you,” whispered Peggy, tears welling unexpectedly in her eyes. She dashed them away as quickly as they fell. “You’re very kind, Mr. Jarvis.”

At home, Peggy made her way to the yellow bathroom as instructed, gasping lightly with surprise as she entered it.

The flickering golden glow of candlelight emanating from dozens of candles placed carefully around the claw-foot tub lit the room in tones of shadowed honey and smoky amber. Velvety jazz—slow and silky— floated on the cool breeze coming from the open window and it took Peggy a moment to see the radio on the windowsill. It took her another moment still to see Angie in the tub, candlelight coloring her half-lidded gaze with heat.

“Come on in, English,” drawled the young woman lazily. Angie dipped a measure of water out of the tub with her cupped hand and poured it over her delicate skin, burnished bronze in the soft light. “Water’s fine.”

Peggy Carter did not require a second invitation.

Torn between wanting to be in the tub with Angie instantly and wanting to treat her lover to a sensuous show, Peggy compromised, hurrying out of her dress and shoes, but taking her time with the silk slip that clung to her body and the black garters and stockings she knew affected Angie so. When she finally lowered herself into the tub, she groaned with deep, unrestrained appreciation.

The cool water was revitalizing, rousing Peggy’s sleepy brain and refreshing her body just enough that she felt she could carry on a coherent conversation but not so much that she would fail to sleep. The warmth and softness of Angie’s body beneath her and of her hands’ lazy caresses were both comforting and tantalizing.

“How long was your day?” said Angie. It was a statement, not a question.

“How’s the longest,” agreed Peggy, sighing in Angie’s arms. “I’m so glad to be home.”
“I’m glad to have ya home,” said Angie. She dipped a washcloth in the cooling water and set about washing the heat and sweat away from Peggy’s shoulders. “I didn’t know what to think when you called.” She smiled, remembering. “Thanks, by the way, for lettin’ me know you were safe.”

Peggy turned and looked at Angie over her shoulder, candlelight reflecting in her very bright eyes. “Me? Oh, darling, thank you for understanding! The line I was on was unsecured and being recorded. I didn’t know how I was—we’d never—“ Her hands flailed with frustration and she turned again, returning to the cradle of Angie’s arms. “We really must devise a set of phrases we can use on the telephone going forward, my darling. I won’t have you worrying sleepless at home if a simple call can put your mind at ease.”

“We’ll work on it tomorrow. After our next trainin’ lesson. But first, you’re gonna sleep in. You’ve hardly slept at all in the last 36 hours.”

Peggy’s lips twisted with disgust. “If only I could, darling. But I’ve got to be back at the office first thing—and we’re no closer to figuring this plot out than we were when we started. We’ll likely be there all night again tomorrow, too.”

“Wait—I think you better start from the beginning, English. What’s really going on? All I got was the cover story, remember?”

Peggy covered her eyes. “Oh, Angie, I’m so sorry. I’m more tired than I think.” She reached up and placed a sweet kiss at the corner of Angie’s mouth. “Either that or being in this tub with you has addled my brain.”

She recounted the discovery of the waylaid recorded calls, of the connection with Fenhoff/Ivchenko, the deciphering of the telex, and what Wallace and Ramirez had discovered in Alexandria.

“But that’s all we have. Lillian Weatherby might be a woman known as Gloria Grayson who might be Dottie Underwood working under a new name. Something is being sent here tomorrow from Algeria—we think, we’re not entirely sure—but what that something is, no one has the slightest idea. And Dr. Ivchenko is involved, if only tangentially. We have no idea if this is another Leviathan plot or something else entirely!” Peggy slammed her fists into the water, slopping some over the side of the tub. “It’s maddening!”

Angie didn’t respond. Her brows hunched over her eyes like storm clouds and she was deep in thought.

“So…” she said finally, “lemme see if I follow ya here. Someone who may or may not be Dottie Underwood but who worked with Ivchenko in the past has received new orders from someone named Jurgen who says he’s sending her and her mother some ‘mementos’ tomorrow. And the only thing you have to go on for the destination is what again?”

“He mentioned a postcard with a photograph of rowhouses. He said the white steps were ‘striking’, ” Peggy sounded positively morose. “She could be anywhere.”

Angie brightened instantly—though Peggy didn’t see it. “Nah, that’s the easy part, Peg,” she said, smugness evident in her voice. “That’s Baltimore!”

Peggy lifted herself slowly and turned nearly all the way around in the tub to look at Angie’s smiling features with disbelieving eyes. “What?”

“Yeah, I got two aunts who live down there. Patterson Park, just north of the harbor. Both their husbands work at the docks. They live in these really narrow rowhouses with white marble steps
and lemme tell you, the Patterson Park ladies are proud of those steps! There are three kindsa postcards in Baltimore: the wish-you-were-here, the harbor, and the marble steps. I must have six of ‘em stowed in a box in my closet.”

Peggy couldn’t decide what to feel—or so many emotions swirled in her sleep-deprived brain. Relief, pride, urgency, determination, arousal… the maelstrom awakened her senses and her intellect both and she leaned forward until she was just a breath away from Angie’s mouth. She looked into Angie’s pale blue eyes with adoration and lust in equal measure.

“How Angela Maria Martinelli, I’m going to kiss you now. Soundly and thoroughly. Then I’m going to the library. Will you do me the honor of meeting me there when you’ve secured the bathroom against a possible fire?”

She didn’t let Angie respond, but leaned in instead, claiming the blonde’s soft lips in a deeply passionate kiss. When Peggy was through—and she was as thorough as she’d promised—Angie’s eyes fluttered open and the younger woman cleared her throat uncertainly.

“Uhhh… what was the question?” she asked shakily.

Peggy chuckled, gave Angie a quick peck on the cheek, and extricated herself expertly from the tub, wrapping herself in one of the Egyptian cotton bathsheets stacked nearby. She dashed across the tile floor and into the hall before Angie could stop her.

Ten minutes later, Angie found Peggy in the library as promised. She was leaning over the Regency mahogany library table, poring over a series of atlases she’d pulled off the reference shelves. She hadn’t bothered to dress and was, instead, still wearing the bathsheet she’d wrapped herself in on the way out of the bathroom.

“Steady, Eddie,” Angie whispered to herself, still dazed and distracted by Peggy’s kiss. Seeing Peggy conspicuously underdressed and leaning over a table wasn’t helping matters. At all.

“There you are, darling,” said Peggy, glancing quickly over her shoulder. “Come look at these.”

Angie took a deep breath and walked over to look at the open books, studiously ignoring Peggy’s bare legs. She tightened the belt on her robe nervously, feeling overdressed by comparison.

“What’re ya lookin’ at?” she asked, not quite making sense of the maps she saw.

“This is French Algeria and its environs, where we know Jurgen was as recently as the 23rd,” said Peggy, pointing to two different atlases layered one upon the other. She pulled another book closer and pointed out the Eastern Seaboard of America. “This is Alexandria, Virginia, where Lillian-Gloria-Dottie was when she made contact with Jurgen. And this,” she said, pointing out Maryland, “is Baltimore. We know Jurgen is sending something to Baltimore later today. We just don’t know what or how.”

“What other projects was Fenhoff involved in? I mean, other than trying to get half of Manhattan to murder the other half. Do you know?”

“Most recently, he worked with Leviathan. We believe he’s been part of the team grooming young Russian girls to become intelligence operatives. It’s possible he’s known Dottie since she was very young.”

“What a way to grow up,” said Angie darkly, shaking her head.

“Indeed,” agreed Peggy, frowning. “Before that, Fenhoff was attached to Hydra, a secret Nazi unit
attempting to create the perfect soldier. We believe he utilized his mastery of hypnosis and other mind control techniques to reduce the amount of sleep the soldiers required and to render them impervious to pain and other interrogation tactics.”

“And before that?” asked Angie.

It wasn’t the question Peggy had been expecting. “I…I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t think I’ve ever given it much thought. Why?”

Angie shrugged. “Well, Fenhoff is in prison, right? He’s probably gettin’ questioned about Leviathan every day. Jurgen would know that so whatever he’s workin’ on won’t be connected to Leviathan at all. Or to Hydra either—since Jurgen’s probably been told by now you’re on the case.” She crossed her arms and leaned on the table, her blue satin robe parting just enough to give Peggy a tantalizing peek at a long leg. “My guess? Just like Fenhoff knew Dottie a long time ago, Jurgen knew Fenhoff. They worked together on something before the super soldier stuff, something Jurgen thinks we’ve forgotten.”

Peggy tore her eyes away from Angie’s open robe. “But what?” she asked, exasperated. “I don’t have the slightest idea where Fenhoff was before the Hydra unit and Red Skull!” She looked down at the open atlases, completely at a loss. Until she spied a map of Europe with its green-hued Germany. “Unless….”

Peggy leaned across the table and brought the atlas closer, flipping pages until she had a map of Germany alone splayed upon the table.

“Unless what?” asked Angie, hurrying to Peggy’s side.

“In 1936, the German government purchased the right to utilize a large portion of the upper peninsula of this island,” said Peggy, pointing out the Baltic island of Usedom, “including the village of Peenemunde where they promptly built a research center. That research center’s entire focus was on the V-1 and, later, the V-2 rocket program. The best scientific minds in Germany—and sometimes not from Germany—were sent there to design and build guided missiles capable of long-range attacks. Their ultimate goal was to destroy America from the relative safety of home.”

Angie cursed under her breath. “I lost a brother, three uncles, and seven cousins in the war, Peggy. Please tell me we wiped these bastards off the face of the Earth.”

Peggy looked up at Angie with both pain and pride in her eyes. She hadn’t known the extent of Angie’s family’s losses—was, in fact, embarrassed she’d never asked—but in this particular case, Peggy had good, if inadequate, news. “The Germans were nearly successful…until Great Britain discovered the location of the lab and its testing site during a reconnaissance mission. The RAF began a bombing mission called Operation Hydra over the site in 1943. It forced the Germans to relocate underground.” She looked uncertain then, her brows crowding low over her mahogany eyes. “We’ve always believed that’s when Hydra came into being—that the Nazis relocated the entire research center and its staff to an underground location and expanded their focus to include Red Skull’s super soldier and laser weaponry experiments. We thought they’d named the unit Hydra after the RAF’s bombing operation as a way to confuse our intelligence operatives. But…what if we were wrong, Angie?”

Angie looked up, her own features twisted into an expression not unlike a question mark. “We who, English? Were you with that RAF operation?”

A shadow of sadness swept across Peggy’s eyes. “Not that one, no. I…my unit took part in the operation that destroyed Red Skull’s underground laboratory.”
Angie’s eyes widened. “Wait.” She splayed her palms in front of her as if to ward off an onrushing train, her brain working a mile a minute. “Are you tellin’ me you were—” Her eyes widened even more as she made the connection Peggy had been expecting her to make for weeks now. “You’re Betty Carver! Which means—” Angie stopped suddenly, the implications of her discovery hitting her like the proverbial train she’d been holding off just a second ago.

Peggy shook her head. “Steve and I never…. We weren’t….together.” Pain, old but still sharp, welled in her eyes. “Perhaps we would have been. If he’d…. If he’d lived.” Peggy had been dreading this particular conversation, had wanted to avoid it all together, if possible. Would she fall into grief again? Would the knowledge of what might have been with Steve ruin what she had with Angie now?

Deep sorrow replaced the surprise in Angie’s startled features. She stepped forward and enfolded Peggy in her arms.

“Oh, Peg,” she said, blinking back tears. “I’m so sorry.” She thought of all the times she’d had that stupid radio show on at the Automat, of all the times she’d gone on and on about Captain America and how great he was…. It must have been like a knife twisting in Peggy’s guts every single time and she had never let it show—not even once. “I’m so, so sorry.” She leaned back just enough to look into Peggy’s copper-coffee eyes, now rimed with tears. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It wasn’t safe to tell you anything before, my darling. I was just a girl working for the telephone company, remember? And after….” Peggy made a small gesture meant to encompass everything that had happened between the two of them since her cover had been blown. “It never seemed the right time,” she confessed sheepishly. “I was afraid…. Afraid it would change things between us.”

Angie rolled her eyes briefly and sighed. “Ya big knucklehead,” she whispered, shaking her head. A small, rueful smile tugged at her lips. “Nothin’ can change how I feel about you, English. Not even you bein’ Captain America’s girl.” She brushed a damp curl of Peggy’s hair out of her eyes. “I’m just sorry you’ve been grievin’ him all alone, Peg. I wish I’da known.”

Peggy smiled wanly. “You know now,” she pointed out.

“I do,” agreed Angie. “So if you ever need a shoulder, I’ve got two. They’re all yours, okay? Always have been, always will be.”

Peggy’s eyes filled with liquid emotion. “Oh, Angie, darling,” she said, pulling the younger woman into her arms. “Whatever would I do without you?”

“For one thing, you’d still be wondering where these ‘mementos’ are headin’,” deadpanned the actress. She released Peggy gently, looking at her with new, admiring eyes. “Now tell me what happened the day you and Cap saved the world. Why do you think you were wrong about the underground lab?”

Peggy balked at Angie’s words, not certain she felt comfortable with her heroic description of the battle with Red Skull. Whatever else it meant to the world, whatever else might be documented in her war record, to Peggy it would only ever be the day Steve had died.

“We destroyed it utterly, capturing Dr. Zola and freeing their captives—Allied soldiers they’d been using as experimentation subjects.” Peggy pushed past the painful memories and turned her mind’s eye to the minutiae of the weeks after the attack, to the endless hours spent cataloging what was left of Hydra’s laboratory, their equipment, and its possible uses.

“Do you know the one thing we never found, my darling?” she asked, quickly reviewing her
memory of the entire underground compound from top to bottom. “In all the wreckage, in all those underground labs with all those incredibly advanced devices, the one thing we never found was evidence of the V-2 rocket program.”

“But…the plane…” Angie’s voice was plaintive and hesitant. Now that she knew what Peggy had lost that day, she hated having to dredge it all up again. But everyone and their mother knew that Captain America had died in a Nazi plane, ditching it in the freezing ocean rather than letting it crash into Manhattan. He’d never been found.

“It was a bomber, Angie. We all thought they’d abandoned the rocket program in favor of Red Skull’s aircraft designs—that the entirety of the Peenemunde research center had relocated with Red Skull to his underground laboratory and had been working on the bomber. But what if there was a split amongst the researchers? What if Red Skull, Dr. Zola, and Dr. Fenhoff founded Hydra while those scientists loyal to the V-2 rocket program—including Jurgen—continued on with their work in another underground facility?”

Angie paled, turning as white as an egg. “Peggy—do you think Jurgen finished it? The long-range missile, I mean. Is that what he’s sending today?”

Peggy blanched and stiffened, gripping the edge of the table to steady herself. Then she relaxed, but only just. She shook her head.

“If he’d perfected the long-range missiles, he’d send them to New York and Washington. Perhaps to Norfolk, Virginia and other clearly military targets.” She traced the coast of Maryland in the atlas. “Not to Baltimore. Most of the military production has stopped there.” She shrugged, at a loss. “Baltimore must be expedient for another reason.”

Angie snorted. “I don’t know how,” she said, her voice laced with derision. “I mean, unless you wanna lose somethin’ at the docks. My Uncle Tony—the one I clocked when I was a kid—he says Baltimore harbor’s got more holes than all the Swiss cheese in Switzerland. And more people on the take than Chicago and New York combined. He says he could take my Aunt Stella to Italy for a whole month on what he makes under the table in a year!”

Once again, Peggy found herself staring wide-eyed at Angie Martinelli as another puzzle piece quietly clicked into place.

“Oh, it’s brilliant,” she said, looking off into the distance as her mind raced.

“What? What’s ‘brilliant’?” asked Angie. She could practically see the gears turning in Peggy’s head.

Peggy stayed silent a moment longer, working through her theory privately before sharing it. She wanted to make certain it was sound before she took any action. Eventually her eyes focused back on Angie’s. There were missing pieces, to be sure, but her theory was plausible. Frighteningly so.

“Right. Germany’s in chaos after the war, yes?” she said, leaning over the atlases again. “Overrun with Allied soldiers and politicians, all clamoring for a piece of the Teutonic pie, as it were. In fact, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if a different American unit discovered and destroyed Jurgen’s underground rocket laboratory, wherever it was.”

Peggy spent a moment searching the map of Germany for a likely spot but quickly gave it up. “Doesn’t matter,” she reminded herself. “Say Jurgen and a few of his fellow rocketeers escaped. So many loyal to the Nazi party have, after all. Say they had the critical data from their research and they wanted to rebuild, wanted to continue the rocket program. Say they spent a few months trying
to set up shop in Eastern Europe or Africa, but the chaos was devastating to them.” Peggy looked up, a cocky grin playing around her lips. “Germans love their schedules, after all. They’re the reason we have the phrase ‘runs like clockwork.’”

“If Europe and Africa are out, so are Russia and Japan—for even bigger reasons. Where would Jurgen’s team go?”

“To the only place on Earth that became more organized because of the war.” When Angie still looked confused, she said, “Here. To America.”

Angie’s features transitioned from confusion to shock to a mad grin all in a flash. “You’re kiddin’ me, right?”

“No,” said Peggy, deadly serious. “I’m not. It all makes perfect sense.”

Angie crossed her arms tightly over her chest, a thunderous frown crashing between her brows, obliterating her grin. “You better explain it to me then, English. Because I’m not gettin’ it.”

A little taken aback by Angie’s change of mood, Peggy hurried to explain. “We have to assume only a small group of scientists escaped. Jurgen wanted to continue his rocket program but there was nowhere safe to rebuild close to home. Europe’s infrastructure had been annihilated; he couldn’t get what he needed there. The team wouldn’t have had anything with them except for research notes and diagrams. They needed supplies, a laboratory but the SSR and other American agencies have proven themselves to be very good at keeping American technology in America. They couldn’t get what they needed that way, either. The entirety of the American Intelligence community is positively paranoid rogue Russian and German agents are here, working to destroy the American way of life. I should know.”

“Considerin’ what happened just a few months ago,” said Angie, “they ain’t wrong.”

“No, they aren’t. At least about that part. However, what if our agencies are so focused on technology leaving American soil, they’re overlooking technology and other resources coming into America?”

The storm of Angie’s features broke and dissipated as she considered the question. “So Jurgen rebuilt his lab somewhere here.”

“Where else? America has operational laboratories, a superb railway system, and no shortage of patriotic fervor for creating the next big thing. Look at Howard!”

Angie’s mouth twisted in disgust. “And if they’re all as good as Dottie was at fittin’ in, no one will ever guess they’re Nazis or Russians or whatever.”

“Exactly,” said Peggy. “And how much easier will it be to destroy America from American soil?”

“So whatta we do now, Pegs?”

The grandfather clock in the corner of the library began to chime just then and Peggy’s eyes flicked to it, surprised to find it was already five o’clock in the morning.

“Damn!” she said, frowning. “I feel as if I’ll never sleep again.” Turning to Angie, she said, “Darling, I need you to look over these maps.” She pulled an atlas of the United States of America across the table. “See if you can find any obvious locations for Jurgen’s new laboratory. In the meantime, I think it’s time we had Howard over for tea, don’t you?”
Angie raised an eyebrow at the British woman. “Now?” she asked innocently.

“Yes, now,” replied Peggy, annoyed. “I need to speak with him before I return to the office. We don’t have much time.”

“We have enough time to get dressed before we start invitin’ guests over for tea. I don’t know about you, English, but I’m not awake enough to show off my new defense moves to Mr. Stark.” Angie looked pointedly at Peggy’s abbreviated attire.

Peggy followed Angie’s gaze. “Bloody Nora,” she swore. “I’d forget my own head if it weren’t attached.” She held out her hand. “Come on, darling. You, too.” She grimaced. “I need Howard in one piece for the foreseeable future and I’m likely to pluck his eyes out if he waggles those ridiculous eyebrows of his at you because of that robe.”

Angie giggled. “I’d pay to see that.”

Peggy rolled her eyes. “As would Howard, probably.”

An hour later, Peggy Carter and Howard Stark sat across from one another at a French Empire table with marquetry inlay, drinking strong, black coffee. Angie sat across the room on her favorite settee, poring over the US atlas, occasionally jotting notes in a stenographer’s notebook.

“I gotta tell you, Peggy,” said Howard after hearing Peggy’s theory. “As far-fetched as I think your theory is, it scares the hell outta me.”

“And just how is my theory far-fetched, Howard?” asked Peggy, her eyes flashing. “If you’ll recall, Leviathan infiltrated the Roxxon refinery for the sole purpose of manufacturing your nitramene in vast quantities, the formula for which they’d stolen from your vault. They also managed to steal your failed ‘productivity aid’ and sent you to drop it in the middle of Times Square where it would have killed thousands!”

“But a lab here in America? Run by Nazis and Russian intelligence?” He rubbed the back of his neck, frowning. “And not just any lab—a lab working on rockets. It’s just….” He looked at Peggy, his eyes as serious as she’d ever seen them. “You don’t know what’s going on, Peg. How important rockets and missiles are becoming. A friend of mine in California has been working on a liquid rocket fuel for a while now. I haven’t talked to him in months. The feds have him locked down so tight, he’s not even allowed to have a telephone in his house. They think we’re in a race with the Germans and the Russians.” He sighed and looked into his coffee cup, a frown creasing his forehead. “If what you’re telling me is true, we are.”

Peggy leaned forward. “Not just a race—a race on their own soil.” She sighed, too, but out of frustration. “Was there another underground lab in Germany, Howard? Do we know that at least?”

Howard looked at her for a long moment, his features unreadable. Finally, he gave her a short nod. “Yeah. I don’t know much about it but we got ‘em. Americans, I mean. It was in a forest somewhere. Up north. I remember hearing something about a big fire. I don’t know.” He shrugged, wishing he had more information for her. “I can make some calls.”

“Don’t. I don’t want to tip our hand and we don’t know who we can trust at this point. I suspect some agencies have been infiltrated with double agents.”

“Then what can I do?” Howard balled his hands into fists on the table. “I have to do something, Peg.” He was a man of action—always had been. He wanted to help.

“Go to California, Howard. Help that scientist friend of yours. We need to be first with liquid rocket
fuel and the formula must stay in American hands.” She looked him squarely in the eyes. “You’re the only one I trust on both counts.”

Howard nodded again. “I’ll fly out today,” he said. “What’re you going to do?”

Peggy grimaced. “I’m going to Baltimore,” she said. “Whether Jack Thompson wants to send me there or not.”

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In the end, Peggy convinced Jack Thompson to send her to Baltimore with the help of one of Angie’s aunt’s postcards and the frankly welcome news that the ‘mementos’—whatever they were—were probably traveling via cargo ship and would take 8 or 10 days to arrive. Relieved by the unexpected breathing space—and possibly seeing an opportunity to rid himself of Peggy once and for all if she was wrong—he eagerly made her a part of the tactical team going to Baltimore, along with Wallace and Li.

Peggy spent all of Sunday in bed with Angie, sleeping (mostly), and all of Monday working on logistics with her team. Knowing Wallace would balk at any hint of leadership from her, Peggy opted to let him take the lead in the planning—and was pleasantly surprised by his methodical and thorough consideration of the obstacles and challenges of the mission.

By Tuesday, their resources had been requisitioned and their covers had been established. Wallace headed down to Baltimore almost immediately to start work as a new dock foreman at the international container transfer facility. His father and uncle still worked the docks at New York Harbor and he had the lingo and the bearing down. Plus he was built like a tank. No one would have any problem believing his cover.

Li, on the other hand, with his slight build and his Chinese heritage, would arrive late Wednesday afternoon dressed to the nines. His cover was that of an international importer/exporter whose shipment of Chinese art and antiquities was a week overdue. He would be both belligerent and obsequious in his attempt to get dock workers to locate and deliver his goods and he’d have a ready supply of cash with which to grease the proverbial wheels. His cover would put him on the docks every day, perfectly positioned to demand to see every new manifest, eyes open for any unusual shipments or suspicious activity.

Peggy would revisit one of the covers she used while helping Howard and would arrive as a cargo inspector with a questionable reputation. Instead of inspecting milk trucks, however, she would be inspecting restricted and quarantined cargo: livestock, plants and trees, produce and other foodstuffs along with flammable, chemical, and mineral shipments. Wallace, arriving ahead of her, would spread the rumor that she could be bribed. The hope was someone would do just that—attempt to bribe her to look the other way when offloading whatever Jurgen had sent.

Packing for her trip at home, Peggy encountered the first resistance she’d had all week to her team’s carefully-constructed plan.

“You ain’t goin’ alone, Margaret Elizabeth Carter, and that’s the end of it.” Angie Martinelli stood just inside their bedroom door, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, a scowl as big as the moon etched into her unusually severe features.

“I’m not really going alone, Angie,” Peggy said, trying to mollify her. She failed to adequately hide her bemused grin at the usage of her full name and Angie’s scowl deepened. “Each of us is traveling separately so as not to arouse suspicion but we will all be working together once we arrive in Baltimore.”
“And what about on your way there? What about when you aren’t at the docks pretendin’ to be some crummy hoof n’ mouth inspector on the take?”

Peggy raised a single eyebrow. “I’m perfectly capable of traveling by train alone, Angie,” she said curtly. “As for my—or should I say ‘Lucille Bascomb’s’—free time, Jack has secured accommodations at The Mount Royal Hotel. I’m certain it will be perfectly safe.”

“The Griffin was perfectly safe, too—until Dottie Underwood took a room down the hall,” said Angie, continuing to glower.

Peggy sighed and dropped the rose-pink cardigan she’d been folding, leaving it rumpled on her open suitcase. She walked over to where Angie still stood, grumbling like a cantankerous radiator.

Peggy cupped Angie’s cheek in her hand and smiled softly as she gazed into the younger woman’s unhappy eyes.

“I love you, too, darling,” she said simply, watching with tenderness the effect her quiet declaration had on the younger woman.

Angie’s eyes widened momentarily before her irises shaded into summer seaside blue and she smiled shyly, her cheeks pinking as she blushed.

“You think I’m bein’ silly, don’t you?” she asked.

Peggy shook her head. “Not at all. Angie, if the situations were reversed, I know I would feel exactly the same way. This part—the separation during a mission—is never easy.” She looked into the middle distance, memories misting her eyes. “When duty calls, though, we answer,” she said absently, the rat-a-tat of remembered machine gun fire slowly fading away.

Angie understood both the determination and the loneliness present in that statement and set her mouth in a grim line.

“Then we compromise,” she said, watching with satisfaction as her words brought Peggy back to the present. “Maybe I can’t help you. Maybe I can’t go with you. But that doesn’t mean I can’t go at all.”

“What?” Peggy looked at Angie, not understanding.

“I haven’t seen Tony and Stella since their first baby was born and that was three years ago. They got another one already, just about to have his first birthday. Carmine.” She looked up at the ceiling, her features scrunching up as she shook her head. “No, that’s not it. Carlito? Claudio?” When she caught Peggy’s amused look, she snorted. “You try to keep up with my cousins! My ma’s got eight brothers and five sisters and that’s just one side of the family!”

Peggy’s eyes widened. “Bloody Nora!” she swore again, not realizing how large a family Angie came from. She thought about someday meeting them all and paled visibly, wondering how she could possibly survive such an encounter. She envisioned groaning tables of food laid out on red gingham table cloths, endless raffia-wrapped bottles of red wine, and red velvet décor. She pictured hearty, barrel-chested men slapping each other on the back, women with hawk eyes gossiping in the kitchen as they stirred steaming pots of marinara, and so many children running underfoot it made her dizzy.

“Anyway, my point is maybe I take a train down to Baltimore to see my Aunt Stella’s new baby.” She cast about for the baby’s name again. “Costanzo.” After a minute, she shook her head again, putting her hands on her hips. “Nope. That’s not it either. Doesn’t matter. What matters is I’ll be in
Baltimore in case you need me.”

Peggy tore her mind’s eye away from the terrifying prospect of dinner with the extended Martinelli clan and turned her attention back to Angie, feeling very much as if she’d missed something. “Pardon me?” she said.

“I’ll be right back. I’m gonna go get my suitcase. It’s under the bed in my old room.” Angie slipped into the hall before Peggy could stop her.

“Suitcase?” Peggy hurried to the doorway, stopping at the threshold. “Angie? What are you talking about?” she called. “What suitcase?”


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As far as Angie Martinelli was concerned, this super spy business was for the birds. She’d been in Baltimore for four days and—other than a single brief rendezvous with Peggy at a White Coffee Pot diner on the outskirts of town—not one exciting thing had happened.

On her second evening, after being peed on one too many times while changing little Cosmo’s diapers, Angie took to strolling along the harbor alone after dinner, hoping to see or hear something useful and feeling closer to Peggy somehow in the process. Her hopes were dashed evening after evening, hearing only the usual dockside banter between longshoremen and foremen and sailors and captains. And she never once caught the slightest glimpse of Peggy—as Lucille Bascomb or as anyone else.

Still, it was a pleasant outing and it gave her time to think. Long days with squalling children, cooking, and cleaning did not leave her time for much else. She missed the peace and quiet of the mansion back home.

The fifth evening was no different than the rest—after helping to clear the table, she skipped down the marble steps of her aunt’s house on Montford and walked to the end of the street where she entered the park. She followed the western walkway through the grounds and trees, peering nosily at the couples walking arm in arm or families out for an evening stroll. After a few minutes, she exited the park onto Lombard where she walked a few blocks down to Collington to pick up the westbound P line to the harbor. Usually, she’d take the bus all the way to Lombard and Calvert, where she’d hop off and walk down to Pratt Street, following her nose to the salt water past the closed up shops. Tonight, though, Angie got off at Gay Street near the Customs House, having heard the night before that a big ship was coming in. Gay Street went all the way down to Pier 3 and Angie thought she might get a glimpse of the ship as it docked.

A glimpse was all she got.

The big boat wouldn’t be coming all the way in to the inner harbor but she could see black smoke billowing out of its smokestack and the very tops of the tall winches, like porcupine needles, over the harbor buildings. If she leaned out over the railing as far as she dared, she could almost see its flag waving from the bow.

Angie felt excitement bubble up from her middle at the sight, wondering if this would be the ship with the famed “mementos,” wondering if Peggy and her team would finally be able to intercept
whatever Jurgen had sent and they could all go home. She tried to see how to get down to the outer harbor from where she was, but she wasn’t having much luck. Just as she decided to head further down the pier to a better vantage point, she heard her name called from behind her.

“Angie? Angie Martinelli, is that you?”

Angie froze, still awkwardly leaning over the gunmetal gray railing. Eventually, she pried herself loose and slowly turned around, a surprised grin plastered across her face. There was no mistaking the voice.

Well, that answers that, she thought.

“Iowa?” she asked, her own voice at least half an octave above normal. The accent was the same but little else was. Dottie Underwood—or whoever she was—no longer sported saddle shoes and tartan skirts under a cloud of bottle blonde hair. Instead, her narrow features seemed longer somehow, framed as they were by ebony finger waves. A charcoal turtleneck sweater and dark gray pleated slacks completed the look. She couldn’t have looked any more like a femme fatale if she tried.

Dottie smiled enigmatically but it never reached her eyes. “Let’s forgo our little games, shall we?” she suggested, her bubbly Iowa accent falling away as if it had never existed. She cast her eyes around their immediate surroundings. “Where’s your…friend, Angie?” When she didn’t see anyone nearby, she added, “Surely Peggy wouldn’t allow you to do reconnaissance on your own, would she? How careless of her.”

Angie didn’t answer immediately, well aware from her training that Dottie’s questions—no matter how damning they sounded—might just be her way of fishing for information. She tried for indignation instead, hoping to throw Dottie off.

“Peggy Carter? Boy, you’re sure out of the loop, Iowa. Peggy Carter was arrested! They think she’s some sorta traitor—“

A hard slap across her mouth cut off Angie’s lie. Dottie, much closer in proximity now and having moved seemingly in the blink of an eye, leaned in to whisper in Angie’s ear.

“Consider that your only warning,” she said darkly. “I said no games. I make it a habit to say what I mean.”

Angie swallowed slowly, tasting the tang of blood on her tongue. “What do you want?” she asked, schooling her voice to be hard, cold. Inside, she trembled.

Dottie looked at Angie for a long, terrifying moment before she pushed the younger woman away from her. She turned her back on the actress, retrieving a pair of black gloves from the small clutch she wore across her lean frame.

“Did she tell you she threw me out a window?” Dottie asked, her sickeningly sweet Iowa accent returning. She pulled the gloves on slowly.

Angie didn’t answer.

“She broke my leg in two places. I was in traction for weeks.” Murder glittered in Dottie’s pale blue eyes when she turned around. “I spent every moment of it dreaming of ways to kill Peggy Carter.”

Dottie took two steps toward Angie, forcing her backward. Angie caught the scent of danger a second too late and cried out when two men gripped her arms painfully. A third covered her mouth
with tape.

Dottie grinned—a terrible, serpentine slither of lips and teeth.

“It never occurred to me that I would be able to do it without harming a single hair on her head,” she said sweetly, drawing one gloved index finger down Angie’s cheek. Angie flinched away but found her chin held in an iron grip. “You see, Angie, I know all about our Margaret Elizabeth Carter. What she does…. Where she works…. Where she goes when she ‘clocks out’…. If the two of you haven’t made Howard Stark’s abandoned Brooklyn Heights mansion a love nest by now, you soon would have.”

Angie fought Dottie’s grip again, this time harder, her eyes turning indigo with rage. Dottie laughed. “Already?” she asked. “Delicious! I wish I had the time to hear all the details, Angie, but I’m behind schedule as it is. Pawel will take care of you for me, won’t you, Pawel?”

The thug holding Angie’s left arm laughed a low, menacing laugh.

Dottie let go of Angie’s chin and patted her cheek gently. “I know something else about our Margaret Elizabeth Carter,” she said. “Shall I tell you?”

Angie couldn’t answer but her eyes flashed with contempt. Dottie barreled on, not caring. “I know her first love lies drowned at the bottom of a cold, lonely sea somewhere no one will ever reach him. His death almost broke her. Did you know that? She was on the radio with him as the plane went down. She heard it hit the water.” She clucked her tongue with mock pity before grinning again, this time with genuine glee. “Imagine how she’ll feel when they find you at the bottom of this filthy harbor.”

Angie’s eyes widened with horror and she threw every ounce of her bodyweight into a wild thrash, attempting to break her captors’ grips and escape. Dottie’s glee soured into irritation and she gave Pawel a cutting hand signal. He hit Angie on the back of the head with his blackjack and she went limp instantly.

“Put her in the container we’re using for the guards,” said Dottie, nodding to Pawel. “We can rid ourselves of two birds with one stone, as they say.” Her eyes went hard. “Maybe three. We might be able to keep Peggy Carter from interfering with our mission by giving her something more… personal…to worry about. Meet us at the rendezvous point when you’re finished.”

Pawel nodded and dragged Angie into the hazy purple dusk.

Dottie and her two remaining brutes headed to the outer harbor.

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Dusk descended with an ominous violet hue and there was little to guide Peggy Carter’s steps except a few buzzing electric lamps high overhead and the odd rectangle of golden light from the windows of an occupied building here or there.

Resplendently overdressed in her alter-ego’s mouse-brown wig, cat-eye glasses with a gold chain, and pink cardigan tucked under a white lab coat, she stalked angrily toward the container transfer facility’s offices. Her tweed skirt swished noisily as she hurried to meet Butch Wallace, murder on her mind.

*How dare he?* she thought. Sending a non-agent—an innocent!—with such a poorly coded message
was completely irresponsible. What if he’d been caught? What if he’d been killed? The young man in question—a child, really—wasn’t even on the harbor’s payroll! He was one of the many unoccupied youths who haunted the docks for scraps of whatever they needed, like teenaged gulls snatching attention or purpose or sustenance out of the air. Jock, he called himself. When he looked more like a Billy or a Danny, fresh-faced and eager and entirely out of place in a place so devoid of softness and care.

“Here, miss,” he’d said, interrupting one of her many inspections. “A message for you from transfer.”

Peggy had covered her shock with a matronly scowl, snatching the scrap of paper from his hand and shooing him away like a mosquito. He’d laughed as he jogged away.

The note said: *My ship has finally come in! Meet me at six at our normal spot. I have something special for you. DS*

She was still clutching it, balled up in her fist as she made a beeline for her usual meeting spot with Wallace. She planned to throw it at him just before she slapped him.

As she neared the transfer office and the dark corner behind the electrical shed they’d been using as a rendezvous point, she heard something that penetrated the running litany of ways she was planning to eviscerate her colleague. She ducked behind a row of crates and backed into the shadows, realizing as she did so she was still wearing her white inspector’s lab coat.

*That won’t do,* she thought.

As she stripped it off, the unusual sound grew louder.

She found a narrow crack between two crates that allowed her a limited view of the walkway she’d just come from. As she watched, a stocky man not much taller than herself came into view. Or rather, the back of him came into view. He was dragging something heavy wrapped in a tarpaulin and tied with a thick coil of rope and he grunted softly with each monumental pull. After a moment, he dropped his burden and stood up, stretching to relieve the kinks in his back.

“Ach! Jesteś ciężkie jak martwego wół! Jestem zbyt zmęczony na to!” he said under his breath.

*Polish?* The hair on the back of Peggy’s neck stood on end. International harbor or no, speaking Polish out loud these days would be dangerous for any legitimate sailor. The key word being *legitimate.* And what—or who—was he calling “heavy like a dead ox?”

She watched him as he looked around, peering at the row of crates thoughtfully for a moment. He rubbed the small of his back then bent over to grab his burden again, adjusting his route so he was heading right where Peggy was hiding. As he came closer, Peggy could see the soles of a pair of work boots sticking out of the tarp-wrapped bundle.

She cursed a blue streak under her breath and pressed herself deeper into the darkness, bumping something cold and hard with her calf. She reached down and smiled. A crowbar was a very useful tool and she hefted it happily, waiting for the squat, stocky man to back into her hiding place just enough so he could no longer be seen from the boardwalk. When she was certain neither he nor she could be seen, she stepped up behind him and rendered him instantly unconscious with one well-aimed swing of iron.

Moving quickly, Peggy untied the tarpaulin, revealing a softly snoring Butch Wallace. She checked him and discovered a tender lump at the base of his skull as well as a note telling him there was an
emergency at the transfer office written in a distinctly feminine hand. It was unsigned—unlike her note—and she realized her cover had been blown. Butch’s, too, apparently.

Peggy rolled up her lab coat and put it under Butch’s head. He was going to wake up with one hell of a headache later, not to mention how angry he’d be when he realized he’d been made. She was at least gratified to learn he hadn’t been the one to send that child with a note for her. It was small consolation.

After making Butch as comfortable as she could, she took stock of what she knew. She and Butch had been made. The ‘mementos’ from Jurgen must be arriving tonight because someone obviously wanted she and Butch out of the way, hence the notes designed to maneuver them out in the open together. Something had gone wrong along the way, though. Jock had delivered his note later than intended or Butch had been early to the rendezvous point. Whatever the reason, the plan hadn’t worked as expected.

*Whoever’s in charge should have chosen someone less slothful to sweep up the mess,* she thought. Short-and-squat had obviously been tasked with taking out both she and Butch and he’d cocked the whole thing up.

Peggy grinned. There was no reason why she shouldn’t benefit from his failure.

She stripped him and rolled him up in the tarp with her Lucille Bascomb costume. Let him explain *that* to his keepers when they found him later. If they ever did. If they didn’t and Butch woke before his captor did, well, she wasn’t going to lose any sleep over what might happen then.

She donned the Polish man’s clothes, surprised by how well they fit, all things considered. He was close to her height so she didn’t have to roll the cuffs of the pants as much as she thought she might, but his girth required the confiscation of Butch’s belt and the size of his feet required the judicious use of some straw filler she found in an open crate. She twisted her hair up into the man’s knit cap and pulled it low over her eyes. She wouldn’t fool anyone up close, but from a distance, in the lengthening shadows of the oncoming night, she might be overlooked long enough to make a difference.

She gripped the crowbar tightly.

First, though, she had to find Mike Li.

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The first thing Angie Martinelli noticed when her eyes popped open was how dark it was. Well, maybe it wasn’t the first thing. It was the second. The first thing she noticed was the pounding headache she had.

*Steady Eddie,* she cautioned herself. She wanted to sit up. She wanted to rub the back of her neck. She wanted to curse in three different languages. Instead, she did what Peggy had taught her to do: she took stock of her surroundings.

Whatever she was laying on was cold and metal. She could smell bleach, salt water, diesel fuel, and sweat. She heard someone snoring to her left. And it was dark. She counted to sixty in her head but the darkness didn’t improve very much. The snoring, on the other hand, got louder.

She sat up without making a sound and felt the world sway in competing angles. The first felt like residual effects from the knock to her noggin. The second felt like actual swinging and it brought the sound of creaking rope to her ears.
She put two and two together and sighed aggrievedly.

“Someone there?” came a harsh but uncertain whisper. It came from her left side, close to where the snoring seemed to be coming from. The voice was male and didn’t seem to have an accent. Still, it didn’t pay to be stupid.

Angie deepened her voice and made a non-committal grunt.

“That you, Frank?”

She didn’t answer.

“I figured you’d been hit too when nobody came to help. What’s goin’ on?”

Again, Angie didn’t answer. The soft burr of snoring hadn’t stopped but the man seemed to be ignoring it—or maybe hadn’t heard it. Darkness and fear could do strange things to a person. Putting the owner of the voice aside for the moment, Angie did a quick inventory of her person. She was still dressed and shod—both good things. Her handbag was gone—not surprising but unfortunate. She had a pocket light in there, one from Peggy’s kit from the war. It would have been useful right about now.

She probed the tender spot at the base of her skull and found only a helluva bruise. It’d need ice later—if there was a later—but it wasn’t life threatening. She stretched her legs and arms quietly and found herself unrestrained.

Morons, she thought happily. Just as Peggy had predicted, her captors had underestimated her because of her fairer sex. Definitely a plus in her book.

“Frank? Is that you?”

The voice was becoming more desperate now. Angie decided she’d better come clean before he did something dumb.

“I sure ain’t Frank, mister,” she said. “Who’re you?”

The man’s gasp echoed in the container. “A girl?” he asked. “How—what—what’s a girl doing mixed up in this?”


“Jimmy, ma’am,” came the quick reply. “Jimmy Logan. Harbor security. Who are you?”


There was a muffled search, then Jimmy’s sad voice. “No, ma’am. Looks like they took it.”

“Figures. What about your friend, the snorer? Betcha that’s Frank.”

Another muffled search produced a short, quiet cheer. “I think you’re right, ma’am.” A flare of white light sliced through the darkness of the container and hit Angie square in the eyes, blinding her.

“Hey!” She slammed her eyes shut and rolled away from the light. “Turn it off! What if they’re watchin’ us?”

She heard the click as Jimmy snapped the flashlight off again. “Sorry, ma’am! Didn’t think about
that.” He cursed when the blackness swallowed them again. “Can’t see anything now.”

“No, really?” The sarcasm in Angie’s voice was cutting. She slid herself in the direction of the young, green guard. “Hand it over before you get us all killed!” she said, holding her hand out in the darkness.

Jimmy groped for her hand then relinquished the flashlight to her. “Sorry, ma’am.”

“Save your sorries for when this is all over, Jimmy,” said Angie as she covered the glass of the flashlight with her gabardine skirt. “And stop callin’ me ‘ma’am.’ Angie’ll do.” She switched the light on under her skirt and a muted pool of bluish light surrounded her. She blinked a few times then grinned at Jimmy. “Now we’re cookin’,” she said.

Jimmy—a pasty redhead who looked every bit as green as she thought he would be—grinned back. The effect was ghastly in the weird light. “Yes, ma’am—er—Angie.”

A quick examination of Frank Ward revealed a similar lump at the base of his skull and a hidden flask of cheap bourbon, half drained.

“That might explain why he’s still snorin’!” said Angie, chuckling. She took a swig of the bourbon and handed it to Jimmy. “It’ll wake you up,” she explained when he looked at her dubiously. “We’ve got work to do.”

Jimmy took a swig and gasped at the burn. Bourbon clearly wasn’t his drink. Angie suspected he was still into milk. “What work?” he asked, handing the flask back.

Angie kept herself from rolling her eyes but it was a near thing. “Well, I don’t know about you, Jimmy, but I ain’t stickin’ around to see what they have planned for us. We’re gettin’ outta here.” She panned the muted light on the door of the container and cursed to herself. No help there. They were sealed in a long-haul shipping container—one that couldn’t be opened from the inside. And the swaying she felt earlier definitely meant they were hoisted—which explained why no one had bothered to tie them up. No need. They were about as stuck as stuck could be.

She panned the covered light around the rest of the container, noticing stacks of cardboard boxes in the back. She hauled herself off the floor and carefully made her way toward them, shining her light on the words printed on the side: Sani-Flush toilet cleaner.

Useless, she thought. Just as she started to turn away in disgust, though, she remembered two of her older brothers—Joey and Vin—hounding her after school one afternoon.

“Ang, where’s Ma keep the Sani-Flush?” they’d asked. She’d made a smart-ass remark about them actually doing some housework but showed them the shelf in the cellar where their mother kept all the dangerous cleaners—stuff with the word POISON in big red letters or with the tell-tale skull and crossbones on the side. The boys had grabbed the Sani-Flush container and one of their mother’s Pyrex bowls and had run outside with both. Angie’d found them in the alley, dropping pennies in a mixture of Sani-Flush and water to watch them bubble and hiss.

Back in the here and now, she panned her light upward in a sudden flash of insight. If water turned Sani-Flush into an acid then shipping containers hauling the stuff would have to be vented to cut down on condensation—especially in the summer, like now. But where would they put them?

“What’re ya lookin’ for?” asked Jimmy. He came a few steps toward her but stopped in the center of the container when his movement caused the whole thing to sway again.

“Air vents. Probably two of them. They’d be high up ‘cuz hot air rises—bingo!” Angie didn’t
know where Dottie Underwood was getting her henchmen from but she thought the ex-blonde might want to rethink her arrangement. These louts were dumber than soap and half as useful.

She pointed the muted light at a square aluminum vent and then grinned at her sidekick. “You wouldn’t happen to have a screwdriver on ya, would ya, Jimmy?” she asked.

“No, ma’am,” he said, but he was grinning to beat the band. “But I have something that might do the trick.”

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Peggy Carter affected what she hoped resembled the loping cadence of a burly Polish brute but she could not be certain of her success. The discovery of the man’s weapon of choice—a blackjack tucked deeply into a pocket—made her feel slightly more secure and also envious. Why did men’s clothing have such useful things? The pockets in most women’s’ trousers were ridiculously tiny.

As she neared the outer harbor where the newest arrival had berthed, she sensed rather than saw movement from her right. She ducked under a powerful blow and spun in a fluid, graceful motion, raising the crowbar in defense as she faced her silent attacker.

Mike Li, dressed all in black, aborted whatever move he was planning next as his eyes met Peggy’s in the half-light.

“Carter?” he asked, his voice a harsh whisper.

Peggy nodded at him sharply, lowering the crowbar. “Butch and I were made,” she said, getting right to the point. “Butch is unconscious, as is the man who loaned me this clothing. Our shipment must have arrived.”

Li uncurled himself from his low crouch and chuckled to himself. Only Peggy Carter would successfully sidestep a silent Hung Gar attack while dressed as a Polish dockworker and be completely unfazed.

“Yes,” he said. “It has. The longshoremen I’ve been bribing let me know there were some manifest irregularities on this ship. When I couldn’t locate Wallace or you, I decided I would have to do my own reconnaissance.”

Peggy looked Mike Li up and down, impressed by his initiative and his execution of it. “You have hidden depths, Agent Li,” she noted, raising a single eyebrow.

“It’s not only women’s skills our fellow agents are happy to overlook,” he said coldly.

And there it was: the hierarchical truth of the matter. People like Jack Thompson and Butch Wallace were lauded as leaders and heroes despite their many faults simply because they had the right color skin or the right last name. Everyone who differed occupied a lower rung on the ladder. McKnight, with his Irish heritage, outranked Caruso and Garafalo, with their Italian heritage. They, in turn, outranked Krzeminski and Yauch, who outranked Ramirez and Li, who outranked—but barely—Agent Pike, their agency’s only Negro agent. Daniel Sousa, with both his war hero status and his regrettable refusal to hide his disability, moved up and down the ladder depending on his usefulness. Peggy remained steadfastly on the dirt floor below.

“Shall we show them what those at the bottom are capable of, Agent Li?” she asked, eyes sparkling.

“When you,” he said, the hint of a smile tugging at his usually grim mouth.
“After you, I think,” countered Peggy, the outline of a plan formulating in her mind. “Allow me to explain….”

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Dottie Underwood—also known as Lillian Weatherby, Gloria Grayson, or Nicole Girard, depending who you asked—watched impatiently as two identical cargo containers were removed from the Tourville and lowered to the dock. She looked back toward the harbor offices often, wondering what was keeping Pawel. The last thing she needed right now was a Polish national missing on US soil.

“Atek,” she hissed. “Woda.” Her third-in-command, a brutish troll with a crooked nose, deposited a sloshing bucket of water at her side and dropped a soup ladle into it with a splash. She sneered at him but did not rebuke him. There was no time. She didn’t know what she would find when the container doors were opened but she knew fresh water would be the most immediate need—if the ‘mementos’ had survived.

She listened with one ear to the Baltimore harbor dockworkers’ shouted orders as they arranged for the containers’ delivery. The rest of her attention was still focused on Pawel, now twenty minutes overdue.

“Atek,” said Atek, catching himself before he nudged the woman from whom he took orders. He nodded in the direction of the harbor offices and Dottie could just make out two figures heading in their direction. They were too far away to identify but she could see the one in front had his hands raised. Every third step or so, he lurched forward as if prodded from behind.

“Atek?” she asked quietly. Her second’s orders had been to find and kill that worthless SSR agent—Walter or Wallace or whatever his name was—and to return to the dock. Under no circumstances was he to engage with anyone else. Dottie knew he was no match for Peggy Carter—if she couldn’t best her, none of these men could either.

Atek peered at the figures as they came closer. “Tak,” he said finally. Who else could it be? When he looked back, the second container had finally been lowered to the dock and his boss was concluding their business with the American dockworkers. He watched jealously as she pulled a wad of cash from her tiny, ridiculous bag and peeled off bills to hand out to the grubby, grabbing men.

When they were finally gone, Dottie nodded to him and Stasio. “Otworzyć je,” she said, nodding to the containers and each man took a door. Stasio used a bolt cutter to cut the lock on his, then tossed the tool to Atek, who did the same.

Stasio managed to release the latches on his container first and he opened the doors slowly. He knew what the cargo was and he was afraid of what he might find. Dottie, too, seemed wary and they both stood there, looking into the darkness with varying levels of trepidation.

“Herr Doktor?” asked Nicole hesitantly.

Stasio heard movement immediately, then a shuffling sound that came nearer. Finally, a figure came into the weak pool of light offered by the dock’s buzzing lamps overhead. He was stooped and pale, gray-haired and unshaven. His clothes where filthy and hung loosely on his body. He seemed frail and he adjusted his thick glasses uncertainly, shielding his eyes with his hand as he peered up at her.

“Fraulein Weatherby?” he asked, his voice raspy and weak.
“Ja, Herr Doktor,” she said. She took a step toward him. “Sind Sie gut?”

“Oh ja, ja,” he said as he slowly sank to the ground. “Ich könnte zwar etwas Wasser verwenden.”

Dottie cursed and hissed an order to Stasio who brought the bucket of water to the fallen man immediately. As the younger Pole helped the man to drink, she went to the other container. Atek had just opened its doors and another man strode into the light without hesitation. He, too, was pale and thin. He, too, wore glasses and was unshaven. But he was younger and heartier than the other man; his hair was dark and his features, though severe, were unlined. Despite a certain unsteadiness, he inclined his head in greeting.


“Willkommen Sie in Ihrem neuen Land, Herr Doktor,” she said with a serpentine grin. Both of the mementos had survived. It was more than she could have hoped for. “Sprechen Sie Englisch?”

Bretschneider nodded again. “Of course. I spent months preparing for this opportunity.”

Dottie nodded to Atek and he fetched the bucket of water and the ladle while Stasio helped the older gentleman to stand.

“Then speak nothing else on this soil. We have new names and identities for you but first we must get you cleaned up, into new clothing, and on your way to your new home.” She caught sight of Pawel and his captive as they stepped out of the shadows and her mood darkened.

“You’re late,” she hissed over her shoulder.

“Actually,” said Peggy, smiling up at Dottie from under Pawel’s knit cap, “I think we’re right on time.”

Before Dottie could react, Peggy launched Li toward Dottie’s two henchmen. As Li took on Atek with a flurry of barely defended kicks, Dottie rounded on Peggy with a roar of surprised rage, only to be met by a handy crowbar that rang as she hit it.

As she backed away from Peggy, shaking the numbness and pain from her arm, Dottie knew her unit was outmatched and the success of her mission was in question. She retrieved her Tokarev service pistol from the small of her back and squeezed off two shots in the semi-darkness, one that missed Peggy entirely and one that winged Li, catching him high in the left shoulder. Unfazed by the wound, Li readied himself for another attack but Dottie was too quick. Peggy hit her broadside just as she squeezed the trigger a third time.

Li collapsed to the dock while Dottie and Peggy struggled for the gun.

“Masz swoje rozkazy,” said Dottie, glancing at Atek and Stasio as they stood watching the fight. “Je realizować!”

Jumping as if slapped, Atek grabbed the two Germans and hustled them away into the night. Stasio headed in the other direction.

Peggy used the momentary lapse in Dottie’s attention to her best advantage and swung the crowbar at the same leg she’d injured at the airplane hangar. It connected with a sickening crunch and Dottie screamed. Her pistol clattered to the dock.

As Peggy lunged for it, Dottie began to laugh. “You’ll want to consider your next move very carefully, Peggy,” she said, wincing as she hobbled toward the route Atek had taken.
“Stop where you are, Dottie,” Peggy warned, aiming the intercepted pistol at the Russian with deadly certainty.

“You don’t think I had an insurance policy, dearest Peggy?” asked Dottie, her Iowa accent making a reappearance. “Just in case I found myself in another jam?” She took another two steps away from Peggy.

“I said stop!” Peggy adjusted her aim, the grim look in her ebony eyes promising death if Dottie moved again.

Dottie ignored her. “It was luck that I happened upon her at all, but there she was, leaning over that railing like she was waiting for a sailor boy coming back from the war.” She shook her head sadly. “Oh, she tried to convince me you were a traitor—that she hadn’t seen you since you were arrested—but I know better. I know what happens in that six-story mansion on the river, Peggy Carter. When the two of you are all alone.”

For the first time, Peggy wavered. “What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“Like I said, it was luck. Well, lucky for me, to be more precise. I doubt Angie feels the same.” She nodded to Peggy’s left where the harbor lights just showed the outline of a cargo crane and a container hoisted over the black water of the Chesapeake Bay. “She’s up there, you see. Tucked nicely out of the way but handy—in case I need her. Which apparently I do.” She grinned again but it didn’t reach her eyes. “You’ll have to decide which one of us is more important to you, Peggy. Because you can’t have us both.”

“Lucky for me, I don’t need both of you,” said Peggy as she squeezed the trigger.

Dottie saw her error a second too late but managed to dodge the first bullet as it came her way. “Rzuć to!” she shouted to Stasio.

Peggy heard a clank followed by an extended zzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz-sound as the ropes holding the container aloft unwound from the crane. She looked away from Dottie for half a second, watching with horror as the container plummeted into the filthy harbor water. When she turned back, she fired again and again, the spray of sparks from the Tokarev spewing dragon-like in the darkness. Dottie was nowhere to be seen.

“Angie!” Peggy cried, tossing the pistol away when the cartridge was empty. She sprinted toward the crane and reached dockside just as the container slipped beneath the surface. Without a moment’s hesitation, she stripped off the knit cap and her borrowed shoes and dove straight into the black waters, swimming hard for the bottom, lungs bursting, eyes burning.

She followed the bubbles escaping from the container as they burbled to the surface in one long agonizing stream, rushing past her in the eerie darkness with a distorted hiss. She pounded on the container as she reached it and pulled herself along the side until she found the doors. She tried again and again to pry open the latches but they wouldn’t budge. Lungs screaming for air, lights popping in her field of vision like fireworks, she dug desperately in the sand at the bottom of the harbor and found the padlock holding the doors in place. It was locked up tight.

Venting the remainder of her air in a frustrated gurgling scream, Peggy pounded on the doors with all her terror and rage. She didn’t even leave a mark.

As the blackness of unconsciousness reached its slimy fingers into her brain, she used her last remaining bit of strength to kick off the bottom of the bay, breaking through the surface of the water just as her lungs could take no more. She took three massive gulps of air and was just about to dive
back down when she heard a familiar voice dockside.

“Nice night for a swim, English?”

Angie’s lopsided grin was the most infuriatingly beautiful thing Peggy had ever seen.

Peggy sat simmering in rage while Jack Thompson railed at her two days later in his office. He left the blinds in his office up, of course. He wanted the blistering to be as public and as humiliating as possible. He blamed her for every mission failure—from Wallace getting made to Li getting shot and everything in between. She knew it was little more than a tantrum but it stung, nonetheless. That he couldn’t be reasoned with in this state was a given but she found herself wishing for it.

Wallace had been made, yes, but what did that have to do with her? She certainly hadn’t sold him out and she was quite sure nobody else had, either. The more likely scenario was one in which Butch couldn’t keep his mouth shut in the midst of some childish self-aggrandizement. That he hadn’t come forward to take ownership of it meant he either had no idea he’d done anything wrong or he was more like Jack Thompson than Peggy had thought. She hoped that wasn’t the case. She hated overestimating people.

What no one seemed to be thanking her for was the fact Butch Wallace was even still alive. Pawel Slusarski, a Polish national and former member of the Polish Army, had been captured and although he had said little aside from his name, rank, and service number yet, the potential for learning a great deal more about Dottie’s plan was certainly there.

As for the loss of the “momentos,” she regretted nothing. Given the same desperate choice under the same desperate circumstances, well, Peggy knew she would choose Angie again and again. Even if it turned out the same as it did this time—that Angie had already rescued herself and the two captured security men and didn’t require saving after all.

As for Jack and the others, what they didn’t know wouldn’t hurt them. Peggy gave the sequence of events straight down the line, but when it came to Dottie’s Solomon’s choice, Peggy misquoted her, leaving Angie out of the picture entirely. Li had been unconscious when Dottie had given Peggy the ultimatum, so he wouldn’t be able to contradict her, and the security men liked the story better that way anyway. Saving themselves from the hoisted cargo container was infinitely more heroic than being rescued by an out-of-work Automat waitress any day of the week and they knew it.

That only left Pawel Slusarski, and Peggy thought he might not want to be remembered as having been outwitted by a skinny American girl with no training to speak of, especially in whatever black hole of a detention center he’d ended up. It would be bad enough if the American agents tasked with questioning him knew that particular information; it would be even worse if his fellow prisoners ferreted it out. Such a thing could leave a man hanging in the wind, both figuratively and literally, and, while shoelaces were hard to come by in a military prison, such a thing wasn’t unheard of, and Peggy figured the captured Pole would rather err on the side of continuing to breathe.

An hour of Jack Thompson’s litany of her many failures had Peggy wishing for an end to her misery. During the war, she hadn’t put much stock into the L-pill, the cyanide exit often issued as a last resort option in case of capture by the enemy. Now, she was beginning to see its merits.

Butch Wallace watched Jack’s little show, jaw locked down tight, getting more and more steamed. What Jack was shouting—it just wasn’t right! Peggy Carter wasn’t to blame for this—for any of it. More importantly, Peggy had saved his life—even after he’d gone and fallen for the oldest trick in the book: an unsigned, off-plan, “urgent” message sent via non-regulation channels. He might as
well have painted the word SPY on his forehead in red paint. No wonder he’d gotten clobbered.

The whole thing went to the dogs and they didn’t catch the Russian harpy or her “package”—so what? What was Peggy supposed to do? It had ended up one against five at the end and they’d made her choose between civilians or the mission. She was always going to choose the civilians; Jack should have realized that. She was Captain America’s girl, for Christ’s sake!

He watched Jack rail at the poor girl for another thirty seconds before storming up out of his chair and banging into Jack’s office, hollering at the top of his lungs as the windows rattled.

“Enough! Jack, enough!” he shouted and Jack rounded on him, white with rage. Butch went on anyway, though not as loudly as he’d started. “We get it, okay? Just—just let it go. Let the kid go home. She hasn’t slept in forty-eight hours.” He ran his hand over the back of his head and scowled. “If you gotta yell at her some more, you can do it tomorrow, all right?”

The blond chief took a breath. The mask of anger in his features didn’t slip exactly. Rather, it softened—an iota of reprieve, no more.

He glanced at Peggy sitting stoically in the hard chair in front of his desk before waving her out of the room. “Go on, Carter—get out of my sight. We’ll continue this tomorrow.”

Peggy nodded but said nothing as she rose. She turned eyes filled with genuine gratitude on Butch, though, who grunted diffidently and flushed briefly pink under her gaze.

Peggy saved her smile for when neither man could see her. Nothing else needed said.

Outside the mansion, Peggy paid the cabbie and smiled impatiently when he doffed his cap at her in appreciation of her tip.

She said something pleasant to him in return and had turned and was already halfway up the steps before he drove away. She fumbled the key in the lock in her haste and flung the front door open with more force than she was intending, rolling her eyes at herself, but not slowing down.

She hadn’t seen Angie since the docks and they’d only had a few stolen moments in the dark before all Hell had broken loose. Just enough time for Angie to explain—in very general terms—how she’d freed herself and her fellow prisoners from the cargo container and for Peggy to press urgent kisses to both of Angie’s cheeks and every spot in between.

Peggy didn’t even know if Angie was back from Baltimore yet. For all she knew, the blonde was still changing diapers and scrubbing marble steps as the guest of her brother’s family.

“Angie? Darling?” she called out, standing in the foyer, the front door open behind her and quite forgotten.

Nothing.

No answer.

Peggy waited a full minute before deflating, her excitement and eagerness leaving her in a rush, like air from a child’s balloon. Disappointment, deep and draining, replaced it, and she turned to close the door, throwing the locks as an afterthought.

She popped the clasp of her clutch purse and dropped her house key inside before losing all her
momentum, leaning heavily against the thick oak of the door, the last 48 hours finally catching up to her in one final push.

Oh, but she was exhausted. The fight had been bad enough, but the desperation of her journey to the bottom of the harbor had leached much more than energy from her. It had dredged up the bones of forgotten grief, a rattling skeleton ready-made for the darkness and depths of her closet. She’d remained nearly untouched by Jack Thompson’s impotent fury because of that grief and the guilt that came attached. What harm was there in a man’s criticism when she blamed herself for so much more already?

“Ain’t you a sight for sore eyes,” said a voice behind her and Peggy whirled, shocked right to her toes to see Angie Martinelli. The young actress looked fresh and cool in a lemon print, sleeveless boat-neck dress with a narrow white belt and a full skirt. Paired with bright white wedge sandals, she was the very picture of summer. She leaned against the coat closet door, hands pressed behind her back.

“What’ sa matter, Pegs?” she asked, blue eyes twinkling. “Cat got your tongue?”

Peggy didn’t answer her, only raised a single eyebrow and glanced down at the vibrant yellow print on Angie’s dress, question marks in her eyes.

“Oh, we gotta sayin’ here in the States, English—’When life gives ya lemons, you gotta make lemonade.’” Angie looked Peggy up and down, admiring her tight red skirt and the short-sleeved, cream-colored, low-cut blouse that went with it. “It just takes a little sugar is all.”

Peggy Carter smirked and stowed her purse on the credenza before stalking over to Angie like a panther in red patent-leather pumps.

“Sugar, you say?” she asked, placing her hands to either side of Angie, trapping her against the closet door. Her eyes flicked hungrily to Angie’s lips. “I should think I have some to spare,” she said, voice low and velvety deep.

Just like her kisses.

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